DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

SOCIOLOGY I

SOCIOLOGY OF DEVIANCE

THIRD TERM: 2019

LECTURER:
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Introduction

Welcome to the third term course on the sociology of deviance. You are advised to attend all lectures and tutorials to facilitate understanding of the course material. This course follows on from the first-term courses in which we considered the relationship between the individual and society and why some people conform to society’s dominant values more than others. This course offers an introduction to the key themes in the sociology of deviance. One of the goals is to shed some light on the processes involved in the social construction of deviance in contemporary society. Deviance is a recognised field of study in Sociology. It is diverse in scope and highly complex. It is growing larger on a daily basis as new forms and categories of deviance emerge in various societies. We are inundated everyday through various forms of communication, especially the mass media, about incidents of deviance. Hence, deviance is a real problem and challenge globally. It is, however, not unique to our time and space. Deviance is a much broader category than crime. Whilst the latter forms part of the study of deviance, deviance does not necessarily imply or constitute crime. Crime denotes a violation of a society’s formally enacted laws and is subject to punishment.

What is deviance? Deviance is multi-dimensional and complex to define. There is no one uniform understanding of what deviance is. Definitions of deviance vary depending on the social, economic, historical, geographical and political context. There are at least five definitions of deviance: norm violation, re-active construction, violation of rights, the statistical definition and the absolutist definition.

A more common understanding defines deviance as a product of normative expectations. Deviance presupposes a normal or accepted behaviour, the recognition and the sanctioning of the conduct that does not conform to this norm. Throughout history societies have developed rules that regulate the behaviour of its members in order to ensure conformity with existing norms. These in no way reflect general consensus about acceptable forms of behaviour. This raises questions of who defines deviance, why, when, for whom, for what purpose and with what consequences. The ability to define and construct deviance is intricately linked to the power structure of society. Clinard and Meier (2001:v) observe that “often any consensus that has appeared to exist has been the result of political, social and economic powers of groups that have succeeded in imposing on others their views of what constitutes deviance”. It is vital for us to explore the various areas of contestation and contradictions in defining deviance. We will examine how the interactions of various variables (such as race, age, gender, ethnic group, class, geographical location, marital status and generational gap) influence definitions of deviance.

In this module we adopt the understanding that deviance is a social construct. We will examine two related phenomena in the social construction of deviance: moral panic and the medicalisation of deviance. Moral panic is referred to as collective behaviour which involves triggering acute public anxiety through the exaggerated and distorted claims about a particular phenomenon, individual or social group(s) who are socially constructed as ‘folk devils’ (deviants) by powerful social forces, the ‘moral entrepreneurs’ (Cohen, 1972; Victor, 1998; Goodie & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). This involves a process of social typing in which the folk devils are demonised and dehumanised as the other and as threats to existing social order. The medicalisation of deviance emphasises the influence, role and professional power of health and medical personnel in the social construction of deviance. Medicalization is the process whereby non-medical aspects of social life come to be seen in medical terms, usually as disorders or illnesses. According to Horwitz (1981: 750), this is a tendency to define deviance
as a manifestation of an underlying sickness, to find the causes of deviance within the individual rather than in the social structure, and to treat deviance through the intervention of medical personnel.

Like many highly-charged terms, it is fair to conclude that the term ‘deviant’ acts is applied indiscriminately to a whole variety of behaviours, values, beliefs, and physical attributes, which meet with general disapproval, anger, ridicule or condemnation or which deviate from what is regarded as normal or acceptable behaviour. Implicit here is the notion that the behaviour is disturbing, derogatory, devalued, immoral, dehumanising, inappropriate, threatening, frowned upon, evil, sinful, forbidden, unusual, strange, extraordinary and unacceptable. Deviants are more often than not described as ‘the other’, as outcasts, who do not fit in society. These categories imply the use of judgement, labelling, stereotypes, censure and restrictions. In this way, a distinction is clearly drawn between conformists and nonconformists. Many people fall victim in the process of othering. It is not uncommon that the very same deviant acts with negative connotations are praised and condemned by certain groups at various points in time. Again, this highlights a lack of consensus, selectivity and fluidity of the subject matter. It is important for us to unpack these issues and their implications for the individuals involved and the existing social order.

