6.2: Explaining Deviance

Skills to Develop

• Explain what biological and psychological explanations of deviance have in common.
• State the major arguments and assumptions of the various sociological explanations of deviance.

If we want to reduce violent crime and other serious deviance, we must first understand why it occurs. Many theories of deviance exist, and together they offer a more complete explanation of deviance and the reactions to it than any one theory offers by itself. The sociological theories highlighted in the pages that follow stress elements of the social environment and of social interaction. Before turning to them, we briefly discuss biological and psychological approaches, both of which stress factors lying inside the individual.

Biological and Psychological Approaches

Although several biological and psychological explanations exist, they share a central proposition: deviants are different biologically or psychologically from nondeviants, and they have biological or psychological problems that predispose them to committing deviance. The implication is that deviants are biologically or psychologically abnormal. We have space here to discuss just a few of these explanations.

Early biological explanations focused on body size and shape (Rafter, 2008). Rafter, N. (2008). The criminal brain: Understanding biological theories of crime. New York, NY: New York University Press. Toward the end of the 1800s, Italian physician Cesare Lombroso measured various body dimensions of Italian prisoners and decided their bodies resembled those of primitive men. He reasoned that criminals were evolutionary accidents, or atavists, whose brains were incapable of conforming to modern norms. Coming in the aftermath of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, Lombroso’s view gained instant popularity but was soon discredited for various methodological problems, including
imprecise body measurements and the lack of adequate control groups. Nonetheless, his view that criminals are biologically different continues to guide today’s biological research on crime and deviance.

This research is much more sophisticated than the earlier work and has made important strides in understanding the possible biological bases of deviant behavior. One line of research focuses on heredity and violent crime. Studies of identical twins tend to find that if one twin has committed a crime, so has the other twin, and if one twin has not committed a crime, neither has the other one. Although this similarity suggests a genetic basis for criminality, identical twins are alike beyond their genes. Usually they spend much time together, have the same friends, and are very close emotionally. These social similarities may explain why their activities, including criminal behavior or the lack thereof, are so often alike (Nisbett, 2009).


Figure 5.2

One line of contemporary research on biology and crime focuses on identical twins. Although twins often behave the same in regard to committing a crime, it is not clear whether their identical genetic makeup or their similar social environment accounts for their similar behavior.

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To avoid these possibilities, a few studies examine identical twins who were separated in infancy and reared by different families. Some of these studies also find that if one twin has committed a crime, so has the other one. However, many of these twins were in fact raised by parents who were neighbors or relatives and even spent time with each other while they were growing up. Because these “separated” twins were not so separated after all, the influence of their similar social environments on their similar behavior cannot be ruled out. Because of these problems, many scholars say it is premature to conclude that a strong genetic basis for criminality exists (Nisbett, 2009).

Nisbett, R. E. (2009). *Intelligence and how to get it: Why schools and cultures count*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton. Other scholars, however, are convinced that such a basis does exist and argue that genes and the social environment have a joint influence on deviant behavior (Beaver, 2009).


The most popular contemporary psychological explanation of deviance focuses on various *personality problems* that are said to create deviant individuals. Several studies find that young children with behavior problems and adolescents who commit delinquency are more likely than well-behaved youths to have personality problems such as impulsiveness and irritability (Moffitt, 2006).

Moffitt, T. E. (2006). A review of research on the taxonomy of life-course persistent versus adolescence-limited antisocial behavior. In F. T. Cullen, J. P. Wright, & K. R. Blevins (Eds.), *Taking stock: The status of criminological theory, vol. 15: Advances in criminological theory* (pp. 277–311). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction. These problems arise during early childhood and are thought to be caused by biological abnormalities or inadequate parenting (or both). Several well-designed studies strongly suggest that early childhood programs, including home visits to children at risk for antisocial behavior (such as those born to teenage mothers) may reduce these problems and thus reduce deviance, delinquency, and crime (Welsh & Farrington, 2007).


