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Theoretical Approaches to Deviant Behavior

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Abstract: This article, entitled “Theoretical Approaches to Deviant Behavior”, highlights the main theories of deviant behavior. Sociological approaches can identify personality traits that, in certain contexts of social learning and experience, predispose certain individuals to turn their attention to delinquent acts.

Keywords: deviant behavior; structural functionalism; theory of conflict; labeling theory; atavism; penology

Introduction

Deviant behavior is described as any behavior that does not comply with the dominant rules of society. There are many theories that explain why behavior comes to be classified as deviant and why people engage in it.

There are four main sociological theories of deviant behavior. The general reaction behind generating such behavior is *frustration*. A first sociological theory is the typology of social deformation, developed by the American sociologist Robert K. Merton (1957) (Merton, 1968, p. 698). Merton proposed a typology of deviant behavior, a classification scheme designed to facilitate understanding. The typology of Merton’s deviance was based on two criteria: (1) a person’s motivations or

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adherence to cultural goals; (2) a person's belief in how to achieve their goals. According to Merton, there are five types of deviance based on these criteria: *conformity, innovation, ritualism, withdrawal, and rebellion*. Merton's typology is fascinating as it suggests that people can use deviance to pursue widely accepted social values and goals. For example, people who sell illegal drugs have rejected culturally acceptable means of making money, but still share the widely accepted cultural value of making money. Thus, deviance may be the result of accepting one rule but violating another in order to pursue the former.

The second main sociological explanation of deviance comes from *structural functionalism* (Voinea & Bulzan, 2013, p. 111). This approach argues that deviant behavior plays an active, constructive role in society, ultimately helping to correct different populations in a given society. Deviance helps to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. It draws lines and delimits borders. This is an important function that states the values and cultural norms of a society for the members of that society. In addition to clarifying the moral boundaries of society, deviant behavior can also promote social unity by creating a "We Versus Them" mentality in relation to deviant individuals. Ultimately, deviance is actually seen as a means by which society can change over time. Deviant behavior can unbalance social stability, but – in the process of restoring balance – society will adjust the rules. With changing norms in response to deviance, deviant behavior can contribute to long-term social stability.

The third major sociological theory of deviance is the *theory of conflict*. Conflict theory suggests that deviant behavior results from social, political, or material inequalities of a social group. In response to these inequalities, certain groups will act deviantly to change their circumstances, to change the social structure that gave rise to their circumstances, or just to "act" against their oppressors. An example of conflict theory would be the Occupy Wall Street movement that began in the fall of 2011¹. Furious at the extreme financial inequality in the United States, protesters began holding several protests in Zuccotti Park – near Wall Street in New York City – to protest against the generous livelihoods of those at the top of the socio-economic ladder. Protesters deviated from social norms to articulate dissatisfaction against the extremely rich. Their actions and perspectives demonstrate the use of conflict theory to explain social deviance.

¹ Adevărul, Mișcarea/ The truth, the movement, "Occupy Wall Street" [cited 4.02.2022], available: https://adevarul.ro/economie/stiri-economie/miscarea-occupy-wall-street-extinde-lumea-1_50ba05907c42d5a663b0626e/index.html.

Howard Becker's *labeling theory* (Becker, 1963) refers to the idea that individuals become deviant when a deviant label is applied to them; they adopt the label by setting out the behaviors, actions, and attitudes associated with the label. Labeling theory holds that people become deviant because others force that identity on them. This process works because of the stigma; when applying a deviant label, a stigmatized identity is attached to the labeled person.

The labeling theory allows us to understand how the past behaviors of a deviant labeled individual are reinterpreted according to their label. This process of reforming past actions in the light of a current deviant identity is called "retrospective labeling." A clear example of retrospective labeling is the way in which the perpetrators of the high school massacres were rehabilitated after the incidents took place. Much of their shooting behavior has been reinterpreted in light of the deviant identity with which they were labeled as a result of the shootings.

A biological theory of deviance proposes that an individual deviates from social norms largely due to genetics. The theory is primarily about formal deviance, using biological reasons to explain crime, although it can certainly be extended to informal deviance.

A biological interpretation of formal deviance was first advanced by the Italian School of Criminology, a school of thought in the mid-nineteenth century. The school was run by criminologist Cesare Lombroso (Lombroso, 1992, p. 158), who argued that crime is a biological trait found in some human beings. Enrico Ferri (Ferri, 1940, p. 304) and Raffaello Garofalo (Garofalo, 1885) continued the legacy of the Italian school, as Lombroso's predecessors. The Italian school was interested in why some individuals were involved in criminal behavior and others were not. Their explanation was that some individuals had a biological penchant for murder.

