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Social Structure and Deviance

Introduction: Social Structure and Social Control

S. Pfohl (1994) described the history of Deviance and social control as a "battle story." He explained it as a "battle to control the ways people think, feel, and behave" (p. 3). Those who "win" were viewed as the "good", as acceptable, and as symbols of normality. The "losers", on the other hand, were viewed as living outside the boundaries of established social structure. They come to be known as the "evil", the criminal, the perverted, and the "Deviant".

The "battle" (Pfohl, 1994) can be seen as being fought on three fronts. The first front can be viewed as everyday social rituals that attempt to "force" conformity (e.g., religion, education, parenting, suggested lifestyles). Emile Durkheim (1893) referred to this as a person being indoctrinated into the "collective conscience." Once Deviance is identified and labeled as such, a second front of attack begins. The various "agents of containment" (Pfohl, 1994) come into play. Police, clergy, teachers, doctors, and the like, begin to "contain" the Deviance and eradicate it from society. Finally, the third front, one which is often at odds with the first "attacks", involves the theorists and researchers attempting to explain the behavior. This front is designed to understand the behavior in order to identify ways to cure, contain, or control "Deviant" behavior.

Social Structure and Deviance

Emile Durkheim (1897) was one of the first to point out the connections between social structure and Deviance. Durkheim stated that during periods of disruptions of the traditional structure, a state of Anomie, or normlessness, would prevail. The state of Anomie would cause the societal norms to no longer hold or contain the members of a society. He felt that during

these periods, the norms and customs of the predominant social structure would no longer guide individual behavior. Lust and greed would then take over and allow individuals to become involved in Deviance.

Robert Merton (1938) believed examining how individuals adjust or adapt to a given social structure would identify the connection between social structure and Deviance. Merton offered five ways in which individuals adjust or adapt to a given social structure: (1) Conformity (i.e., accepting the existing cultural goals and institutionalized means); (2) Innovation (i.e., accepting the cultural goals, but rejecting the existing institutionalized means – instead resorting to crime to obtain the means); (3) Ritualism (i.e., rejecting any hopes of obtaining cultural goals, but accepting institutionalized means); (4) Retreatism (i.e., rejecting of both the goals and means); and (5) Rebellion (i.e., accepting of self-defined goals and means). Deviance is therefore a result of either the Innovation or Rebellion form of adaptation.

Howard S. Becker (1963) also discussed the impact of social structure and Deviance. H believed all social groups would make rules in an attempt to regulate behavior by identifying behavior that is "right" and that which is "wrong". Those who commit wrong behaviors are identified as Deviant and "outside" of the given social structure. Becker believed once outside the given social structure, there was no real need to conform, thus increased Deviance was a natural result.

Erich Goode (1981) discussed the "normative" definition of Deviance in attempting to examine the connections between social structure and Deviance. Under this definition, an external observer can determine Deviance simply by evaluating the behavior against the given society's norms and customs. If a behavior violates the dominant norms of a social structure, it

is Deviant. It is not important whether an act is observed or labeled by a member of that society, simply that it contradicts a given normative code.

S. Messner and R. Rosenfeld (1994) present an interesting view of the pursuit of the "American Dream", the dominant social structure in the United States, and Deviance. They argued the concept of the American Dream has an inherent dark side. This dark side is the belief that with the pursuit of the culturally defined goals comes "ambition", and with this often comes Deviant behaviors. Any social structure, which places an emphasis on achievement and success, will generate pressures to succeed at any cost. This individual competition can often generate conflict that is fertile grounds for Deviant behavior. Messner and Rosenfeld believed this competition combined with the fact that not all individuals in a given social structure are "equal" (e.g., economic inequality), causes a serious dilemma for many involved. Criminal or Deviant behavior may be the only way some segments of the population can "compete" or attempt to obtain the American Dream.

Social Structure and Control Theory

Most Criminological theory in existence attempts to explain the cause of Deviant behavior. Control theorists approach the problem from the opposite direction and try to explain what causes people to conform. It is thought that if one can figure out what causes conformity, it can, in turn, be determined what causes Deviance. In other words, Deviance is simply caused by the absence of what causes conformity. "Social control" over the individual is what causes conformity under this line of thinking. Therefore, the absence of social control causes Deviance. When examining Control Theory, three primary theorists come to mind: Walter Reckless, Ivan Nye, and Travis Hirschi.

First is Walter Reckless (1973) and what he has termed "Containment Theory." In this theory, Reckless assumed there were powerful forces pushing the individual to a Deviant course of action. This "pushing" was said to be sociological forces such as "poverty or depravation, conflict and discord, external restraint, minority group status, and limited access to success in an opportunity structure" (p. 59). He also discussed the ideas of Inner Containment and Outer Containment. Inner Containment consists of such things as self-control, good self-concept, and well-developed superego. Outer Containment consists of such things as institutional reinforcement, norms, and social expectations.

In contrast, Ivan Nye (1958) assumed there were also powerful forces that push individuals toward Deviance. Nye relied heavily upon Freudian psychology and pointed toward the idea that since all humans are born with the same animal instincts, people have a natural tendency to break social norms. Control, to him, was that society uses its social structure to control individuals, thereby suppressing one's animal instincts. Social control, according to Nye consisted of Internal Control (e.g., one's own conscious); Indirect Control (e.g., seeking of parental approval); Direct Control (e.g., police and parental authority); and Legitimate Need for Satisfaction (e.g., legitimate means exist in the social structure for one's success).

Finally, Travis Hirschi (1969), like Nye, believed humans being "animals" were endowed with the ability to commit Deviant acts. It is only the strength of one's "bond" to society which determined if a Deviant act would be committed or not. Hirschi believed there were four elements to one's bond to society: (1) his or her Attachment to others; (2) his or her Commitment to conformity; (3) his or her Involvement in conventional activities; and (4) his or her Belief in the moral validity of social rules.

Conclusion

Crime, delinquency, and Deviant behavior are part of the human experience. They have existed throughout the history of mankind and will, with all probability, continue well into the future. Even with the myriad of Criminologists, philosophers, and Sociologists who have examined the phenomena of Deviance, it often seems that little insight into the actual causes have been developed. In regards to its connection to and impact upon social structure, much mixed opinion still remains. Many believe Deviance is something a social structure brings upon itself by labeling certain behaviors as "wrong" and not allowed. Deviance, therefore, is an inherent byproduct of social structure in any form. Some view Deviance as something which "attacks" a social structure and something that must be eradicated before it spreads. Still others view Deviance, to a degree, as healthy to social structure. It helps solidify social structure by allowing members to develop a social conscious and establish a common view of Deviance and methods to control it. A possibly controversial aspect of some of these views is that some types of Deviance are needed in order to facilitate change and innovation in a social structure. Either way, as long as there is any social structure, there will be those who neither support nor recognize it – they will always be the Deviants.

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