

DEVIANCE AND SOCIAL CONTROL

Deviance is one of the more intriguing topics studied by sociologists. The sociological study of deviance covers the gamut of fascinating (if occasionally despicable) behaviors: alcoholism, mental illness, gambling, murders, adultery, crime, drug use, stripping, pimping, prostitution, bulimia, suicide, pedophilia, necromancy, pornography, panhandling—to name just a few.¹ At first glance, gamblers, murderers, prostitutes, and the rest may seem like strangers among us. They aren't (as I will discuss in this chapter, the deviants are us). Moreover, because deviance is the flip side of conformity, understanding deviance contributes to our understanding of conformity. Besides, although curiosity about “perversion” may seem morbid, it's hard not to be fascinated by deviant behavior.

The Relativity of Deviance (What We Already Know)

Because of the close connection between norms and deviance, it is fair to say that we already have a great deal of sociological knowledge about deviance.

For one thing, we know that *norms vary across societies*. So, we also know that *what is considered to be deviant varies across societies*. Different societies have different expectations about how people ought to behave. A particular act may be regarded as normative

¹When I was a college student, people referred to deviance courses as “the sociology of nuts, sluts, and perverts.”

in society A but deviant in society B. In some countries (e.g., Belgium, France, Germany, Japan, Spain), it is expected that you will stop to help a stranger in trouble; fail to help and you might end up being arrested. In most places in the United States, however, the law can't touch you—even if you stand by and watch a murder.

Important: To define an act as deviant is to say nothing about whether that act is inherently good or bad, or moral or immoral. Remember, good, bad, moral, and immoral are not sociological concepts. (If you need to, review chapter 4 on that point.) To say that an act is deviant is to say only that it violates the norms of a particular group of people at a particular point in time.

Travelers to Singapore are warned that anyone caught spitting in public can be subject to a fine of more than \$500 and that failing to flush a public toilet could cost you almost \$100. However, a recent law does allow one to purchase chewing gum in Singapore, as long as one has a prescription. Traveling in the Netherlands, on the other hand, might be a little more relaxing—if you are at least eighteen years of age, you can stop in at a coffee shop and order marijuana with that mocha latté (one gram for about five or six dollars).

It's a shocking fact that it is impossible to find any specific act that is regarded as deviant in every culture.²

For another thing, we know that *norms change over time—even within a particular culture*. So, we also know that *what is considered to be deviant at one time may be considered normative at another time*. For example, in the 1950s college women were expected to wear skirts or dresses to class and men were expected to wear jackets and ties; these days things are much more casual (I occasionally see students wearing pajamas to class). One hundred years ago, it was a crime to join a labor union. Two hundred years ago, one person could own another person; today, slavery is considered very deviant.

Finally, we know that *norms vary within a particular society—that different subgroups have different norms*. So, we also know that *what is considered deviant will vary from subgroup to subgroup within a particular society*. For example, according to the norms of many groups, dancing and playing cards are respectable, normative behaviors. But in some religious subcultures, dancing and card playing are regarded as deviant. Generally, drinking alcohol is normative, as long as the drinker does not drive or become drunk. But in some adolescent subcultures, on the other hand, “drinking until you pass out” is normative. (You may recall from chapter 7

²Wait! You might be thinking, what about murder? Isn't murder regarded as deviant in all cultures? The trick here is that murder is not an act, but a category of acts that a society has elected to say are deviant. To put it another way, some form of killing is tolerated in nearly every society. But what sorts of killing are called murder and what sorts are not varies according to society. Similarly, what constitutes killing in self-defense varies across societies.

that one of the things that defines a subculture is that its norms vary from those of the larger society.) We also have different expectations for different kinds of people. Thus, it is considered deviant for women to chew tobacco but not for men.

11.1 Which of the following statements about deviance are true, and which are false? Explain your answers briefly.

- a. Society can be divided into people who conform and people who do not conform to social norms.
- b. People generally agree on which behaviors are deviant and which are not deviant.
- c. Most people have violated one or more important mores at some time in their lives.
- d. Most deviant behaviors are regarded as deviant in all societies and at all times.
- e. Only acts that are harmful to people are judged deviant.



Nonsociological Theories of Deviance

Deviance has long intrigued social observers. For centuries many theorized that deviance was simply a product of sin and was caused by such factors as demonic possession. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, skeptical social observers began to look for different causes. The first attempts at scientifically explaining deviance focused on biological factors. For example, Cesare Lombroso, a physician who worked in Italian prisons, argued in 1876 that deviants were, in effect, biological failures. Claimed Lombroso, “Criminals are evolutionary throwbacks,” or *atavists*.³

But Lombroso’s study overlooked a couple of important factors. First, owing to heightened scrutiny on the part of police, Italian prisoners were most likely to be Sicilian—a group of people who tended to have lower foreheads, more prominent cheekbones and protruding ears, and more body hair than the average Italian. Had Lombroso journeyed to Sicily, he would have found the same physical characteristics to be present among the general *nonimprisoned* population. British psychiatrist Charles Goring and others later probed the matter more carefully. Comparing thousands of convicts and nonconvicts, they found no evidence of

³The term *atavism* refers to a biological state with a variety of physical manifestations, including low foreheads, prominent cheekbones, protruding ears, and lots of body hair.

Deviance is relative—acts considered deviant today (smoking and other forms of air pollution) were not necessarily regarded as deviant in times past.



“Judge, my client is willing to plead guilty to bank robbery if you’ll drop the charge of smoking in public.”

any physical differences that would distinguish members of one group from the other.

Other researchers have attempted to identify physical characteristics typical of criminals. In the late 1940s, William Sheldon contended that a person’s body shape plays a role in criminality. He distinguished three general body types: (1) *ectomorphs* (tall, thin, fragile), (2) *endomorphs* (short and fat), and (3) *mesomorphs* (muscular and athletic). After analyzing the body structures and criminal histories of hundreds of young men, Sheldon reported that criminality was linked to mesomorphy. Later researchers found merit in Sheldon’s findings but argued that he had misunderstood the cause-effect relationship between body type and crime. According to these researchers, mesomorphy itself was not the cause of criminality. Rather, the way mesomorphs tended to be socialized (to be tougher and to have less sensitivity toward others) created a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy that encouraged criminality.

