

**Lesson
Ten**

The Social Construction of Crime and Deviance

Aims

The aims of this lesson are to enable you to

- define deviance and distinguish between legal and illegal deviance
- understand that deviance is socially defined, and that the behaviour classified as deviant varies historically and culturally
- describe the effect of 'labelling'
- see how deviant behaviour can be interpreted and explained

Context

We have seen in the last lesson how society exercises a variety of formal and informal controls in order that everyone can live together in reasonable harmony. But not every individual keeps the written and unwritten laws of society. When a person goes beyond the laws or customs of his society, something has to be done and that is one of the primary subjects of this lesson.



Deviance

The bare chested man in the middle of a market place with tattoo marks all over him, the punk with stiff spikes of pink and purple hair, the old woman who keeps fifteen cats, all excite attention.

Why?

Because they are all different from the 'normal' — They are violating the rules that make for social order, or at least, not conforming to the norm. They are **deviants**.

Social control, we have seen, tries to prevent **violations** of the norms and rules of society. But violations will always occur and such violations of social order are called **deviant actions**.

All the deviants we described above excite our curiosity — we look at them because they are so different from the rest of us, but we do not actively disapprove of them nor feel they ought to be punished. The snide remarks, the sniggers, the looks, are all punishment enough!

The homosexual, the person who has a series of adulterous relationships, the gambler, may be subjected to greater social disapproval, but the deviance is still not illegal. Society tolerates a certain amount of deviance — this is **legal deviance**.

Deviance and Crime

Some of the rules of society, we have seen, are laws. Violations of these laws are a more serious matter, and are regarded as criminal. Those deviant acts which break the law are **criminal** acts. All criminal acts are deviant, but all deviant acts are not criminal. Or, in other words, **crime** is always deviance; but, deviance includes more than crime. Crime is **illegal deviance**.

Tax evasion, bribery, theft, murder and rape are all deviant actions which constitute crime or illegal deviance.

An interesting point is that some forms of legal deviance are looked upon with greater social disapproval than some forms of illegal deviance. For instance, people regard a rude, uncouth man, one who belches after meals, and wears dirty clothes, with greater disapproval than the man who is adept in evading income tax!

Activity 1	Are crime and deviance the same thing?
	

Changing Standards of Deviance

Deviance refers to those activities which go against the norms and expectations of society.

But, norms and expectations are not the same in all societies. Neither do they remain the same at all times in the same society. This is why we say that behaviour classified as deviant varies historically and culturally.

Now read this extract on Aztec society:

“Within the Aztec society in Mexico, human sacrifice was common. Those who died in this way included both Aztecs themselves and their enemies captured in battle. For a warrior it was the most noble form of death. It has been estimated that during the four day dedication of a great temple to the war god Tenochtitlan, 20,000 people were sacrificed. The sacrifices were sometimes followed by ceremonial cannibalism. Parts of the dead person were eaten by members of the Supreme Council and the nobles. They believed that by eating human flesh the life force of the dead person would enter their bodies and give them the strength to carry out the wishes of the gods.”

(Adapted from ‘Flesh and Blood’ by P Tannahill.)

Activity 2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why were warriors in Aztec society willing to be sacrificed? 2. How was cannibalism viewed by Aztecs? 3. There are occasionally instances of cannibalism in our society. How do we react to them?
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3.

Deviance, then, is **relative**. Most actions are not in themselves 'deviant'. Whether an action is deviant or not depends on whether it is performed in the right place and time, and by the right person. Thus, shouting and cheering at a football match is quite all right, but the same behaviour in a lecture hall would be considered deviant. The action is the same in both cases. Or, think of an eighty-year-old grandmother, in a mini-skirt, dancing in a discotheque! She would be a figure of fun! But not so her eighteen year-old grand-daughter.

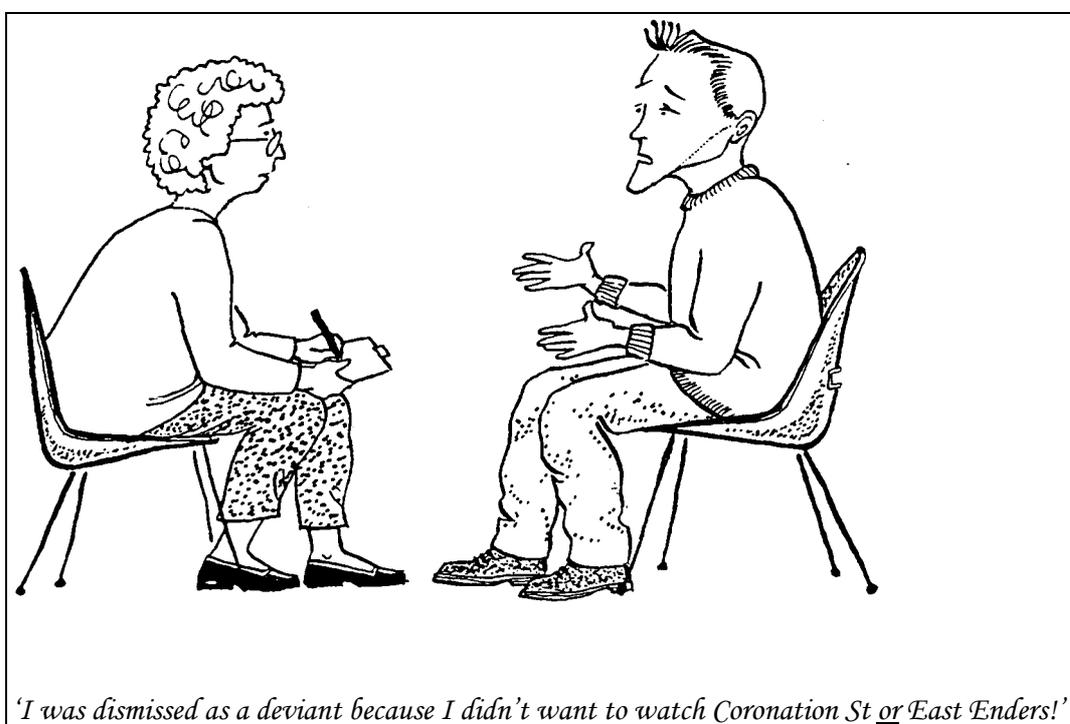
Deviance depends on what is considered appropriate. And what is considered appropriate or right changes from time to time. A number of years ago a woman smoking in public was a deviant! Today, her behaviour would not be considered so.