**Sociological Explanations**

Biological and psychological theories perhaps begin to explain why some individuals are more likely than others to commit deviance, but they have less to say about the other questions posed earlier: why rates of deviance differ within social categories and across locations, why some behaviors are more likely than others to be considered deviant, and why some kinds of people are more likely than others to be considered deviant and punished for deviant behavior. To answer these questions, sociological explanations are necessary. While biological and psychological theories suggest that deviants are different from nondeviants and are in that sense abnormal, sociological explanations suggest that deviants are normal people who have been influenced by the social environment to commit acts that violate social norms. In this way, they complement the social-psychological experiments discussed in the previous chapter. Sociological explanations as a whole have important implications for successful programs and policies to reduce deviance and crime. Consistent with this book’s public sociology theme, a discussion of several such strategies concludes this chapter.

We now turn to the major sociological explanations of crime and deviance. A summary of these explanations appears in Table 5.1 "Theory Snapshot: Summary of Sociological Explanations of Deviance and Crime".

**Table 5.1 Theory Snapshot: Summary of Sociological Explanations of Deviance and Crime**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major theory</th>
<th>Related explanation</th>
<th>Summary of explanation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Durkheim’s views</td>
<td>Deviance has several functions: (a) it clarifies norms and increases conformity, (b) it strengthens social bonds among the people reacting to the deviant, and (c) it can help to lead to positive social change.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social ecology</td>
<td>Certain social and physical characteristics of urban neighborhoods contribute to high crime rates. These characteristics include poverty, dilapidation, population density, and population turnover.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strain theory</td>
<td>According to Robert Merton, deviance among the poor results from a gap between the cultural emphasis on economic success and the inability to achieve such success through the legitimate means of working. According to Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin, differential access to illegitimate means affects the type of deviance in which individuals experiencing strain engage.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functionalist</td>
<td>Poverty and other community conditions give rise to certain subcultures through which adolescents acquire values that promote deviant behavior. Albert Cohen wrote that lack of success in school leads lower-class boys to join gangs whose value system promotes and rewards delinquency. Walter Miller wrote that delinquency stems from focal concerns, a taste for trouble, toughness, cleverness, and excitement. Marvin Wolfgang and Franco Ferracuti argued that a subculture of violence in inner-city areas promotes a violent response to insults and other problems.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social control theory</td>
<td>Travis Hirschi wrote that delinquency results from weak bonds to conventional social institutions such as families and schools. These bonds include attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People with power pass laws and otherwise use the legal system to secure their position at the top of society and to keep the powerless on the bottom. The poor and minorities are more likely because of their poverty and race to be arrested, convicted, and imprisoned.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>Inequality against women and antiquated views about relations between the sexes underlie rape, sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and other crimes against women. Sexual abuse prompts many girls and women to turn to drugs and alcohol use and other antisocial behavior. Gender socialization is a key reason for large gender differences in crime rates.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist perspectives</td>
<td>Edwin H. Sutherland argued that criminal behavior is learned by interacting with close friends and family members who teach us how to commit various crimes and also about the values, motives, and rationalizations we need to adopt in order to justify breaking the law.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differential association theory</td>
<td>Gresham M. Sykes and David Matza wrote that adolescents must neutralize potential guilt and shame by justifying their delinquency. Specific rationalizations include: (a) denial of responsibility, (b) denial of injury, (c) denial of the victim, (d) condemnation of the condemners, and (e) appeal to higher loyalties.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic interactionism</td>
<td>Deviance results from being labeled a deviant; nonlegal factors such as appearance, race, and social class affect how often labeling occurs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Functionalist Explanations

Several explanations may be grouped under the functionalist perspective in sociology, as they all share this perspective’s central view on the importance of various aspects of society for social stability and other social needs.

Émile Durkheim: The Functions of Deviance

As noted earlier, Émile Durkheim said deviance is normal, but he did not stop there. In a surprising and still controversial twist, he also argued that deviance serves several important functions for society.

First, Durkheim said, deviance clarifies social norms and increases conformity. This happens because the discovery and punishment of deviance reminds people of the norms and reinforces the consequences of violating them. If your class were taking an exam and a student was caught cheating, the rest of the class would be instantly reminded of the rules about cheating and the punishment for it, and as a result they would be less likely to cheat.

