

Deviant Behaviour: A Critical Analysis of Definitions and Theoretical Perspectives

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Abstract

Deviant behaviour represents a miscellaneous social phenomenon that has been studied through multiple disciplinary approaches, including sociology, psychology, and criminology. This article provides a broad analysis of definitional approaches and theoretical frameworks used to understand deviant behaviour. Through a systematic review of literature spanning classical to contemporary perspectives, this study examines how deviance is conceptualized across different theoretical paradigms, including functionalist, conflict, symbolic interactions, psychological, and criminological approaches. The analysis reveals that deviance is not an inherent quality of an act but rather a socially constructed label applied through processes of social interaction and power dynamics.

Significant theoretical developments include Merton's strain theory, Becker's labeling theory, Sutherland's differential association theory, and contemporary integrated models. Research gaps identified include limited cross-cultural comparative studies, insufficient attention to digital deviance, and the need for more comprehensive integrated theoretical frameworks. This article contributes to the scholarly discourse by synthesizing diverse theoretical perspectives and highlighting areas requiring further empirical investigation. The findings emphasize the importance of context-sensitive approaches to understanding deviance and inform policy recommendations for more effective social intervention strategies.

Keywords: Deviant behaviour, Definitions, Sociological Theories, Criminological Theories

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1. Background of the Study

Deviance has been a central concern in social sciences since the emergence of sociology as a distinct discipline in the nineteenth century. The systematic study of deviant behaviour began with the pioneering work of early sociologists who sought to understand why individuals violate social norms and how societies respond to such violations (Durkheim, 1893/1997). Émile Durkheim's foundational work established that deviance is not merely a pathological phenomenon but serves important social functions, including boundary maintenance and social solidarity (Durkheim, 1895/2014).

The conceptualization of deviance has evolved significantly over the past century, moving from absolutist perspectives that viewed deviance as inherently wrong to relativist approaches that recognize the socially constructed nature of deviant labels (Goode, 2016). Contemporary scholarship acknowledges that what constitutes deviance varies across cultures, historical periods, and social contexts (Clinard & Meier, 2015). This recognition has prompted scholars to examine not only why individuals engage in deviant behaviour but also how societies define, label, and respond to such behaviour.

The multidisciplinary nature of deviance research has enriched our understanding while simultaneously creating conceptual challenges. Sociologists have focused on social structures and processes that generate

deviance (Merton, 1938; Becker, 1963), psychologists have explored individual-level factors and personality traits associated with deviant behaviour (Eysenck, 1977), and criminologists have developed theories specific to criminal forms of deviance (Hirschi, 1969; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). This theoretical diversity reflects the complexity of deviant behaviour and the multiple levels at which it operates.

Recent decades have witnessed significant shifts in deviance research, including increased attention to the role of power in defining deviance (Quinney, 1970), the medicalization of deviant behaviour (Conrad & Schneider, 1980), and the impact of globalization and digital technologies on forms and expressions of deviance (Wall, 2007). These developments necessitate a comprehensive examination of definitional and theoretical approaches to deviance that can accommodate both classical insights and contemporary challenges.

2. Research Problems

The study of deviant behaviour faces several significant conceptual and empirical challenges that impede comprehensive understanding and effective intervention. First, there exists substantial definitional ambiguity regarding what constitutes deviance, with competing perspectives offering contrasting criteria ranging from statistical rarity to norm violation to social harm. This lack of conceptual clarity creates difficulties in comparing research findings across studies and

disciplines. Second, the proliferation of theoretical frameworks, while enriching scholarly discourse, has resulted in theoretical fragmentation, with limited integration between sociological, psychological, and criminological approaches. Third, many theoretical models developed in Western contexts may have limited applicability to non-Western societies, raising questions about cultural validity and universality of deviance theories. Fourth, rapid social changes, particularly digitalization and globalization, have created new forms of deviance that existing theoretical frameworks struggle to explain adequately. Fifth, there remains insufficient empirical research examining the intersection of various social identities (race, class, gender, sexuality) in shaping experiences of deviance and social control. Finally, the relationship between micro-level individual factors and macro-level social structures in producing deviant behaviour requires more sophisticated theoretical and methodological approaches. These problems underscore the necessity for a comprehensive analysis that synthesizes existing knowledge while identifying gaps requiring further investigation.

