

# Encyclopedia of Identity

## Deviance

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The study of identity has, for a long time, entailed how people deal with similarity and dissimilarity to others. In particular, theories focus on whether people prefer to be part of a group or to be distinctive and unique. *Deviance* describes situations in which people break social rules and conventions. From an identity perspective, there are many motives and causes for engaging in deviant behavior and there are also causes for defining other people's behavior as deviant. This entry explores the identity perspective of deviance from two main points of view: sociological and psychological.

## Sociological Perspectives

Sociologists have analyzed how social order is sustained both in society as a whole, through laws, institutions, and distribution of wealth, and through microsociological mechanisms of personal relationships, roles, and influence. Society depends on social order, which must be maintained by ensuring individuals comply with consensual rules when it is important to do so. Most everyday actions, such as buying and selling items, arriving for work in the morning, driving a car, and greeting people, are governed by clear social rules. Understanding and following these rules is essential for the smooth running of society. If people disregarded these rules, social order would break down. Erich Fromm argued that society depends on people being motivated to conform to social conventions and laws.

## Anomie

Émile Durkheim viewed deviance as a social fact, an inevitable part of how society functions. He argued that deviance is a basis for change and innovation, and it is also a way of defining or clarifying important social norms. One reason that people engage in deviant behavior may be a state of anomie, which is the absence of clear social norms. For people to understand what these norms are, the rules need to be tested occasionally. As an example, among stock market speculators, the [p. 214 ↓ ] boundary between clever dealing and improper dealing is defined by laws. Sometimes individuals are prosecuted legally (such as Enron's Ken Lay, or Nick Leeson, the rogue trader

from Barings Bank). Most of the time, however, inappropriate behavior is likely to be regulated by informal social processes. The groups surrounding these individuals are likely to put pressure on them to behave in line with relevant norms.

But Durkheim's point is that unless we have a clear idea of where the boundaries of acceptable behavior lie, it is difficult for us to be aware of the norms. As a simple example, in different countries, there are different norms about waiting in line. The British are known for their orderly approach to queuing, and indeed people who jump a queue in the United Kingdom are likely to receive strong criticism from others, including being told to wait their turn. In other countries, it is quite normal for people simply to push to the front, leaving the hapless British feeling both frustrated and foolish. British tourists abroad usually learn quickly that they need to follow a different set of rules.

Robert Merton's theory of anomie proposed that deviance is often a response to situations in which goals cannot be achieved through conventional behavior. Democratic societies often claim to be meritocratic, in that effort and ability will be rewarded fairly. However, it turns out that people from wealthier, better-connected, and more privileged circumstances have easier routes to personal success and prosperity. When people realize that routes to achievement are blocked, they experience "strain" and are likely to turn to tactics that will help them get past the blockages. Some of these are legitimate and approved. For example, poorer people are more likely to play the lottery than richer people. Merton regarded deviance as only one of several possible reactions to frustration, and his ideas have much in common with theories of relative deprivation, social identity theory, and system justification theory. Merton proposed five types of reaction: conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion. Conformity involves simply trying harder to play by the rules (e.g., working harder to achieve). Retreatism involves withdrawing from the game (e.g., not bothering to work). Ritualism involves continuing to follow the practices and rituals necessary for success and approval (e.g., going to church) but without the original purpose of doing so. These three reactions leave the status quo unchanged. In contrast, both innovation and rebellion are forms of deviance. Whereas innovation is likely to involve breaking rules to achieve normative objectives (e.g., stealing to become rich), rebellion involves challenging the rules or objectives themselves (e.g., antiglobalization protests and terrorist acts).

Various types of social control inhibit deviance. Primary groups such as families, work groups or teams, and close social groups may control deviance through direct sanctions over their members. These groups can exert influence directly and immediately. If a child is disobedient, a parent can impose a sanction or punishment right away. If a team member cheats in a game, the referee can immediately exclude the player. In close-knit communities, there is a high level of primary control so that if a member breaks an important rule, he or she may be excluded from the group. For example, the family reputations of people in some cultures may be put at risk if a member engages in a criminal or shaming activity. So-called honor killing of women for adultery, or sometimes even for having been raped, is an example of extreme reactions to deviance. These examples, however, also highlight that deviance is not easily defined in terms of a specific behavior. Instead, deviance is defined by the formal or informal rules imposed by other people in the social context in which the behavior occurs. Social control is also exerted through secondary groups that are more abstract, such as organizations, or membership in larger social categories such as gender, and through the wider social norms that they follow. Such organizations and institutions often have formal power and authority, rules and regulations by which they constrain their members. Travis Hirschi, analyzing the causes of delinquency, proposed that social control is based on bonds of attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief.

