

# Conflict Theory and Deviance

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of the social conflict approach to deviance, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Alexander Liazos and Conflict Theory of Deviance

## 1. ALEXANDER LIAZOS AND CONFLICT THEORY OF DEVIANCE

You may recall there are three dominant theoretical perspectives in sociology: social conflict theory, structural functional theory and symbolic interaction theory. Each of these theories can be applied to the concept of deviance. This lesson will focus on the social **conflict theory of deviance**.

The social conflict approach focuses on how inequalities in society produce conflict and result in change. Sociologist **Alexander Liazos** argued that the power structure in society is critical in determining what is deviant versus what is not deviant. Anything antagonistic to the power structure's interests is defined as deviant, while anything in line with the interests of society's elite--the capitalists and those with power--is acceptable behavior. Those who have more influence with respect to power, wealth, and prestige get to decide what is labeled as deviant, and those who don't have any power are much more likely to be labeled as deviant. Simply put, powerlessness equals deviance.



### HINT

Karl Marx, who influenced the social conflict theory to deviance, famously said, "The ruling ideas of each epoch are always and always have been the ideas of the ruling class." This idea holds that the laws, norms, and regulations of society reflect the interest of the capitalist ruling class. They have the power to bend these ideas of right and wrong, good and bad, to their interests. Therefore, good is in line with the interests of the ruling class, and bad is anything that opposes the ruling class.

In addition to helping shape the meaning of good and bad in society and bending that meaning to their interests, society's elite might also receive special treatment. Those with resources-- society's elite--have the material ability to fight labels of deviance that may be applied to them. They can use these resources to resist the consequences of deviant behavior, meaning they are potentially able to avoid the consequences of bad behavior, whereas people without power can not.



## THINK ABOUT IT

In theory, is the homeless man on the street able to resist his deviant label? No, he's not, because he lacks power and resources. On the other hand, somebody with resources who commits some kind of white collar crime can use those resources to shape public opinion and avoid a deviant label.

Those with power also benefit because people hold the widespread belief that the laws are just and good, so resistance to these laws is unlikely. The ideas of the ruling class therefore are disguised behind ideas of fairness, justice, and freedom, so the rest of society may not recognize that there are interests behind the laws of society that might work counter to some members of society.



## BIG IDEA

This is a clever ruse that we call ideology. Operating with this theoretical perspective, Liazos argued that those who are defined as deviant are defined as such not necessarily because they're more harmful to society, but because they are powerless.

Those who lack the material resources and power--the homeless, thieves, drug addicts, and especially those who challenge the status quo--are the people that are labeled as deviant. All over the world and throughout history, progressive people, intellectual people, and those who want to fight for a society that runs counter to the ideas of the ruling class, have been systematically rounded up and persecuted. You can see how the ideas of the ruling class have historically been the ruling ideas of society.



## TERM TO KNOW

### Conflict Theory of Deviance

A theory of deviance that links the labeling of deviance to the dynamics of power in society (powerlessness = deviance).



## PEOPLE TO KNOW

### Alexander Liazos

An influential American sociologist who argued that the dynamics of power need to be considered in order to fully understand the labeling and identification of deviance in society.



## SUMMARY

Today you learned about sociologist **Alexander Liazos** and his social **conflict theory of deviance**, one of a number of theoretical approaches to deviance.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



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