

SOCIAL CLASS AND DEVIANT BEHAVIOR:
SUGGESTIONS FOR THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL IMPROVEMENT

by

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Sociological theories which posit an inverse causal relationship between social class and deviant behavior are able to coexist with other sociological theories stressing a positive relationship between social class and deviance because of the present theoretical and empirical inability to distinguish between them. In order to resolve this dilemma, class-deviance theorists are advised to restrict their concern to behaviors that show promise of class linkage, to specify limiting conditions in the formation of propositions, and to entertain reasonable alternative explanations. Methodologists could also profit by employing multiple measures of the class variable, by utilizing a more precise cutting point strategy with respect to class, and by using both self-report and official indicators of deviance.

The following conclusion offered by Westie and Turk is justifiably pessimistic:

Perhaps the most important contribution of sociologists to the study of human behavior has been their demonstration that the significance of whatever variable is used in research depends upon the location of persons in social structures and the interaction among persons at the various levels of power and prestige characterizing such structures....Criminologists alone have produced hundreds of studies attempting to determine and to explain the relation between social stratification and the phenomenon of crime....Nevertheless, these relations have not yet been established with precision, and explanatory propositions are found in the literature without adequate empirical data by which to evaluate them (1965: 456).

Responsibility for the present obscurity concerning the relation between class and deviance variables does not rest solely on the shoulders of empirical research,

however, but must be shared by current theoretical attempts at linking these variables. The remainder of this paper will discuss the dual responsibility of theory and research with the intent of suggesting several ways in which both may profit in future confrontations with the class-deviance problem.

Theories which address the problem of explaining the presumed relation between class and deviance are of three major types: structural deprivation theories, cultural socialization theories, and psychological socialization theories. At present all three approaches are general and flexible enough to allow equally well reasoned arguments, either for the case of negative association between class and deviance or for the case of positive association between these variables.

Merton's (1957) "anomie" formulation which extends Durkheim's (1897) theory of suicide to the more general phenomena of deviance is an example of deprivation theory implying negative association between class and deviance. Merton reasons that the desire to achieve success is a cultural goal of sufficient generality in the United States to cut across all social class levels. The means to achieve success are structurally allocated in such a manner, however, that those of under-privileged class position are deprived of the necessary means to improve their lot. This discrepancy between structural means to attain success and the desire for success (anomie) leads to an increase in deviant behavior among the lower classes. Similar theories that posit an inverse relationship between class and deviance based on some form of deprivation have been developed by others (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955; Stinchcombe, 1964).

As impressive as the above formulations have been, however, it is possible to argue for a positive association between class and deviance using the same framework. Winslow (1967) reasons that a discrepancy between means and ends in the lower classes, rather than leading to deviant behavior, would more likely result in a devaluation of the success goal and acquiescence to one's less advantaged position. In the higher class levels, however, the pressure for success would be more keenly felt due to the operation of structural constraints preventing devaluation: e.g. greater parental pressure for excellence and the immediate presence of peer and adult models exemplifying achievement. Thus it is in the more advantaged strata where relative deprivation or anomie is evidenced, and this should be reflected by a greater incidence of deviant behavior.

Cultural-socialization theories that posit a negative association between class and deviance do not view deviance as a response to deprivation, but assume it to be a natural outgrowth of the lower class value system as expressed by adults and passed on to the young. For example, Miller (1958) states that the lower classes organize their behavior around a number of "focal concerns," i.e., trouble, toughness, smartness, excitement, fate, and autonomy, which presumably lead to a higher incidence of deviance. Matza (1964), in discussing the role of "sub-teranean value systems," also views deviance as a response to a cultural precept. One variant of the cultural socialization perspective is the culture conflict school of deviance exemplified by the early work of Thrasher (1927), Shaw and McKay (1942), Sellin (1938), Kobrin (1951), and Vold (1958).

Although not prominent in the literature, one could also make a case for the existence of a positive relationship between social class and deviant behavior from a cultural socialization perspective. For example, it might be argued that middle and upper class families, by tending to deemphasize "trouble," or by re-defining many offensive behaviors as harmless pranks, may actually expose their children to a higher probability of committing deviant acts than is the case among the lower classes.