3. Objectives

This article aims to explore the definitional and theoretical approaches to deviant behavior from various disciplinary perspectives. The specific objectives include: examining diverse definitions of deviance to identify commonalities and differences; synthesizing major theoretical frameworks from sociology,

psychology, and criminology regarding the causes and persistence of deviant behavior; tracing the evolution of deviance theories and noting key paradigm shifts; evaluating the strengths and limitations of different theoretical approaches across contexts; identifying research gaps that require further investigation; exploring the implications of these theories for social policy and intervention strategies; and proposing future research directions to enhance the understanding of deviance in contemporary society.

4. Methodology

This study employs a systematic literature review methodology to analyze definitional and theoretical approaches to deviance behaviour. The review encompasses scholarly works from sociology, psychology, criminology, and related disciplines published between 1895 and 2024. Literature search strategies included electronic database searches of JSTOR, Web of Science, PubMed, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar using keywords including "deviance," "deviant behaviour," "social deviance," "norm violation," "labeling theory," "strain theory," and related terms. Selection criteria prioritized peer-reviewed journal articles, seminal books, and theoretical treatises that made significant contributions to understanding deviance. The review included both empirical studies and theoretical works, with particular attention to foundational texts that established major theoretical paradigms and contemporary works that extended or challenged these frameworks.

The analytical approach involved thematic synthesis, whereby definitions and theoretical perspectives were categorized according to disciplinary origin, theoretical orientation, and level of analysis. Definitions were analyzed using content analysis to identify core conceptual elements and points of convergence and divergence. Theoretical frameworks were evaluated based on their explanatory scope, empirical support, and applicability across different contexts and types of deviance. The analysis examined both the internal logic of individual theories and the relationships and tensions between different theoretical approaches.

This methodology has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The review is necessarily selective rather than exhaustive given the vast literature on deviance. Language limitations restricted inclusion primarily to English-language sources, potentially excluding important contributions from non-English scholarly traditions. The emphasis on published academic literature may underrepresent practitioner perspectives and unpublished research. Additionally, the interpretive nature of theoretical analysis means that categorization and evaluation of perspectives involves subjective judgment, though efforts were made to represent theories accurately and fairly. Despite these limitations, the systematic and comprehensive approach employed provides a robust foundation for synthesizing current knowledge and identifying areas for future research.

5. Literature Review

5.1 Historical Development of Deviance Research

The systematic study of deviance emerged in the late nineteenth century with the work of early sociologists who sought to understand social order and disorder. Durkheim (1895/2014) established foundational principles, arguing that deviance is normal and functional in all societies, serving to clarify moral boundaries and strengthen social solidarity. This functionalist perspective influenced subsequent generations of scholars and established deviance as a legitimate area of sociological inquiry (Erikson, 1966).

The Chicago School of Sociology in the early twentieth century pioneered empirical research on deviance, conducting ethnographic studies of urban social problems including crime, prostitution, and gang activity (Shaw & McKay, 1942). These studies emphasized the role of social disorganization and ecological factors in producing deviance. Concurrently, psychological approaches emerged that focused on individual differences and personality factors associated with deviant behaviour, though these were often criticized for neglecting social context (Eysenck, 1977).

The mid-twentieth century witnessed significant theoretical innovations. Merton (1938) adapted Durkheim's concept of anomie to American society, developing strain theory to explain how blocked opportunities produce deviant adaptations. Sutherland (1947)

formulated differential association theory, arguing that deviance is learned through interaction in intimate groups. These theories shifted focus from individual pathology to social processes and structural factors (Akers, 1998).

The 1960s brought a radical reconceptualization with the emergence of labeling theory. Becker (1963) argued that deviance is not a quality of the act but rather the consequence of the application of rules and sanctions by others. This perspective emphasized the role of power in defining deviance and the self-fulfilling nature of deviant labels (Lemert, 1951). Labeling theory prompted increased attention to processes of social control and the construction of deviant identities.

