

Assess the usefulness of functionalism in explaining the causes

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From a sociological viewpoint, deviance refers to those activities that do not conform to the norms and expectations of members of a particular society, which often bring general disapproval. However, it is only a relative concept, as it may differ from time to time and place to place. Here, a question may be pointed out, what causes deviance in society. There are some non-sociological explanations suggest that deviance comes from the biological or psychological nature of the individual, rather than this, functionalists seek the source of deviance in the nature of society.

They emphasize the importance of shared norms and values as the basis of social order, it would appear that deviance is a threat to order, it therefore should be seen as a threat to society. However, many of them argue that in certain aspects, deviance contributes to the maintenance and well-being of society. This argument was developed by Emile Durkheim with his discussion of crime¹. He argued that crime is present in every known society; it is an inevitable part of life.

The reason for that is simple, every member of society is exposed to different influences and circumstances and it is "impossible for all to be alike" especially in being able to commit to the collective norms and values of society. And Durkheim went one step further by saying that, crime is not only inevitable but also functional. According to him, all social change begins with some form of deviance. In order for society to progress rather than stagnate, the collective sentiments must not be too powerful to crush originality, both of the criminal and the genius.

The clash of old moral codes with new moral codes is necessary to develop the morality of the future. The facts happened in the 20th century had supported Durkheim's beliefs by evidence. Nelson Mandela's action of imprisonment for 27 years brought about the end of the apartheid system in South Africa. Etc. Moreover, Durkheim believed that if crime is inevitable, so is punishment. The function of punishment 'serves to heal the wounds done to the collective sentiments' but not to remove crime in society.

With the existence of punishment, the collective sentiments would only keep their power to control behaviour, and the crime rate would not reach the reach the point where it became harmful to society. Thus, a healthy society requires both crime and punishment, both are inevitable and functional.

Durkheim's views have been developed by a number of sociologists, such as Robert K. Merton. Merton pointed out the negative effects of deviance.

He firstly assumes that all members of society share the same values, but not everyone is placed in a same position in the social structure, thus they do not have the same opportunity of realizing these values. Such a situation would result deviance as to ensure that certain individuals who committing deviant acts are able to achieve the values that society holds. And if society gives greater emphasis to possession of such values more than the way in which such values are achieved, than deviant acts may become rampant and a state of anomie would exist where there are no longer norms and values.

Merton used the example of American society to illustrate his theory, where each American is committed to live in the American dream, which is become financially successful. However, such strong emphasis on this ideal can lead

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to different responses by individuals seeking to achieve these aims. Merton outlined this in five possible ways: firstly is conformity, this is also the most common response, that members of society follow the norms and values of society and achieve their visions through hard work.

The rest four responses can be clearly explained by using Taylor's words, 'The deprived ones either resort to using foreign coins or magnets to increase their chances of winning (innovation), or play on mindlessly (ritualism), give up the game (retreatism), or propose a new game altogether (rebellion)'². Without a collective sentiment, the society can not survive and deviance will be encourage in a situation where 'anything goes'.

However, Merton's work has been criticized for failing to consider the power relationships in society as a whole, that is who makes the laws and who benefit from the laws. His theory also neglects to explain why some people who experience the effects of anomie do not become criminals or deviants, as it is too deterministic. Despite these criticisms, Merton's theory remains one of the more plausible attempts to explain crime rates in whole societies. Albert K. Cohen's work was a modification and development of Merton's position.

He began his argument in a similar way to Merton, but when many lower-working- class boys suffer from status frustration, that they are frustrated and dissatisfied with their low status in society, instead by turning to criminal paths to success, as Merton suggested, they resolve their frustration by rejecting the success goals of the mainstream culture. They replace them with an alternative set of norms and values that is, the delinquent

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subculture, in order to achieve success and gain prestige. This can be seen as a collective solution to the common problems of lower-working-class adolescents.

According to Cohen, 'the delinquent subculture takes its norms from the larger culture but turns them upside down'. Thus, a high value is placed on activities such as stealing, which are condemned in the wider society. In this way, lower-working-class boys are more likely to become successful and gain prestige. Unlike Merton, Cohen saw some delinquency as being a collective response directed by subcultural values. Nevertheless, Cohen's theory was believed to be plausible only for a small minority of delinquents, as most delinquent youths originally accepted the mainstream standards of success.

In spite of such criticisms, Cohen's ideas continue to offer insights into delinquency. Even his critics would generally accept that the search for status remains an important factor in the formation of delinquent subculture. Furthermore, Walter B. Miller sees crime as a product of lower-class culture. Miller did not believe that a deviant subculture arose from the inability of the members of lower social strata to achieve success. Instead he explained crime in terms of the existence of a distinctive lower-class subculture.

He argued that this kind of distinctive cultural system includes a number of major areas of interest and involvement, which are 'toughness', 'smartness' and 'excitement'. These all, in practice, can lead to a number of deviant acts that are generally disapproval in the larger culture. For example, toughness can lead to assault and battery; smartness is expressed in the cardsharp and

excitement is sought in gambling, etc. Miller concluded that, this subculture stems from, and is partly sustained by, the necessity for a pool of low-skilled labour, to whom can provide satisfactions outside work which offset the dissatisfaction produced by work.

In support, some studies have found working-class cultures in Britain with values significantly at odds with those of the middle class and the criminal justice system, such as Owen Gill's study of Luke Street³. However, some sociologists deny that there are significant differences in the values of different classes, which relate to crime. Unlike all other explanations of delinquency, an American sociologist David Matza produced his own distinctive explanation of delinquency. He first of all suggests two ways that many sociological theories of delinquency are misled.

Firstly, they make deviants appear more distinctive than they really are. And secondly, they present an over-deterministic view of the origins of deviance. Compare to subculture theories, Matza argues that, to a considerable extent, male delinquents are committed to the same norms and values as other members of society rather than opposing it. He believes that, far from being committed to crime, delinquents are only occasional, part-time law-breakers; they are 'casually, intermittently, and transiently immersed in a pattern of illegal activity'.

In certain circumstances they are able to convince themselves that the law does not apply to them on this particular occasion by using 'techniques of neutralization'. This includes several techniques, such as 'denial of responsibility'. Delinquency can become possible once potential delinquents

have freed themselves from the normal constraints society exercises over them. They are in a state of drift and may or may not break the law. And Matza stresses that delinquents do not hold different values to other members of society; they simply express subterranean values at the wrong place and time.

In order for some adolescents overcome the feeling of powerless, they need to take some action that will 'restore their mood of humanism', and committing a delinquent act assures them of at least some response, even if it is a negative one. And Matza emphasizes that delinquency never becomes more than an occasional activity. Matza's work is radically different; he stresses the choices that are available to all human beings, including delinquents. It is important in challenging the assumptions on which earlier theories were based. Nevertheless, Matza himself has been criticized.

Steven Box (1981) questioned the evidence that Matza used in support of his theory. And Stephen Jones (1998) also pointed out that Matza's theory is quite good at explaining occasional delinquency but not violence. Despite these drawbacks, Matza's work has raised some important questions about deviance. Differ from the functionalist perspective, interactionists like Erving Goffman views deviance as a 'mortification of the self'. However, since the issues of crime, deviance and conformity are essentially about what humans consider to be right and wrong, it is hardly surprising that values impinge on this area of study to a very great extent.