Deviance and Social Control:
Connections to Culture, Social Structure, and the Social Order

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The Basics of Deviance and Social Control

All societies will have examples of behaviors that are considered “wrong,” “bad,” or “immoral.” Criminologists refer to such actions as deviance and, in general, deviance is thought of as having negative impacts on society, such as creating chaos and instability for the larger society as well as harms for individuals who may be victimized by deviant behavior. In an attempt to limit the corrosive effects of deviance, societies employ what is called social control, which consists of negative sanctions or punishments as well as positive sanctions or rewards. The basic idea is that punishments in response to deviance will curb such behavior while rewards for conforming behavior will encourage people to obey the rules – leading to a more stable, safe, and orderly society as well as enabling the larger society and its leaders to focus their attention on other concerns.¹

By way of example, when people commit a crime in American society, the police may arrest them, and the courts may bring them to trial and, if they are convicted, decide upon a punishment. The correctional system will often implement the punishment in the form of

¹ The vast majority of sociological research on social control focuses on punishment. While this undoubtedly represents a shortcoming in knowledge, for the remainder of this paper the term social control will mainly refer to punitive sanctions.
probation, imprisonment, boot camps, etc. Here, criminal behavior (a subset of deviant behavior) prompts social control, which, in this case, is a punishment implemented by the criminal justice system. When deviance of a non-criminal nature occurs (such as talking back to parents, lying to a spouse, excessive tattooing or body piercing), and social control is the response, this response may come from virtually anybody – which, in these cases may consist of expressions of disapproval, avoidance, etc. A few things to remember at this point are that both deviance and social control are behaviors, and that any and all individuals may perform social control as well as engage in deviance (in fact, all of us engage in deviance as well as perform social control on a fairly regular basis).

Fascinating though this discussion has already become, you may begin to wonder what importance deviance and social control may have for society as a whole. Among the many potential answers to this question, two of the most important will suffice for now. First, when deviance is performed and detected in a society, and social control responds to this behavior, then the rule that prohibits the deviant act in question is upheld, or receives validation. Depending on the severity of the social control reaction, the degree of importance of the violated rule can be known. Thus, deviance and social control function to identify behaviors that are “bad” and denote the relative degree of wrongfulness of a given deviant act. This process therefore communicates to the larger society what the rules are and how important they are. As a result, deviance and social control are one way that the rules espoused by the larger culture are created and maintained. In addition, according to Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), a towering figure in sociology, deviance and social control also serve to create “social solidarity,” or a sense of togetherness or “we-ness” among members of society. Solidarity is a necessary prerequisite
for society to exist in the first place. So, for Durkheim, deviance and social control are essential building blocks of society, without which society would be impossible.

A second important feature of deviance and social control concerns something more insidious: the potential for misuse of social control. History is replete with examples where societies used social control against certain groups as a way to oppress them. Lynchings of African-Americans in the post-bellum South and elsewhere in the U.S., the attempted extermination of Jews in Europe by German Nazis in World War II, and the sudden and large increase in the numbers of African-Americans and Hispanics in prison and jail as part of modern America’s “War on Drugs” may all be used as examples of discrimination or unfairness in social control (as well as in definitions of what constitutes deviance). Although the latter example may be controversial (and will be returned to later in this chapter), these examples of social control may be seen as unfair or discriminatory in that they specifically targeted members of certain groups to receive social control.

In sum, bad behavior (deviance) and punitive responses (social control) may be important for creating and maintaining society, but they may also raise the specter of oppression and discrimination if used unfairly. Now that you have a taste of the importance that deviance and social control have for society, let us next explore these concepts in greater detail before returning to a more thorough exploration of their social implications.

**WHAT IS DEVIANCE?**

At the most basic level, deviance can be thought of as behavior that violates any social norm. Norms refer to rules about what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior in a given situation. A key feature of norms is that they can change considerably across different situations
and over time. Such differences in *context* mean that rules about deviance are fluid, rather than fixed. For example, shouting hello to one of your friends is acceptable in many public places, but is considered inappropriate (or deviant) during one of your classes or in the library. As a result, *definitions of deviance may vary across space* in that different social situations contain different rules about right or wrong. This same principle holds when comparing norms from different societies to one another or comparing different subcultures within a given society. Take the case of how people greet one another, as another example. When people in the U.S. meet for the first time or when they get together for social activities, males in particular often greet one another by shaking hands. Members of Hispanic cultures often greet one another with an embrace and perhaps a single kiss on the cheek – except for male-male greetings, which tend to consist of handshakes or a firm one-handed hug and several strong pats on the back. Same sex greetings among members of many Arab cultures, however, usually include an embrace and several cheek kisses, even for male-to-male greetings. Members of many Asian cultures bow to one another as a greeting. Yet, even within these cultures, there may be considerable variation as to how greetings are performed, depending on the age, gender, and degree of familiarity among those involved. If you feel that the type of greeting seems to be an unimportant or esoteric topic, consider the consequences of using deviant greetings such as when you meet the parents of your “significant other” for the first time and decide to slug the father on the arm and say “what’s up dude!?“ or if you embraced and kissed on the cheek several times a stranger who was interviewing you for a job. *Definitions of deviance may also show a great deal of variation over time.* For example, both social and legal norms regarding tobacco have become stricter in the U.S. since the late 1980s, while norms about gender roles loosened considerably in the latter half of the 20th century.
The importance of context to understanding and identifying what is or is not deviant cannot be over-emphasized. Thus, what may be considered by mainstream American society as deviant, such as recreational drug use, may not be considered deviant in certain times and places. For example, marijuana use was not considered deviant among the “hippy” subculture of the 1960s – in fact, it was considered “normative,” meaning that the hippies considered people who did not smoke the drug to be deviant. For Jamaica’s Rastafarian subculture, marijuana use is also normative. Heavy alcohol consumption, viewed as deviant by American society as a whole, may not be considered deviant at certain times, such as New Year’s eve, or certain places, such as college fraternity parties, and bachelor and bachelorette parties. Some groups, such as outlaw biker gangs, may not see even violent acts such as rape, fighting, and even murder, as deviant, especially under certain circumstances.