Psychological socialization theories positing a negative association between class and deviance stress the impact of lower class training practices on the young irrespective of the content being disseminated. Several variables that are said to characterize lower class families and cause deviant behavior are an emphasis on physical punishment as a control device, inadequate supervision, and non-affectionate family bonds (McCord and McCord, 1956; Glueck and Glueck, 1962).

It could also be argued, however, that the higher social strata's stress on freedom, mobility, and permissiveness (Sears, Maccoby and Levin, 1957; Bronfenbrenner, 1958) exposes their young to broader social contacts. This greater potential for exploring one's environment might, in turn, increase the probability that the highly advantaged will engage in more behavior that could be considered deviant.

The point to be made with respect to the above mentioned theories is that while they attempt to explain the relationship between class and deviance, specific directional conclusions do not logically follow from first premises. Being general orientations they make it possible to construct cases for either negative or positive association as evidenced by the variety of contradictory theories that now coexist in the class-deviance literature.

Clearly theoretical efforts focusing on the class-deviance relationship could benefit by being reworked. The major directions such rethinking would take, is open to speculation. However, several basic problems are so frequently overlooked that until they are recognized and dealt with, little clarity can be expected to come from future work on the class-deviance problem.

Minimal Modifications Necessary For Class-Deviance Theory

1. The Present Failure to Specify Possible Limiting Conditions for the Class-Deviance Relationship

Most theorists who posit a relationship between social class and deviance assume that most or all deviance is negatively linked to class. Clearly this is not the case. The most frequent crimes reported in this country are traffic violations which predominate in the middle rather than in the lower classes (Ross, 1961). This is not to say that being middle class causes traffic accidents and other violations. Rather the class-deviance relationship is probably "interpreted" (Lazarsfeld, 1955) by the fact that the middle class simply has more drivers on the road.

Less frequent types of deviant behavior also show a dubious linkage with social class. For example, check forgery (Lemert, 1953) appears to be a middle class phenomena as does shoplifting (Cameron, 1964), although the data in either case are by no means clear. Abortion shows no apparent class relationship (Schur, 1965). Drug addiction appears to vary more by legal restriction and availability of the drug than it does by class (Lindesmith and Gagnon, 1964). Some political crimes like conscientious objection are questionably related to class (Sibley and Jacob, 1952). White collar crimes are by definition middle class crimes, and yet the range taken in by the latter is so broad as to make any class-deviance conclusions within it tenuous. Black market violations during World War II encompassed nearly all levels of social class (Clinard, 1952). One could add to this list.

The point to be made is that if one defines deviance as violations of the law, or even more broadly as violations of social conduct norms, then deviant behavior

covers a multitude of behavior patterns for which class might be expected to correlate in only a few cases. General theories of deviance which lean heavily on class as an explanatory factor rarely specify limitations in the scope of their independent variable. What is clearly needed then are theoretical efforts which restrict their concern to specific behaviors that show promise of class linkage rather than to focus on the relationship between class and deviance in general.

2. The Present Employment of a Ubiquitous Variable to Explain a Rare Event

If one considers all violations of criminal law that result in police arrest for any given year, the prevalence of deviant behavior in the United States rarely exceeds two per cent (Uniform Crime Reports). While this percentage could be increased by eliminating the very young, by restricting the population to males, etc., deviance as law violation is still a rare event.

The point to be made here is that since so few individuals at any class level engage in deviant behavior, social class by itself is not sufficient to explain it. For instance, if a substantial negative correlation were found between some form of deviance and social class, the latter might be considered a necessary but hardly a sufficient cause for the behavior occurrence since approximately 98 per cent of the eligible population failed to engage in it. Specification of additional limiting conditions is a necessity which is usually overlooked by deviance theorists who rely on class as a major explanatory tool.

3. Present Failure to Consider Alternative Explanations

Theorists employing the inductive method often forget that a zero order relationship between social class and some episode of deviant behavior does not automatically imply direct causation. A strong correlation indicates that "something" needs explaining; it does not affirm that the variable considered independent has caused variation in the variable considered dependent (Kish, 1959).