Another category of nonsociological theories treats deviance as a result of personality factors—especially those arising from “unsuccessful socialization.” Such researchers hypothesize, for example, that people with a strong conscience (or *superego*, to use Freud’s term) tend to be good, whereas people with a weak conscience tend to be bad. Psychological theorists may also posit that some forms of deviance, such as violence, are a manifestation of an “aggressive personality,” whereas other forms, such as homosexuality, may be seen as an expression of “psychological dependency.” These theories do not explain, however, why

such a small percentage of people with aggressive personalities commit homicide or why such a small proportion of people with dependent personalities become homosexual.

Sociological Theories of Deviance: Émile Durkheim and Suicide

Sociologists tend to be much more impressed by the fact that deviance is tied to social norms. Because social norms exist outside the individual, sociologists look for causes of deviance in the same place: *outside the individual*.

THE COLLECTIVE CONSCIENCE AND STRUCTURAL STRAIN

Émile Durkheim was one of the first researchers to look for the causes of deviance in terms of social rather than individual factors. In his early research during the 1880s, Durkheim focused on the act of suicide. Suicide was an interesting choice in that hardly anything seems more personal than the decision to kill oneself. Surely the causes of suicide must be within the individual! (In point of fact, Durkheim was not really interested in individual acts of suicide. He was concerned with suicide rates and what changes in suicide rates indicated about the health of a particular society.)

As we discussed briefly in chapter 1, Durkheim's primary concern was the nature of society and social order. What sorts of factors hold a society together? What sorts of factors can destroy a society? Durkheim envisioned society as a system made up of interrelated parts. Like a well-oiled machine, a well-functioning society depends on each of its parts working together. Each part of the social system—the institutions of family, religion, and education, for example—work together to make the entire system of society run well. Because of the close connection among all the social parts, when one part of this social machine is not working properly, the entire system ceases to work well.

According to Durkheim, in some societies the social machine was maintained in smooth working order because of the strength of what he called the *collective conscience*—"the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of the same society." The collective conscience, in other words, was made up of the values, beliefs, norms, and goals shared by people in a particular society. The collective conscience was a kind of social oil that made things work smoothly.

As we also discussed in chapter 1, in the late nineteenth century, many people believed that society was in chaos and about to fall apart. For centuries society had seemed to be in a holding pattern, and social change, when it did occur, came slowly—almost unnoticed. But in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, social change became a fact of life. That sounds reasonable to us, because we live in a society in which change is a part of life. But a couple of hundred years ago, change was new and seemed to be undermining the very nature of what held society together. There were many prophets of doom.

To Durkheim, one of the symptoms of this “society falling apart” syndrome was the high rate of suicide. In many Western countries, the rate of suicide seemed to be increasing. Whereas many of his contemporaries were asking what was wrong with the people who were killing themselves, Durkheim started asking what it was about *society* that caused increases in the rate of suicide. Durkheim argued that changes in suicide rates could be explained not by focusing on individuals but only by focusing on different social factors.

Durkheim’s study, titled *Suicide* (published in 1897), was one of the first to use statistical analysis. One finding was that the rate of suicide was higher in industrializing societies than in non-industrializing societies. This led Durkheim to suspect that suicide rates were manifestations of the amount of *structural strain* in a social system.

More specifically, as a result of his analysis, Durkheim argued that as societies grew larger, more complex, and more specialized, the things that traditionally had held people together would begin to fail. As the division of labor became specialized, people began to do different kinds of work; these differences meant that some people achieved a financial success that took them far from their original lifestyles. However, although people could technically improve their social class standing, they did not know any of the norms that accompanied their new stations in life. No longer was there a great deal of agreement on what values were most important and on which norms applied to whom.

EGOISM AND ANOMIE

Durkheim identified several sources of suicide, including *egoism* and *anomie*. Each is a manifestation of a different kind of structural strain. *Egoism occurs when people are not well integrated into society*. In a state of egoism, people lack ties to their social groups. For example, Durkheim found that unmarried people were less integrated into society than married people, who had ties to spouses, children, their children’s friends’ parents, and so on.

Durkheim also argued that Protestants (whose religion encouraged independent thinking) were less integrated into their social groups than Catholics (who were encouraged to look to their priests for leadership). Integration is tied to suicide rates because people who lack ties to their social groups simply have less to live for (that is, less reason not to kill themselves).

For example, while both married and unmarried individuals may occasionally entertain suicidal thoughts, the married have more social responsibilities, which deters them from committing suicide, than do the unmarried, who have no one to worry about . . . ; Catholics are socially integrated, they experience social support (comfort, understanding, and sympathy), which deters them from committing suicide in times of despair. (Liska 1987, 30)

Increases in suicide rates, according to Durkheim, also were linked to rapid social change, which resulted in a state of social confusion he called *anomie*. The word is taken from the Greek term for “lawlessness” or “normlessness.” So, anomie (or anomy, as it is sometimes spelled) is a situation in which people do not experience the constraint of social norms—either because there are no norms or because they don’t know the norms. More technically, anomie is *a state wherein society fails to exercise adequate regulation of the goals and desires of individual members*. To put it yet another way, anomie exists when things like the collective conscience are not powerful enough to affect the behavior of individuals. The lack of social constraint from social norms, like the lack of integration present in egoistic states, creates a situation in which behavior is not properly regulated and suicide is thus easier.

Durkheim hypothesized that anomie and egoism were both major influences on the rate of suicide in modern society. When people lived in a state of anomie (that is, when the collective conscience was not powerful enough to regulate their behavior) or egoism (as when people were not well enough integrated), they were more likely to kill themselves.⁴ In short, Durkheim came up with *structural* explanations of suicide rather than individualistic ones. Durkheim never argued that the decision to kill oneself was anything other than a private one for the individual. Durkheim was concerned only with the *rate* of suicide within a particular social group. Or, in Mills’s language, Durkheim treated what many had regarded a private trouble as a public issue and thereby broadened our understanding of the phenomenon of suicide.

⁴Durkheim also identified other causes of changes in suicide rates. For example, he found that just as not enough moral regulation and integration would lead to an increased suicide rate, so would too much moral regulation. The lowest suicide rates require a balance between social freedom and social control.

More Structural Strain: Robert Merton and Anomie

The American sociologist Robert Merton rediscovered Durkheim's ideas about anomie in the late 1930s. Merton was not particularly interested in the problem of suicide, but he suspected that Durkheim's conception of anomie might help us to understand other forms of deviance.

