How Would You Define Deviance?

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How would you define deviance, and which theories would you use to guide your definition?

In any society, various social norms range from formally structured rules and laws to widely recognized behavioural standards. These norms may vary across cultures, groups, and societies. Any behavioural conduct that does not conform to these standards, rules, and laws can be termed deviant. Referred to as rule-breaking behaviour, deviance is an inevitable part of society that occurs when an individual or a group displays non-conformance towards established models of behaviour, most often to achieve personal goals or interests. However, criminal behaviour is a form of deviance. However, not all deviant conduct can be considered a crime. Only when societal laws are broken can behaviour be regarded as criminal. While piercing body parts, picking one's nose in a public place, or opposing a political party may be termed as non-conformance of socially acceptable behaviour, none of these actions is punishable by law. On the contrary, robbery, rape, murder, theft, and assault fall under the category of serious offences that are punishable by law. It is important to note that in certain situations, what is considered deviant by one group may not be regarded as deviant by another (Thompson, 2020).

Numerous theories have been put forth over the years to explain deviant behaviour. Various functionalist perspectives can be used to guide the definition of deviance stated above. The Anomie theory was proposed by Emile Durkheim, who viewed deviant behaviour as a central part of society. According to the Anomie theory, innovation takes place in societies as a result of non-conformance. It is through non-conformance that the acceptable standards are defined and clarified. Robert Merton's strain theory explains deviance as a result of social situations that hinder goal achievement through traditional methods. Uneven distribution of wealth and privilege leads to frustration among the masses, hence forcing individuals to deviate through innovation and rebellion. Another functionalist perspective was presented by Travis Hirschi through Social Control Theory. Focusing on selfish human nature, the sociologist shared his disbelief that people abide by social norms and associated conformance with strong social ties to social institutions such as schools and families. Therefore, individuals with weak social associations, such as unhealthy relationships with parents, are more prone to exhibiting deviant behaviour (Abrams, 2018).

Another school of thought that drives the definition of deviance is Symbolic Interactionism. Edwin H. Sutherland proposed the Differential Association theory, which describes non-conformance as a

learned behaviour that arises from the process of socialization. Interaction with friends and family not only develops deviance but also teaches rationalizations to justify lawbreaking. It is, therefore, one's association with deviant individuals earlier in life that creates non-conformance at a later stage. Labelling theory postulates that deviance is a result of being labelled (Bohm & Vogel, 2011). Deviants live up to the self-image attributed to them by society, and their behaviour is reinforced due to the marginalized treatment directed towards them. This labelling is imposed by powerful individuals such as judges, politicians, and doctors, among others. Individuals may be labelled as sex offenders, drug addicts, prostitutes, etc., depending upon the deviant behaviour exhibited. Other non-legal factors such as race, physical appearance, and social class also affect how labelling occurs and influence the self-image of individuals (Abrams, 2018). Conclusively, deviance is an imperative part of any society influenced by socialization and social segregation, which ensures that acceptable standards are reinforced.

How is deviance measured? Do you see any difficulties with the methodology?

Deviance or delinquent behaviour can be commonly measured through the use of two methods. The first method considers the official records of any convictions for crimes committed, and the second method is through the measure of self-reporting. The greatest advantage of official records is their high reliability, whereas self-reports benefit in terms of detecting a vast range of behaviours, both in terms of seriousness and frequency of the non-conforming behaviour (Sanches, Gouveia-Pereira, Maroco, Gomes, & Roncon, 2016). With various studies accounting for the validity of self-reports, this method is most often utilized in psychological research to gauge delinquency and deviance (Webb, Katz, & Decker, 2006).

Three types of self-reporting scales are commonly used to measure deviance. These focus on measuring either the frequency, the variety, or the seriousness of the non-conforming behaviour. While the frequency scales gauge the number of times each deviant act is committed over a particular period, the seriousness scales measure the seriousness and severity of these behaviours. Developed by experts in the field, seriousness scales segregate offences into two or, in some cases, three categories, i.e., serious, moderate, and minor offences. The level of the most serious offence determines the label attributed to individuals. The variety scales are used to quantify the different types of deviance committed by a person over a certain time. Each item on the variety scale deals with a particular type of infraction.

Since deviance is a behavioural outcome, it can not be measured with a hundred per cent accuracy. The methods availed to measure deviant behaviour can, however, provide an overview of the situation. Although the official records and self-report measures provide insight into the prevalence and degree of various offences, there are certain difficulties and disadvantages associated with these methods. The official records are often an over-representation of the most serious forms of deviance

and may highlight only the most criminally severe offenders, especially the ones caught and convicted. Such records may not account much for unregistered deviances and may underrepresent minor and moderate offences. Similarly, many consider self-reports to be less reliable as such reports lack objectivity, may be influenced by bias, and may be negatively impacted by the memory of the incident and a need to conceal facts.

The frequency scale is the most widely used tool in deviance research. However, recent research has highlighted its shortcomings, such as low internal consistency and stability over time, highly skewed data, and a rather difficult item pool. The frequency scales present a disadvantage due to their low group differences and a weaker association with conceptual variables. The frequency scale may also over-represent minor offences based on their high frequency of incidence. In contrast, the variety scales are attributed to superiority due to higher internal consistency and stability over time (Bendixen, Endresen, & Olweus, 2010). Variety scales also utilize simpler answering formats, making them time-efficient and reducing the incidence of guessing. Over the years, frequency scales have gained a reputation for being more reliable and valid.

While there are means to measure deviance, its difficulties arise due to its behavioural context and varied interpretations from different structures of society. While deviant behaviour may hold significant importance in one context, it may be disregarded in another. Quantifying behaviour may lack the necessary objectivity. Misrepresentation of facts due to poor memory and the need to be considered socially acceptable may also hinder truthful responses on self-reports. Although a certain level of subjectivity can be achieved through focused group discussions and observations, these accounts can not be completely reliable since they are open to human interpretation. It can therefore be established that the measurement of deviance through official records and self-report, although it may have certain disadvantages, can be utilized to create an outline of the prevalence, seriousness, and types of deviance occurring within society.

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