STOP & REVIEW: Before moving on, identify at least three behaviors which are deviant in some contexts, but not in others. Explain why.

In addition to showing variation over time and space, the relative importance of norms is another essential consideration. Violating certain norms is seen as more wrong or deviant than other violations. At the least severe end are folkways, which largely consist of social customs and manners, such as how greetings are performed, table manners, toilet habits, general cleanliness and grooming, courtesies performed while driving a car, and many other aspects of day to day social interactions. Violating a folkway is not generally considered particularly wrong or serious, and indeed many times is inadvertent. Sanctions, therefore, are usually mild for this type of deviance. Mores (pronounced “more-rays”) represent more important norms and thus receive more severe sanctions when they are violated. Mores typically pertain to maintaining social
members’ well-being, such as their physical safety and freedom, as well as their property, and to appropriate economic behavior. Thus, if a person is victimized in any way, such as being sexually or physically assaulted or having their money or property taken through force or fraud, this type of deviance violates a mos.²

While violations of mores such as theft, physical assaults, selling unsafe consumer goods, and convincing investors to buy worthless stock or other property are considered very wrong and serious deviant acts, they do not represent the most serious type of deviance. For that distinction we turn to the idea of taboos, which pertain to the behaviors that a society or culture considers most sacred or profane. Performing a profanity, or failing to perform a sacred act, is often considered more wrong and more serious than many mores, and can sometimes result in more severe sanctions. In the U.S., for example, it is taboo to murder a young child, or for a child to kill a parent, because such acts are almost beyond the idea of “wrong” – they are profanities, as they profane some of our most cherished norms about family and the vulnerability of children. Yet, many other types of homicide are probably not considered taboo, such as arguments among friends that escalate into murder, or even the murder of a convenience store clerk during a robbery (as awful as these acts are). Oddly, many taboos concern food and sex. In most cultures it is taboo to commit cannibalism and for Jews and Moslems eating pork violates a taboo. In the U.S. it is taboo to eat insects, yet some Asian and African cultures regularly eat certain insects. Most cultures also have an incest taboo, a bestiality taboo, and a taboo against having sexual relations with children. For some cultures homosexuality is taboo, although it is no longer considered taboo in the U.S. and most of Europe (and in many major metropolitan areas is no longer even considered deviant). Conversely, consciously not marrying and having children may

² Mos is the singular of mores. Typically, though, scholars refer to the plural mores.
be taboo in certain times and places. Interestingly, unlike the less serious mores, many taboos do not involve victims. Most if not all religions will identify certain actions as taboo and, again, many of these pertain to food and sex, but some will also pertain to proper worship and prayer. Not every act identified as wrong by a religion, however, will be considered taboo among the adherents of that religion—some acts, such as missing worship services or dressing casually at services, may be seen as violating folkways (or perhaps mores).

STOP & REVIEW: Other than the specific acts mentioned in this section, can you think of three examples each of (1) folkways, (2) mores, and (3) taboos in any given time or place?

A final type of norm consists of legal definitions. Laws are norms that have been codified or written into law. Such laws may come from folkways (such as parking violations), mores (many acts of force and fraud), or taboos (such as incest). Scholars frequently distinguish between two different types of laws. *Mala en se* laws refer to behaviors that “are wrong in and of themselves.” Typically, these criminal acts involve a victim and some type of force or fraud. *Mala prohibita* laws pertain to acts that “are wrong because society defines them as wrong.” Such crimes do not include direct victims, such as prostitution and drug possession. Mala prohibita laws are also called “victimless crimes” because their violation usually does not directly harm people other than those engaging in the crime itself.