ANOMIE AND MODERN SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Merton continued in Durkheim's footsteps by focusing on structural strain as a cause of deviance. But Merton applied the concept of anomie more broadly than Durkheim had. Durkheim had implicitly assumed that once society completed its transition from preindustrial to industrial, anomie would go away. From his twentieth-century perspective, however, Merton realized that anomie was not about to go away; indeed, as far as Merton was concerned, *anomie is built into the structure of modern society*.

Merton refocused the meaning of anomie to make it speak more directly to twentieth-century society. Instead of seeing anomie as a situation in which there was a lack of norms (as Durkheim had), Merton said that *anomie occurs when the norms of a society do not match its social structure*. (This might sound complicated, but don't give up. Keep reading.)

Merton (1938) began his analysis by noticing that all social systems have two characteristics. First, they have commonly accepted *goals* for their members. These goals are simply socially valued things worth striving for. As we discovered in chapter 7, at the top of the list of things that people in the United States tend to value are achievement and success.

Second, each society establishes what it considers to be legitimate ways, or *means*, to reach these valued goals. In this society, for example, education and hard work are the legitimate and approved routes to achievement and success.

According to Merton, everything is fine in a society in which there is a good match between the culturally approved goals and the availability of legitimate means to reach those goals. In a well-structured society, everyone will understand what the goals are, and people will be able to reach those goals by following socially acceptable means.

In modern Western society, however, there tends to be a significant gap, or *disjunction*, between goals and legitimate means. Or, as Merton put it, anomie exists "when a system of cultural values extols, virtually above all else, certain common success-goals for the population at large while the social structure rigorously

Table 11.1 Adaptations to Anomie

	Culture		Social Structure
	Culturally Emphasized Goals		Institutionally Available, Legitimate Means to Goal Attainment
I. Conformity	+ accept		+ accept
II. Innovation	+ accept		– reject
III. Ritualism	– reject		+ accept
IV. Retreatism	– reject		– reject
V. Rebellion	± reject	old and substitute new ones	±

SOURCE: Adapted from Robert K. Merton, “Social Structure and Anomie,” *American Sociological Review* (1938): 672–682.

restricts or completely closes access to approved modes of reaching goals for a considerable part of the same population” (1938, 211). Under such circumstances, Merton argued, “deviant behavior ensues on a large scale.”

Merton understood that the American Dream (the idea that hard work will lead to success) is frequently a myth.⁵ As he looked around, he saw whole segments of society whose access to legitimate means to success was highly restricted. One must have a college education to achieve the best jobs, for example, and Merton realized that a college education was out of the reach of many—no matter how smart they were or how hard they worked. This was just the sort of situation in which, Merton said, there was a disjuncture between socially approved goals (success) and means (education). This disjuncture, for Merton, represented a form of structural strain—which he called anomie. But Merton did not stop there. He noted that when there is anomie, or a disjuncture between goals and means, people may respond (or adapt) in different ways. These modes of adaptation are summarized in table 11.1.

RESPONSES TO ANOMIE

Some people in society may not experience any disjuncture between goals and means. For example, for some people hard

⁵Merton surely had a well-developed sociological imagination. Had it not been so well developed, he might never have come to this insight, because everything in his personal history seemed to be proof of the truth of the American Dream. Merton was born in 1910 on the “wrong side of the tracks” in north Philadelphia. He worked his way out of the slums by winning a scholarship to Temple University, where in 1931 he earned his BA. Merton then won a fellowship to Harvard to pursue graduate studies, and in 1936 he was awarded the PhD in sociology.

work may indeed lead to success.⁶ In other cases, even when they keep running into obstacles (as when, for example, someone can't afford to pay the costs of a college education), people may ignore the disjuncture and keep on trying. In other words, they may continue to accept the goals of success and achievement and the means of hard work even when it isn't getting them anywhere. Merton calls this adaptation *conformity*.

Other people respond to anomie in a variety of ways. Merton called the first mode of adaptation that is obviously deviant *innovation*. Innovators accept and pursue the accepted goals of society but, when confronted with a lack of legitimate means, devise new ones. For example, if in the pursuit of the accepted goal of wealth, Mary finds she has no legitimate access to wealth, she might innovate by embezzling from her employer. The innovator, then, accepts the cultural goals but rejects the legitimate means for achieving these.

Some people reject culturally approved goals but continue to pursue the means. Merton calls this apparently odd form of behavior *ritualism*. Ritualists follow legitimate means without caring about the goals. Ritualists, then, simply go through the motions. Ritualism is the deviant response sometimes chosen by petty bureaucrats who, frustrated at not being able to achieve their goals, continue to stamp papers and file them even when there is no point to doing so. To the ritualist, following the rules becomes more important than achieving the goals. The professor who shows up in class but does not put any effort into teaching is another example of a ritualist who is only going through the motions. Notice that ritualism is an invisible form of deviance. Because the ritualist goes through the motions of conforming, he or she may be viewed as a conformist.

Retreatists are noticeably different in that they reject both the goals and the legitimate means to them. For example, like ritualists, retreatists do not care about the goal of success; but unlike ritualists, neither do they care about going through the motions. Some retreatists literally drop out of society by moving, say, to the mountains of Idaho and living in huts. (A generation ago, the hippies who "turned on, tuned out, and dropped out" were splendid examples of retreatists.)

The fifth mode of adapting to anomie that Merton identified was *rebellion*. Rebels are deviant in that they reject both cultural goals and means and then substitute new ones. It is the substitution of new goals and means that distinguishes the rebel from the retreatist. And it is the substitution of new goals and means that makes the rebel

⁶As we will discuss more fully in chapters 13 and 14, such people tend to occupy specific places in the social structure. Upper- and middle-class people, for example, are less likely to experience the anomie of blocked opportunities (because they are less likely to experience blocked opportunities).

seem to be the greatest threat to society. The rebels' response to strain in the social structure is to tear it down and to build up a new one.

But Merton overlooked an important question: In a society in which there is a disjuncture between legitimate means and culturally approved goals, which mode of adaptation will people choose? How come some people choose to conform or to innovate? Why is it that still others choose to retreat or rebel?

LEGITIMATE VERSUS ILLEGITIMATE MEANS

Two students of Merton, Richard A. Cloward and Lloyd E. Ohlin (1960; see also Cloward and Ohlin 1959), extended Merton's analysis by suggesting that *just as legitimate means to success are unequally distributed in society, so are illegitimate means*. For example, to innovate successfully, one needs to learn certain skills. Suppose you want to be a bank robber. If your career is going to last longer than a few minutes, you need to learn how to select your targets (for example, banks located near freeway exits are much preferred to ones located on busy downtown streets). How do professional bank robbers signal to bank customers and employees that they are about to participate in a robbery and had best cooperate? How big a cut should the getaway driver be promised so that he or she won't fink to the cops?