Conflict perspectives gained prominence in the 1970s, with scholars arguing that deviance definitions reflect the interests of powerful groups and serve to maintain social inequality (Quinney, 1970; Chambliss, 1975). These perspectives challenged the assumption of consensus in functionalist approaches and highlighted how criminalization serves economic and political interests. Feminist scholars extended conflict perspectives by analyzing the gendered nature of deviance definitions and social control (Chesney-Lind, 1973).

Recent decades have seen increased theoretical integration and attention to new forms of deviance. Integrated theories attempt to combine insights from multiple perspectives (Thornberry, 1987; Tittle, 1995). Developmental and life-course perspectives examine

how involvement in deviance changes over time (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Contemporary research addresses digital deviance, terrorism, corporate crime, and other forms requiring adaptation of classical theories (Wall, 2007; Friedrichs, 2010).

5.2 Current State of Deviance Research

Contemporary deviance research is characterized by theoretical pluralism and methodological diversity. Quantitative studies employ sophisticated statistical techniques to test theoretical propositions and identify risk and protective factors (Agnew, 2006). Qualitative research provides rich descriptions of subjective experiences and meanings associated with deviant behaviour (Adler & Adler, 2006). Mixed-methods approaches combine quantitative and qualitative data to provide more comprehensive understanding.

Major research streams include studies of specific types of deviance such as substance abuse, sexual deviance, white-collar crime, and mental illness (Best, 2004). Comparative research examines variations in deviance across cultures and societies, though this remains underdeveloped (Cao, 2004). Developmental research traces trajectories of deviant behaviour across the life course (Moffitt, 1993). Intervention research evaluates programs designed to prevent or reduce deviance, with mixed results regarding effectiveness (Welsh & Farrington, 2006).

Digital technologies have transformed both the forms and study of deviance. Cybercrime, digital piracy, online harassment, and other forms of digital deviance present new challenges for theory and policy (Holt & Bossler, 2016). Social media has created new contexts for deviant behaviour and new mechanisms for social control (Marwick & boyd, 2014). These developments require adaptation of existing theories and development of new conceptual frameworks.

5.3 Research Gaps

Despite extensive scholarship, several significant gaps exist in deviance research. First, most theories were developed and tested in Western, particularly American, contexts, with limited attention to cultural variation and applicability in non-Western societies (Karstedt, 2001). Cross-cultural comparative research remains underdeveloped, limiting understanding of universal versus culturally specific aspects of deviance.

Second, while individual theories focusing on single levels of analysis exist, comprehensive integrated frameworks that effectively link individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and societal factors are lacking. Recent integrated theories represent progress but require further empirical validation (Cullen, 2011). The mechanisms through which macro-level social structures shape individual behaviour require more sophisticated theoretical and methodological approaches.

Third, inter sectional of social identities and their combined effects on experiences of deviance and social control require more attention. While research exists on individual dimensions such as race, class, or gender, understanding of how multiple marginalized identities intersect to shape vulnerability to deviance labels and differential treatment by control agents remains limited (Potter, 2015).

Fourth, the relationship between mental health and deviance requires more nuanced examination. The medicalization of deviance has led to some behaviours being redefined as illnesses rather than moral failings, but the boundaries remain contested and the implications for social control insufficiently examined (Conrad, 2007).

Fifth, digital deviance and the transformation of social control in networked societies require more theoretical attention. Existing theories developed for offline contexts may not adequately explain online behaviours and interactions. The role of algorithms, artificial intelligence, and automated systems in defining and responding to deviance represents a frontier requiring new conceptual frameworks.

Sixth, longitudinal research examining how deviance changes over the life course and across historical periods remains limited. While developmental perspectives have advanced understanding, more research is needed on desistance processes, the long-term consequences of deviance labels, and how social changes affect rates and

types of deviance over time.