A second function of deviance is that it strengthens social bonds among the people reacting to the deviant. An example comes from the classic story *The Ox-Bow Incident* (Clark, 1940), Clark, W. V. T. (1940). *The ox-bow incident*. New York, NY: Random House. in which three innocent men are accused of cattle rustling and are eventually lynched. The mob that does the lynching is very united in its frenzy against the men, and, at least at that moment, the bonds among the individuals in the mob are extremely strong.

A final function of deviance, said Durkheim, is that it can help to lead to positive social change. Although some of the greatest figures in history—Socrates, Jesus, Joan of Arc, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. to name just a few—were considered the worst kind of deviants in their time, we now honor them for their commitment and sacrifice.

*Figure 5.3*
Émile Durkheim wrote that deviance can lead to positive social change. Many Southerners had strong negative feelings about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the civil rights movement, but history now honors him for his commitment and sacrifice.


Sociologist Herbert Gans (1996)


pointed to an additional function of deviance: deviance creates jobs for the segments of society—police, prison guards, criminology professors, and so forth—whose main focus is to deal with deviants in some manner. If deviance and crime did not exist, hundreds of thousands of law-abiding people in the United States would be out of work!

Although deviance can have all of these functions, many forms of it can obviously be quite harmful, as the story of the mugged voter that began this chapter reminds us. Violent crime and property crime in the United States victimize millions of people and households each year, while crime by corporations has effects that are even more harmful, as we discuss later. Drug use, prostitution, and other “victimless” crimes may involve willing participants, but these participants often cause themselves and others much harm. Although deviance according to Durkheim is inevitable and normal and serves important functions, that certainly does not mean the United States and other nations should be happy to have
high rates of serious deviance. The sociological theories we discuss point to certain aspects of the social environment, broadly defined, that contribute to deviance and crime and that should be the focus of efforts to reduce these behaviors.

### Social Ecology: Neighborhood and Community Characteristics


### Sociology Making a Difference

Improving Neighborhood Conditions Helps Reduce Crime Rates

One of the sociological theories of crime discussed in the text is the social ecology approach. To review, this approach attributes high rates of deviance and crime to the neighborhood’s social and physical characteristics, including poverty, high population density, dilapidated housing, and high population turnover. These problems create social disorganization that weakens the neighborhood’s social institutions and impairs effective child socialization.

Much empirical evidence supports social ecology’s view about negative neighborhood conditions and crime rates and suggests that efforts to improve these conditions will lower crime rates. Some of the most persuasive evidence comes from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (directed by sociologist Robert J. Sampson), in which more than 6,000 children, ranging in age from birth to 18, and their parents and other caretakers were studied over a 7-year period. The social and physical characteristics of the dozens of neighborhoods in which the subjects lived were measured to permit assessment of these characteristics’ effects on the probability of delinquency. A number of studies using data from this project confirm the general assumptions of the social ecology approach. In particular, delinquency is higher in neighborhoods with lower levels of “collective efficacy,” that is, in neighborhoods with lower levels of community supervision of adolescent behavior.

The many studies from the Chicago project and data in several other cities show that neighborhood conditions greatly affect the extent of delinquency in urban neighborhoods. This body of research in turn suggests that strategies and programs that improve the social and physical conditions of urban neighborhoods may well help decrease the high rates of crime and delinquency that are so often found there.
Strain Theory

Failure to achieve the American dream lies at the heart of Robert Merton’s (1938) strain theory (also called anomie theory). Recall from Chapter 1 “Sociology and the Sociological Perspective” that Durkheim attributed high rates of suicide to anomie, or normlessness, that occurs in times when social norms are unclear or weak. Adapting this concept, Merton wanted to explain why poor people have higher deviance rates than the nonpoor. He reasoned that the United States values economic success above all else and also has norms that specify the approved means, working, for achieving economic success. Because the poor often cannot achieve the American dream of success through the conventional means of working, they experience a gap between the goal of economic success and the means of working. This gap, which Merton likened to Durkheim’s anomie because of the resulting lack of clarity over norms, leads to strain or frustration. To reduce their frustration, some poor people resort to several adaptations, including deviance, depending on whether they accept or reject the goal of economic success and the means of working. Table 5.2 "Merton’s Anomie Theory" presents the logical adaptations of the poor to the strain they experience. Let’s review these briefly.