## Labeling

A further distinction, made by Edwin Lemert, is between primary and secondary deviance. Primary deviance involves relatively trivial departures from rules that are generally socially acceptable. For [p. 215 ↓ ] example, jaywalking is illegal, but in some cities people do it frequently. Stealing minor items of office stationery (pens, sticky notes, tape, etc.) is common, and generally nobody bothers too much about it. Similarly, most people tell white lies, and once in a while people may not mention if they received too much change in a shopping transaction. When committing such acts, most people feel able to sustain the idea that they are still honest and law-abiding, acting within the bounds of their roles, and that these acts are minor exceptions. Linked to these forms of primary deviance, sociologists also observe that societies allow certain norms of evasion. For example, drivers on freeways often travel a little faster than the official

speed limit. It is widely accepted that breaking the limit will be tolerated, but only up to a point. Similarly, police officers often are given the discretion to issue a warning rather than a formal charge. These norms of evasion provide fuzzy boundaries. People who show that they conform to most rules are usually given a little freedom to bend some rules, but if authorities so choose, they can impose the rules strictly.

Secondary deviance describes a situation when a person has been publicly identified as deviant, for example, by being classified as mentally unstable, criminal, delinquent, or perverted. The implications of secondary deviance were explored powerfully by Howard Becker, who argued, on the basis of his research on marijuana smokers, that deviance is a label placed by a given society, and thus its meaning shifts depending on the context. In other words, to understand deviance, we have to also understand why behavior gets labeled as deviant. An important feature of labeling theory is the idea that once a person is labeled, this can generate a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby others behave in ways that confirm or reinforce the label. A person who is labeled finds himself or herself unable to escape. Labeling theory has been applied to mental illness by psychiatrists such as Thomas Szasz; it has been shown that once a person is labeled as mentally ill, the people around that person reward behavior that confirms the label. Labeling theory can be criticized for overplaying the role of labeling. Abnormal behavior is sometimes associated with medical problems, and some criminal behavior is so reprehensible or so unusual that it is difficult to explain purely in terms of labeling. Critics of labeling theory argued that it underplays the responsibility of the deviant for his or her own behavior.

The distinction between deviance that is merely labeled and deviance that may objectively be a risk to the group is illustrated by situations of ideological opposition. A powerful example of the fact that deviance is often defined in relative rather than absolute terms comes from how different sides define terrorism. Powerful and majority groups may label sniper shootings and suicide bombings as terrorist acts because they are outside the law and are not formal acts of war. In contrast, the perpetrators of these acts often consider them to be legitimate and appropriate reactions to unjust oppression or exploitation by the majority. Sometimes people who are labeled terrorists by one camp are heroes and martyrs in the eyes of another.

The focus of social control over deviance shifts to different individuals and groups depending on the broader social and historical context. For example, in the 1960s surveys showed that Americans felt greater distance from homosexual and lesbian people than they did from alcoholics, prostitutes, ex-convicts, and former mental patients. Although public attitudes toward homosexuality remain fairly intolerant, homosexuality is now recognized as a legitimate lifestyle, with legal civil partnerships in many countries. That is, homosexuality has generally shifted from being at the extreme end of criminality to being noncriminal.

Sociologists study deviance at different levels of analysis. Some deviance departs from cultural norms and values, for example, women in Catholic countries who decide to use birth control. Other deviance is defined in terms of individual pathology (e.g., psychosis, extreme neurosis). Some deviance is expressed by individuals within a group (e.g., a student who wears unusual clothes), and other deviance can be expressed by a group within society (e.g., a gang or a cult). The idea of deviant subcultures is important because it highlights that groups can generate their own sets of norms, and people within those groups feel they are not deviant even though the group as a whole may be viewed as deviant by others.

[p. 216 ↓ ]

## Psychological Perspectives

### Individual Propensity to Deviate

Early psychological approaches to deviance emphasized the biological and psychodynamic roots of deviance. For example, theorists such as William Sheldon argued that criminals had a particular type (muscular) of body shape. Although it is plausible that certain types of crime might require particular body shapes (e.g., a cat burglar may need to be athletic), it is not plausible that there is a generally criminal body type (stock market fraudsters may come in all shapes and sizes). Many researchers tried to predict criminality on the basis of personality traits (e.g., Hans Eysenck, who

proposed that criminality resulted from high levels of psychoticism, extraversion, and neuroticism).