Finally, intervention research requires more rigorous evaluation and attention to implementation factors that affect program effectiveness. Many interventions lack strong theoretical foundations or fail to address multiple levels of influence simultaneously. Translating theoretical insights into effective prevention and intervention strategies remains a significant challenge.

6. Results and Discussions

6.1 Definitional Approaches to Deviance

The analysis reveals multiple competing definitions of deviance, each emphasizing different criteria and reflecting distinct theoretical assumptions. These definitional approaches can be categorized into four main types: statistical, normative, reactive, and harm-based definitions.

Statistical definitions conceptualize deviance as behaviour that deviates significantly from statistical norms or averages. According to this approach, any behaviour that is relatively rare or unusual can be considered deviant (Gibbs, 1981). While this definition has the advantage of apparent objectivity, it faces significant limitations. Rarity alone cannot distinguish between valued exceptions (genius, heroism) and negatively sanctioned behaviours. Additionally, some common behaviours like tax evasion may be deviant despite high prevalence, while some rare behaviours are socially approved.

Normative definitions conceptualize deviance as violation of social norms, whether formal rules codified in law or informal expectations embedded in custom and practice (Clinard & Meier, 2015). This approach recognizes that deviance is defined relative to socially established standards of conduct. Norms vary across cultures, subcultures, and historical periods, making deviance a relative rather than absolute concept. The strength of normative definitions lies in their recognition of social context, but they face challenges in societies characterized by normative pluralism and conflict. When different groups hold competing norms, whose standards define deviance becomes a political question.

Reactive definitions emphasize that deviance is not an inherent quality of behaviour but rather a consequence of social reactions and labeling processes. Becker's (1963, p. 9) influential formulation states: "deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an 'offender.'" This approach shifts attention from the behaviour itself to social processes through which behaviours and persons are defined as deviant. The reactive approach highlights the role of power in defining deviance and the potential for unjust application of deviant labels. However, critics argue this perspective may go too far in denying that some behaviours are inherently harmful regardless of social reactions.

Harm-based definitions conceptualize deviance as behaviour causing harm to individuals or society (Hagan, 1994). This approach attempts to identify an objective criterion—harm—that transcends cultural relativism. Harm can include physical injury, property loss, psychological damage, or social disruption. The challenge lies in defining harm and determining acceptable levels of harm, which inevitably involves value judgments. Some scholars propose that serious deviance should be limited to harmful behaviours, while less serious rule violations represent a broader category (Goode, 2016).

The analysis suggests that no single definition is entirely satisfactory. Each captures important aspects of deviance while having limitations. A comprehensive understanding requires recognizing that deviance operates simultaneously as statistical deviation, norm violation, labeled status, and potential harm. The most appropriate definition depends on the specific research question and theoretical framework being employed.

6.2 Sociological Theories of Deviance

Sociological theories of deviance can be organized into three major paradigms: functionalist, conflict, and interactionist perspectives, each offering distinct explanations for the origins and functions of deviant behaviour.

6.2.1 Functionalist Theories

Functionalist theories emphasize how deviance serves important social functions despite its apparent negativity.

Durkheim (1895/2014) argued that deviance is normal and inevitable in all societies, serving four key functions: clarifying moral boundaries, promoting social unity through collective responses, inducing social change by challenging existing norms, and providing warning signals about social problems requiring attention. According to this perspective, some deviance is necessary for social vitality and adaptation.

Merton's (1938) strain theory represents the most influential functionalist approach to explaining deviance. Merton argued that American society places strong emphasis on material success goals while providing unequal access to legitimate means for achieving these goals. This disjunction between culturally prescribed goals and socially structured opportunities creates strain that can be resolved through five modes of adaptation: conformity (accepting both goals and means), innovation (accepting goals but using illegitimate means), ritualism (abandoning goals but continuing to follow means), retreatism (rejecting both goals and means), and rebellion (substituting new goals and means). Innovation, particularly common among lower-class individuals facing blocked opportunities, explains much property crime and other acquisitive deviance.

