Deviance: Crash Course Sociology #18

Crash Course: Sociology
https://youtube.com/watch?v=BGq9zW9w3Fw
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/BGq9zW9w3Fw

A person holding up a convenience store and a pacifist at a protest might seem like polar opposites. But they actually have something in common. So do an American vegan preparing a meal at home and a white-collar criminal committing tax fraud and a runaway slave. They're all social deviants. We've spent a lot of time so far talking about how society fits together and how it functions, but we can't cover that in any meaningful way without also talking about the people who don't fit. We have to talk about who's "normal" and who's deviant and how they get to be that way.

theme music plays

Now, you might think that calling pacifists and vegans and runaway slaves 'deviant' is rude, but in sociology, deviance isn't an insult. Deviance simply means being non-normative: different. So, while this does include some things that we might think of as bad or harmful, like crime, it also includes things that we might just think of as outside the mainstream. So if eating a burger is a traditional "all-American" cultural activity, then being a vegan in America is deviant. But there's something important to notice here. I didn't say being a vegan in a society where most people eat meat is deviant, because deviance is not just a matter of numbers.

Deviance is anything that deviates from what people generally accept as normal. For instance, red hair is statistically uncommon, but it's not considered deviant. Dyeing your hair bright purple, that is deviant, and might earn you some strange looks from some people. And strange looks from strangers are a form of social control: attempts by society to regulate people's thought and behaviors in ways that limit, or punish, deviance.

Specificaly, the strange looks are what known as negative sanctions: negative social reactions to deviance. The opposite, naturally, are positive sanctions: affirmative reactions, usually in response to conformity. Once you start looking, you begin to see forms of social control, both positive and negative, everywhere. A friend making fun of your taste in food, or a teacher congratulating you on a good paper, or someone commenting loudly on your bright purple hair, sanctions all.

These are all examples of informal norms, or what sociologists call folkways. You won't be arrested for violating a folkway, but breaking them usually results in negative sanctions. But not all norm violations are informally sanctioned. Formal sanctioning of deviance occurs when norms are codified into law, and violation almost always results in negative sanctions from the criminal justice system - the police, the courts, and the prison system.

So given the power of formal sanctions, why does anyone do deviant things? This is a big question. Before we get to the sociological perspective, we need to mention some of the biological and psychological views of deviance that have been influential in the past.

Spoiler alert: historically these explanations have been insufficient in helping us understand non-normative behavior. For example, the earliest attempts at scientific explanations for deviance and crime in particular are biologically essentialist explanations. They were based on the idea that something about a person's essential biology made them deviant.

In 1876, Cesare Lombroso, an Italian physician, theorized that criminals were basically sub-human, throwbacks to a more primitive version of humanity. He went so far as to suggest that deviance could be singled out based on physical characteristics, like a low forehead, stocky build, and prominent jaw and cheekbones, all of which he saw as reminiscent of our primate cousins.

Another scientist, US psychologist William Sheldon, also found a relationship between general body type and criminality. In the 1940's and 50's, he studied body types and behavior and concluded that men who were more muscular and athletic were more likely to be criminally deviant.

We know today that the idea that physical features somehow correspond to criminality is just - no. It's wrong. But later work by Eleanor and Sheldon Glueck appeared to confirm what Sheldon's basic findings on muscularity and criminal aggression. However, they refused to ascribe their results to a biological explanation. They countered that a simple correlation between body type and criminality could not be taken as causal evidence.

Instead, they argued that this was an example of a self-fulfilling prophecy. People expect physically strong boys to be bullies, and so they encourage aggressive behavior in such boys. Large boys who have their bullying behavior positively sanctioned are encouraged to continue being aggressive, and some eventually grow up and engage in aggressive criminal behaviors.

Psychological approaches by contrast, place almost all the explanatory power in a person's environment. While some elements of personality may be inherited, psychologists generally see personality as a matter of socialization. So they see deviance as a matter of improper or failed socialization.

