

# Positivist and constructionist theories: basic differences essay sample

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There is a basic difference in the two theories known as positivist and constructionist in sociology. It is considered determinism. In order to understand the theories and deviance, one must understand determinism. What is determinism? It is the belief that everything is already decided and occurs based on every thought, action and feeling we have by things that have already happened. The future then is determined by our past.

Positivism originated with August Comte. It was considered a philosophical approach that replaced speculation with science. Positivist theorists believe deviance is real and falls under three categories. First that deviance is absolutely real. Second, that deviance is observable or like an object and third that deviance is determined by forces. The old school positivism relied on biological reasons or factors. The newer idea or contemporary school looks at society as the cause of deviance. If deviance is the opposite of normalcy then what is normal? According to Emile Durkheim, normal is defined by specific behaviors or characteristics that are present in majority of cases, and exceptions are abnormal (Wikipedia).

On the other hand, constructivism looks at finding the source for why we believe the way we believe, and life experiences effect, on those beliefs. They don't consider the world as being divided into right and wrong, deviant and non-deviant. They believe the issue is not why certain people violate norms but how norms are constructed (including what factors are considered in defining people or labeling them as deviant) and how are sanctions applied-why are some people engaged in certain behaviors (or who possess particular characteristics) condemned and labeled, " deviant." Society has a tendency to label behavior that does not meet their definition of normal

therefore these people have a stigma and must decide to live up to that label or change it. Positivist Perspectives

In looking at determinism, we have biological determinism an example of which is phrenology, and social determinism an example which is anomie-strain.

### Phrenology

Phrenology is an example of the biological theory of positivism. It is based on biological determinism and looks at physical attributes. They studied the bumps and bulges of a person's skull and determined they are present for a reason and being located in certain areas made the person more likely to do certain things or to be deviant. Franz Joseph Gall looked at this idea in 1796 when he noticed that his classmates who could memorize large amounts of information easily seemed to have prominent eyes and large foreheads. He believed other qualities besides memory could be determined by external features as well. Thieves were also studied and determined to have the same bumps and bulges behind their ears. Anomie-strain

Anomie-strain is an example of social determinism. It is considered to be socially based. These sociologists looked at the source of deviant behavior being caused by social factors and the functioning of society. It states that people act and perform based on their environment and culture not their genetics. According to Allan Levite a writer, "mere effect does not become an explanation for human behavior unless someone sees a reason—usually an ideological reason—to make one. It is now impossible to seriously attribute such problems as crime or poverty to physiology or physics, but they can

easily be attributed to society.” (Levitte, 1996). The basis for studies done for years on the effects of TV violence on children by predisposing them to violence, could we not also say that is predisposes them to normal activities in their future based on their society. It would prove this idea wrong considering Adolf Hitler never watched TV but was aggressively violent. In the 1940’s, Merton addressed the biological aspect of deviance and determined biology cannot by itself be blamed for the nature and difference of deviance from one society to the next.

His interest wasn’t so much why someone deviates but why the rates differed dramatically from one society to another. Merton also changed the concept to where there is an apparent lack of fit between cultures norms, about the apparent lack of success and the appropriate goals to achieve them. He believed the United States puts more emphasis on success, and anomie -strain becomes the explanation for high rates of deviant behavior in the U. S. compared with other societies, and also an explanation for the distribution of deviant behavior across groups defined by class, race, and ethnicity. The U. S., in fact, Merton sees as an example of a society in which success goals (often defined primarily in monetary terms) are emphasized for everyone in the culture, and people are criticized for not performing to their best ability. Constructionist Perspective

Constructionist looks at deviance from a different perspective. It is the “social construction of deviance” that needs to be explained, not the (“wrong”) choices of individuals. Labeling Theory

The labeling theory, an example of constructivist perspective is the theory put forth to define how deviance is experienced and why people continue to be deviant. The labeling theory was developed by a group of sociologists in the 1960's. It is a version of symbolic interactionism defining deviance as a collective action involving the acts of more than one person, and the views and perceptions of more than one person or group of people. It focuses on the interaction of the supposed deviant and other people. This approach views deviance as being always and everywhere a process of interaction between at least two kinds of people, those who commit a deviant act and the rest of our society. People of power tend to label others with less power. Once labeled as deviant, the person labeled is likely to be seen only as a deviant, and then persecuted for it because people always assume that they will only commit deviant acts and a stigma develops.

The basic difference between the positivist and the constructionist point of view is the positivist looks at the individual person studying the biological and social characteristics of the person and determines characteristics and defining deviance based on determinism whether it is society idea of deviance or the individual physical characteristics. The constructionist on the other hand, focuses strictly on society and symbolism. We label individuals with a label of deviance because we expect them to continue being deviant based on our ideas of what is right and wrong. We also label individuals as deviant because they are different. We look at autistic children as deviant because they do not conform and act as other children of their age group. As a society we do not understand or accept differences. We want people to

conform to what as our culture or society has labeled as normal, how we expect others to act, to look, or to talk.

#### Works Cited

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