Obviously, even though they are deviant, most folkways and even some mores are not written into law and, therefore, are not considered crimes. Many taboos are also not legal violations, such as those that involve food consumption. Conversely, some law violations are not considered deviant (such as speeding). Yet, many “wrong” acts are considered both deviant and criminal. It is important to remember the distinctions between crime and deviance, as well as
their similarity. Figure 1 is a Venn diagram that portrays these three different combinations of deviant and criminal acts. The area in the left hand oval labeled “A” represents all behaviors that are against the law (criminal) but typically not seen as deviant by the larger society, such as walking a dog without a leash or being in a public park after closing. Area “B,” in the right hand oval, corresponds to actions that are widely seen as deviant but are not criminal, such as loudly passing gas in a crowded movie theater. Area “C,” where the two ovals overlap, stands for the collection of behaviors that are considered both deviant and criminal, such as stealing a car or using heroin.

STOP & REVIEW: Other than the specific acts mentioned in this section, can you think of three behaviors that are: (1) criminal but not widely thought of as deviant, (2) deviant but not criminal, (3) both deviant and criminal?

Figure 1

Comparison of Criminal and Deviant Behavior

A = Criminal but not Deviant; B = Deviant but not Criminal; C = Both Deviant and Criminal

Given the extreme contextual relativism regarding what is or is not deviant, it is has proven especially difficult to give a succinct definition of what “deviance” really is. Indeed scholars to this day disagree on how to define deviance. Several different perspectives or
definitions have been offered: statistical, absolutist, normative, labeling, conflict, and the new “synthetic approach.” The statistical approach to deviance is perhaps the most limited and at times most misleading. It defines deviance as any behavior or status that is statistically rare. This emphasizes the “different-ness” of deviance and how people who occupy unusual statuses, such as having physical disabilities or deformities, or who perform unusual behavior, such as homosexuality or religious snake handling, might be reacted to with disgust or avoidance. However, some usual statuses and behaviors might be seen as desirable (rather than as deviant). Being unusually rich or beautiful seems to fit the statistical definition of deviance, as might the performance of exceptional athletic feats, such as winning an Olympic gold medal, yet we do not typically think of these statuses and behaviors as “deviant.” Thus, the statistical definition has fallen out of favor and offers scholars of deviance little utility.

The absolutist perspective defines as deviant only those behaviors that are thought to be deviant at all times and all places – hence the idea that such acts are “absolutely” deviant. Few, if any, acts could fit this definition, however. Incest is often pointed to as being absolutely deviant. But the precise definition of incest varies considerably over time and space. Even siblings could sometimes marry and not be considered deviant – as in the case of ancient Egyptian pharaohs, such as King Tutankhamen marrying his sister. Homicide may be another example, but in times of war homicide is actually normative, rather than deviant. Even if a few behaviors could be identified as absolutely deviant, no matter the time or place, they would likely be so few in number as to be of little use to scholars. The relativist nature of deviance, pointed to above, renders the absolutist perspective on deviance little more than a chimera. Yet, the innovative and popular “self-control” theory of crime (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990: 15) utilizes a rather expansive and potentially useful absolutist definition: “acts of force and fraud undertaken in
pursuit of self-interest.” I personally find the idea of “force and fraud” to be quite interesting and have used it numerous times throughout this chapter. But this definition leaves out a lot of what scholars and laypersons alike might consider to be deviant, such as recreational drug use, strange sexual practices like bestiality and “swinging” (also known as wife or partner swapping). In essence all types of victimless deviance are ignored in this particular absolutist definition, which, again, points to a major flaw of this type of definition.

The *normative* approach defines deviance as behavior that violates a social rule or norm held by people in a given time and place. This type of definition is the one most commonly used by scholars today, and has much to recommend it. Different from the absolutist approach, the normative definition is fluid rather than rigid, and so can cope with contextual differences in what is or is not deviant. However, how do we resolve the question of inter-group differences when, for example, one group argues that affirmative action policies should be banned, while another group argues for their continuation? On one hand, we could say that these groups have different norms, and call the case closed. But what happens when both groups belong to the same society and each is vying to have its views be seen as acceptable by the larger society? Because it sees all individuals’ and all groups’ opinions as equal in importance, the normative perspective cannot deal with the issues of competing claims regarding deviance. Thus, while it is quite useful for many purposes, there are some problems with the normative approach to deviance.

What are variously called reactivist, labeling, conflict, or radical approaches to deviance are all expressly directed toward contending with the issue of “power” – namely the power to create or impose definitions of deviance, the implications of these definitions, and the power of individuals and groups to avoid being labeled deviant and receiving punishment. For the labeling or reactivist approach Howard S. Becker (1963: 9) famously stated:
Social groups create deviance by making rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act a person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules or sanctions to an “offender.” The deviant is one to whom that label has been successfully applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label.