With respect to the class-deviance relation, for example, it is typical to assume a one to one correspondence between deviant behavior and the labeling procedure employed by the police and the courts. Thus any association found between class and legally defined crime is usually interpreted as the causal effect of class on deviant behavior. This may not be the case, however. As Wheeler (1967) and others have pointed out, a great many behaviors that could be defined as deviant go unnoticed by the police directly. Those behaviors that do come to their attention are usually reported by the public, and of those reported an even smaller number result in arrest. If the police and that section of the public sufficiently concerned to report an offense share an anti-lower class bias, then only those deviant behaviors perpetrated by members of the lower class will be selected for official sanction. Thus a negative zero order relationship found between class and deviance could be spurious, i.e., it might be explained by the uncontrolled influence of general negative attitudes toward members of the lower class.

Another alternative explanation for a negative class-deviance relationship might be generated by the simple fact that more facilities are available to process deviants in the centers of large cities. Since these ecological areas also contain a large lower class element, the probability of this strata having contact with the police is increased which again makes the negative relation found between class and deviance spurious. That is, the zero order relation would disappear if one controlled for the number of policemen in the area.

When attention is turned away from the theories that posit a class-deviance relationship and towards the empirical evidence on which these theories are ultimately based, additional problems are encountered.

Minimal Modifications Necessary for Class-Deviance Research Methods

1. The Inadequacy of Class Measures Presently Employed in Deviance Research

Social stratification, socio-economic status, and social class are sometimes differentiated and sometimes considered synonymous. It is important to recognize that social inequality as a theoretical construct is multidimensional and can be tapped by a number of separate indicators: e.g., occupational prestige, income, education, residential area, house type, etc. Rarely do researchers interested in the class-deviance relation use more than one of these indicators, the most frequent being occupation of the respondent's father (Nye, Short and Olson, 1958; Clark and Wenninger, 1962; Reiss and Rhodes, 1963; for an exception see Lander, 1954). A question to be raised is how these other measures of social inequality relate to deviance and whether they--taken as single measures or in conjunction with other measures--can predict deviance better than occupation taken alone.

An additional question can be raised concerning the efficacy of using occupation of respondent's father as a measure of class location since it is usually not the father's behavior in which one is interested but the son's. Clearly, many juveniles between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one have already assumed their first job, and it is this position which should be given precedence over the father's whenever possible. This is especially important given the imperfect correlation between father's and son's occupations. To my knowledge this procedure is not followed.

2. The Inadequacy of Present Cutting Point Strategies with Respect to Class

Most research attempting to outline the relationship between social class and deviance utilize only three or four arbitrary divisions of the independent variable (Lander, 1954; Nye, Short and Olson, 1958; Clark and Wenninger, 1962; Reiss and Rhodes, 1963). Such collapsing is wholly inadequate given the rarity of actual deviance and the fact that the propositions tested predict clustering. Maximum class variation should be maintained, especially in those strata where deviance is expected to cluster, in order to give the researcher the opportunity of uncovering any complexity in relationships that might exist. The present use of only three or four class categories permits only minimal conclusions about the form of the relationship. Also, since ordinal correlation coefficients are very sensitive to manipulation of cutting points with grossly classified data, the arbitrary collapsing of interval class measures may produce inflated correlations that would not be replicated should different cutting points be used.

3. The Inadequacy of Deviance Measures and the Generation of Contradictory Findings

Deviance, like social class, is a multidimensional concept, and is even more complex in some respects. Whereas social class can be used to characterize all individuals along some fairly accepted interval scales, deviance has the appearance of a discrete behavioral event which is not as easily generalized across all subjects. Also, no accepted standardized measures have yet been developed to assess the relative degrees of deviance characteristic of different individuals.

In considering such a scale, the following types of problems arise. How should the multitude of deviant behaviors be weighed? Does the amount and kind of deviant behavior recorded by the police at all reflect the amount and kinds of hidden deviance? Should each additional deviant act for a specific individual be given the same weight in increment? How does one deal with differential gaps in time between deviant events, e.g., should an increasing pattern of crime be given the same weight as a decreasing one if the acts involved are of the same magnitude? Should definitions of the self as deviant or not deviant be considered in the weighting procedure?