Strain theory has been extensively tested and refined. Agnew's (1992) general strain theory expanded beyond Merton's focus on blocked opportunities to include additional sources of strain: removal of positively valued stimuli and presence of negatively valued

stimuli. Agnew argues that strain produces negative emotions like anger and frustration, which increase motivation for deviance as a coping mechanism. General strain theory has received substantial empirical support and explains various forms of deviance beyond property crime (Agnew, 2006).

Critics note that functionalist theories may overstate social consensus about goals and norms, neglect power differences in defining deviance, and provide limited explanation for why specific individuals experiencing strain engage in deviance while others do not (Taylor, Walton, & Young, 1973). Despite these limitations, strain theories remain influential in explaining relationships between social structure and deviant behaviour.

6.2.2 Conflict Theories

Conflict theories emphasize how power, inequality, and group conflict shape definitions and distributions of deviance. These perspectives challenge functionalist assumptions of social consensus and argue that deviance definitions reflect the interests of dominant groups (Quinney, 1970).

Marxist conflict theory argues that law and definitions of deviance protect the property and interests of the capitalist class while criminalizing behaviours threatening these interests (Chambliss, 1975). From this perspective, crime among the poor represents rational responses to exploitation and blocked opportunities, while harmful behaviours of the wealthy (corporate crime, wage theft, environmental destruction)

are often not criminalized or receive minimal sanctions. The criminal justice system serves to control the working class and maintain capitalist social relations.

Quinney's (1970) social reality of crime theory outlines how powerful groups create and apply criminal law. Crime is defined through political processes reflecting power differentials, criminal definitions are applied by authorized agents to maintain established order, behaviour patterns develop in relation to criminal definitions, and conceptions of crime are constructed and diffused through communication processes. This framework emphasizes that crime is a social construction serving ideological functions.

Feminist conflict theories analyze how patriarchal power structures shape deviance definitions and control, with different standards applied to men and women (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2013). Women who violate traditional gender roles may be labeled deviant regardless of harm, while male violence is often minimized or excused. The criminal justice system has historically ignored crimes against women while strictly controlling women's sexuality and autonomy.

Critical race theories examine how racism shapes deviance definitions and enforcement, with behaviours associated with minority groups more likely to be criminalized and more harshly punished (Alexander, 2012). The war on drugs exemplifies this, with racially disparate enforcement despite

similar usage rates across racial groups. These perspectives highlight how deviance serves to maintain systems of racial domination.

Conflict theories have been criticized for overemphasizing power and economic factors while neglecting other influences on deviance, potentially romanticizing deviance by portraying it solely as resistance or adaptation to oppression, and offering limited explanation for deviance by the powerful themselves (Akers, 1994). Despite these criticisms, conflict perspectives provide crucial insights into the political nature of deviance definitions and the role of social control in maintaining inequality.

6.2.3 Interactionist Theories

Symbolic interactionist theories focus on micro-level processes through which meanings, identities, and definitions emerge through social interaction. These theories examine how people learn deviant behaviour, how deviant identities are constructed, and how social reactions shape subsequent behaviour.

Sutherland's (1947) differential association theory proposes that deviant behaviour is learned through interaction with others who provide definitions favorable to norm violation. The theory specifies that criminal behaviour is learned in intimate personal groups, learning includes techniques of committing acts and motives and rationalizations, and the specific direction of motives is learned from definitions of legal codes as favorable or unfavorable. A person becomes

deviant when exposed to an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation. The theory emphasizes that deviance is learned through the same processes as conforming behaviour.

Akers (1998) refined differential association through social learning theory, incorporating principles of operant conditioning. According to this perspective, deviant behaviour is acquired and maintained through differential reinforcement, with behaviours followed by positive consequences or removal of negative consequences being more likely to recur. Imitation of deviant models and exposure to definitions favorable to deviance through interaction also contribute to learning. Social learning theory has received substantial empirical support across various types of deviance (Akers & Jensen, 2006).