Just as legitimate opportunity structures are unequally distributed in society, so, too, are illegitimate opportunity structures. If you are poor and illiterate, you probably will not have much of a future as a computer hacker or bank embezzler. If you are poor and want to steal, you are pretty much limited to taking on a single victim (or possibly two or three) at a time. But as an executive officer in a savings and loan, you have the unusual opportunity of swindling hundreds, if not thousands, of people.

11.2

- a. Merton wrote about deviance as an adaptation to "structural strain." What was the source or nature of this strain?
- b. What did Cloward and Ohlin add to Merton's theory of anomie?



Learning to Be Deviant: Howard Becker's Study of Marijuana Use

Merton's conception of structural strain gives us some insight into *why* people might act in deviant ways, but it really does not tell us *how* people actually become deviant. Sociologists have noticed that one generally learns to be deviant through a kind of socialization—just as one learns to conform through socialization. In other words, deviance is frequently a learned social behavior.

One sociologist who made this point was Howard Becker. In addition to being a sociologist, Becker was a professional jazz musician in the 1950s, and one of the things he noticed was that jazz musicians tended to smoke marijuana—a practice that was not only deviant but illegal.

Why did people smoke marijuana? At the time, it was widely thought that there was something wrong with the personality of marijuana smokers, that people who smoked marijuana suffered from some sort of psychological maladjustment. It was believed, for instance, that people who smoked marijuana did so out of a felt need for escape or because they were insecure, lacking in self-control, immature, or simply mentally ill. Conventional wisdom, then, regarded marijuana smokers as people with distinct psychological and/or emotional problems.

As a sociologist, however, Becker suspected that to truly understand the nature of this behavior, we would have to place it in its social context. And so it was that Becker began a sociological study of marijuana use. He conducted interviews with dozens of pot-smoking musicians. From his interviews, Becker found that marijuana use did indeed have important social qualities. For example, Becker found that becoming a marijuana smoker involved three separate social processes: (1) learning to smoke (gaining proper technique), (2) learning to perceive the effects, and (3) learning to enjoy the effects.

LEARNING TO SMOKE

According to Becker (1963), the novice smoker does not ordinarily get high the first time he (Becker's subjects were primarily male) smokes marijuana. Generally, it is necessary to smoke the drug several times to achieve a high. One explanation of this is that the novice does not know how to smoke "properly"—that is, in a way that ensures a large enough dosage of the drug. Most of Becker's interview subjects agreed that the drug cannot be smoked like tobacco if the user is to get high:

"Take in a lot of air, you know, and . . . I don't know how to describe it, you don't smoke it like a cigarette, you draw in a lot of air and get it deep down in your system and then keep it there. Keep it there as long as you can."

Unless one uses the proper technique, the effects of the drug will be minimal:

"The trouble with people [who are unable to get high] is that they're just not smoking it right, that's all there is to it. Either they're not holding it down long enough, or they're getting too much air and not enough smoke, or the other way around, or something like that. A lot of people just don't smoke it right, so naturally nothing's gonna happen."

Becker's interview subjects also reported that learning to smoke marijuana was a social thing:

"I was smoking it like I did an ordinary cigarette. He said, 'no, don't do it like that.' He said, 'suck it, you know, draw in and hold it in your lungs till you . . . for a period of time.' I said, 'is there any limit of time to hold it?' He said, 'no, just till you feel that you want to let it out, let it out.' So, I did that for three or four times."

Many reported that as first-time users they had been ashamed to admit their ignorance and so had pretended to already know how to inhale:

"I came on like I had turned on [smoked marijuana] many times before, you know. I didn't want to seem like a punk to this cat. See, like I didn't know the first thing about it. I just watched him like a hawk—I didn't take my eyes off of him for a second, because I wanted to do everything just as he did it. I watched how he held it, how he smoked it, and everything. Then, when he gave it to me, I just came on cool, as though I knew exactly what the score was. I held it like he did and took a toke just the way he did."

No one Becker interviewed had become a marijuana user without first learning the technique for smoking that allowed one to inhale a sufficient dosage—one that allowed the effects of the drug to be evident.

LEARNING TO PERCEIVE THE EFFECTS

Even after the novice learns the proper smoking technique, he or she may not evaluate the results as "being high." A remark made by one smoker pointed to the next step on the road to becoming a marijuana user:

"As a matter of fact, I've seen a guy who was high out of his mind and didn't know it." [Becker asks, "How can that be, man?"] "Well, it's pretty strange, I'll grant you that, but I've seen it. This guy got on [high] with me, claiming that he'd never got high, one of those guys, and he got completely stoned. And he kept insisting that he wasn't high. So, I had to prove to him that he was."

Becker's research suggested that getting high involves two things: (1) achieving the physiological effects of the drug and (2) recognizing and identifying these effects. Without the second element, one is not really high because one does not know one is high! Becker found that people who believed the whole thing was an illusion did not continue to use marijuana because there was no point to doing so. Thus, without social support, most people would not get beyond their first attempt. Generally, however, novice users said they had faith that eventually

they would feel some real effects. Recognizing the effects of the drug frequently came as a result of interaction with more experienced users:

“I didn’t get high the first time. . . . I don’t think I held it in long enough. . . . Probably let it out, you know, you’re a little afraid. The second time I wasn’t sure, and he [the more experienced smoker] told me, like I asked him for some of the symptoms or something, how would I know, you know. . . . He told me to sit on a stool. I sat on—I think I sat on a stool—and he said, ‘Let your feet hang.’ And then when I got down my feet were real cold, you know? And I started feeling it, you know. That was the first time. And then about a week after that, sometime pretty close to it, I really got on. That was the first time I got on a big laughing kick, you know? Then I really knew I was on.”

One frequently reported effect of marijuana is intense hunger. One novice smoker remembers the first time he felt this:

“They were just laughing the hell out of me because like I was eating so much. I just scoffed [ate] so much food, and they were just laughing at me, you know? Sometimes I’d be looking at them, you know, wondering why they’re laughing, you know, like I’d ask, ‘What’s happening?’ and all of the sudden, I feel weird, you know. ‘Man, you’re on, you know. You’re on pot [high on marijuana].’ I said, ‘No, am I?’ Like I don’t know what’s happening.”