Table 5.2 Merton’s Anomie Theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adaptation</th>
<th>Goal of economic success</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Conformity</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Innovation</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Ritualism</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Retreatism</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Rebellion</td>
<td>±</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+ means accept, – means reject, ± means reject and work for a new society


Despite their strain, most poor people continue to accept the goal of economic success and continue to believe they should work to make money. In other words, they continue to be good, law-abiding citizens. They conform to society’s norms and values, and, not surprisingly, Merton calls their adaptation conformity.
One of Robert Merton’s adaptations in his strain theory is *retreatism*, in which poor people abandon society’s goal of economic success and reject its means of employment to reach this goal. Many of today’s homeless people might be considered *retreatists* under Merton’s typology.

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Faced with strain, some poor people continue to value economic success but come up with innovative means of achieving it. They rob people or banks, commit fraud, or use other illegal means of acquiring money or property. Merton calls this adaptation *innovation*.

Other poor people continue to work at a job while really giving up all hope of improving their lot in life. They go to work day after day as a habit. Merton calls this third adaptation *ritualism*. This adaptation does not involve deviant behavior but is a logical response to the strain poor people experience.

In Merton’s fourth adaptation, *retreatism*, some poor people withdraw from society by becoming hobos or vagrants or by becoming addicted to alcohol, heroin, or other drugs. Their response to the strain they feel is to reject both the goal of economic success and the means of working.

Merton’s fifth and final adaptation is *rebellion*. Here poor people not only reject the goal of success and the means of working but work actively to bring about a new society with a new value system. These people are the radicals and revolutionaries of their time. Because Merton developed his strain theory in the aftermath of the Great Depression, in
which the labor and socialist movements had been quite active, it is not surprising that he thought of rebellion as a logical adaptation of the poor to their lack of economic success.

Although Merton’s theory has been popular over the years, it has some limitations. Perhaps most important, it overlooks deviance such as fraud by the middle and upper classes and also fails to explain murder, rape, and other crimes that usually are not done for economic reasons. It also does not explain why some poor people choose one adaptation over another.

Merton’s strain theory stimulated other explanations of deviance that built on his concept of strain. Differential opportunity theory, developed by Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin (1960), tried to explain why the poor choose one or the other of Merton’s adaptations. Whereas Merton stressed that the poor have differential access to legitimate means (working), Cloward and Ohlin stressed that they have differential access to illegitimate means. For example, some live in neighborhoods where organized crime is dominant and will get involved in such crime; others live in neighborhoods rampant with drug use and will start using drugs themselves.

In a more recent formulation, two sociologists, Steven F. Messner and Richard Rosenfeld (2007), expanded Merton’s view by arguing that in the United States crime arises from several of our most important values, including an overemphasis on economic success, individualism, and competition. These values produce crime by making many Americans, rich or poor, feel they never have enough money and by prompting them to help themselves even at other people’s expense. Crime in the United States, then, arises ironically from the country’s most basic values.

In yet another extension of Merton’s theory, Robert Agnew (2007) reasoned that adolescents experience various kinds of strain in addition to the economic type addressed by Merton. A romantic relationship may end, a family member may die, or students may be taunted or bullied at school. Repeated strain-inducing incidents such as these produce anger, frustration, and other negative emotions, and these emotions in turn prompt delinquency and drug use.

Deviant Subcultures

Some sociologists stress that poverty and other community conditions give rise to certain subcultures through which adolescents acquire values that promote deviant behavior. One of the first to make this point was Albert K. Cohen (1955), whose status frustration theory says that lower-class boys do poorly in school because schools emphasize middle-class values. School failure reduces their status and self-esteem, which the boys try to counter by joining juvenile gangs. In these groups, a different value system prevails, and boys can regain status and self-esteem by engaging in delinquency. Cohen had nothing to say about girls, as he assumed they cared little about how well they did in school, placing more importance on marriage and family instead, and hence would remain nondelinquent even if they did not do well. Scholars later criticized his disregard for girls and assumptions about them.