Labeling theory, developed by Lemert (1951) and Becker (1963), shifted focus from explaining initial deviant acts (primary deviance) to understanding how social reactions produce stable deviant identities and careers (secondary deviance). According to this perspective, most people commit deviant acts occasionally, but only some are caught and labeled. Being labeled deviant by official agencies or significant others alters self-concept and social opportunities, potentially leading to acceptance of a deviant identity and further involvement in deviant behaviour. Labeling creates a self-fulfilling prophecy as labeled individuals are excluded from

conventional opportunities and gravitate toward deviant subcultures.

The labeling process involves several stages. Official labeling through arrest or institutional processing represents a status-degradation ceremony that transforms public identity (Garfinkel, 1956). Stigma associated with deviant labels becomes a master status that overrides other social identities (Goffman, 1963). Labeled individuals may experience role engulfment, whereby the deviant identity becomes central to self-concept (Schur, 1971). Social exclusion and reduced opportunities following labeling increase the likelihood of further deviance.

Critics argue that labeling theory neglects factors that lead to initial deviance, overestimates the impact of labels while underestimating resilience, and has difficulty explaining secret deviance that occurs without detection (Akers, 1994). Research on labeling effects shows mixed results, with some studies finding amplification effects while others show no impact or deterrent effects (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989). Although it has its limitations, labeling theory has significantly shaped criminology and policy by drawing attention to the possible harmful effects of criminal justice interventions.

6.3 Psychological Theories of Deviance

Psychological theories emphasize individual-level factors including personality traits, cognitive processes, and developmental experiences

that increase propensity for deviant behaviour. While often criticized for neglecting social context, these theories provide important insights into individual differences in responses to similar environmental conditions.

6.3.1 Personality Theories

Eysenck's (1977) personality theory proposes that deviance reflects biologically based personality dimensions. Eysenck identified three major dimensions: extraversion (sociability, impulsivity), neuroticism (emotional instability, anxiety), and psychoticism (aggression, tough-mindedness). According to the theory, individuals high in extraversion and neuroticism are more difficult to condition socially, leading to inadequate conscience development and increased deviant behaviour. High psychoticism additionally contributes to serious antisocial behaviour.

Research provides partial support for personality-deviance relationships. Meta-analyses show that low conscientiousness and low agreeableness consistently predict criminal behaviour (Miller & Lynam, 2001). However, effect sizes are modest and personality alone cannot explain deviance without considering social context. Critics argue that personality theories underestimate situational influences and the social construction of personality itself.

6.3.2 Cognitive Theories

Cognitive theories emphasize thinking patterns and moral reasoning associated with deviance. Kohlberg's (1976)

moral development theory proposes that moral reasoning progresses through stages from preconventional (punishment avoidance) to conventional (social approval) to postconventional (universal principles). Research shows that persistent offenders often exhibit lower levels of moral reasoning, though findings are inconsistent and may reflect educational differences rather than moral capacity (Palmer, 2003).

Cognitive distortions systematic errors in thinking that justify deviant behavior have received substantial attention. Neutralization theory (Sykes & Matza, 1957) identifies techniques through which individuals rationalize deviance including denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of victim, condemnation of condemners, and appeal to higher loyalties. Research confirms that offenders employ neutralizations, though debate continues about whether these precede or follow deviant acts (Maruna & Copes, 2005).

6.3.3 Development Psychological Theories

Development psycho-pathology examines how biological vulnerabilities interact with environmental factors across development to produce antisocial behaviour. Moffitt's (1993) taxonomy distinguishes adolescence-limited offenders who engage in temporary antisocial behaviour during adolescence from life-course-persistent offenders whose problems begin in childhood and continue into adulthood. Life-course-persistent offenders exhibit neuropsychological deficits and

experience inadequate parenting, while adolescence-limited offenders respond to the "maturity gap" between biological and social maturity.

Attachment theory emphasizes the importance of early bonding experiences for social development (Bowlby, 1969). Insecure attachment resulting from inconsistent or abusive caregiving can lead to problems with emotion regulation, empathy, and interpersonal relationships that increase deviance risk. Research supports links between attachment problems and various forms of deviance, though effects are mediated by multiple factors (Hoeve et al., 2012).