In essence, then, the novice smoker learns from more experienced users to experience the effects of marijuana use as a high. The ability to perceive the drug’s effects must be achieved if use of the drug is to continue.

LEARNING TO ENJOY THE EFFECTS

Suppose the user has learned the proper smoking technique and has learned to identify the effects as a high. A final step is necessary before the user will continue to use the drug: He or she must learn to *enjoy the effects*. The sensations of a marijuana high are not necessarily pleasurable ones. The typical novice smoker feels dizzy, thirsty, hungry, paranoid, confused about time and space, and more. Are these responses enjoyable? As you might guess, the effects of the drug might be downright unpleasant. At best, the effects of the drug are ambiguous.⁷

⁷In some important respects, Becker’s portrayal of becoming a marijuana user may no longer reflect the reality of this process. The active ingredient in marijuana is THC (tetrahydrocannabinol). Fifty years ago, the level of THC in marijuana was quite low, and the effects of the drug were relatively subtle. But today, the level of THC in marijuana is very high (no pun intended), and the effects of the drug are much more noticeable. This probably means that it is much easier for novices to perceive the effects of the drug but more difficult for them to perceive its effects as enjoyable.

The “taste” for sensations is in large part a socially acquired one. Remember your first sip of coffee? Yuck! What about oysters, green olives, and dry martinis? Double yuck! Yet many people begin to enjoy these. The same is true for the sensations produced by marijuana use. But it’s not necessarily easy:

“It started taking effect, and I didn’t know what was happening, you know, what it was, and I was very sick. I walked around the room trying to get off, you know; it just scared me at first, you know. I wasn’t used to that kind of feeling.”

Another user reported:

“I felt I was insane, you know. Everything people done to me just wiggled me. I just couldn’t hold a conversation, and my mind would be wandering, and I was always thinking, oh, I don’t know, weird things, like hearing must be different . . . I get the feeling that I can’t talk to anyone. I’ll goof completely.”

Over time, however, many people come to regard these sensations as desirable. As an experienced user explained:

“Well, they get pretty high sometimes. The average person isn’t ready for that, and it is a little frightening to them sometimes. I mean, they’ve been high on lush [alcohol], and they get higher that way than they’ve ever been before, and they don’t know what’s happening to them. Because they think they’re going to keep going up, up, up till they lose their minds or begin doing weird things or something. You have to like reassure them, explain to them that they’re not really flipping or anything, that they’re gonna be all right. You have to just talk them out of being afraid. Keep talking to them, reassuring, telling them it’s all right.”

As you can see, what starts as an unpleasant experience becomes a desirable and sought-after one. In the end, with some help from one’s peers, the user begins to regard being high as “fun.” In simple terms, the individual not only has learned a deviant act but has learned to enjoy it as well.

The idea that deviance, like conformity, is learned behavior has added a great deal to our understanding of human behavior.

The Societal Reaction Perspective: Labeling Theory

The traditional view of deviance focuses on why and how individuals commit deviant acts. These theories tend to take for granted that some acts are deviant and others are not. One implication of this is that regardless of who commits the deviant act, they will be responded to in the same way as anyone else who commits that particular sort of deviance.



“With all that I’ve learned about sociology recently, establishing who’s naughty and who’s nice is not as simple as it used to be.”

But sociologists know that this is not true. As William Chambliss (1973) found in his comparison of different youth gangs, in some cases it is not *what* you do but *who* you are. More specifically, Chambliss found that lower-class youths were more likely to be sanctioned than middle-class youths—even though the lower-class kids committed fewer deviant acts! The societal reactionist perspective in general, and labeling theory more particularly, focuses not on the one who commits the deviant act but on the response of the audience.

Labeling theorists take note of the fact that being judged and labeled deviant has significant consequences for people’s behavior. The label of deviant is powerful!

Let’s take the hypothetical case of Bob, who has just graduated from high school. One night Bob and three of his friends (including Melissa, his girlfriend) decide to steal a car and take it for a joyride. Actually Bob has chugged so much beer that he can barely walk, let alone go for a ride. But after listening to his friends cluck and call him a chicken, he goes along. As soon as he gets into the car, however, he throws up and passes out.

Meanwhile, John, the guy who’s driving, has had a few too many beers himself and wanders all over the road. This catches the attention of the police in a patrol car, which comes up behind the stolen car with lights flashing. This strikes John as rude, and so he decides to speed up and outrun the cops. Inevitably, John’s poor coordination lands them all in a ditch. The other three (who are relatively sober) take off and manage to outrun the cops. But Bob is still unconscious in the back seat—and the police are happy enough to arrest him as a reward for their crime-fighting efforts.

Bob is taken to jail, fingerprinted, and photographed. A few days later, Bob is brought to court to be arraigned. Being the upstanding fellow that he is, Bob refuses to fink on his friends, and so the court throws the book at him. He's found guilty of grand-theft-auto (a felony) and sentenced to ninety days in jail, with another nine months suspended.

Bob serves his summer in jail, but his real sentence is much longer. First, he loses his college scholarship. However, that hardly matters because Bob's only interest in college was so that he could go on to law school and become an attorney. Bob knows that convicted felons can't become lawyers, so what's the point?

Bob's girlfriend, Melissa, still loves him, but her parents forbid her to date him. After all, Bob is a convicted criminal, and they don't want their daughter hanging out with an ex-con. His other friends are sympathetic, but they go off to college and lose touch. Bob tries to find a job, but every time he fills out an application, he has to deal with the question "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?"

Bob is the same guy he was before he went along on the joyride—but this Bob has an entirely different life than the old Bob. So what if he drinks too much now and gambles away what little money he has. It's not like he has any hope of leading a normal life.

Bob is a truly pathetic case, and I've exaggerated his circumstances to make a point: The label of deviant can trigger a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you treat people as deviant and cut off their opportunities to be anything other than deviant, you increase the chances that they actually will become deviant.

Sociologists would refer to Bob's initial foray into crime (his joyriding) as an instance of *primary deviance*. Primary deviance may be committed for all sorts of reasons, including, as in Bob's case, a desire to fit in with the group. Social labeling theorists seek to explain the acts of deviance that take place after the individual has been labeled as a deviant. These subsequent acts of deviance are called *secondary deviance*. Edwin Lemert explained the difference this way:

Primary deviance is assumed to arise in a wide variety of social, cultural and psychological contexts and at best has only marginal implications for the psychic structure of the individual; it does not lead to symbolic reorganization at the level of self-regarding attitudes and social roles. . . . Primary deviation, as contrasted with secondary, is polygenetic, arising out of a variety of social, cultural, psychological and physiological factors. . . .