Another sociologist, Walter Miller (1958), said poor boys become delinquent because they live amid a lower-class subculture that includes several focal concerns, or values, that help lead to delinquency. These focal concerns include a...
taste for trouble, toughness, cleverness, and excitement. If boys grow up in a subculture with these values, they are more likely to break the law. Their deviance is a result of their socialization. Critics said Miller exaggerated the differences between the value system in poor inner-city neighborhoods and wealthier, middle-class communities (Akers & Sellers, 2008). Akers, R. L., & Sellers, C. S. (2008). Criminological theories: Introduction, evaluation, and application. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.


Social Control Theory

Travis Hirschi (1969) Hirschi, T. (1969). Causes of delinquency. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. argued that human nature is basically selfish and thus wondered why people do not commit deviance. His answer, which is now called social control theory (also known as social bonding theory), was that their bonds to conventional social institutions such as the family and the school keep them from violating social norms. Hirschi’s basic perspective reflects Durkheim’s view that strong social norms reduce deviance such as suicide.

Hirschi outlined four types of bonds to conventional social institutions. The first is attachment, which refers to how much we feel loyal to these institutions and care about the opinions of people in them, such as our parents and teachers. The more attached we are to our families and schools, the less likely we are to be deviant. The second type is commitment, which refers to how much we value our participation in conventional activities such as getting a good education. The more committed we are to these activities and the more time and energy we have invested in them, the less deviant we will be. The third dimension is involvement, or the amount of time we spend in conventional activities. The more time we spend, the less opportunity we have to be deviant. The final type of bond is belief, which refers to our acceptance of society’s norms. The more we believe in these norms, the less we deviate.

Figure 5.5
Travis Hirschi’s social control theory stresses the importance of bonds to social institutions for preventing deviance. His theory emphasized the importance of attachment to one’s family in this regard.

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Hirschi’s theory has been very popular. Many studies find that youths with weaker bonds to their parents and schools are more likely to be deviant. But the theory has its critics (Akers & Sellers, 2008). Akers, R. L., & Sellers, C. S. (2008). *Criminological theories: Introduction, evaluation, and application*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. One problem centers on the “chicken and egg” question of causal order. For example, many studies support social control theory by finding that delinquent youths often have worse relationships with their parents than do nondelinquent youths. Is that because the bad relationships prompt the youths to be delinquent, as Hirschi thought? Or is it because the youths’ delinquency worsens their relationship with their parents? Despite these questions, Hirschi’s social control theory continues to influence our understanding of deviance. To the extent it is correct, it suggests several strategies for preventing crime, including programs designed to improve parenting and relations between parents and children (Welsh & Farrington, 2007). Welsh, B. C., & Farrington, D. P. (Eds.). (2007). *Preventing crime: What works for children, offenders, victims and places*. New York, NY: Springer.

Conflict Explanations

Explanations of crime rooted in the conflict perspective reflect its general view that society is a struggle between the “haves” at the top of society with social, economic, and political power and the “have-nots” at the bottom. Accordingly, they assume that those with power pass laws and otherwise use the legal system to secure their position at the top of society and to keep the powerless on the bottom (Bohm & Vogel, 2011). Bohm, R. M., & Vogel, B. (2011). *A Primer on crime and delinquency theory* (3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. The poor and minorities are more likely because of their poverty and race to be arrested, convicted, and imprisoned. These explanations also blame street crime by the poor on the economic deprivation and inequality in which they live rather than on any moral failings of the poor.
Some conflict explanations also say that capitalism helps create street crime by the poor. An early proponent of this view was Dutch criminologist Willem Bonger (1916). Bonger, W. (1916). *Criminality and economic conditions* (H. P. Horton, Trans.). Boston, MA: Little, Brown. who said that capitalism as an economic system involves competition for profit. This competition leads to an emphasis in a capitalist society’s culture on **egoism**, or self-seeking behavior, and **greed**.

Because profit becomes so important, people in a capitalist society are more likely than those in noncapitalist ones to break the law for profit and other gains, even if their behavior hurts others.