Related to the above is the problem of packaging or grouping deviant acts into clear categories, which is referred to as the deviant box. This remains a major problem within the sociology of deviance. In other words, there is considerable overlap between and amongst the various deviant acts in this field.

Over the years, the sociology of deviance has developed various analytical tools. Each of these perspectives represents an attempt to explain deviance, its nature, why it occurs and under what circumstances. This module will attempt to expose you to various theoretical perspectives that have been used to analyse and explain deviant behaviour. We will evaluate the validity of each perspective, and whether one theoretical perspective is sufficient in explaining deviant behaviour.

Deviance has implications for social control. One of the core objectives of this course is to explore critically the relationship between deviance and social control with specific reference to South Africa. The latter needs to be understood from a broad perspective, which includes both formal and informal means of social control. We will examine contemporary issues facing South Africa, including but not limited to these: the nature and extent of violence and crime, police and policing, prisons and vigilantism.

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

The module requires you to study core readings that will be provided and discussed in class. You are expected to consult additional readings to corroborate your understanding. Hence, a more general learning outcome is for you as a student to demonstrate that you have read widely, understood and synthesised the information and structured your arguments accordingly.

It is assumed that students are generally familiar with the form and with the logic of sociological explanation. You are, thus, encouraged to make use of the relevant information from the first semester that equipped you with the various sociological concepts.

**At the end of the course you should:**
• Have a critical understanding of the phenomena of deviance from a sociological perspective.
• Understand the various attempts to conceptualise, define and theorise deviance.
• Have developed an independent critical capacity to evaluate these different perspectives.
• Have a critical understanding of various forms of deviance and their impact on the existing social order.
• Appreciate various forms of social control of deviant behaviour. Effectively, be able to discuss and critically evaluate the nature of societal reactions to deviance.
• Understand the nature and extent of violence, crime and social control in South Africa.

READINGS AND COURSE REQUIREMENTS

The course outline provides a skeletal framework for your reading. You are encouraged to read more widely and critically on the subject in order to develop the all-important comparative perspective. You will be rewarded for showing insights which are not necessarily covered in the course as long as they are directly related to the topic. Relevant references will be added throughout the duration of this module, and you will be directed to relevant readings for each of the topics and tutorials. The prescribed texts are on the Short Loan Section of Rhodes Library. Full-text readings (including the course outline) have, also, been posted on the Library’s webpage. Click Course support --- Course materials ---- Scroll down the list of course guides---- click Sociology 1.

The websites of the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (www.csvr.org.za); Institute for Security Studies (www.iss.org.za); South African Police Service (www.saps.gov.za) are particularly useful.

Videos and documentaries will be screened on selected topics.

There will be four tutorials for this term. You need to read the prescribed readings in advance. Tutorial questions will be given to you during the first week of term. Tutorials are compulsory and form part of the DP requirements.

Please refer to Handout No.1 for the rules regarding the university's policy on plagiarism as well as the department’s rules regarding formatting, referencing, and late submission of assignments.

You are welcome to consult me in my office in the mornings (up to 13h00) if you have any questions or want to discuss any aspect of the course. No consultation on Fridays. Contact details are on the front cover of this course outline. I am unavailable for any consultation an hour before lectures. Special arrangements should be done in advance if you are unable to communicate with me during the consultation times.

ASSESSMENT

There will be three forms of assessment for this course:

1. In-term assessment:
(a) Tutorials: 20%
(b) A class test: 80%

16 August 2019
18h30-20h00
@ Barratt 1 and 2

Seating Plan:

Barratt 1: Abraham to Mckenzie.

Barratt 2: Mcongwane to Zwane.

Please note: The University’s examination rules apply to the test venues

2. **Exams:** A three-hour examination at the end of the year covering the two modules done during the second semester.

**COURSE STRUCTURE**

1. The social and political context of deviance
2. The social construction of deviance:
   - The medicalisation of deviance
   - The phenomenon of moral panic
3. Theories of deviance: classical and modern
4. The many faces of deviance with specific reference to violence and crime in south Africa
5. Social control and deviance with specific reference to South Africa

**PRESCRIBED READINGS**