Psychoanalytic theory (e.g., the work of Freud and Fromm) emphasizes the role of socialization. Those who follow this perspective argue that parents instill in their children a respect for rules and authority; this respect is represented by the superego. This superego is an internalized control system that motivates people to follow social rules, to respect law and order, and so on. That is, conformity is thought to be important for people's self-concepts. However, criminality can be viewed as a product of many forces aside from either biological factors or parental socialization practices. The absence of a stable home and the presence of negative socializing agents may play a role, but all of these aspects of socialization may, in turn, be affected by other factors such as poverty within the home and in the wider community. Approaches that focus on differences between individuals are useful when explaining why some people break rules more often than others, but they do not help to explain why people are deviant in some situations rather than other situations, why people label others as deviant, or how people react to deviant individuals.

A different perspective concentrates on moral reasoning and development. Delinquent behavior may result from inadequate levels of moral development or from faulty moral reasoning. This might explain why people tend to be consistent in their level of delinquency over time. From yet another perspective, Nicholas Emler has argued that delinquency is often a response to reputational, pragmatic, and situational demands.

An additional perspective on deviance is evolutionary theory; proponents of this theory argue that physically stigmatized (deviant) group members may receive hostile and exclusionary reactions from others because they pose a threat to survival of the group. Norbert Kerr suggests that people may be sensitized to the possibility of being rejected because it has so many consequences for their physical and psychological well-being.

## Conformity and Deviance

Muzafer Sherif's experiments on norm formation in the 1930s illustrated that in ambiguous situations people quickly form norms. In his autokinetic effect experiments,

participants viewed an illusion in which an objectively stationary point of light in a dark room appears to move (possibly a consequence of eye movements). In a series of trials, the light was shown and participants were asked to estimate the distance moved on each trial. When people listened to judgments made by others, they quickly converged to make estimates within the same range. Dependency on others was also illustrated by Solomon Asch's conformity experiments, which showed that in the face of a unanimous majority, people would conform to their (incorrect) judgments about which one of a series of lines was the same length as a comparison line. These experiments illustrate the pressure toward uniformity in groups. People feel that they should be in agreement, especially about the physical world. Thus, when people feel they are deviant, they will often comply (publicly agree) with a majority in the group. On the other hand, the presence of a supporter can reduce such compliance, and in any case, public compliance does not necessarily mean that people privately agree with the majority.

Leon Festinger proposed that pressure toward uniformity within groups is based on the group's ambition to move toward particular goals (*group locomotion*) and the desire among group members to validate their opinions about the nonphysical world (*social reality*). The social reality function involves both the process of evaluating the accuracy of opinions and validating (confirming) the accuracy of those opinions. Faced with a dissenting member, groups are likely to engage in communication to deal with the problem. Possible solutions are to evict the deviant from the group, [p. 217 ↓] to pressure the deviant to conform, or to change the group's opinion to agree with the deviant. Dorwin Cartwright and Alvin Zander added two further reasons why groups desire uniformity: Uniformity helps to define the group's boundaries and distinctiveness from other groups, and uniformity strengthens the cohesiveness of the group.

## Minorities

An important criticism of Festinger's model is the assumption that people want to compare themselves with others who are similar. Contrary to that assumption, sometimes people prefer to compare themselves with others who are dissimilar (worse), because this allows people to enhance their self-concept. People might also find dissimilarity useful because it allows them to contrast their own position from that of a rival or enemy. Equally fundamental is the assumption in Festinger's model that



influence is likely to be unidirectional, namely, from the majority to the minority. Serge Moscovici proposed a theory of minority influence that explains why a deviant group member can change the majority opinion under some circumstances. Moscovici's genetic model proposes that any member of a group can potentially exert influence on others. Echoing Durkheim's theorizing, Moscovici holds that deviants play a key role in bringing about social change. To illustrate this, Moscovici and colleagues showed how judgments of whether physical stimuli (a blue slide) were blue or green could be influenced by a minority if the minority showed an incorrect (green) but consistent response. Moscovici identified that in these situations, even though the majority opinion is known (we generally agree what blue looks like), a consistent message from a minority can make us reconsider our judgments. Further research suggested a minority group member's opinion has greater influence when the minority combine their consistency on that particular opinion with flexibility (e.g., agreeing with the majority in opinions on other topics). Thus, in strong contrast to Festinger's ideas, Moscovici holds that groups progress and develop as a result of conflict. Whereas people succumb to "normative" influence from majorities (i.e., people simply conform without changing their private opinions), conflict from minorities makes groups reevaluate their ideas and perspectives and allows them to innovate.

