

Sociological and biological theories of crime and deviance



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This essay will discuss the concepts of crime and deviance. It will use the sociological and biological approaches to explain crime and deviance and how relative these terminologies are. Official crime statistics will be evaluated as well.

Browne et al refers to crime as "a label that is attached to certain forms of behaviour which are prohibited by the state and have some legal penalty against them" (Browne et al. 2016) This definition implies that a crime is committed only when behaviour violates the law. It may be said therefore that where there is no law, there is no crime. On the other hand deviance is defined as " non-conformity to a given set of norms that are accepted by a significant number of people in a community or society" (Giddens 2001). The implication of this definition is that although certain behaviour may violate societal norms, they may not have the label of being a crime if no law exists against such behaviour.

In any society social control is achieved by positive and negative sanctions which are enforced by agencies such as police or courts to ensure people conform to a particular set of norms especially the law (Browne et al. 2016). If someone commits a crime such as rape and murder, formal sanctions are applied to ensure norms are adhered to and they can be arrested, charged to court and sentenced to prison. These formal sanctions are officially known, so therefore, crime can be seen as act of deviance which breaks not only a norm, but a law, thereby leading to formal sanctions being applied.

On the other hand, if people are seen deviating from societal norms it can lead to informal sanctions being imposed on them. Informal sanctions are

less organised and socially defined. Many forms of deviant behaviour are not punishable by law. Excessive gambling, being nude in public, prostitution, and many more of such behaviours are seen as deviant. Some illegal acts are not necessarily seen as deviant. For example, eating while driving is not generally seen as deviant behaviour even though it is against the law. An act can be deviant but not criminal, breaking social rule but not legal rules. For example, a male teacher wearing a dress to teach in the class can be seen as being deviant but criminal offence has not been committed. An act can also be criminal but not deviant. For example speeding and breaking the speed limit is a criminal offence but if someone is found guilty of a minor speeding offence and fined, are subjected informal sanction (Browne et al. 2016).

From the examples given above, it can be seen that what is considered as deviant and/ or crime may change over time and space, culture and place. As a result of this, crime and deviance have been referred to as relative terms without universal definitions (Coates et al. 2009). What is crime in one context could be deviant behaviour in another. Also what is illegal at one time could be legal at another time or in another place. In the UK, since 2007, it became illegal to smoke in public places. Prior to this, it was not (McIntosh 2005). Killing an enemy soldier at wartime would not be considered as illegal but could be counted as a criminal act if the killing took place during a knife fight in a pub (Browne et al. 2016). Same sex relationship was previously considered illegal in 1967 in the England and Wales. However, this changed in 2014, and same sex marriage is now lawful (Harper et al. 2014). Across cultures evidence has shown that what is seen

as a crime or deviant can vary across cultures and society. For example, in some parts of Nigeria, female circumcision is culturally acceptable with no laws against offenders (Gbadebo et al. 2015). However in western societies like the UK, this is considered a crime with severe penalties. In the case of alcohol, it is generally not a crime to consume. However, drinking while at work would be deviant at work. Further, driving under the influence of alcohol would be a crime. In Muslim communities with strict alcohol rules, drinking any amount of alcohol would be seen as both deviant behaviour as well as a crime (Al-Ansari et al. 2016).

Several theoretical approaches have been used to attempt to explain the concepts of crime and deviance. In this essay, two of such would be applied; the functionalist approach and the biological.

According to the functionalist theory, crime and deviance arise due to the way a society is structured. Functionalists have the viewpoint that shared norms and values are important to social order and the success of society. Durkheim, a key proponent of the theory argued that crime and deviance form an inevitable part of social life due to the different levels to which individuals are committed to the shared value and moral beliefs of society which is based on their personal experiences. Durkheim believes that crime and deviance have some benefits to society as a reminder of the moral boundaries, as a means of developing new ideas, through helping to releasing stresses in society and also as a warning device that the society is not working properly. However too much crime is dysfunctional for the society and could become a threat to social order (Browne et al. 2016).

Merton another functionalist theorist developed on Durheim's ideas. He suggested that social order is based on consensus around social goals and the approved pathways to achieving those goals. However, sometimes society is structured in such a way that not everyone has the opportunity to meet these goals by applying the approved means or following the approved pathways. Hence, such individuals could resort to deviant behaviour as their form of adaptation. According to Merton, such individuals face a sense of strain and anomie as the rules around how to meet the set social goals does not meet their needs. Merton's strain theory is helpful as it attempts to link the structure of society to crime and deviance. However, most people who experience strain do not resort to crime and deviance. This would appear to weaken his theory and explanation (Blundell et al. 2009).

The biological approach suggests crime is inherited and that an abnormality in the genetic makeup of individuals make them to turn to crime. Lombroso, a 19th Century Italian Criminologist was an important biological approach theorist. He suggested that criminals were throwback to primitive early stage of evolution with the physical features and instinct of an ancient man. He argued that criminal or deviant behaviours are related to certain physiological and or psychological characteristics. He listed abnormal physical features such as large jaws and cheekbones, sloping forehead, ears with unusual size and other features associated with the early stages of human evolution as being associated with the having criminal or deviant behaviour (Browne et al. 2016). He believes specific criminals such as rapist, thieves and murderers could be distinguished by this specific characteristics. He also argues that people's personality could be explained by these

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physical characteristics and that such people hardly feel any pain or touches and lack moral sense (Giddens and Sutton 2013).

During the Victorian times, the Phrenology theory was used to explain that one's personality was related to size and shape of the skull, suggesting that criminal could be identified by these features. Psychologists have also associated the presence of an extra Y-chromosome with criminal behaviour especially as such individuals are extroverts, less rational, less cautious and more impulsive. To support their claim, they refer to brain scans of psychopaths which shows brain abnormalities that could explain their behaviour (Browne et al. 2016).

Critics have questioned and even rejected the biological approach. One of the main arguments against the approach is that it fails to recognize that crime and deviance are socially defined and vary over time, and between cultures and sub-groups. Crime is not distributed randomly by genes or personality but follows a social pattern linked to age, class gender and ethnicity.

Official crime statistics is the way crime is officially generated and measured based on quantitative numeric data collected by home office. Official statistic is drawn from records kept by the police and other official agencies.

Statistics appear to be a straight forward measure although there is no accurate official statistics on crime. They are useful because they show change and long-term trends that can be used to compare crime over time. It provides cheap sources and easily available resources, and statistical information on crime rates that are recorded. Crime recorded by police represents a partial picture of total crime committed. Only 40% of offences

reported to the police are actually recorded, because the crime might be seen as trivial or not actually a crime. Some crimes have no proper victim, although the crime has taken place, the people involved both wanted it to happen. Many women would not want to report a crime of rape, domestic abuse and child abuse because they are embarrassed. It failed to note unreported crime which exists and also police are too busy to decide which crimes to report and respond to first (Coates et al. 2009).

In conclusion, this essay has used examples from difference contexts to show that crime and deviance are relative terms. As argued by functionalist theories crime and deviance are socially defined and therefore vary over time and across cultures. On the other hand the biological approach that suggests that crime and deviance are linked to biological characteristics seem to lack a strong standing as crime and deviance are socially defined. With regards to crime statistics, they are a very useful resource to everybody but could be inaccurate and out of date as some crimes may not be reported.

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