This statement has several important features. First, building on the normative approach, no behavior is inherently deviant; rather, social processes must define what is or is not deviant. However, according to the labeling perspective, deviance cannot exist, until deviant labels have been successfully applied to behaviors and perpetrators. Thus, the key to labeling is social control, which, thorough its mobilization, creates deviance. Second, the conflict and radical traditions emphasize the differential power of social groups to create social norms in the first place. Groups with more economic or political power are better able to have their views of wrong or deviant behavior become accepted by the larger society – whether it concerns a social norm or a criminal law. Weaker groups, on the other hand, are not only less likely to have their views manifested in social norms or laws, but may even have deviant labels applied to the norms and behaviors that they advocate or perform. A brief example concerns the use of intoxicating substances. The drug of choice of Whites and the middle and upper economic classes is alcohol, which is legal for those over age 21. Drugs such as marijuana and cocaine are associated with “outsider” groups and are criminal. A final feature of the labeling approach also concerns power, but at the individual level. Here, the differential power of individuals to resist the application of the deviant label is highlighted – powerful people will be better to avoid labeling. As an example, guilty or not, O.J. Simpson was able to avoid the official “murderer” label mainly because of the vast financial resources he possessed, which he mobilized to present a successful
defense in court. Average U.S. citizens, not possessing such resources, would likely have been unable to avoid the murderer label in such a case.

A major problem with the labeling approach is that, even if they commit what might be seen by the larger society as a deviant or wrong act, people are not actually “deviant” until they are caught and successfully labeled as such. “Secret deviants,” who may perform acts widely viewed as wrong, such as heroin use, are not actually performing deviance unless they are caught and labeled. This seems to violate one of the major tenants behind the idea of deviance – that wrong or bad behavior constitutes deviance.

A new “synthetic approach” (Tittle 1995: 124) defines deviance as “any behavior that a majority of a given group regards as unacceptable or that typically evokes a collective response of a negative type” (emphasis added). This definition combines or synthesizes the normative and labeling approaches but, in doing so, attempts to avoid the major shortcomings of each. From the labeling view comes the idea that social control mobilization is itself sufficient to identify deviance; but, because it is not required, the “secret deviance” of the heroin user mentioned above would now be seen as actual deviance. Additionally, the relative, contextual features of deviance, emphasized by the normative approach, are also considered. However, the relative power of actors to impose or avoid the deviant label is largely neglected, as is the issue of identifying deviance when separate groups define deviance differently. Thus, while perhaps an advance, the synthetic approach to defining deviance does not resolve all issues.

STOP & REVIEW: Before moving on, answer the following questions. (1) Can you think of any behavior that is always deviant, no matter the time, place, or culture? (2) Do you feel that deviance can occur, even if a social control response is absent? (3) What evidence can you provide that powerful people can be “deviant”?
**What is Social Control?**

Social control is behavior, performed by various agents of social control (i.e., people, groups, or organizations), who attempt to label or define specific behaviors, persons, or groups as wrong, bad, evil, or unacceptable – in essence to apply the deviant label. When applied to specific individuals, such punitive social control takes the form of a sanction. In this case, social control can be thought of as actions that punish those who perform deviance (or, in the view of labeling theory, social control consists of actions that create deviance through labeling). Although social control also refers to the process of defining behaviors as deviant or criminal, and can seek to label entire groups as deviant, for the time being, we will focus on the dynamic between individual deviants and social control agents.

Agents of social control are of two types. Formal social control agents are representatives of the state or government, such as police, prosecutors, judges, and members of the correctional system, such as probation officers, prison wardens and correctional officers. Such formal social control is coercive in that it focuses on punitive sanctions. A less recognized type of formal social control is termed beneficent, because it is intended to appease certain groups as a way to discourage their deviance. Beneficent formal social control emanates from “benefits” to marginalized groups, such as the poor, in the form of public education, health care, job training, affirmative actions policies, etc. Such social control is intended to placate certain groups (and, perhaps, society as a whole) as a way to control or reduce deviance. Benefits may also be offered to powerful groups such as wealthy individuals and large corporations, mainly in the form of tax reductions, as a way to reduce white-collar crimes such as tax evasion. Whether coercive or beneficent, formal social control is rigid, operating according to an elaborate system of rules and procedures. Although specific individuals are involved, formal social control is best
viewed as performed by a group or organization. In addition to government, formal social control can also be performed by other organizations, such as a university, which have written rules and specific procedures for implementing them.

In contrast, *informal social control agents* can be (and are) anybody and everybody, and such behavior may be performed singly or in groups. Indeed, we all act as informal social control agents in many ways. Our body language and facial expressions can indicate subtle disapproval. More obviously, verbal comments we might make, like “that wasn’t cool,” “what a jerk,” “she is such a slut,” and “I think he’s becoming an alcoholic,” also constitute social control. Another key difference is that informal social control is fluid, meaning that it operates in many different ways at different times and places, and not according to specific procedures. Informal social control can also be viewed as consisting of rewards or inducements toward conformity, such as expressions of affection by parents toward children when they succeed at school and saying “thank-you” to a spouse for doing housework. But social control in the form of rewards is much less commonly examined than coercive types, which will be the focus of the rest of our discussion.