A classic example of this strain of psychological explanation is found in the 1967 work of Walter Reckless and Simon Dinitz. They studied boys who lived in an urban neighborhood known for its high rate of delinquency. Using the assessment of the boys' teachers, they grouped the youths into good boys and bad boys, and then interviewed them to construct psychological profiles.

They found that the so-called "good boys" had a strong conscience, were good at coping with frustration, and identified with conventional cultural norms. The "bad boys" on the other hand, were opposite on all counts.

Following the boys over time, Reckless and Dinitz found that the "good boys" had fewer run-ins with the police, and they attributed this to the boys' ability to control deviant impulses. This idea that deviance is essentially a matter of impulse control is called containment theory, or having a personality that contains deviant actions.

And containment theory has received support in recent research, including a 2011 study on 500 male fraternal twins that assessed their self-control, resilience, and ability to delay gratification. Researchers found that the brother who scored lower on these measures in childhood was more likely to be criminally deviant in adulthood.

Now, while we've seen that there's clearly value in both biological and psychological approaches, they're each also fundamentally limited. For example, both kinds of explanations link criminal deviance to individual factors, either of body or of mind, while leaving out other important factors like peer influence, or what opportunities for deviance different people might be exposed to. Plus, biological and psychological explanations only understand deviance as a matter of abnormality. Both approaches begin by looking for physical or mental irregularities, whereas more recent research suggests that most people who do deviant things, are both biologically and psychologically "normal," or to use a better word, let's say "typical."

Finally, neither biology nor psychology can answer the question of why the things that are deviant are considered deviant in the first place. Even if you could 100% prove that a certain abnormality caused people to be violent, not all violence is considered a form of

deviance - think boxing.

And here's where we can turn to a sociological approach, which sees deviance and criminality as the result of how society is structured. And here, the approach is based on three major ideas:

First is the idea that deviance varies according to cultural norms. In other words, nothing is inherently deviant. Cultural norms vary from culture to culture, and over time and place. So, what's deviant now might have once been quite normal.

Slavery is an obvious example. Not only was race-based slavery normal in 19th-century America, rejecting it was considered deviant. So deviant in fact, that physician Samuel Cartwright wrote about a disorder he called "drapetomania" to explain the supposed "mental disorder" that caused slaves to flee captivity.

The second major principle sociologists draw on is the idea that people are deviant because they're labeled as deviant. What I mean here is that it's society's response that defines us or our actions as deviant. The same action can be deviant or not depending on the context. Sleeping in a tent in a public place can be illegal, or it can be a fun weekend activity depending on where you do it.

And, as the Gluecks argued, labeling people can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. When society treats you as deviant, it's very easy to become one. Deviance doesn't even necessarily require action. Simply being a member of a member of a group can classify you as a deviant in the eyes of society.

The rich may view the poor with disdain or imagined moral failures, or we can turn again to racism and slavery which imagined African Americans as deviant by nature.

And the last major sociological principle for understanding deviance is the idea that defining social norms involves social power. The law is many things, but Karl Marx argued that one of its roles is as a means for the powerful elite to protect their own interests.

This is obvious in the case of something like fugitive slave laws, which applied a formal negative sanction to deviating from the norms of slavery. But we can also see it in things like the difference between a campaign rally and a spontaneous protest. Both are public political speech, and both may block traffic, but they draw resoundingly different reactions from police.

So these are three foundational ideas about the sociological perspective on deviance, but I want to stress that they only begin to define a perspective. Sociology clearly understands deviance in a different way than biology and psychology do. But if you really want to dive into more detailed sociological explanations, you'll need to wait until next week when we look at the major theoretical explanations for crime and deviance.

Today we learned about social deviance. We discussed biological and psychological approaches to explaining deviance, what they can bring to the table, and their inherent limitations. Then we finished by turning to the sociological perspective and talking about the social foundations of deviance.

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