Secondary deviation is deviant behavior [that results] as a means of social defense . . . or adaptation to the . . . problems created by the societal reaction to primary deviance. . . . Secondary deviation refers to a special class of socially defined responses which people make to problems created by the societal reaction to their deviance. (Lemert 1967, 17, 40)

Erving Goffman's work on social identity helps us to make sense of the power of labels. Goffman argued that the stigma⁸ of negative social labels can work to spoil a person's identity. According to Goffman, a stigma is "any attribute that discredits a person or disqualifies him or her from 'full social acceptance'" (1963, 3).

Goffman identified three types of stigma. First, there are *abominations of the body*—clearly visible physical marks (deformities, scars, disfiguring injuries). Second, there are *blemishes of individual character*—labels of mental disorder, dishonesty, alcoholism, or bankruptcy. Finally, there are *tribal stigmas*—or being discredited for membership in a particular racial, religious, or ethnic group or subcultural group. In other words, a stigma can be either ascribed or achieved.

Goffman argued that a stigma can affect one's social interactions in two ways. When a stigma is visible or known, it can result in a *discredited identity*. Like Bob, who because he lived in a small town was publicly labeled as a criminal and treated as such people with discredited identities have a tough time being nondeviant even if they want to be.

Frequently, however, individuals are able to hide attributes that, if visible, would stigmatize them. In other words, stigmatized individuals may try "to pass"—that is, to camouflage the attribute that would get them labeled as deviant. Successfully passing means that the individual is not discredited. But because the person is vulnerable to being found out, he or she is *discreditable*—that is, in danger of feeling the full force of the stigma.

Goffman observed that the results are the same regardless of whether the person achieves a stigma or has it ascribed to him or her: "In all of these various instances of stigma the same sociological features are found: an individual who might have been received easily in ordinary social intercourse possesses a trait that can intrude itself upon the attention and turn those of us whom he meets away from him, breaking the claim that his other attributes have on us" (1963, 18).

Others have found that a negative label, or a social stigma, can easily become a person's master status (the concept of master status was introduced in chapter 8). Criminologist Edwin Schur noted, for example, that such negative social labels as drug addict, homosexual, prostitute, or juvenile delinquent "will dominate all other characteristics of the individual. Good athlete, good conversationalist, good dancer, and the like are subordinated to or

⁸The term *stigma* comes from ancient Greece and Rome, where runaway slaves and criminals were branded with a hot iron or needle as a sign of their disgrace. These brands were called *stigma*, from the Greek verb *stizein*, meaning "to tattoo." When the word became part of the English language in the late sixteenth century, it was used as it had been by the ancients—to refer to visible signs of disgrace.

negated by this trait, which is immediately felt to be more central to the 'actual' identity of the individual" (1971, 9).

11.3 Explain the difference between *primary* and *secondary* deviance. Why do some sociologists think it is important to distinguish between the two types?



The Functions of Deviance: Maintenance of the Status Quo and Social Change

According to conventional wisdom, society would be much better off if it could get rid of crime and deviance. Durkheim started changing at least sociologists' minds about this. His reasoning was this: If people continue to violate norms, their behavior must offer some benefit to society. What benefit do crime and deviance confer on society? Well, for one thing, criminals and deviants represent social enemies, and hating these social enemies can help unite society. Thus, Durkheim argued,

crime brings together upright consciences and concentrates them. We have only to notice what happens, particularly in a small town, when some moral scandal has just been committed. They stop each other on the street, they visit each other, they seek to come together to talk about the event and to wax indignant in common. (1893/1933, 102)

Sociologist Kai T. Erikson extended Durkheim's idea that crime could be functional by noting that deviance *clarifies* society's norms and moral boundaries. Typically a group's norms are pretty vague, but societal reaction to rule breakers helps to clarify the limits of normative (appropriate) behavior:

The reaction to some people as rule violators functions to clarify the meaning of the norm. Others learn "how far they can go." Consider the rule, "do not cheat on examinations." What does it mean for specific examination situations? In the case of a take-home examination, it clearly means that a student should not copy another student's answer. Does it also mean that students should not work together or talk over the assignment at all? How does the rule apply to term papers? Does it mean that students should not seek assistance from other students or other professors? Does it mean that one term paper should not be submitted in two classes? When some

Ponder

Generally speaking, the stigma that results from conviction for a white-collar crime is less than the stigma that results from conviction for a street crime. Why do you think this is so?

students “go too far” and exceed the academic community’s boundaries or tolerance limits, the community reacts, and that reaction defines specific situational meanings of the rule. (Quoted in Liska 1987, 40)

Finally, deviance encourages social change. Durkheim noted that deviant people are sources of social change of the sort that can benefit society. As proved by the American revolutionaries of the eighteenth century, today’s deviance may become tomorrow’s morality, today’s deviant may become tomorrow’s hero.

A CAUTION ABOUT CRIME DATA

Sociologists who study crime and deviance use data from a variety of sources. It’s important to be careful when interpreting these data. Suppose, for example, you came across table 11.2. This table shows, among other things, that in the year 2000 more than half (57.9 percent) of all people in state prisons for drug offenses were black. This statistic is made all the more startling given that blacks make up only about 12 percent of the U.S. population.

A sociologically naive person might conclude that blacks are more likely to use drugs than whites or Hispanics.

A close inspection of table 11.3, however, would show how wrong-headed that conclusion would be. The data in table 11.3 look at the people who are regular drug users. It shows that if we look at all regular drug users, we find that the percentage of each group is fairly close to their percentage in the United States. In other words, whites make up about three-quarters of the U.S. population and close to three-quarters of those who regularly use illegal drugs.

Table 11.2 Racial Composition of those Incarcerated for Drug Offenses in U.S. State Prisons, 2000–2005.

Race/Ethnicity of Prisoner	Year		
	2000	2003	2005
White	23.2%	25.9%	28.5%
Black	57.9	53.0	44.8
Hispanic	17.2	20.0	20.2
Other	1.7	1.1	6.5
Total	100%	100%	100%
(N)	251,100	259,900	253,300

SOURCE: Adapted from Marc Mauer, 2009. *The Changing Racial Dynamics of the War on Drugs*. Washington, DC: The Sentencing Project.