The term Lombroso used to describe the appearance of ancestral life-like organisms is *atavism*. He believed that atavism was a sign of inherent crime, and therefore saw criminals born as a form of human subspecies. Lombroso believed that atavism could be identified by a number of measurable physical stigmas – a prominent jaw, drooping eyes, large ears, a twisted, flat nose, long arms relative to the lower limbs, sloping shoulders. The concept of atavism was blatantly wrong, but like many others in his day, Lombroso sought to understand behavioral phenomena with reference to the principles of evolution as they were understood at the time.

Lombroso's work was continued by the study of *penology* by Enrico Ferri (Ferri, 1940, p. 304), the criminology section that deals with the philosophy and practice of

different societies in their attempt to suppress criminal activities. Ferri's work in the field of penology was essential in developing the justification for "social defense" for the detention of convicted people. Ferri argued that anyone convicted of a crime should be detained for as long as possible. According to Ferri, if individuals committed crimes because of their biological constitution, what was the purpose of discouraging or rehabilitating them? For Ferri, none of these therapeutic interventions could change the biology of the offender, making them useless. After a person was convicted of a crime, the state's responsibility was to protect the community and prevent the killer from doing more harm – as his biology determined he would do.

Garofalo is probably best known for his efforts to formulate a "natural" definition of crime. Classical thinkers have uncritically accepted the legal definition of crime; crime is what the law says. This seemed quite arbitrary and "unscientific" to Garofalo (Ciobanu, 2003, p. 254), who wanted to anchor the definition of crime in something natural. The most significant was Garofalo's reformulation of the classical notions of crime and his redefinition of crime as a violation of natural law or a human universal.

A human universal is a trait, characteristic, or behavior that exists between cultures, regardless of the nuances of a given context. A famous example of the universal is the incest taboo. Except for a very small number of small communities, all human cultures have a taboo against incest in some form. Garofalo's presentation of the crime as a violation of a human universal allows criminals to be characterized as unnatural. As soon as the criminals are marked as inhuman or unnatural, the public is allowed to consider an individual convicted of a crime as completely different from the rest of society; a whole new range of punishments is allowed, including severe social stigma. The biological explanations of the Italian school did not resonate in the American criminal justice systems. However, some traces still exist.

Nowadays, the conversation about crime and biological explanations focuses more on the relationship between genetics and crime than on the relationship between phenotypic characteristics and crime. As the emphasis is on real genetics rather than phenotypic gene expression, stereotyping individuals with "criminal" traits or inclinations is more difficult. For example, when you walk down the street, you can tell who has a prominent jaw, but you can't tell who has the genetic combination that increases the tendency to aggression. Although the debate has changed, a biological explanation for deviance and crime is still commonplace.

Psychological theories of deviance use the psychology of a deviant to explain his motivation and compulsion to violate social norms. In many ways, psychological theories of deviance mirror biological explanations, with only an additional emphasis on brain function. While historical biological explanations, such as those offered by the Italian school, have used biological features of the whole body (e.g., prominent jaws, large ears) as signifiers of a biological propensity for criminal behavior, today's psychological theories of deviance use brain biology (in terms of brain structure, neurotransmitter levels and psychiatric diagnoses) to explain deviance.

While psychiatric diagnoses are commonly used to explain deviance, we must remember that what matters as a legitimate diagnosis is always in dispute. DSM, the manual recognized by the psychological community as a legitimate psychiatric diagnosis, is a revised manual. An example of the importance of these reviews: homosexuality was included in the DSM¹ as a psychiatric condition. Thus, until its elimination in 1986, homosexuality (psychological condition) could have been a psychological explanation for deviant sexuality. However, since its removal from the DSM, homosexuality is no longer recognized as a legitimate psychiatric condition, and therefore homosexuality-as-a-psychiatric-condition now denied has no explanatory role in terms of deviant sexuality. This demonstrates the fluctuating nature of psychological theories of deviance.

Theoretical Conclusions

The analysis of the most important theoretical approaches to deviant behavior finds its necessity in trying to understand the causes that determine non-compliant behavior that is not approved by society. These theories explain why behavior comes to be classified as deviant and why people engage in it. Each of the above theories contributes to the understanding of some aspects of deviant behavior.

¹ DSM - *Manual de Diagnostic și statistică a Tulburărilor Mentale/ Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Available: <https://ro.scribd.com/doc/103683503/1-Dsm-IV-Tr-Romana>.

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