

The Normality of Crime:
Durkheim and Erikson
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The idea that crime might be a normal part of society seems untenable to many people. Yet it is the major tenant of the functional theory of crime. The idea found in Durkheim that the amount of deviance remains relatively stable over time, refers to a number of different but interrelated aspects of his theory of society. To begin with a good deal of what Durkheim says in reference to deviance is found in, *The Rules of Sociological Method*. One of his concerns in this work, as in his work *Suicide*, is to demonstrate that sociology has a unique object of study, moral life. As he states in *Suicide*, there can be no sociology without societies and societies cannot exist if there are only individuals. There is a moral reality greater than the individual. With societies and moral order represented by the conscious collective, there exists social facts which themselves are external to the individual. These social facts hold a moral authority over individuals in society and help keep social order stable.

According to Durkheim deviance is not a pathological aberration in the character structure of particular individuals, but rather, it is 'an integral part of all healthy societies.' Because crime is found in all healthy societies it must be performing some necessary, positive function or else it would disappear as societies progress and become more complex and civilized. Crime is normal because a society without crime would be impossible. Behaviors considered unacceptable have increased, as society progresses not decreases.

If a society is operating as its normal healthy self the rate of deviance should change very little. If, on the other hand, the rates drop or increase significantly this would be an abnormal condition and an indication of sickness in the organism. The change can be brought on by basically three different conditions. The first is the forced division of labor. In advanced industrial societies with a highly developed complex division of labor, the moral authority that holds individuals together is the highly independent nature of extremely differentiated social positions, something Durkheim termed organic solidarity. In a society in which social and occupational positions change rapidly or in which people are forced into positions below or above their talents, there is a forced division of labor. Moral authority begins to breakdown and deviance rates change. As second source of change in deviance rates would accompany the development of anomie. When the individual and the collective conscious are no longer in tune with one another the individual is lost as the moral authority fails to regulate the desires and needs of the person. A third source of increased deviation results when the cult of the individual runs amuck. The cult of the individual refers not to particular individuals but rather to the belief that human beings in the abstract are individuals. When individuals begin to take this ideology too seriously and begin to act more and more independently, holding little regard for the solidarity of the moral order, deviance rates will again fluctuate away from the normal.

All of this aside, if a given society is operating in its normal mode the rate of deviance will remain relatively stable. This will be true regardless of the individuals who made up the rates or their motives for committing deviant acts.

The individual committing a deviant act may indeed be pathological; the rate however, is not.

Perhaps Durkheim's clearest example is in his study of suicide. Every society is inclined to have a particular suicide rate that remains constant as long as the structure of each society remains the same. Any individual within society showing inclinations toward suicide is reflecting the collective inclination toward suicide, which exists above and beyond the individual. The structure of society itself determines the collective inclination. For example, in a society incapable of storing a surplus, where every individual is needed in production of subsistence, it is likely there will be an inclination toward altruistic suicide. Individuals inclined to suicide are likely to commit suicide for the sake of society.

There have been a number of studies concerned with suicide that follow in Durkheim's footsteps. Most of these are concerned with the relationship between the breakdown in constraint exerted over individuals. For example Gibbs and Martin look at the degree of status integration in relation to suicide rates. The more integrated the statuses the lower the rates of suicide.

Perhaps the most well known study that attempts to show the relative stability of deviance over time is Kai Erikson's, *Wayward Puritans*. Erikson closely scrutinizes the Massachusetts Bay Colony of the 17th century to test three hypothesis concerning deviance. Two of those are worth talking about in some detail. The first because it relates to a basic function deviance serves for all healthy societies. This helps to explain why deviance is always present in society. The second hypothesis deals more directly with the contention that deviance remains fairly constant over time.

Erikson states that every community has its own particular set of moral boundaries and that each community also has its own particular styles of deviance. The moral boundaries give each group a distinct identity, which gives its members a sense of belonging, and identity. Deviant behavior functions to illuminate those moral boundaries. In day-to-day living we often lose sight of those features of our community, which gives it its own special identity. The boundaries appear in a haze of uncertainty, or perhaps transform in the process of maturation. Deviance acts as a fine lens to bring the boundaries back into focus and clarify the will of the collective conscience.

Erickson first approached this idea in an article published in 1959 entitled, *The Functions of Deviance in Groups* (Dentler and Erikson). The authors attempt to apply three propositions derived from the works of Durkheim. The first proposition states “groups tend to induce, sustain, and permit deviant behavior” (1959:90). Groups while setting up their normative patterns allocate positions within the group to be filled by people displaying behavior contrary to the acceptable norms. Thus, when the range of behavior was being established certain behavior was defined as deviant. The behavior then becomes permitted within the group in the same sense that behavior exhibited by leaders is induced, sustained and permitted. The range of behavior allowed by the group is essential to group formation. What this proposition implies is a built-in division of labor, certain people will fill certain roles and perform particular functions, the higher the position the more one will mirror the norms, the lower the positioning the more likely these persons will exhibit deviant norms. As Dentler and Erikson argue (1959:10):

Thus the rankings that take place on a scale of social preference serve to identify the activities that members are expected to carry out; each general rank represents or contains an equivalent role which defines that member's special relationship to the group and its norms. To the extent that a group ranks its members preferentially, it distributes functions differentially.

