

The Labelling Paradox: How Societal Power Dynamics Create Deviance

Deviance is rule breaking. It is not enough to break a rule or a norm to be deviant, you also have to be named a deviant. Society's reaction to deviance makes a person deviant, not the act itself. Someone has to decide that the act is deviant and if others agree with the label, a deviant has been made and a deviant act named. It's usually someone from a class with more power who does the labelling.

Labelling is always about power. And it's not just about rich and poor, it's also good-looking and ugly, slim and fat, old and young, educated and uneducated and the list goes on. Labelling asserts power. Many people try to take back power by using the labels in a positive way and it has had some effect, for example, queer or slut or differently abled.

Deviance is a result of naming not behaving. People behave all the time. It's by labelling the behaviour that society creates deviance. People's reaction to the behaviour creates deviance. Any behaviour can be labelled as deviant depending on culture and also norms in a specific area within culture, for example, deviance is different in the city compared to the village. People might still disagree on what is a deviant act even if they live in the same reality.

To understand deviance, we have to understand why people feel the urge to label people who are different. Why do they think their worldview is correct and label the deviant as immoral? They impose their morals on those who have less or no power to reject it. Naturally, the labelling is done by the people in power on the poor, or by men on women, or by adults on children or ethnic majorities on ethnic minorities. Labelling demonstrates power over another. In an affluent neighbourhood, deviance can be seen as part of growing up, an innocent act, but in a poor neighbourhood, the same act can be seen as a sign of delinquency and a roadmap to a life of crime. Labelling affects people even as they try to reject it. A child who has been labelled a delinquent is stigmatised in all society's institutions. Teachers look down on them and employers don't want them. A child who gets to sow their wild oats as the saying goes without being labelled a deviant and potential lifetime criminal will go on to a bright future and be liked by teachers, employers and people in authority.

Emile Durkheim's perspective

Emile Durkheim, a French sociologist, believed deviance serves a purpose in society. He stated that it reaffirms boundaries as it affirms cultural values and norms. The response to deviance clarifies moral boundaries and brings people together. Deviance also encourages social change and as Durkheim believed, without deviance we wouldn't have society. He believed we need badness to have goodness.

Durkheim believed deviance clarified norms and reinforced conformity, it also strengthened bonds between people uniting against the deviant, finally, he also believed it deviance can lead to positive societal change and challenge people's views of what's right and wrong. Unfortunately, this kind of bonding can also turn into a lynch mob as they are united against something, not for something. It's ok to be against something, but have a solution as well, not just a label.

Immigration and deviance

An immigrant culture creates deviance. Immigrants are different and the native people, in an act to retain control and power, name deviant people. Naming is catching someone and when

someone is caught, it's hard to get away from the label. Deviance comes from being socially marked as a deviant. Putting a label on a deviant person causes the person to see themselves as deviant. They conform to the label. Who is strong enough or deviant enough to resist being labelled? Deviance is necessary for change and innovation, both are needed for a society to keep reinventing itself and not go stale. In a society with unclear rules, anomie can take over and cause chaos. Anomie is social unrest and today we can see clear examples of anomie in, for example, Sweden.

Sweden has so many criminal groups it has lost count and these groups as well as individuals are constantly testing the rules. When hard crime by children is met by a talk with parents while drinking juice and eating buns the rules are stretched further and further. While telling the Swedish people not to put group against group, the government is doing exactly that and it has created areas where the Swedish police has lost authority and power. Sweden is like a permissive parent who has lost all respect.

The only way to start changing this is to start treating everyone equally. When there is little disapproval from the people that matters, nothing will change. Parents who feel excluded from Swedish society won't change their children's behaviour as they feel the same exclusion. Anomie in Sweden then seems to be due to a lack of integration. A weakened bond between the individual and group to the community causes deviance. Language is a major issue when it comes to lack of integration. Everyone should be incentivised to help make integration a natural two-way process. If criminals are met with empathy and understanding, if they are labelled victims, more deviance will occur.

Deviance is supposed to clarify rules, everyone in society will then learn what is unacceptable. Anomie in Sweden is not just down to lack of integration. The digital age has made many people superfluous, ethnic Swedes who used to work in factories, young men who used to be called for army training and those with no education or low education are no longer needed. All of this mixed with a lack of a two-way integration process, exclusion and no-go areas cause social unrest and if not dealt with, a civil war.

Shift in labelling

The shift in labelling of deviant people from bad to sick has made society more understanding and deviant people can now get help instead of punishment. Normal or abnormal behaviour depends on the label attached to the person or the act. If society doesn't like or understand a behaviour, they stick a label on it, for example, mental illness. The labelled person will find it hard to be seen as normal once the label has been attached. A mental illness is for life.

The person who is continuously rejected in their attempts to be normal, to rid themselves of the label, eventually gives up and relaxes into the role of a sick person in need of help. People who are considered mentally ill have a feeling that others are conspiring against them and they are right. The people close to the person think they are helping by putting a label on behaviour they don't understand, but naming a person mentally ill instead of accepting that someone is different becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. A person who is different is not sick, but if labelled as such, it's hard to reject the label.

Power dynamics in labelling and dissent

It's the powerful who label and they also have the power to resist being labelled. Anomie is the nature of capitalism. The rich hide their greed and put attention on the lower classes' criminality by strict laws and policing. Society labels the lower classes much more than its middle and upper classes.

Today, to be deviant is also to dare to speak up against the mainstream narrative, but it's not easy as there are so many labels that make a deviant an outcast almost immediately as they are named, for example, covidiot, climate denier and conspiracy theorist.

Dissenting voices are not always right, but their presence is a safeguard against authoritarianism, stagnation and close-mindedness. Listening to understand is a powerful approach that enhances problem-solving.