

# Functions of Deviance

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of deviance, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Emile Durkheim's Theory of Deviance
2. Four Social Functions of Deviance
3. Kai Erikson and Study of the Puritans

## 1. EMILE DURKHEIM'S THEORY OF DEVIANCE

Sociologist **Emile Durkheim** theorized that deviance was a necessary condition for a well-functioning and stable society. You may think this is counter-intuitive. How would deviance help to promote social order, social cohesion, and the overall stability and harmony of the society?



## PEOPLE TO KNOW

### Emile Durkheim

A hugely important sociologist who is famous for, among a number of things, theorizing the social functions of deviance.

## 2. FOUR SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF DEVIANCE

Despite being counter-intuitive, Durkheim theorized about deviance with relation to social solidarity, stating that deviance has **four social functions**:

- **Deviance clarifies cultural values** Deviance helps to define what is good and bad in society. What is defined as good, in a way, depends on the polar opposite, what is defined as bad. You can only define the good in relation to the bad, and vice versa. These two concepts are inextricable and will always remain paired. People need examples in society of what is wrong so that they can become unified around what is right, and deviant behavior helps to define these boundaries. Without definitions of deviance, you can't have any social order, because individuals would each set their own moral code and set of standards, and society would come unraveled.

## IN CONTEXT

Recall that Durkheim was a structural functionalist, meaning that he was concerned with what makes society harmonious, orderly, and stable. Since deviance unifies people with respect to what is good and proper in society, it serves as one of these structural functions. In this manner, deviance holds society together.

Paradoxically, deviant behavior sets an example for the rest of society, so that people can become unified on what is culturally valued and right as opposed to what is wrong. Sharing these cultural values of right is what holds people together, and in turn, helps to hold society together.

- ***Deviance helps to define morality.*** Durkheim theorized that when people respond to deviance, it defines their collective notions of morality. Similar to defining cultural values, moral notions are also clarified when individuals respond to deviant behavior. Deviance is a critical function for society because it provides everyone with the same code to live by, enabling them to live in groups by virtue of the fact that they uphold the same notion of deviance and the same morality.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you get caught stealing and are punished, this sends a signal to the rest of society that stealing is wrong. It clarifies the boundaries of moral behavior by defining what is right and wrong.

- ***Deviance helps to unify society.*** When people respond to deviance, it helps to unify society. In response to deviant behavior, people come together against the common offender and strengthen their social bonds in the community, and in the process, create shared values of right and wrong. This can happen on a large scale or a smaller scale.

➞ **EXAMPLE** National responses to disasters like 9/11 or Pearl Harbor unified an entire nation against a common enemy. It can also happen on a community level, like the outcry that happens when a sex offender wants to move into the area. The community comes together against this common enemy. In essence, people are saying, “He’s not like us. We’re right. He’s wrong.” Their commonality is based upon their shared conviction that he is wrong.



#### DID YOU KNOW

George Orwell’s book, *1984*, talked about the importance of always needing to have a common enemy. Without a common enemy, there is no unity. Common feelings are created, and it helps to hold society together.

- ***Deviance promotes social change.*** Finally, Durkheim theorized that deviance is very important for the process of social change. As is often the case, deviance is the spark that lights the fire of social change.

## IN CONTEXT

During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, Rosa Parks refused to sit in the area of the bus designated for black people. Her refusal was regarded as deviant behavior that became a catalyst to galvanize a movement to cause social change.

Likewise, the Greensboro Four, the four black youth who staged the sit-ins at a lunch counter at Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina, were sitting at the "whites-only" counter. This, too, proved to be an important catalyst in Civil Rights Movement. You can see how deviant behavior can cause social change.



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### Four Functions of Deviance

A pioneering sociologist Emile Durkheim argued that deviance is not abnormal, but actually serves four important social functions: 1) Deviance clarifies our collective cultural values; 2) Responding to Deviance defines our collective morality; 3) Responding to deviance unifies society; 4) Deviance promotes social change.

## 3. KAI ERIKSON AND STUDY OF THE PURITANS

What happens if there's a society with little or no deviance? The answer, emphatically, is that there is no society without deviance. Durkheim has shown how deviance promotes morality and social solidarity, elevates the idea of good as opposed to bad, and enables the essential functioning of the social order.

However, what happens when there's little "conventional" deviance? The idea of deviance is relative--what is deviant in one society might not be deviant another society, although the overarching point is that deviance exists in all societies.

**Kai Erikson**, a sociologist, did a historical study of the Puritans and their forms of deviance.

#### IN CONTEXT

Puritans were a very pure, non-offending group of people, yet they still had relative forms of deviance. Some infractions had to be identified and prosecuted in order to maintain the social order.

Erikson looked at conventions of deviance through time and found that the Puritans had several waves of crime. They were different, but the rate of deviant offenders stayed the same throughout the whole time. The most famous of these waves were the witch trials, where witches were burned at the stakes.

In reality, this ludicrous form of deviance was created to serve those same four functions, maintaining solidarity in society, establishing what is good as opposed to bad, and defining morality in cultural values. People can't do this on their own without some example or pariah--in this case, the 'witches.'

Even in a stable, 'Puritan,' harmonious society, they still needed some form of deviance in order for society to stay glued together.



#### BIG IDEA

The discipline of sociology is hugely indebted to Durkheim for developing the theory that deviance, though counter-intuitively, actually benefits society. Human beings living in groups need order, rules, and norms in order to survive, and deviance helps to provide these--it's an essential part of cohesive, social living.



## PEOPLE TO KNOW

### Kai Erikson

An American sociologist who studied the Puritans and argued that even a highly disciplined, religious society created deviance to clarify its moral boundaries.



## SUMMARY

Today you learned about sociologist **Emile Durkheim's theory of deviance** and its **four social functions**. You also learned about a theoretical application of Durkheim done by sociologist, **Kai Erikson**, in his Study of the Puritans.

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



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