The stigma attached to divorce is no longer so great, so the divorcee is no longer looked upon as a deviant. Homosexuality, which was formerly a criminal offence, was made legal in 1969, but the homosexual today is still thought of as deviant, though the time is soon approaching, in western society at least, when homosexuality will not be considered deviance. Thus, behaviour classified as deviant differs historically.

What is considered appropriate differs from society to society. Having four wives is quite acceptable in an Islamic society but is illegal in western society. Such differences are found in norms concerning the most trivial matters as well as the most important.

In Moslem society, women keep large parts of their body covered whereas, in the West, the exposure of legs, arms and neck is quite acceptable. In Asian countries, the man in an important job is expected to favour his relatives in job appointments — he would be considered deviant if he did not! But in the West, it is the man who does help his relatives in this way, who would be deviant.

Take a man who eats only chocolate eclairs for breakfast. Is he a deviant? If he is one of the 'idle rich', he would be called an eccentric rather than a deviant. If he cannot really afford the eclairs, he might be looked upon as mad, his behaviour deviant. So what is called 'deviant' also depends on the status and position of the person in a society.



Activity 3

Fill in the blanks:



Deviance varies *historically* because norms change from to

Deviance varies *culturally* because norms differ from to

Stereotypes of Deviance

Suppose there is a brawl in the street, involving a black youth and a white man. Who is the one likely to be accused of causing it? The black boy, of course. But why is this so? Because we have a certain image of black youth — as being wild and unruly, as having higher crime rates, as not caring for rules and regulations. This image of black youngsters as hooligans is what is called a **stereotype**.

Our stereotypes of deviants include that of the homosexual male as a simpering youth, with girlish looks and dress; that of the ex-convict as unreliable, likely to break the law, etc.

People who are labelled in this way are treated accordingly. Thus a homosexual male is always expected to be picking up men, a black youth on the scene of a fight is immediately suspected of having started it.

The important point is that people do not have to do deviant acts to be labelled as deviant. There are so many black boys who are quiet and well-behaved, but because of the stereotype associated with them they are frequently looked upon as trouble-makers. Once labels are placed on people they are treated accordingly.

A stereotype which has become established in recent years is that of the British football hooligan :

“The image of Britons overseas is now so bad that foreigners fear our arrival, curse our presence and breathe a sigh of relief when we leave.

This weekend, thousands of football fans travelled to Channel to converge on Stuttgart for England’s opening match in the European championships. They were greeted by squads of armed police and fearsome dogs straining at the leash.

On Friday night in the only English pub in Stuttgart, the vanguard of the English fans stood on tables chanting ‘Seig Heil’ and making Nazi salutes. Sporting white T-shirts with ‘Official English Hooligan’ and ‘English invasion of Germany’ emblazoned across their chests, many of them were clearly in the mood for trouble. “It’s going to be war” said Michael, a scar-faced Chelsea fan.”

(Adapted from *The Sunday Times*, 12 June 1988.)

The actions of a few football hooligans has meant that all football supporters have become suspect in the eyes of other Europeans.

Activity 4	How many groups of people can you think of who have become stereotyped in this way? Make a list of them.
	

Activity 5	What is the likely consequence of 'labelling'?
	

Suggested Answers to Activities

One

All crime is deviance, but all deviance is not crime.

Two

1. They regarded it as a noble form of death.
2. They believed that eating human flesh transferred the life force of the dead person to them and gave them the strength to do the work of the gods.
3. With horror and disgust. Those people who practice cannibalism might be viewed as mentally ill.

Three

time, time; society, society.

Four

This question is very open-ended. A complete response is therefore not given. Here are some possible answers:

the dumb blonde; the skinhead; the New age traveller, the bowler-hatted businessman; the artisan in a cloth cap; the worker in overalls; the second-hand car dealer; the fitness fanatic; the idiotic aristocrat; the bespectacled librarian.

Five

A person is treated according to the label even when he does not fit the stereotype.