The second proposition states that, "deviant behavior functions in enduring groups to help maintain group equilibrium" (1959:11). Essential to the group is the comparing and contrasting of behavior.

In order for certain forms of behavior to be rewarded for conformity to group norms, deviant norms must be present to give meaning to the reward system (1959:12). Both highly conforming and deviant behavior are necessary in maintaining the mean of the total range of behavior found in any group. The elimination of either one will result in a shift of threat mean producing different normative patterns (1959:12). Therefore, deviance is an integral part of maintaining group boundaries.

"Groups will resist any trend toward alienation of a member whose behavior is deviant" (1959:14), is the third and final proposition Dentler and Erikson propose. Unless the deviant presents a real threat to group solidarity, the deviant will be retained and dealt with in the group. "A group is distinguished in part by the norms it creates for handling deviance and by the forms of deviance it is able to absorb and contain" (1959:13). These norms for handling deviance become a key factor in establishing "jurisdiction over behavior," promoting "group identity and distinctiveness," and pinpoints t "the range of behavior" the group encompasses (1959:20):

... deviant members are important targets toward which group concerns become focused. Not only do they symbolize the group's activities, but also they help give other members a sense of group size, its range and extent, by marking where the group begins and ends in space. In

general, the deviant seems to help give the group structure a visible “shape.” The deviant is someone about whom something should be done, and the group, in expressing this concern, is able to reaffirm its essential cohesion and indicate what the group is and what it can do.

Coser recognizes the same functions of deviance as pointed out by Dentler and Erikson with an important variation in the leadership position. Leadership is not highly conforming behavior but is itself built-in deviance, even if it is legitimized.

The rank and file may take the customary for granted, but a break of wont and use may enhance the reputation of the leader. The flexibility required in leadership roles may entail greater or lesser departures from otherwise expected behavior so that a certain amount of license to deviate and to violate norms is built into the very definition of leadership. (Coser 1962:180).

We are led to believe that the group accepts leadership deviance as “good” if it does not become overly out of hand. Leadership may in fact be trying to meet the needs of the group, which it cannot do effectively within the strict interpretation of the group norms.

Although Dentler and Erikson’s article pertains to small group level analysis, the assumptions appear to be easily adapted to other levels of analysis. Now we can move back to a discussion of Erikson and *Wayward Puritan*.

Again, as derived from Durkheim, Erikson recognizes that behavior is not inherently deviant or normal, but instead it is defined that way by people in charge of defining (1966:11). Why is it that a person who exhibits a wide range of behavior in their life becomes labeled deviant when perhaps only certain episodes in his/her activities are or would be considered deviant by the group? Concentrating on behavior will no lead to any illuminating answers. The process by which people are sifted, screened, and sorted into deviant roles

provides a better understanding of the functions of deviance since the screening device is an important social control mechanism (196:11–12). Erikson gives little insight into just what constitutes this screening device, although he does acknowledge that social class, past records, and other similar concerns play an important part. He is more concerned in just as he was in the small group studies, with what functions deviance performs for keeping the group in tact.

The concentration of Erikson's work is on how the group manages to maintain its boundaries. Erikson tells us that boundary maintenance is a system that (1966:10):

... controls the fluctuation of its constituent parts so that the whole retains a limited range of activity, a given pattern of constancy and stability, within the larger environment. A human community can be said to maintain boundaries, then, in the sense that its members tend to confine themselves to a particular radius of activity and to regard any conduct which drifts outside that radius of activity as somehow inappropriate or immoral. Thus the group retains a kind of cultural integrity, a voluntary restriction on its own potential for expansion, beyond that which is strictly required for accommodation to the environment. Human behavior can vary over an enormous range, but each community draws a symbolic set of parentheses around a certain segment of that range and limits its own activities within that narrower zone. These parentheses, so to speak, are the community's boundaries.

Interaction is the key to marking the boundaries and deviance plays an essential role in this interaction process. Interaction between social control agencies and persons labeled deviant "do the most effective job of locating and publicizing" boundaries (1966:10–11).

Erikson chose Massachusetts Bay Colony to test three functional mentioned earlier, just slightly reworked. Ultimately, Erikson uses three crime waves in Massachusetts's history, the Antinomian controversy, the witch scare, and the Quaker invasion to show how in some instances moral boundaries had changed and the deviance worked to show that the behavior was now

acceptable. In other instances, with Anne Hutchinson for example, reaction to the deviance was used to highlight the existing norms and to clarify to all that the norms were still very strong.

In the end for Durkheim and Erikson, crime and deviance is a natural social process we would not want to get rid of even if one could.

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