5.2: Social Control and the Relativity of Deviance

Learning Objectives

- Define deviance, crime, and social control.
- Understand why Émile Durkheim said deviance is normal.
- Understand what is meant by the relativity of deviance.

Deviance is behavior that violates social norms and arouses negative social reactions. Some behavior is considered so harmful that governments enact written laws that ban the behavior. Crime is behavior that violates these laws and is obviously an important type of deviance that concerns many Americans.

The fact that both deviance and crime arouse negative social reactions reminds us that every society needs to ensure that its members generally obey social norms in their daily interaction. Social control refers to ways in which a society tries to prevent and sanction behavior that violates norms. Just as a society like the United States has informal and formal norms (see Chapter 2 "Culture and Society"), so does it have informal and formal social control. Generally, informal social control is used to control behavior that violates informal norms, and formal social control is used to control behavior that violates formal norms. We typically decline to violate informal norms, if we even think of violating them in the first place, because we fear risking the negative reactions of other people. These reactions, and thus examples of informal social control, include, but are not limited to, anger, disappointment, ostracism, and ridicule. Formal social control in the United States typically involves the legal system (police, judges and prosecutors, corrections officials) and also, for businesses, the many local, state, and federal regulatory agencies that constitute the regulatory system.

Social control is never perfect, and so many norms and people exist that there are always some people who violate some norms. In fact, Émile Durkheim (1895/1962), Durkheim, E. (1962). The rules of sociological method (Ed. S. Lukes). New York, NY: Free Press. (Original work published 1895) a founder of sociology discussed in Chapter 1 "Sociology and
the Sociological Perspective”, stressed that a society without deviance is impossible for at least two reasons. First, the collective conscience (see Chapter 1 "Sociology and the Sociological Perspective") is never strong enough to prevent all rule breaking. Even in a “society of saints,” such as a monastery, he said, rules will be broken and negative social reactions aroused. Second, because deviance serves several important functions for society (which we discuss later in this chapter), any given society “invents” deviance by defining certain behaviors as deviant and the people who commit them as deviants. Because Durkheim thought deviance was inevitable for these reasons, he considered it a normal part of every healthy society.

Figure 5.1. Informal social control, such as the anger depicted here, is used to control behavior that violates informal norms.© Thinkstock

Although deviance is normal in this regard, it remains true that some people are more likely than others to commit it. It is also true that some locations within a given society have higher rates of deviance than other locations; for example, U.S. cities have higher rates of violent crime than do rural areas. Still, Durkheim’s monastery example raises an important point about the relativity of deviance: whether a behavior is considered deviant depends on the circumstances in which the behavior occurs and not on the behavior itself. Although talking might be considered deviant in a monastery, it would certainly be considered very normal elsewhere. If an assailant, say a young male, murders someone, he faces arrest, prosecution, and, in many states, possible execution. Yet if a soldier kills someone in wartime, he may be considered a hero. Killing occurs in either situation, but the context and reasons for the killing determine whether the killer is punished or given a medal.

Deviance is also relative in two other ways. First, it is relative in space: a given behavior may be considered deviant in
one society but acceptable in another society. Recall Chapter 2 "Culture and Society"’s discussion of sexual behavior, where we saw that sexual acts condemned in some societies are often practiced in others. There we contrasted a small island off the coast of Ireland, where sex and nudity are considered disgusting, with another island in the South Pacific, where sexual activity is very common. We also saw that although many societies condemn homosexuality, in some societies homosexuality is actually fairly common.

Second, deviance is relative in time: a behavior in a given society may be considered deviant in one time period but acceptable many years later; conversely, a behavior may be considered acceptable in one time period but deviant many years later. In the late 1800s, many Americans used cocaine, marijuana, and opium, because they were common components of over-the-counter products for symptoms like depression, insomnia, menstrual cramps, migraines, and toothaches. Coca-Cola originally contained cocaine and, perhaps not surprisingly, became an instant hit when it went on sale in 1894 (Goode, 2008). Goode, E. (2008). Drugs in American society. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill. Today, of course, all three drugs are illegal.

The relativity of deviance in all of these ways is captured in a famous statement by sociologist Howard S. Becker (1963, p. 9), Becker, H. S. (1963). Outsiders: Studies in the sociology of deviance. New York, NY: Free Press. who wrote several decades ago that

deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules or sanctions to an “offender.” The deviant is one to whom that label has been successfully applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label.

This insight raises some provocative possibilities for society’s response to deviance and crime. First, harmful behavior committed by corporations and wealthy individuals may not be considered deviant, perhaps because “respectable” people engage in them. Second, prostitution and other arguably less harmful behaviors may be considered very deviant because they are deemed immoral or because of bias against the kinds of people (poor and nonwhite) thought to be engaging in them. These considerations yield several questions that need to be answered in the study of deviance. First, why are some individuals more likely than others to commit deviance? Second, why do rates of deviance differ within social categories such as gender, race, social class, and age? Third, why are some locations more likely than other locations to have higher rates of deviance? Fourth, why are some behaviors more likely than others to be considered deviant? Fifth, why are some individuals and those from certain social backgrounds more likely than other individuals to be considered deviant and punished for deviant behavior? Sixth and last, but certainly not least, what can be done to reduce rates of violent crime and other serious forms of deviance? The sociological study of deviance and crime aims to answer all of these questions.

Conclusion

- Deviance is behavior that violates social norms and arouses negative social reactions.
- Crime is behavior that is considered so serious that it violates formal laws prohibiting such behavior.
- Social control refers to ways in which a society tries to prevent and sanction behavior that violates norms.
- Émile Durkheim believed that deviance is a normal part of every society.
- Whether a behavior is considered deviant depends on the circumstances under which it occurs. Considerations of certain behaviors as deviant also vary from one society to another and from one era to another within a given
For Your Review

1. In what ways is deviance considered relative?
2. Why did Durkheim consider deviance a normal part of society?