Whether performed by formal or informal agents, social control can take on many different forms; some of the major types are: avoidance or banishment, physical pain (such as spankings, beatings, executions, or any type corporal punishment), detention (in a prison or being “grounded” to one’s home), financial sanctions (such as fines, loss of job or allowance), and emotional sanctions (like gossip, ridicule, humiliation, intimidation, and withdrawal of affection). Some of these sanctions, like executions, are obviously severe, while others might seem relatively innocuous or mild, perhaps to the point where you may wonder how they could really be effective punishments. Avoidance, for example, may not seem like a big deal. But
consider how you might feel if your family and closest friends simply refused to speak with you or be in your presence. The loneliness, isolation, and sense of rejection you would experience would most likely feel oppressive, even unbearable, in a very short time. Alternatively, consider banishment from society. How might you feel if you were permanently banished from society? Loneliness might be the least of your worries. Poverty and mere survival might quickly head to the top of the list. Similarly, consider the withdrawal of affection from friends and family. Suppose that your repeated bad behavior has so upset your mother (or your spouse, best friend, etc.) that they no longer seek out your company, no longer share with you in any of the emotional experiences that make you enjoy life, such as friendship, camaraderie, being loved or cared for. If you have a young child, think about how you might feel if he or she no longer smiled at you or came to you when they were scared or upset, or no longer wanted to hug or be held by you. While these informal sanctions do not involve physical or financial dimensions, they can be quite severe nonetheless. Yet an important feature of these punishments is that they rely on close personal bonds to be effective. If you are not close to your mother, or if a friend does not have your respect, then avoidance or withdrawal of affection in these cases might not bother you in the least. Figure 2 lists a number of formal and informal social control agents and some of the specific sanctions they might administer.
Figure 2

Agents of Social Control and Examples of their Controlling Behavior:

I. Formal Social Control Agents
1. Police
   - Detain
   - Arrest
2. Prosecutors
   - Prosecution
   - Plea Bargain
3. Judges & Juries; Prison Wardens & Correctional Officers
   - Jail or Prison Time
   - Execution
   - Monetary Fine
   - Community Service
   - Solitary Confinement
   - Corporal Punishment

II. Informal Social Control Agents
1. Family members
   - Avoidance
   - Weakened Attachment
   - Loss of Financial Support
   - Physical punishment
   - “Grounding”
2. Spouse or “Significant Other”
   - Avoidance
   - Weakened Attachment
   - Withhold affection (sexual or emotional)
   - Spend or withhold money
3. Friends and Acquaintances
   - Avoidance
   - Disrespect
   - Weakened Attachment
   - Gossip
4. Bosses and Co-workers
   - Avoidance
   - Loss of Job
   - Demotion
   - Loss of Pay
While the immediate goal of coercive types of social control is undoubtedly to sanction or punish, there is a great deal of debate as to what the larger implications of social control are – whether for groups as large as society as a whole, or as small as a husband and wife dyad. For scholars, the question becomes “what is social control intended to accomplish for society?”

One widely agreed-upon purpose of social control is that it is intended to create and maintain the social order (or social stability and cohesion) by minimizing behavior that is socially disruptive or otherwise defined as bad or wrong – in essence, to reduce or control the level of deviance. For one group of scholars, the functionalists, controlling deviance is unquestionably good and beneficial for society, because it identifies norms and their relative importance, thereby creating and maintaining cultural norms or rules, as well as the larger social order. However, for conflict scholars, social control is inherently unfair as it will tend to reflect the norms of powerful groups, may actively criminalize (or “deviantize”) the norms of weaker groups, and, is most likely to be directed toward weaker groups. In such a portrayal, formal social control becomes a tool that elites manipulate to protect their interests and to oppress threatening groups and their members. Social control may thus serve to maintain the status quo (i.e., the way things are). These two positions are explored below.

The functionalist position on social control is closely tied to the writing of French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1982) who famously wrote that “crime is normal, because a society without it is utterly impossible.” Thus, Durkheim was arguing that crime actually produces benefits for society – that is, it is “functional.” For Durkheim, certain acts are defined as crimes because they offend the “collective conscience” of a society and, therefore are condemned. Norms deemed important by a society are cherished because they define the content of the society’s culture: what the society stands for, what it means to be a social member, what
members can expect from each other in social interactions, and what responses they can expect from society as a whole. Violations of these norms, and society’s response in the form of social control, serve as a reminder of the content of specific norms and their importance. Thus, deviance and social control identify cultural content in particular, which also functions to create and maintain social boundaries and social identity – crucial aspects of the social order.