Table 11.3 Racial Composition of the United States and of Regular Illegal Drug Users in the U.S., 2000–2005.

Race/Ethnicity of Drug User	Percent of Total Population	Year		
		2000	2003	2005
White	76%	74.8%	71.0%	69.2%
Black	12	11.5	12.3	14.0
Hispanic	9	9.1	12.2	12.4

SOURCE: Adapted from Marc Mauer (2009), and *Drug Use Among Racial/Ethnic Minorities*, Revised Edition, National Institute on Drug Abuse, Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health. 2003.

The question is, why are regular drug users who are black or Hispanic more likely to go to prison? One might be tempted to say that perhaps black or Hispanic drug offenders commit more serious drug offenses (i.e., selling as opposed to possession of drugs). Unfortunately, there are no reliable data on this point; however, “Persons who use drugs . . . generally report that they purchased their drugs from someone of their own race” (Mauer 2009, 8).

The differences in incarceration rates is probably explained by a number of factors. In recent decades, the criminal justice system has specifically targeted the use of “crack” cocaine⁹ with enhanced sentences. Because crack is relatively cheap, it is attractive to low-income users. Blacks are more likely than whites to have low incomes and live in communities with “limited access to treatment and alternative sentencing options” like diversion programs (Mauer and King 2007, 18).

11.4 In 1955 Rosa Parks, an African American woman, disobeyed an Alabama state law by not giving up her seat to a white person (as the law insisted). Parks was arrested, convicted, and fined \$10 plus \$4 court costs. What function did her deviance play?



Deviance Is Not Immutable¹⁰

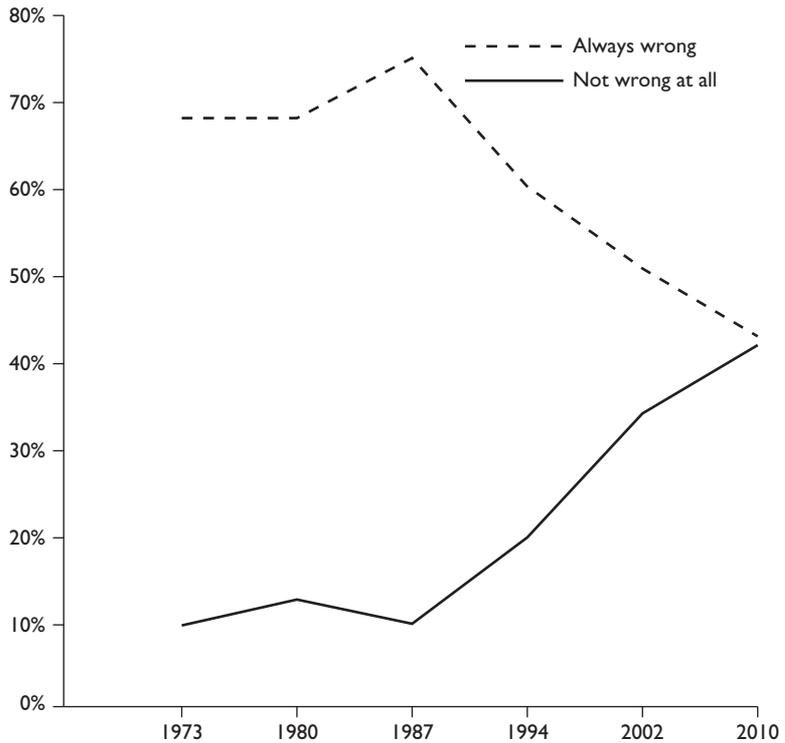
Deviance is an inevitable part of social life. According to Emile Durkheim, it is impossible for a society to exist without deviance: Societies create norms and, inevitably, some people will violate them.

⁹Crack cocaine is a kind of cocaine that is produced by dissolving cocaine in water, mixing it with common household chemicals, and boiling the mixture until “rocks” appear.

¹⁰Immutable means unchanging and unchangeable.

Figure 11.1
 Percentage of American Adults Who Say that Sex between Two Adults Is “Always Wrong,” or “Not Wrong at All” (1973–2010).

SOURCE: Smith, 2011.



No act, however, is inherently deviant. Any particular behavior is deviant only if people in a society have rules against that behavior. Moreover, as people change, rules may change and different behaviors may be defined as deviant (or not).

Traditionally, if a student enrolled in a social problems or a sociology of deviance class, one of the topics listed on the syllabus would be homosexuality. There was little question that homosexual behavior was deviant.

Indeed, until the early 1960s, homosexual acts, called *sodomy* or *crimes against nature*, were felonies in all state jurisdictions in the United States. Things began to change in the 1960s and 1970s, but—as late as 1986, half of the states still had laws prohibiting sodomy.¹¹ As shown in figure 11.1, in the 1980s, most Americans believed that homosexual behavior was “always wrong” and most court decisions reflected that belief. For example, in 1982, Michael Hardwick was arrested in his bedroom with another man and charged with violating Georgia’s law against sodomy. Over the course of the next four years, the case found its way to

¹¹Technically, sodomy includes any sexual intercourse that does not involve a penis and a vagina—whether it involves same sex or different sex partners. However, I can’t find any record of different sex partners being prosecuted.

the U.S. Supreme Court, where five of its nine members found that people who wished to engage in same sex sexual acts have no constitutionally protected right to do so.

However, in the new century, people's attitudes began to change. Then, in 2003, the Court was presented with another sodomy case. In *Lawrence v Texas* (2003) a six-to-three majority ruled that sodomy statutes were unconstitutional violations of American's right to privacy.

Did this mean that sodomy laws were taken off the books? No. At this writing, some fourteen states' laws criminalize sodomy, and in many of these states there continue to be prosecutions or, at least, legal harassment of gays.¹²

A year after the *Lawrence* case was decided, in 2004, the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that the state's constitution equal protection clause required that same-sex couples be allowed to marry. At this writing, same sex marriage is legal in Connecticut, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Vermont, and Washington State (and Washington D.C.).

Same sex marriage is allowed in several other countries: Argentina, Belgium, Canada, Iceland, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, South Africa, and Sweden.