Not surprisingly, conflict explanations have sparked much controversy (Akers & Sellers, 2008). Akers, R. L., & Sellers, C. S. (2008). *Criminological theories: Introduction, evaluation, and application*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. Many scholars dismiss them for painting an overly critical picture of the United States and ignoring the excesses of noncapitalistic nations, while others say the theories overstate the degree of inequality in the legal system. In assessing the debate over conflict explanations, a fair conclusion is that their view on discrimination by the legal system applies more to victimless crime (discussed in a later section) than to conventional crime, where it is difficult to argue that laws against such things as murder and robbery reflect the needs of the powerful. However, much evidence supports the conflict assertion that the poor and minorities face disadvantages in the legal system (Reiman & Leighton, 2010).

Reiman, J., & Leighton, P. (2010). *The rich get richer and the poor get prison: Ideology, class, and criminal justice* (9th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon. Simply put, the poor cannot afford good attorneys, private investigators, and the other advantages that money brings in court. As just one example, if someone much poorer than O. J. Simpson, the former football player and media celebrity, had been arrested, as he was in 1994, for viciously murdering two people, the defendant would almost certainly have been found guilty. Simpson was able to afford a defense costing hundreds of thousands of dollars and won a jury acquittal in his criminal trial (Barkan, 1996). Barkan, S. E. (1996). The social science significance of the O. J. Simpson case. In G. Barak (Ed.), *Representing O. J.: Murder, criminal justice and mass culture* (pp. 36–42). Albany, NY: Harrow and Heston. Also in accordance with conflict theory’s views, corporate executives, among the most powerful members of society, often break the law without fear of imprisonment, as we shall see in our discussion of white-collar crime later in this chapter. Finally, many studies support conflict theory’s view that the roots of crimes by poor people lie in social inequality and economic deprivation (Barkan, 2009).


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**Feminist Perspectives**

Feminist perspectives on crime and criminal justice also fall into the broad rubric of conflict explanations and have burgeoned in the last two decades. Much of this work concerns rape and sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and other crimes against women that were largely neglected until feminists began writing about them in the 1970s (Griffin, 1971).

Griffin, S. (1971, September). Rape: The all-American crime. *Ramparts*, pp. 26–35. Their views have since influenced public and official attitudes about rape and domestic violence, which used to be thought as something that girls and women brought on themselves. The feminist approach instead places the blame for these crimes squarely on society’s inequality against women and antiquated views about relations between the sexes (Renzetti, 2011).


Another focus of feminist work is gender and legal processing. Are women better or worse off than men when it comes to the chances of being arrested and punished? After many studies in the last two decades, the best answer is that we are not sure (Belknap, 2007).

Women are treated a little more harshly than men for minor crimes and a little less harshly for serious crimes, but the gender effect in general is weak.

A third focus of feminist work is the causes of female deviance and crime. Several studies find that the poverty, negative community conditions, and other factors that affect male criminality also affect female criminality. But they also find that the sexual abuse many girls suffer is a particular cause of many of their behavior problems, including prostitution and drug and alcohol abuse (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004). Chesney-Lind, M., & Pasko, L. (2004). The female offender: Girls, women, and crime. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

A final area concerns why females commit less crime than males. Most sociologists attribute this difference to gender socialization. Simply put, socialization into the male gender role, or masculinity, leads to values such as competitiveness and behavioral patterns such as spending more time away from home that all promote deviance. Conversely, despite whatever disadvantages it may have, socialization into the female gender role, or femininity, promotes values such as gentleness and behavior patterns such as spending more time at home that help limit deviance (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004). Chesney-Lind, M., & Pasko, L. (2004). The female offender: Girls, women, and crime. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Noting that males commit so much crime, Kathleen Daly and Meda Chesney-Lind (1988, p. 527) wrote, "A large price is paid for structures of male domination and for the very qualities that drive men to be successful, to control others, and to wield uncompromising power….Gender differences in crime suggest that crime may not be so normal after all. Such differences challenge us to see that in the lives of women, men have a great deal more to learn."

Two decades later, that challenge still remains.

*Figure 5.6*

Gender socialization helps explain why females commit less serious crime than males. Boys are raised to be competitive and aggressive, while girls are raised to be more gentle and nurturing.

