

Deviance: A Brief Sociological Investigation

Deviance is a social construction that varies across cultures, time, and subgroups within society. Acts that violate culturally accepted norms (based on shared values and beliefs) are considered deviant. Those who do not possess a sociological imagination tend to view these deviant acts as resulting from a problem within the individual. However, sociologists are able to look to social factors to explain deviance. William J. Chambliss provides an example of this connection between society and deviance in his 1972 article entitled, "The Saints and the Roughnecks." Even more evidence can be found in an article from Michael L. Benson called "Denying the Guilty Mind: Accounting for Involvement in White-Collar Crime." Both of these investigative writers explored illegal deviant acts, and studied the social factors that contributed to the incidences of these acts and the perception of them.

"The Saints and the Roughnecks" by William Chambliss examines the public observation and future careers of two small town gangs, one consisting of "eight promising young men – children of good, stable, white, upper-middle class families, active in school affairs, good pre-college students" and the other being made up of "six lower-class white boys known as the Roughnecks" ([1972] 2009, 260). The two groups were relatively comparable in the deviant behavior they engaged in, although the types and frequency did vary. Part of this variation in the kind of deviant acts they completed can be accounted for with social factors. The Saints, being upper-middle class, had their own cars that allowed them to leave their hometown of Hannibal and engage in much of their deviant behavior in Big City. Not only could they afford alcohol, but owning automobiles gave them the ability to drive drunk once they acquired it. They did this frequently and never received a ticket for doing so (Chambliss [1972] 2009, 261,268). The socioeconomic differences between the two groups also accounted for the public perception of the two gangs. While the Saints could afford to drive to Big City to do their deviant acts, the Roughnecks did not have cars or funds to leave Hannibal. Therefore, they had to meet in relatively

open places in their own town and their activities were much more visible. This contributed to the much more negative view that the townspeople held of the Roughnecks.

Social factors also contributed to the level of deviance in the future careers of the members of both gangs. As Chambliss explains, “The community responded to the Roughnecks as boys in trouble, and the boys agreed with that perception. Their pattern of deviancy was reinforced, and breaking away from it became increasingly unlikely” ([1972] 2009, 270). This follows the process of the labeling theory of deviance – that is, being labeled as a deviant can create a self-fulfilling prophecy where opportunities to be anything other than deviant are not available (McIntyre 2008, 185). In accordance with the expectations of the Hannibal community, seven out of eight Saints went on to college. On the other hand, only two of the Roughnecks went on to college, two went to prison for varying degrees of murder, one was a small time gambler and one’s whereabouts was unknown (Chambliss [1972] 2009, 269-270). It is likely that financial opportunities open to the Saints helped with their entrance into college, especially considering that the only Roughnecks who went to college did so because of athletic scholarships (Chambliss [1972] 2009, 269-270). However, it is clear that the social factor of being labeled a ‘deviant’ by the community contributed to the continued deviance of the Roughnecks, and that a lack of this label aided the success (and lack of deviance) of the Saints in the future.

Michael L. Benson’s 1985 article entitled “Denying the Guilty Mind: Accounting for Involvement in a White-Collar Crime” also explores deviance, this time in the form of crimes committed by persons of high social status in the course of their occupation (Sutherland 1949). Benson examines the different rationales that those convicted of these crimes gave and their reactions to being called a criminal. Of particular interest were the Anti-trust Violators, or people who had broken anti-trust laws. These offenders “focused on the everyday character and historical continuity of their offenses.” They were quoted saying things like “It was a part of the everyday...It was a method of survival” (Benson [1985] 2009, 301). Their actions are directly in line with Robert K. Merton’s theory of human reaction to

anomie. Anomie, according to Merton, occurs when the norms of society do not match its social structure (McIntyre 2008, 175). In the case of the anti-trust violators, a norm of society (in the form of a goal) is that a business must make profit. The workers accepted this goal, but did not accept the means that American anti-trust laws made available to them. These means, although considered legitimate, were not perceived as available to those who committed these crimes. It is important to remember, just as the Thomas theorem states, that if people define their situations as real, they are real in their consequences (McIntyre 2008, 3). This means that, even if there were legitimate means available to the people who committed these crimes, they saw breaking the anti-trust laws as the only way to achieve the goal of profit and business survival. The effects of this sentiment and the resulting actions on the part of the anti-trust violators had the very real consequences of achieving the goal but a subsequent arrest. Merton would have considered the violators to be innovators (McIntyre 2008, 176). They accepted, probably with the desire to keep their jobs, the goal of making profit. But they devised new means to achieve this goal, that is, they used illegal methods. Although the particular people that Benson studied stated that they were only doing what had always been done, whoever they learned the behavior from certainly were innovators. As Benson explains, "From the offender's point of view, he is doing what businessmen in our society are supposed to do – that is, stay in business and make a profit" ([1985] 2009, 303). Clearly, the factors of social norms, their accompanying goal expectations, and a social structure that does not provide the means to achieve these goals, contributed to the deviance perpetrated by anti-trust violators.

Although the sociologically naïve may attribute deviance to problems originating in the individual, sociologists possess the ability to study social factors and their role in deviant behavior. William J. Chambliss' article about the Saints and Roughnecks adolescent gangs examines the way that the social factors of socio-economic standing and social labeling contribute to the types of deviant acts the young men committed and to their future levels of deviance. Similarly, Michael L. Benson's article

about White-Collar criminals examines how social factors play a role in deviance. The anti-trust violators he studied suffered from a disjunction between social goal expectations and legitimate means to achieve those goals. This resulted in their deviance. Both of these men certainly understood that in order to understand deviance, one must look beyond the individual.