For functionalists, deviance and social control operate in two important ways on the social order. First, by classifying behaviors as deviant and setting boundaries on behavior, society fosters solidarity (a sense of “we-ness” or togetherness) among its members by communicating notions of right and wrong and establishing social expectations and obligations. Second, identifying individuals who have violated society’s standards of right and wrong and labeling them as deviant strengthens the social solidarity among non-deviant members of society by validating the will of the collective conscience. Such understandings disintegrate when people who violate standards of right and wrong are not punished; because this throws the collective conscience into disarray, weakens social solidarity, and attenuates social boundaries. Including those discussed, Steven Pfohl (1994) identifies four main “functions” of crime, according to Durkheim (see Box 1). However, while Durkheim and other functionalists seem to argue that it is deviance per se that has functional qualities, the social control response that is prompted by deviance is in many cases that behavior that actually serves to produce beneficial outcome for society. Yet, Durkheim also argued that too much crime could be pathological for society, as it could overwhelm social control resources and produce social chaos and anomie. Finally, while this discussion has been directed at society as a whole, these same processes should hold (with perhaps some variation) for smaller groups, such as subcultures within a society, workgroups, friendship groups, even families and dyads.
The Functions of Deviance & Social Control

1. **Boundary-Setting Function:** the performance of deviance and the social control response identify limits of right and wrong, or the moral boundaries of culture.

2. **Group Solidarity Function:** social control indicates the moral revulsion felt by society in response to deviance and may actually draw the society closer together by reinforcing cultural norms and beliefs.

3. **Innovation Function:** societies can stagnate if deviance does is absent or too rare because deviance spurs social change in the form of new ideas, technologies, and other “innovations.”

4. **Tension-Reduction Function:** the social control of deviants may be one way that society reduces social tension; as may certain events, such as festivals and holidays, such as Mardi Gras, Oktoberfest, and Homecoming where social members are permitted to engage in certain acts, such as heavy drinking, that are normally considered deviant.

An interesting application of some of Durkheim’s ideas about deviance and social control comes from Kai Erikson’s (1966) *Wayward Puritans*, a historical analysis of Puritan colonial society in the 1600s. In this analysis, Erikson not only asserts that examples of deviance and social control help establish normative boundaries, but that each society will, of necessity, produce a certain *volume* of deviance and social control. Societies will ensure a certain volume of deviance not only through the making of norms and laws, but also through fluctuation in their enforcement. Because such enforcement is dependent on social control resources, the goal of social control, for Erikson, is to stabilize deviance, so that its functions can be manifested. Thus, if deviance increases in a society, social control will focus its effort on the most serious violations and ignore some of the less serious ones. Likewise, if deviance decreases, social control will, of necessity, begin to rigorously enforce all norms – any may even create new norms to create sufficient levels of deviance. To demonstrate his ideas, Erikson wrote that Puritan society, being small and homogeneous with low levels of deviance, developed a need to
increase deviance so that the functions of deviance and social control could be performed. Puritan society accomplished this by either narrowing the definitions of deviance or by labeling more people as deviant. Specifically, during the “antinomian controversy,” Puritan society defined certain topics of religious discourse as seditious or deviant; during the “Quaker persecutions,” members of the Quaker religion came to be defined as an invading army and were harassed and imprisoned; while at the infamous Salem Witch Trials, the testimony of a clique of teenage girls was sufficient to label dozens of innocents as “witches.” In all these cases, increases in social control served Puritan society by drawing it more tightly together and highlighting social boundaries.

While the work of Durkheim, Erikson and other functionalists look for social meaning and purpose in deviance and social control, this perspective is lacking in several respects. First, functionalism assumes a common set of norms or “consensus” in a society – failing to consider the possibility of competing norms and the process by which some group norms (and not others) become applicable to the larger society. Second, functionalism is not concerned with potential differences in enforcement of norms (social control) across different groups, or with the implications that the successful application of the deviant label might have on individuals or groups. Yet perhaps the most blatant shortcoming of functionalists is the failure to examine which groups benefit and which suffer from the creation of particular norms. To say that the deviantization of Jews in Nazi Germany was functional for that society ignores the horrors the Jews suffered in the Holocaust (see Pfohl 1994). Thus, the repercussions of creating populations of “outsiders” and scapegoats through deviance definitions and enforcement are ignored in the functionalist tradition (Becker 1966; Szasz 1985).
The reactivist or conflict perspective picks up these threads of thought, and indeed is unique in the study of deviance and social control for viewing the creation of norms and laws as problems or issues to be studied. Like Durkheim, the conflict perspective reaffirms the position that deviance is not an inherent characteristic of certain behaviors, individuals or groups. Instead of arising from a society-wide “collective conscience,” however, definitions of deviance are viewed by conflict scholars as being socially constructed through the collective action of individuals and groups (with potentially competing interests) who lobby for public attention and legislative access. To the extent that an attempt to create a new definition of deviance is successful, then the norms espoused by the prevailing group are more likely to be accepted by the larger society and even become written into law.