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Symbolic Interactionist Explanations

Because symbolic interactionism focuses on the means people gain from their social interaction, symbolic interactionist explanations attribute deviance to various aspects of the social interaction and social processes that normal individuals experience. These explanations help us understand why some people are more likely than others living in the same kinds of social environments. Several such explanations exist.

Differential Association Theory

One popular set of explanations, often called learning theories, emphasizes that deviance is learned from interacting with other people who believe it is OK to commit deviance and who often commit deviance themselves. Deviance, then, arises from normal socialization processes. The most influential such explanation is Edwin H. Sutherland’s (1947) Sutherland, E. H. (1947). Principles of criminology. Philadelphia, PA: J. P. Lippincott. differential association theory, which says that criminal behavior is learned by interacting with close friends and family members. These individuals teach us not only how to commit various crimes but also the values, motives, and rationalizations that we need to adopt in order to justify breaking the law. The earlier in our life that we associate with deviant individuals and the more often we do so, the more likely we become deviant ourselves. In this way, a normal social process, socialization, can lead normal people to commit deviance.

Sutherland’s theory of differential association was one of the most influential sociological theories ever. Over the years much research has documented the importance of adolescents’ peer relationships for their entrance into the world of drugs and delinquency (Akers & Sellers, 2008). Akers, R. L., & Sellers, C. S. (2008). Criminological theories: Introduction, evaluation, and application. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. However, some critics say that not all deviance results from the influences of deviant peers. Still, differential association theory and the larger category of learning theories it represents remain a valuable approach to understanding deviance and crime.

Techniques of Neutralization

Recall the view on deviant subcultures discussed earlier. Gresham M. Sykes and David Matza (1957) Sykes, G. M., & Matza, D. (1957). Techniques of neutralization: A theory of delinquency. American Sociological Review, 22, 664–670. said this view ignores the fact that adolescents who commit delinquency often feel guilty or ashamed for doing so. They thus must come up with justifications for why it is OK to commit deviance. In short, they must “neutralize” their potential guilt or shame. Sykes and Matza said five such rationalizations, or techniques of neutralization, exist.

The first is denial of responsibility. Youths rationalize that because outside forces, such as the influence of deviant friends, are prompting them to break the law, they are not responsible for doing so. The second technique of neutralization is denial of injury. Here youths contemplating law breaking reason that no one will really be hurt by their actions. The third rationalization is denial of the victim. Would-be delinquents reason that their potential victim deserves what is about to happen. A store’s prices are far too high, so you decide to steal from it. The fourth is condemnation of the condemners. In this technique of neutralization, youths condemn police and other aspects of society as hopelessly corrupt and in no position to criticize the youths’ own behavior. The final technique of neutralization is appeal to higher...
Loyalties. In this rationalization, potential lawbreakers reason that they need to break the law in order to help a friend, a family member, or another member of their primary groups.

Sykes and Matza’s theory has received mixed reviews. On the one hand, many adolescents undoubtedly do feel guilty about breaking the law and must engage in techniques of neutralization before they can do so. On the other hand, some delinquents may not rationalize their behavior until after they have already broken the law, which is not what Sykes and Matza thought (Hamlin, 1988). Hamlin, J. E. (1988). The misplaced role of rational choice in neutralization theory. *Criminology*, 267, 425–438. Critics also question Sykes and Matza’s assumption that delinquents feel guilty about their behavior.

**Labeling Theory**

If we arrest and imprison someone, we hope they will be “scared straight,” or deterred from committing a crime again. Labeling theory assumes precisely the opposite: it says that labeling someone deviant increases the chances that the labeled person will continue to commit deviance. According to labeling theory, this happens because the labeled person ends up with a deviant self-image that leads to even more deviance. Deviance is the result of being labeled (Bohm & Vogel, 2011). Bohm, R. M., & Vogel, B. (2011). *A primer on crime and delinquency theory* (3rd ed.). Manuscript submitted for publication.

