

Sociological Theories of Deviance: Definitions & Considerations

NCSS Strands: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Time, Continuity, and Change

Grade level: 9-12

Class periods needed: 1.5- 50 minute periods

Purpose, Background, and Context

Sociologists seek to understand how and why deviance occurs within a society. They do this by developing theories that explain factors impacting deviance on a wide scale such as social frustrations, socialization, social learning, and the impact of labeling. Four main theories have developed in the last 50 years.

- ❖ **Anomie:** Deviance is caused by anomie, or the feeling that society's goals or the means to achieve them are closed to the person
- ❖ **Control:** Deviance exists because of improper socialization, which results in a lack of self-control for the person
- ❖ **Differential association:** People learn deviance from associating with others who act in deviant ways
- ❖ **Labeling:** Deviant behavior depends on who is defining it, and the people in our society who define deviance are usually those in positions of power

Students will participate in a "jigsaw" where they will become knowledgeable in one theory and then share their knowledge with the rest of the class. After all theories have been presented, the class will use the theories to explain an historic example of socially deviant behavior: Zoot Suit Riots.

Objectives & Student Outcomes

Students will:

- ❖ Be able to define the concepts of social norms and deviance

- ❖ Brainstorm behaviors that fit along a continuum from informal to formal deviance
- ❖ Learn four sociological theories of deviance by reading, listening, constructing hypotheticals, and questioning classmates
- ❖ Apply theories of deviance to Zoot Suit Riots that occurred in the 1943
- ❖ Examine the role of social norms for individuals, groups, and institutions and how they are reinforced to maintain a order within a society; examine disorder/deviance within a society (NCSS Standards, p. 42-43)

Materials

- ❖ Handouts for each theory
- ❖ Worksheet for recording information about three other theories
- ❖ “Irish women drinking” image (from a greeting card)
- ❖ Zoot Suit desktop documentary found at:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-BhkhOAt1I>

Procedures

Day One

Procedure 1: Hook and definitions

Display the St. Patrick’s Day greeting card depicting two Irish immigrant women drinking beer with the caption “To heck with corn beef and cabbage!” Ask students to explain why the card is humorous. Point out the time period, the activities depicted in the photo and alluded to by the caption, and ask students about societal expectations for women during the time period.

Move on to the definition of societal norms and deviance, explaining that deviance takes place when an individual(s) enact behaviors that disturb a social system in ways that threaten the stability of that system. While we find humorous the women drinking beer, “real” women of the time would have been regarded as deviant for behaving irresponsibly and violating society’s expectations for women.

Procedure 2: Learn a theory

Divide students into carefully formed groups of three or four. Distribute one of the four theories or concepts to each group: anomie; control; differential association and labeling.

Explain to the students that we will now study some theories that sociologists have used to explain why deviance occurs in a society. In their groups, students should examine one theory of deviance by reading the worksheet and collectively answering the questions. Groups will be responsible for briefly describing their theory to the rest of the class.

Procedure 3: Share theories

Each group will use the Smartboard to briefly present their theory to the rest of the class. Presentations should include key ideas, definitions, or diagrams along with a one-sentence statement of the theory and an explanation of eradicating deviance according to the theory. Student audience members will record information presented by their classmates on a “Theories of Deviance” worksheet.

Day Two

Procedure 4: Zoot Suit Riots

The Zoot Suit Riots of 1943 provide an historic example of deviance for which multiple sociological theories apply. A counterculture emerged during the 1930s and 1940s that included new music, dancing, and dress- the zoot suit. Mexican American youth in Los Angeles and African American youth in New York City adopted the ostentatious zoot style that included draped pants, wide-brimmed hats, long jackets, shiny shoes, and (sometimes) bold colors. Wearing the zoot suit was a source of pride for many minority youth, providing a sense of identity and belonging. This type of dress ran counter to the notion that a nation at war needed to practice conservatism and its citizens should focus on “producing” for the war effort through work (and not leisure). However, due to prejudice and discrimination, many employers throughout Los Angeles wouldn’t hire Mexican American or African American workers. Further, minorities who

joined the military were often relegated to the lowest ranks; in fact, African Americans were barred from joining the Marines.