Gays in the Military

The 1916 Articles of War prohibited homosexuals from serving in the military. In World War II, "the military developed procedures for spotting and excluding homosexual draftees from service: recruits were screened for feminine body characteristics, effeminacy in dress and manner and a patulous (expanded) rectum."¹³ During the Vietnam War, some draftees claimed homosexual tendencies in order to avoid service. "It didn't always work: in 1968 Perry Watkins, a 19-year-old man, "was drafted despite checking the 'yes' box in the category 'homosexual tendencies' during his pre-induction physical examination. After 16 years of service, the

¹²In the following states, sodomy is outlawed for both gays and straight people: Alabama, Florida, Idaho, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, North Carolina, Virginia, South Carolina, and Utah. In Kansas, Montana, Oklahoma, and Texas, sodomy is only a criminal act if involves same-sex couples.

¹³Unlike their male counterparts, lesbians had little difficulty serving in the military in WWII. For one thing, those seeking to serve were not asked about their sexual orientation—partly because it was contrary to social norms to ask women such questions and partly because women service members who displayed male tendencies were considered to probably "be perfectly normal sexually and excellent military material" (Berube, 1990, 29). After the war, however, women were placed under greater scrutiny, requiring lesbians, like gay men, to work harder to hide their sexuality if they wanted to continue to serve.

military discharged [Sergeant] Perry Watkins for his sexual orientation; he promptly filed a lawsuit” (Webley, 2010). Perry won the lawsuit and the court awarded him retroactive pay, an honorable discharge, and promotion from staff sergeant to sergeant first class.

In 1993, the United States Congress passed the Military Personnel Eligibility Act, informally known as “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” The act barred the military from asking those seeking to serve about their sexual orientation. However, contrary to the common understanding of the law, the act continued to allow the military to investigate the sexual lives of serving personnel. As a result, between 1994 and 2010, “more than 12,000 service members” were dismissed from the military for their sexual orientation” (Webley 2010).

In 2010, The U.S. Congress passed the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell Repeal Act.” The act removed all restrictions against homosexuals serving in the military. While surveys suggested most Americans (about 60 percent) were in favor of allowing gays to serve, there was opposition. In 2009, for example, more than 1,000 retired admirals and generals published a statement saying that “Repeal . . . would undermine recruiting and retention, impact leadership at all levels, have adverse effects on the willingness of parents who lend their sons and daughters to military service, and eventually break the All-Volunteer Force” (quoted in Belkin, et al., 2012).

A year after repeal, research suggested that the pessimistic predictions about allowing gays to serve openly in the military were wrong: The repeal of DADT has had no overall negative impact on military readiness or its component dimensions, including cohesion, recruitment, retention, assaults, harassment or morale” (Belkin, et al., 2012, 4). In June, 2012, Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta celebrated “Pride Month” with a video statement thanking “gay and lesbian service members and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender civilians for their dedicated service to the nation” (U.S. Department of Defense, <http://www.pentagon-channel.mil/Home.aspx>).

Chapter Review

1. Below I have listed the major concepts discussed in this chapter. Define each of the terms. (*Hint:* This exercise will be more helpful to you if, in addition to defining each concept, you create an example of it in your own words.)

relativity of deviance
normative behavior

- nonsociological approaches to deviance
 - demonic possession as a theory of deviance
 - Cesare Lombroso's theory of atavism
 - William Sheldon (ecto-, endo- and mesomorph)
 - Émile Durkheim, collective conscience
 - structural strain
 - anomie and egoism
 - Robert Merton and anomie
 - responses to anomie (conformity, innovation ritualism, retreatism, rebellion)
 - Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin
 - differential opportunities to deviate
 - Howard Becker
 - deviance as learned behavior
 - societal reaction/labeling theory
 - Edwin Lemert
 - primary and secondary deviance
 - Erving Goffman
 - stigma
 - discreditable versus discredited identity
 - functions of deviance
2. Review Merton's typology of adaptation to anomie. Create an example of each type of adaptation (conformity, innovation, ritualism, and rebellion) and explain how each of your examples fits the definition of that type of adaptation. (Don't use examples given in the chapter; make up your own.)
 3. Durkheim suggested that deviance can be a source of social change. Give an example of someone who, during your life-time, was judged to be deviant or criminal but nonetheless brought about social change.
 4. The relationship between conformity to norms and deviance is frequently a complicated one. Describe a situation in which conformity to the norms of some smaller group would result in nonconformity to the norms of the larger society. Then, discuss what implications this sort of conflict of norms might have for sociologists who want to understand why people deviate.

Answers and Discussion

11.1

- a. False—society *cannot* be divided into people who conform and people who do not conform to social norms. If we tried to make such a division, everyone would be on the same side of the line. Everyone deviates sometimes, and most people conform most of the time. (Even chainsaw murderers usually eat dinner with a fork and use toilet paper in the socially prescribed manner.)





- b. False—people generally do *not* agree on which behaviors are deviant and which are not deviant. In fact, there is a great deal of disagreement in society about what is deviant and what is not. It varies among subcultures and across time. However, within a particular society, there may be general agreement on the most important norms (for example, there is usually pretty solid agreement on what constitutes taboo behavior).
- c. True—most people have violated one or more important mores at some time in their lives. You may be the exception, but most of us will violate an important norm at least occasionally.
- d. False—most deviant behaviors are *not* regarded as deviant in all societies and at all times. As I tried to emphasize, it is very difficult to identify a particular behavior that is deviant everywhere.
- e. False—it is *not* merely acts that are harmful to people that are judged to be deviant. There are many acts that really do not harm anyone but that are still regarded as deviant. It would be accurate, I think, to say that all deviant behaviors are offensive (if only in the sense that deviant acts offend social norms). Talking with your mouth full of food, for example, or picking your nose doesn't harm anyone, but these behaviors certainly do offend people.

11.2

- a. For Merton, the structural strain that led to anomie was the contradiction between socially approved goals and socially approved means. In our society, earning lots of money is a socially approved goal. But there are not enough socially approved/legitimate means for everyone to achieve this goal. This contradiction leads some people to deviate.
- b. Their contribution was to point out that just as not all people have the same access to socially approved/legitimate means, not all people have the same access to illegitimate means.

11.3 Primary deviance is deviance that people commit—on a whim or owing to particular circumstances. If they are caught and sanctioned for this act, they may be led to perform secondary deviance. Secondary deviance is deviance that people perform as a result of being labeled as a deviant.

11.4 She said that she did it because her feet were tired, but when Parks refused to give up her seat to a white person and was arrested for this “crime,” she became a symbol that helped launch the civil rights movement.