6.4 Criminological Theories

Criminological theories focus specifically on criminal forms of deviance, though many have broader applicability. These theories often integrate sociological and psychological insights while emphasizing factors particularly relevant to crime.

6.4.1 Social Control Theories

Control theories ask why people conform rather than why they deviate, arguing that deviance is natural when social controls are weak. Hirschi's (1969) social bond theory proposes that conformity results from strong bonds to conventional society consisting of four elements: attachment (emotional connections to others who discourage deviance), commitment (investment in conventional activities that would be jeopardized by deviance), involvement (time spent in conventional activities that limits opportunities for deviance),

and belief (acceptance of conventional values and morality). Weakening of any element increases the likelihood of deviance.

Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) general theory of crime argues that low self-control, established in early childhood through inadequate parenting, explains most criminal behaviour (Pangngasekara, 2024). Individuals with low self-control are impulsive, risk-seeking, short-sighted, prefer simple tasks, and pursue immediate gratification. These traits lead to crime when opportunities present themselves, though they also predict other risky behaviours. Research generally supports relationships between self-control and crime, though critics argue the theory is tautological and underestimates situational factors (Pratt & Cullen, 2000).

6.4.2 Routine Activities Theory

Cohen and Felson's (1979) routine activities theory explains crime patterns without reference to offender motivation, arguing that crime occurs when three elements converge: motivated offenders, suitable targets, and absence of capable guardians. Changes in routine activities of everyday life affect crime rates by altering opportunity structures. For example, increased female labor force participation increased daytime residential burglary by reducing home guardianship. The theory has been extensively applied to explain spatial and temporal variations in crime and to develop situational crime prevention strategies (Felson & Clarke, 1998).

6.4.3 Integrated Theories

Recognizing that single-factor theories have limited explanatory power, scholars have developed integrated theories combining elements from multiple perspectives. Thornberry's (1987) interactional theory integrates control theory, social learning theory, and developmental perspectives, proposing reciprocal relationships between bonding variables, delinquent associations, and delinquent behaviour that vary across developmental stages. Elliott, Huizinga, and Ageton's (1985) integrated theory combines strain, control, and learning theories, arguing that weak bonds and strain increase associations with delinquent peers, which provide learning environments for deviance.

Tittle's (1995) control balance theory represents an ambitious integration attempting to explain all deviance. The theory proposes that deviance results from imbalances between control exercised and control experienced, with control deficits predicting repressive forms of deviance (submission, predation) and control surpluses predicting autonomous forms (exploitation, plunder, decadence). While conceptually complex, the theory has generated research and debate (Piquero & Hickman, 2003).

6.5 Contemporary Developments and Emerging Perspectives

Recent theoretical developments reflect attempts to address limitations of classical theories and explain contemporary forms of deviance. Developmental

and life-course criminology examines how involvement in deviance changes across age, incorporating insights from longitudinal research showing that most antisocial behaviour is limited to adolescence (Sampson & Laub, 1993). This perspective emphasizes turning points and transitions that alter criminal trajectories, including marriage, military service, and stable employment.

Biosocial criminology integrates biological and environmental factors, examining genetic influences, neurological functioning, and biological vulnerabilities that interact with social experiences to shape behaviour (Walsh & Beaver, 2009). While controversial due to concerns about biological determinism, research demonstrates that biological factors contribute to individual differences while emphasizing gene-environment interactions rather than simple biological causation.

Cultural criminology examines the symbolic meanings, subcultural dynamics, and emotional experiences associated with deviance and social control (Ferrell, Hayward, & Young, 2015). This perspective draws on cultural studies and media theory to analyze how crime and deviance are represented, performed, and consumed in contemporary culture. Cultural criminology addresses limitations of positivist theories by attending to meaning-making and subjective experience.

