



Sociology Virtual Learning

High School/Lesson 33

Symbolic Interactionism &

Deviance

May 5, 2020



Sociology

Lesson: May 6, 2020

Objective/Learning Target:

The student will understand the symbolic interactionism theory of deviance.

Warm Up:

Review: Think back to when we learned about culture. Is culture inherited or learned? What do sociologists say?



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Culture is learned.

If culture is learned, is deviance learned?

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Is culture inherited or learned? What do sociologists say?

Culture is learned.

If culture is learned, is deviance learned?

Sociologists believe that deviance is a learned behavior that is culturally transmitted.

Lesson/Activity Introduction:

Think back to the very beginning of the semester when we learned about the three main perspectives in Sociology. If you need to review, [click here](#).

According to [Symbolic Interactionism](#) , deviance is transmitted through socialization in the same way that deviant behavior is learned. For example, an early study revealed that delinquent behavior can be transmitted through play groups & gangs.

Today, you will learn about two theories that explain how deviant behavior is learned: **Differential Association & Labeling Theory**. Both are based on Symbolic Interactionism.

Lesson/Activity:

How is deviance learned?

Differential association theory states that individuals learn deviance in proportion to the number of deviant acts they are exposed to.

According to this theory, the more people are exposed to people who break the law, the more apt they are to become criminals.

There are three characteristics that affect **differential association**:

1. The ratio of deviant to nondeviant individuals. A person who knows mostly deviants is more likely to learn deviant behavior.
2. Whether the deviant behavior is practiced by significant others. A person is more likely to copy deviant behavior from a significant other than from people less important to them.
3. The age of exposure. Younger children learn deviant behavior more quickly than older children.

Lesson/Activity:

How is deviance learned?

Another explanation of how deviance is learned is something called labeling theory. **Labeling theory** states that society creates deviance by identifying particular members as deviant. Specifically, it explains *WHY* deviance occurs by explaining why deviance is relative- that is, sometimes there may be two people breaking the norm but only one may be labeled a deviant.

According to labeling theory, deviance exists when some members of a group or society label others as deviant.

Lesson/Activity:

Labeling theory allows us to understand the relativity of deviance. It explains, for example why unmarried pregnant teenage girls are more negatively sanctioned than the teenage biological fathers. An unsanctioned pregnancy requires two people, but usually only one is labeled deviant.

Teenage pregnancy illustrates the relativity of deviance in another way. That is, the extent to which something is considered deviant changes over time. While teen pregnancy is still considered deviant, societal reaction to it has become less severe.



This young man in New York City in the 1940s probably felt the stigma of being unemployed. How does this stigma relate to the labeling of deviants?

Lesson/Activity:

What are the consequences of labeling?

Labeling people as deviants can cause them pain & suffering, as well as determine the direction of their lives. This is called stigma. **Stigma** is an undesirable trait or label that is used to characterize an individual.

Discussion/ Thinking: - Have you ever been labeled or stigmatized? If so, think about how it made you feel...

Practice/ Discussion:

On a piece of paper, answer the following questions:

1. Which of the following describes what is meant by differential association?
 - A. Crime is more likely to occur among individuals who have been treated differently.
 - B. People may become criminals through close association with criminals.
 - C. Crime is not transmitted culturally.
 - D. Crime comes from conflict between two cultures

Practice/ Discussion:

On a piece of paper, answer the following questions:

2. Name the sociological theory that takes into account the relativity of deviance.
3. What are the social consequences of labeling?

Practice Answer Key:

1. B
2. Labeling Theory
3. Labeling people can cause pain & suffering to the persons labeled, as well as influence their behavior and thereby determine the direction of their lives. Stigma is an undesirable characteristic or label used by others to deny the deviant full social acceptance.

For further consideration:

Think about the following (or find someone in your household to discuss it with):

*Think of someone you know or know of who has been labeled as a deviant by some members of society. Maybe it is a friend or an acquaintance at school. Analyze the consequences of this labeling for the person identified as a deviant. **(Answers will vary)***

Additional Resources:

1. [Deviance \(Crash Course in Sociology Episode\)](#)
2. [Shaming of Teen Mothers \(Article\)](#)
3. [Sociological Explanations of Deviant Behavior \(Article\)](#)