The key determinant of success of these efforts is the relative amounts of “power” those involved can mobilize. Power may come from many sources, including personal charisma, connections or relationships with important others, as well as religion and ascribed characteristics such as race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. But for the conflict tradition, the most important source of power is economic – specifically income, wealth, and occupation. Notably, in the U.S. these sources of power intersect with race/ethnicity and gender such that those with the most economic power tend to be White males. Thus, as a group, rich White males have the most power and, as a result, are the most successful at having their norms become part of law and culture.

This is not to say that relatively powerless groups can never achieve successes in the effort to influence definitions of deviance. Prominent examples come from the women’s and civil rights movements which expanded legal rights for women and racial/ethnic minorities, as well as altering cultural norms surrounding these groups. The more modern “gay rights”
movement is a similar effort. In addition, the prohibition of alcohol during the first half of the 20th century resulted largely from the efforts of relatively powerless groups – namely the rurally based Women’s Christian Temperance Movement. Furthermore, the mere existence of laws against white-collar crimes, presumably more likely to be directed against those with more economic power, attests that the power of rich White males is not absolute. Yet, according to the conflict perspective, such examples are uncommon when compared to social norms and laws as a whole.

The conflict tradition derives its name from the view it holds regarding the creation and enforcement of norms and laws. In large, heterogeneous societies such as the U.S. and many other industrial nations, normative consensus may be rare. Instead, conflict among groups regarding norms will be common. While society can accommodate some normative variation across different groups and subcultures, the law cannot accommodate competing norms. Therefore, a society that contains cultural variation will necessarily codify some norms that run against the norms and beliefs of some groups. Different groups advocating different norms will thus compete within a society for the right to have their views reflected in laws. These assertions suggest a process of normative conflict among social groups in the process of creating laws. The logical outcome of such conflict is that norms reflecting the morals and interests of the most powerful groups are most likely to receive the protection of law – and, again, rich White males are predicted to benefit most from the outcomes of these conflict processes.

The implications of normative conflict for deviance and social control are many. First, by definition, new norms and laws create new deviants and criminals. People not otherwise involved in crime or deviance may have their status altered by these new definitions. In becoming deviants and criminals, these individuals are marginalized and placed in jeopardy by
the threat of social control. If many of these newly created deviants belong to specific groups, then these groups become marginalized, and such group membership may even become a deviant status in itself. Perhaps the best examples of this process concern the Jim Crow south and Nazi Germany. As the Nazi’s rose to power in pre-World War II Germany, the already marginalized Jews became an even more deviant status. By law, Jews now had to wear symbols on their clothing indicating their Jewish status, could only live in certain places, hold certain jobs, and eventually were subjected to Hitler’s attempted “final solution:” genocide. Here, the politically powerful Nazi’s socially constructed “Jew” as a deviant status, and subjected them to the most awful manifestation of social control imaginable. A similar process occurred in the U.S. south following the Civil War and reconstruction. The freed slaves, viewed by Southern Whites as highly threatening to their power and status, became the focus of Jim Crow laws which placed severe restrictions on the most basic civil rights of African-Americans, including the right to vote and have a fair and impartial trial. Social norms associated with this era led to thousands of lynchings of Blacks by White mobs for infractions as minor as not stepping off the sidewalk when a White person passed by or, in the well documented case of Emmitt Till, for whistling at a White woman.

But such ugliness is in the past you might think, or at least things like this could not happen in the modern U.S. Well, sociologist Michael Tonry would disagree with you. Writing about the “War on Drugs,” Tonry (1994) notes that African-Americans increasingly comprised the rapidly growing population of incarcerated drug offenders in spite of voluminous research which shows that Black-White differences in drug offending are negligible. Furthermore, drugs associated with Whites, such as powdered cocaine, receive much less severe sanctions that drugs associated with African-Americans, such as crack cocaine. In fact, according to federal law, the
penalty for possessing 100 grams of powdered cocaine is equal to the penalty for 1 gram of crack cocaine. The so-called “100:1 rule” and the other findings Tonry presents are strong evidence that certain drug laws, and even the “War on Drugs” as a whole, targets certain racial groups, much as the conflict perspective on deviance and social control suggests.

According to the conflict approach, if threats to dominant groups interest arise (as in the 1960s counterculture movements), or when certain segments of the populace become problematic for the larger society, as when poverty increases, social control will mobilize to quash these threats by defining as behaviors specific to these problematic groups as criminal (Spitzer 1975). The segments of the population that disrupt the forces of production or which question the ideology, arrangements, and operations of capitalist economies are most likely to be seen as problematic in nations like the United States (Quinney 1970).

While provocative and thought-provoking, the conflict tradition views all laws as evolving from conflict processes, and fails to consider that certain laws (i.e., mala in se offenses) may result from a real (not false) consensus across groups. Conflict scholars also fail to consider that all groups may benefit from the creation and enforcement and enforcement of certain laws. Additionally, conflict theory cannot account for why certain behaviors more specific to the wealthier and more powerful classes (e.g., corporate crime) have become criminalized, though it can provide an explanation for its level of enforcement and why its penalties are relatively weak.

