

Unit 5 – Deviance and normality

Podcast text

Hello and welcome to the podcast for Unit 5 of Sociology 1101. Today, we will be talking about deviance. In our earlier discussions of socialization and roles, we assumed that people generally follow the rules that society lays out. For the most part, that's true. Even the most die-hard rebels will still obey the rules of conversation, for instance, or they wouldn't get very far in the social world at all. But sociologists also know that people break rules – and that they do so **a lot**. People cheat, lie, and exaggerate their way through nearly every day of their lives. This is part of what gives us our individuality. If everyone followed the rules **all the time**, the world would be a lot less complicated but also a lot less interesting. A more complete portrait of social behaviour allows for rule-breaking. In fact, the dynamic between rule-following and rule-breaking is one of the reasons why the social world is such a fascinating thing to study.

To start, we have to be careful about how we define **deviance**. When we typically hear someone or something described as “deviant”, we assume that means it is wrong, unusual, or strange. Sociologists, however, don't define deviance this way. Instead, sociologists consider deviance to be “any way of acting, or way of being, that elicits the moral condemnation of others.” This is a flexible definition but it is also a very useful one.

First of all, this definition recognizes that deviance is something that is **highly contextual**. For example, binge drinking is not something that is generally considered to be acceptable. People who binge-drink elicit the moral condemnation of others. We try to control binge drinking using formal sanctions, such as laws forbidding the consumption of alcohol in public and against public drunkenness; and also by informal sanctions such as disapproval, gossip, and interventions to try to change a binge-drinker's behaviour. However, as young people you also know that there are situations where binge drinking is **not deviant**, and even considered normal. During Frosh Week or Spring Break, or even on any given on-campus weekend, young people are expected by their peers to get extremely drunk. At many parties and gatherings, this expectation is so strong that *not drinking* is considered deviant, and people who choose not to drink are teased and prodded into joining the “fun”. What is deviant in one situation is not deviant in another.

Second, the definition of deviance as a way of acting or being that is morally condemned by others allows us to study how deviance is defined. If deviance is about “breaking the rules”, then the study of deviance can tell us a lot about *how rules are made and reinforced*. In other words, studying deviance can tell us a lot about how “normality” or “normal-ness” is constructed. It is

useful to think about deviance and “normality” as being two sides of the same coin. It is no accident, for instance, that the habits, preferences, and values of people in power come to be defined as being “normal”, and behaviours that contradict the powerful become labelled as “deviant.” For example, for a long time it was considered normal for men to go off to work and women to stay in the home to take care of the household and raise children. Women who left the home to work were considered abnormal, immoral, and wrong. Some jobs were open to women, but only while they were young and single. For example, young women frequently became teachers, but they were expected to quit their jobs once they got married. Society was very harsh towards women who never married, labelling them as “old maids” and “spinsters,” while men who never married were just “bachelors”.

Third, this definition of deviance can tell us a lot about social change. Lots of behaviours that used to be considered deviant are no longer thought of that way. For example, it is now considered “normal” for women to work throughout their lifetimes, even if they are married and have children. There are other examples of where we have come halfway between deviance and normality. Homosexuality, for instance, used to be considered very deviant – to the point where few men and women publicly embraced their homosexuality for fear of losing their jobs, families, and reputations. Today, it is *sometimes* included in the sphere of “normal”, but this again depends on context. Gay lifestyles are accepted in most major cities in North America, for instance, but the situation varies in smaller towns and villages. Social change also works in the other direction, where behaviours that used to be considered “normal” become deviant. A classic example of this is drinking and driving. My grandmother used to repeat a saying – jokingly – that was quite common in her time: “It’s a good thing we’re driving, because we’re too drunk to walk!” For her generation, there was nothing morally condemnable about driving while drunk. This has changed, largely due to the efforts of groups like Mothers Against Drunk Driving, who have fought to change the cultural definition of impaired driving. Each of these examples show us that social change often happens as a result of groups trying to redefine what exactly “normality” means.

Finally, I want to stress that most sociologists make a distinction between two different kinds of deviance: **primary deviance**, and **secondary deviance**. Primary deviance refers to “everyday” forms of deviance that each one of us engages in. This kind of deviance includes lying, cheating, drinking, smoking, gambling, and eating foods that are bad for us. Each one of these behaviours are subject to some form of social control, but we engage in them anyways. Some sociologists even argue that primary deviance fulfills an important social function. For instance, telling lies is often a way of avoiding conflicts, even if it is technically wrong and the person you are *lying to* would be extremely upset if they knew you were doing it. Getting obscenely drunk with others can be a way of cementing friendships. Pushing this a bit further, there is recurring

controversy about more serious activities like hazing on sports teams and clubs. Hazing involves humiliating new members by making them do morally questionable things. Why would people do this? Sociologists argue that it is a way of affirming the group – making a statement to everyone (new members and old) that the group is so important that it transcends the usual moral code of society.

While each one of us frequently engages in primary deviance, **secondary deviance** is a deeper form of deviance. Sociologists use the term secondary deviance to describe deviant identities, or “a life that is organized around deviance”. Let me explain it this way: Every one of us has likely stolen something in their lives. I vividly remember stealing a 60 cent chocolate bar from the neighbourhood convenience store when I was about 8 or 9 years old. This was a deviant act, but it didn’t become a part of how people see me. Even if I’d been caught (which I wasn’t), I wouldn’t have to go through life labelled as “a thief”. A thief is somebody who habitually steals – who organizes their life around the act of stealing. Sometimes the act is seen as so serious that it only has to be done once, as with murder. A person who murders will be seen as a murderer by others no matter what else they do.

One of the most interesting things about secondary deviance, though, is that it doesn’t always have to do with choice. A disfigured person, for example, has to constantly deal with the stigma of their injury – it is a thing that people judge them on and thing that never goes away. Some sociologists have argued that visible minorities often have to deal with the same sorts of stigma. For example, visible minorities who rise to positions of power in universities, government, and corporations frequently report the feeling that colleagues don’t respect them, because they assume that they got their positions due employment equity programs. This moral condemnation – that they did not honestly earn their success – follows them no matter how successful they are.

In summary, the study of deviance can tell us a lot about how the social world is organized. By looking at rule-breaking, we see that people are not just automatons that bend to society’s rules, but are constantly pushing boundaries and negotiating how their individuality fits in with social conventions. The study of deviance, though, is also a window into its opposite – the processes by which *normality* is defined and enforced. Definitions of “normal” usually reflect the habits and preferences of powerful people. Religious, ethnic, and sexual minorities who fall outside of this idealized version of “normal” frequently find themselves the object of moral condemnation.

QUESTION: Why do you think street crime considered more deviant than white-collar crime?

QUESTION: Why do you think people feel the need to control the behaviour of others?