SoS in Lifelong education extension and social work 2nd semester

Theories of Deviance (psychological perspective of social work)

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Social deviance is a phenomenon that has existed in all societies where there have been norms. There are two possibilities for how an individual will act in the face of **social** norms; conform or violate. There are implicit **social** norms and explicit **social** norms.

- **Key Points**
- Deviant behavior may violate formally-enacted rules or informal social norms.
- Formal deviance includes criminal violation of formally-enacted laws. Examples of formal deviance include robbery, theft, rape, murder, and assault.

- Informal deviance refers to violations of informal social norms, which are norms that have not been codified into law. Examples of informal deviance include picking one’s nose, belching loudly, or standing unnecessarily close to another person.
- Deviance can vary dramatically across cultures. Cultural norms are relative, which makes deviant behavior relative as well.

Deviance, in a sociological context, describes actions or behaviors that violate informal social norms or formally-enacted rules. Among those who study social norms and their relation to deviance are sociologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, and criminologists, all of whom investigate how norms change and are enforced over time.

Major theories related to deviance

- A number of theories related to deviance and criminology have emerged within the past 50 years or so. Four of the most well-known follow.
- Differential- association theory
- Anomie theory
- Control theory
- Labeling theory

Differential-Association Theory

- **Edwin Sutherland** coined the phrase **differential association** to address the issue of how people *learn* deviance. According to this theory, the environment plays a major role in deciding which norms people learn to violate. Specifically, people within a particular reference group provide norms of conformity and deviance, and thus heavily influence the way other people look at the world, including how they react.

People also learn their norms from various socializing agents—parents, teachers, ministers, family, friends, co-workers, and the media. In short, people learn criminal behavior, like other behaviors, from their interactions with others, especially in intimate groups.The differential-association theory applies to many types of deviant behavior. For example, juvenile gangs provide an environment in which young people learn to become criminals. These gangs define themselves as countercultural and glorify violence, retaliation, and crime as means to

Differential-association theory has contributed to the field of criminology in its focus on the developmental nature of criminality. People learn deviance from the people with whom they associate. Critics of the differential-association theory, on the other hand, claim the vagueness of the theory's terminology does not lend itself to social science research methods or empirical validation.

Anomie Theory

- **Anomie** refers to the confusion that arises when social norms conflict or don't even exist. In the 1960s, **Robert Merton** used the term to describe the differences between socially accepted goals and the availability of means to achieve those goals. Merton stressed, for instance, that attaining wealth is a major goal of Americans, but not all Americans possess the means to do this, especially members of minority and disadvantaged groups.

Those who find the “road to riches” closed to them experience anomie, because an obstacle has thwarted their pursuit of a socially approved goal. When this happens, these individuals may employ deviant behaviors to attain their goals, retaliate against society, or merely “make a point.”

- The primary contribution of anomie theory is its ability to explain many forms of deviance. The theory is also sociological in its emphasis on the role of social forces in creating deviance. On the negative side, anomie theory has been criticized for its generality. Critics note the theory's lack of statements concerning the process of learning deviance, including the internal motivators for deviance.

Control Theory

- According to **Walter Reckless's control theory**, both inner and outer controls work against deviant tendencies. People may want—at least some of the time—to act in deviant ways, but most do not. They have various restraints: internal controls, such as conscience, values, integrity, morality, and the desire to be a “good person”; and *outer controls*, such as police, family, friends, and religious authorities. **Travis Hirschi** noted that these inner and outer restraints form a person's **self-control**, which prevents acting against social norms. The key to developing self-control is proper socialization, especially early in childhood.

Children who lack this self-control, then, may grow up to commit crimes and other deviant behaviors.Whereas theory also suggests that people society labels as “criminals” are probably members of subordinate groups, critics argue that this oversimplifies the situation. As examples, they cite wealthy and powerful businesspeople, politicians, and others who commit crimes. Critics also argue that conflict theory does little to explain the causes of deviance.

Labeling Theory

- A type of symbolic interaction, **labeling theory** concerns the meanings people derive from one another's labels, symbols, actions, and reactions. This theory holds that behaviors are deviant only when society labels them as deviant. As such, conforming members of society, who interpret certain behaviors as deviant and then attach this label to individuals, determine the distinction between deviance and non-deviance.

Labeling theory questions who applies what label to whom, why they do this, and what happens as a result of this labeling.Powerful individuals within society—politicians, judges, police officers, medical doctors, and so forth—typically impose the most significant labels. Labeled persons may include drug addicts, alcoholics, criminals, delinquents, prostitutes, sex offenders, retarded people, and psychiatric patients, to mention a few.

The consequences of being labeled as deviant can be far-reaching. Social research indicates that those who have negative labels usually have lower self-images, are more likely to reject themselves, and may even act more deviantly as a result of the label. Unfortunately, people who accept the *labeling of others*—be it correct or incorrect—have a difficult time changing their opinions of the labeled person, even in light of evidence to the contrary.