What can we make of the functionalist and conflict perspectives? In spite of their contradictions and shortcomings, both views make sense and seem to have contributions to make to our understandings of the relationships between deviance and social control and culture, social structure, and social order. It is to these issues that we next turn.
STOP & REVIEW: Before moving on, answer the following questions. (1) Identify at least three ways that social control is performed in (a) your family and (b) among your peers. (2) Give an example of a law and its enforcement that fits into the functionalist perspective. (3) Give an example of a law and its enforcement that fits into the conflict perspective.

Connecting Deviance and Social Control to Culture, Social Structure, and the Social Order

Now, having explored the ideas of deviance and social control in some depth, you might reconsider the opening statement of this chapter – that all societies will have examples of deviant behavior and that they will respond to deviance with social control. According to functionalism, the social processes surrounding deviance and social control are beneficial to society. Deviance and social control serve to define the content of culture through their “boundary-setting” function. Setting boundaries and fostering social solidarity, in combination, are fundamental for the maintenance of the social order. Thus, deviance and social control are necessary for society to exist and endure.

However, functionalists also maintain that, depending on the characteristics of a given society, definitions of deviance will take on different dimensions. For very large, diverse, modern societies such as the United States, deviance definitions are much more permissive than in small homogeneous groups like the Puritans discussed by Kai Erikson. In fact, according to Durkheim’s “community of saints” parable, deviance will be present even within a small group of very honest, gentle, caring persons, such as a society of saints, because such a society could not exist without the social functions performed by deviance and social control. Granted, acts of force and fraud might be almost entirely absent in such a society. Therefore, other norms, perhaps pertaining to food, sex, and religious worship, will have to emerge that will produce a requisite amount of deviance so that social control can be mobilized often enough to create the
social solidarity this (or any other) society will need to exist. Again, in this portrayal, deviance and social control serve to help define culture and are seen as beneficial in relation to the social order.

In contrast, the conflict tradition views the relationship between the social order and deviance and social control as problematic and rife with unfairness. For conflict thinkers, the labeling of behavior, individuals, and groups as deviant serves a beneficial function – but only for certain social groups, namely rich White males. Cultural content including laws, therefore, primarily represent the views of groups that are at the top of structural hierarchies. By having their norms written into law, such powerful groups benefit from conflict processes in that they result in a social order that suits their ideas and interests. More insidiously, since the outcome of conflict processes also produces a caste of “outsiders” whose behavior has become deviant or criminal, dominant classes also ensure the production of deviance – necessary fodder for the maintenance of this social order. Thus, while the social order may be maintained through deviance and social control, as functionalists argue, for conflict thinkers this situation is inherently unfair as powerful groups benefit, and weaker groups suffer, such as women, the poor, and racial/ethnic minorities.

Yet, a number of problems have been identified with both the functionalist and conflict approaches. A middle ground position is suggested by the pluralistic-conflict approach (Akers 1994). This position argues that both the functionalist and conflict perspectives, while making some valid points, are overstated. Especially for large, heterogeneous societies like the U.S., with its many racial/ethnic groups (many of which are growing in size and influence) and large immigrant population, the kind of “collective conscience” discussed by Durkheim, where all norms are largely agreed upon, is unrealistic. Similarly, to portray society as fractured and riven
by a vast array of competing views over all norms is also untenable. One way to resolve the
tension between conflict and functionalist theories, and to contend with their respective
problems, is to consider where and when each point of view is strong or weak. In support of
functionalism, much public opinion research shows that mala en se crimes, such as murder, theft,
assault, embezzlement, and insider stock trading are almost unanimously seen as very wrong or
deviant by members of society. Such laws may, therefore, reflect a core collective conscience in
U.S. society. Yet, this collective conscience may dissolve when mala prohibita laws are
considered. It may be here that norms no longer reflect social interests as a whole, but rather the
interests of certain groups, that the conflict perspective becomes more useful.

The pluralistic-conflict approach argues that a so-called power elite, if it exists, is not
able to enforce its will in all times and all places. Rather, in U.S. society, multiple power centers
exist – some based on economics, with others based on morality, religion, politics, and still
others based on ad-hoc social movements, such as “Megan’s Law” which requires that neighbors
be made aware of sex offenders living in their midst. Pluralistic-conflict asserts that groups with
the most power and resources are most likely to emerge as victorious whenever their norms
conflict with those of other groups. While common sense would argue that economic power,
being most relevant in the U.S., might win most social battles, according to the pluralistic-
conflict perspective, it will not win them all.
**FINAL STUDY QUESTIONS:**

1. In what ways are deviance and social control (a) necessary or useful for a society, (b) problematic or unfair for a society?
2. Is it possible to have a society without deviance or social control? If yes, what would such a society look like? If not, why not?
3. Explain for yourself how specific behaviors, groups and persons come to be defined as deviant in American society today. Which definition of deviance did you use to answer this question?
4. Does social control merely respond to deviance? How might social control behavior serve to create deviance?

**References:**