These tensions became violent on weekends in Los Angeles when thousands of Navy men on-leave crowded into the city's entertainment venues, mixing with zoot-suiters. Allegations of provocation from both sides ensued and, in short, these animosities erupted in riots that lasted for about a week where Mexican American youth wearing zoot attire were beaten by whites and stripped of their clothing.

After watching a brief desktop documentary called "The Power of the Zoot Suit," students will engage in class discussion of two key questions: "*What behaviors could be classified as deviant during the Zoot Suit Riots?*" and "*How might sociologists explain the deviance that occurred in 1943?*"

Assessment of Outcomes

Students will:

- ❖ Contribute to group work by discussing a theory of deviance and presenting to the rest of the class
- ❖ Record the presentations on three other theories on a worksheet to be handed in for assessment
- ❖ Participate in class discussion that applies the sociological theories of deviance to an historic event: the Zoot Suit Riots
- ❖ Journal about one or more theory of deviance, citing examples from their own life or choosing a typical adolescent behavior deemed "deviant" by adults

Extensions and Adaptations

Students can write a fictional account from the perspective of an adolescent that describes deviant behavior and a reflection on its causes in the spirit of a particular sociological theory of deviance.

Students can seek an additional historical example of deviance, gather photos of the event, and record narration that explains the deviance in terms of sociological theory.

Resources

CliffsNotes.com. *Theories of Deviance*. 21 Feb

2012<http://www.cliffsnotes.com/study_guide/topicArticleId-26957,articleId-26873.html>.

National Council for the Social Studies. (2010). *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A framework for teaching, learning, and assessment*. Silver Springs, MD: NCSS.

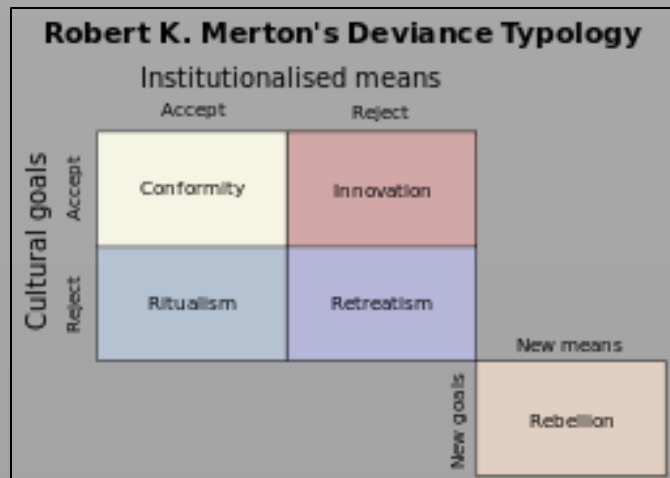
“Social Strain Theory.” Image.

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AMertons_social_strain_theory.svg.

Sociological Theories of Deviance

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.”



If we consider the goal of achieving wealth, Merton would say that a banker fits under the typology of conformity. What type of person might fit into the other typologies?

Ritualism-

Innovation-

Retreatism-

Rebellion-

According to this theory, how might society eradicate deviance?

Explain this theory of deviance in one sentence.

Sociological Theories of Deviance

Control theory

According to **Walter Reckless' 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.

What kinds of social situations might lead to the lack of internal or external controls?

According to this theory, how might society eradicate deviance?

Explain this theory of deviance in one sentence.

Sociological Theories of Deviance

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 achieving social status. Gang members learn to be deviant as they embrace and conform to their gang's norms.

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.

Describe a fictional situation that takes place in Iowa City where deviance could be explained using this theory.

According to this theory, how might society eradicate deviance?

Explain this theory of deviance in one sentence.

Sociological Theories 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, 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.

Describe two hypothetical situations, one in which the labeling of deviance helps society and another where it hurts society.

According to this theory, how might society eradicate deviance?

Explain this theory of deviance in one sentence.

Sociological Theories of Deviance

Record the three theories your group did not receive and their key components

Key components

Key components

Key components