Green criminology applies criminological perspectives to

environmental harms and crimes against the environment, expanding the scope of criminology beyond traditional offenses (White, 2008). Similarly, scholarship on state crime examines deviance by governments including human rights violations, corruption, and state-sponsored violence (Green & Ward, 2004). These developments challenge conventional boundaries between legality and deviance.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

This comprehensive analysis of definitional and theoretical approaches to deviance reveals both significant accomplishments and important limitations in current scholarship. The review demonstrates that deviance is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon requiring multidisciplinary analysis. No single definition or theory provides complete explanation, but each contributes important insights when applied appropriately.

Definitional approaches reveal that deviance operates simultaneously as statistical deviation, norm violation, social construction, and potential harm. The most appropriate definition depends on research purposes and theoretical frameworks. Reactive definitions emphasizing social labeling processes provide crucial insights into power dynamics and the consequences of social control, while normative and harm-based definitions maintain attention to the substantive nature of behaviour and its impacts.

Theoretical analysis demonstrates progressive development from early

functionalist approaches through conflict and interactionist perspectives to contemporary integrated models. Sociological theories provide macro-level understanding of how social structures generate deviance and how power shapes definitions. Psychological theories illuminate individual differences and developmental processes that increase deviance propensity. Criminological theories focus on specific mechanisms relevant to criminal behaviour while often integrating insights across disciplines.

Several conclusions emerge regarding theoretical adequacy. First, single-level theories focusing exclusively on individual, interpersonal, or structural factors have proven insufficient. Effective explanation requires integration across levels of analysis. Second, while classical theories continue to offer valuable insights, they require modification to address contemporary forms of deviance including digital crime, corporate malfeasance, and global crimes. Third, most theories were developed in Western contexts and their applicability across cultures remains underexamined. Fourth, intersectionality of multiple social identities and structural positions requires more theoretical attention than currently exists.

The identified research gaps suggest several priorities for future investigation. First, cross-cultural comparative research is essential to distinguish universal from culturally specific aspects of deviance and to test the generalizability of theories

developed in Western societies. Second, research examining intersectionality and the combined effects of race, class, gender, and other social positions on deviance experiences and social control is needed. Third, digital deviance and transformations in social control through technological systems require theoretical innovation and empirical investigation. Fourth, longitudinal research examining life-course patterns, desistance processes, and long-term consequences of deviance labels would advance understanding of developmental processes. Fifth, intervention research with rigorous evaluation designs is needed to translate theoretical insights into effective prevention and treatment programs.

Recommendations

Based on this analysis, several recommendations for policy and practice emerge:

For Social Policy: Policies should recognize the socially constructed nature of deviance while not ignoring genuine harm. Definitions should be periodically reviewed to ensure they reflect current social values and knowledge. Particular attention should be paid to whether criminalized behaviours genuinely cause harm or primarily serve to maintain power inequalities. Decriminalization should be considered for behaviours that do not cause substantial harm to others but have been criminalized based on moral judgments or to control marginalized populations.

For Criminal Justice: Recognition of

labeling effects suggests minimizing formal processing of minor offenses, particularly for youth. Diversion programs, restorative justice, and community-based interventions may be more effective than traditional punishment for many offenses. Efforts should address racial and class disparities in enforcement and sanctioning. Reintegration programs are essential to counteract stigma and facilitate desistance.

For Prevention: Effective prevention requires addressing multiple levels simultaneously, including individual skill-building, family support, community development, and structural reforms that increase legitimate opportunities. Programs should be theoretically grounded, culturally appropriate, and rigorously evaluated. Early intervention is crucial but should avoid labeling effects.

For Research: Future research should prioritize integrated, multilevel approaches; attend to cultural diversity and intersectionality; examine emerging forms of deviance including digital crimes; employ longitudinal designs to understand developmental processes; and maintain connections between theoretical development and practical application.

For Education: Professional training for those working in criminal justice, social services, and related fields should include education about the social construction of deviance, the consequences of labeling, and the importance of addressing structural

factors rather than focusing solely on individual pathology. Public education should promote critical thinking about deviance definitions and social control.

These recommendations aim to promote more just, effective, and humane responses to deviant behaviour while advancing scholarly understanding of this complex phenomenon. Implementation requires commitment to evidence-based practice, attention to ethical considerations, and ongoing evaluation of outcomes.

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