## Consistency of Deviance and Group Reactions

Given the potentially disruptive impact of a dissenting minority, it is not surprising that research also examines how people react toward deviant group members. One of the most widely reported studies was conducted by Stanley Schachter. He composed groups of 8 to 10 people. The group had to reach agreement on the appropriate treatment/punishment for a delinquent. The groups included 3 confederates, one of whom conformed to the group's modal opinion, one of whom disagreed (deviate), and one who gradually changed from the deviate to the modal opinion (slider). Results showed that communication was directed more frequently toward the deviant than the other confederates and that the deviant was less likely to be treated favorably than other confederates. Subsequent evidence suggests that there may be a threshold effect

with deviants. A deviant who exhibits the potential to change (to conform) is worthy of investment of time and effort because this change will reinforce the group. A deviant who is extreme or whose opinion seems rooted in a more pervasive difference with the group is more likely to be ignored or rejected from the group altogether. This fits with research on minority influence showing that extreme minorities are less influential on the rest of the group than are moderate minorities.

An important question is how people make sense of deviant behavior within their group. It is likely that people who deviate attract the attention of other members of a group because they are distinctive and their actions demand an explanation. This means that we are more likely to make attributions (e.g., dispositional attributions) about the deviant that we do not make for majority members. John Levine and colleagues showed that deviant members who shifted toward the majority opinion were viewed as seeking greater approval from the group, whereas deviants who shifted away were viewed as being independent and assertive. The interpretation of behavior may also depend on other contextual factors. For example, dissent in a group may be acceptable if it does not threaten the group's outcomes, but if it involves [p. 218 ↓ ] harm to the group (e.g., by reducing its rewards or by revealing important information to a rival group), it is likely to invite much harsher reactions. Sometimes, however, a dispositional attribution may be to the benefit of the deviant. Edwin Hollander's research on idiosyncrasy credit shows that people who have shown loyalty to a group in the past may be permitted to dissent from the majority and to influence the majority. Other research shows that incoming leaders may be given more latitude to deviate from group norms and that group members may accept a deviant's views or actions if they are believed to be espoused in the interests or defense of the group.

## Group Distinctiveness and Deviance

The intergroup context has a powerful effect on how people judge deviant group members. For example, José Marques and colleagues demonstrated a *black sheep effect*, whereby people derogate deviants in their own groups relatively more than deviants in other groups. This is thought to be motivated by people's desire to sustain a positive social identity. A deviant in the ingroup threatens the validity of social identity (based on the idea that “we” are right and we agree with one another); therefore,

people are more concerned to identify and respond to deviance in their own groups than in other groups. Dominic Abrams and colleagues also distinguished between two types of deviance in intergroup situations. Antinorm deviance is when, compared to the majority in his or her group, a person expresses views that are relatively opposed to his or her own group and agrees with or supports an outgroup. Pronorm deviance is when the person shows more extreme endorsement of his or her own group and rejection of the outgroup (e.g., a fanatic). People tend to be more sensitive and react more strongly to antinorm deviants. An interesting consequence is that people are often positive toward outgroup members that are antinorm deviants. This is because such deviants lend credibility and support to the ingroup's social reality. The importance of social interaction in groups as a mechanism of social control is demonstrated by developmental psychology research. As young as 8 years of age, children seem to learn that groups expect their members to be loyal and conform, and they recognize that ingroup deviants will be criticized. This understanding appears to be based on their ability to take different social perspectives, and also on the actual experiences of belonging to a range of social groups.

## Deviant Groups

Groups expect and enforce loyalty and conformity, sometimes resulting in phenomena such as *groupthink*. Groupthink presupposes a shared and unanimous way of thinking within a group. However, they do not always derogate deviants. Some groups have norms that encourage originality and innovation, and others are involved in challenging the status quo. These include not only deviant subcultures such as gangs but also groups that are in conflict over their rights or resources. Early theorists of crowd behavior (e.g., Gustav Le Bon) argued that people become more primitive when they are in a crowd, an idea echoed by Edward Diener in his research on deindividuation in groups, which showed that feeling anonymous and unidentifiable in a group can reduce self-regulation and constraint among the group members.

Although there is evidence that people may become more violent and extreme when they are in groups, it does not seem that this is always because they have lost self-control. Social identity theorists such as Stephen Reicher argue that groups may establish or develop a norm to confront authority or behave in extreme ways, and when

people's group identity is salient, the group members follow these norms more closely. This raises the question of who defines an act as deviant and highlights that deviance is frequently defined in relative (norm-violating) rather than absolute (law-breaking) terms. Marilynn Brewer has proposed that people seek optimal distinctiveness for their identity. This means they may seek to be part of groups that are not only sufficiently different from the mainstream that they are distinctive but sufficiently large that they are inclusive and protect the individual from feeling too unique.

Dominic Abrams

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*See also*

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