This effect is reinforced by how society treats someone who has been labeled. Research shows that job applicants with a criminal record are much less likely than those without a record to be hired (Pager, 2009). Pager, D. (2009). *Marked: Race, crime, and finding work in an era of mass incarceration*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Suppose you had a criminal record and had seen the error of your ways but were rejected by several potential employers. Do you think you might be just a little frustrated? If your unemployment continues, might you think about committing a crime again? Meanwhile, you want to meet some law-abiding friends, so you go to a singles bar. You start talking with someone who interests you, and in response to this person’s question, you say you are between jobs. When your companion asks about your last job, you reply that you were in prison for armed robbery. How soon will it take for your companion to make an excuse like going to the bathroom, never to be seen again by you?

As this scenario suggests, being labeled deviant can make it difficult to avoid a continued life of deviance. Although this consequence seems very plausible, the empirical evidence of the effects of being labeled is actually mixed (Akers & Sellers, 2008). Akers, R. L., & Sellers, C. S. (2008). *Criminological theories: Introduction, evaluation, and application*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. Supporting labeling theory, some studies find that offenders treated more harshly by the criminal justice system are more apt to commit new offenses than those treated less harshly, but other studies find the opposite to be true. Still other studies find little effect of labeling one way or the other. Contrary to labeling theory, most studies also find that labeling does not worsen the self-image of those labeled.

*Figure 5.7*
Labeling theory assumes that someone who is labeled deviant will be more likely to commit deviance as a result.

One problem that ex-prisoners face after being released back into society is that potential employers do not want to hire them. This fact makes it more likely that they will commit new offenses.

Labeling theory also asks whether some people and behaviors are indeed more likely than others to acquire a deviant label. In particular, it asserts that nonlegal factors such as appearance, race, and social class affect how often official labeling occurs.

William Chambliss’s (1973) classic analysis of the “Saints” and the “Roughnecks” is an excellent example of this argument. The Saints were eight male high-school students from middle-class backgrounds who were very delinquent, while the Roughnecks were six male students in the same high school who were also very delinquent but who came from poor, working-class families. Although the Saints’ behavior was arguably more harmful than the Roughnecks’, their actions were considered harmless pranks, and they were never arrested. After graduating from high school, they went on to college and graduate and professional school and ended up in respectable careers. In contrast, the Roughnecks were widely viewed as troublemakers and often got into trouble for their behavior. As adults they either ended up in low-paying jobs or went to prison.

Although again labeling theory’s view of this process sounds quite plausible, empirical support for this view is in fact mixed. Some studies find that extralegal factors such as appearance, race, class, and gender do affect the chances of arrest and other official labeling, but other studies find these factors do not matter very much (Walker, Spohn, & DeLone, 2007). The color of justice: Race, ethnicity, and crime in America. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. Despite the mixed evidence for labeling theory’s two central assumptions on the effects of labeling and on possible biases in labeling, it has greatly influenced the study of deviance and crime in the last few decades and promises to do so for many years to come.
Conclusion

- Both biological and psychological explanations assume that deviance stems from problems arising inside the individual.
- Sociological explanations attribute deviance to various aspects of the social environment.
- Several functionalist explanations exist. Durkheim highlighted the functions that deviance serves for society. Merton’s strain theory assumed that deviance among the poor results from their inability to achieve the economic success so valued in American society. Other explanations highlight the role played by the social and physical characteristics of urban neighborhoods, of deviant subcultures, and of weak bonds to social institutions.
- Conflict explanations assume that the wealthy and powerful use the legal system to protect their own interests and to keep the poor and racial minorities subservient. Feminist perspectives highlight the importance of gender inequality for crimes against women and of male socialization for the gender difference in criminality.
- Interactionist explanations highlight the importance of social interaction in the commitment of deviance and in reactions to deviance. Labeling theory assumes that the labeling process helps ensure that someone will continue to commit deviance, and it also assumes that some people are more likely than others to be labeled deviant because of their appearance, race, social class, and other characteristics.

For Your Review

1. In what important way do biological and psychological explanations differ from sociological explanations?
2. What are any two functions of deviance according to Durkheim?
3. What are any two criminogenic social or physical characteristics of urban neighborhoods?
4. What are any two assumptions of feminist perspectives on deviance and crime?
5. According to labeling theory, what happens when someone is labeled as a deviant?