Measures of deviance presently used are primarily self-report, and those that use some official labeling agency. Although the self-report techniques pay more credence than do official statistics to the above measurement problems, at least as far as weighing acts in accord with frequency and severity (Short and Nye, 1957), neither technique attempts to consider them all. The future of deviance research hinges on finding adequate solutions to problems like these. (For one systematic attempt in this direction see Wolfgang and Sellin, 1964.)

For the present measurement problems will be set aside in order to raise a further question. Given that we have measures of a person's degree of deviant behavior, either by self-report or by official information, how is this information mapped unto social class? For the self-report technique this presents no problem since one can simply ask the subject a number of class related questions along with the items that tap his engagement in deviance. The problem is more complex when official statistics are used, however, since class records are usually not included with indices of crime. One generally knows only that a crime was committed but does not know by whom (except in those cases where concern is restricted to an incarcerated subset of the original official pool).

This unfortunate state of affairs makes the procedure of mapping deviance in relation to class difficult for those who use official statistics and leaves only two rather poor strategies open. In both cases the researcher has to reason backwards from official labels to the person's social class. He can do this by personal contact if the subjects are incarcerated or otherwise identified (Glueck and Glueck, 1950); or he can assume the subject's class position reflects the average status for the census tract in which the crime occurred. (Lander, 1954). Neither strategy is fault free. Reasoning backwards by means of personal contact leaves uncontrolled the latent effect that the deviant behavior in question might have had on the respondent's social class or his perception of it; and reasoning backwards to an average status index leaves one open to the charge of producing ecological correlations. (Robinson, 1950), since the individual and his behavior are not directly linked. For example, it is highly unlikely that all crimes in an area are also perpetuated by residents of that area -- or if they are, that these persons necessarily reflect an average.

While our discussion of measurement difficulties and the problems encountered when linking deviance to class appear to give advantage to self-report over official measures of deviance, there are additional problems to consider. When both types of deviant scaling methodologies are considered together, those researchers that rely on official records usually find a negative association between class and deviance, and those who use the self-report instruments usually find no association between class and deviance. Which is reliable?

The self-report adherents might make the claim that deviance and class are unrelated, and that the negative association found in studies that use official data merely reflects the lower class selection bias of officials and not any real class deviance dependency. Since self-report techniques control for such bias, the claim would have merit. On the other hand, those that use official measures might argue

that class and deviance are indeed related, and the inability to find such a relation when using self-report simply reflects a bias in item selection characteristic of these scales. That is, self-report instruments tend to overly represent non-serious offenses, e.g., defying patents' authority, driving recklessly in a car, having relations with persons of the opposite sex. (Taken from, Short and Nye, 1958), and do not give adequate consideration to more serious offenses, e.g., rape, murder, and kidnapping. As a result, the self-report researchers may merely be tapping "prankish" behavior that is characteristic of all class levels, and if they increased the variation in their dependent variable (included more serious offenses) class and deviance would undoubtedly be related. This also appears to be a valid criticism.

It is this author's position that the problems of selection bias in official statistics and the problem of underrepresenting serious offenses in self-reports are inherent to these instruments. That is, one cannot simply correct them by training control agents to ignore their biases or by asking the general public if they engage in rape and how often. The ultimate solution is to recognize the difficulties in each technique, and then use both of them in such a fashion that the strengths of one method cancel out the defects of the other.

For example, the major difference between self-report measures and official statistics is that they are applied to and reflect the behavior of qualitatively different populations. That is, the self-report studies begin by drawing a sample from the general population, and the official report studies begin by drawing a sample from a population already seriously deviant. Since serious deviance is rare in the general population, the methodology of self-report research is biased in the direction of finding little serious deviance whether items of great import are included in the questionnaire or not. Official statistics, on the other hand, are biased in the direction of overly representing serious deviance since the methodology employed here starts with a deviant population.

Now since the test of any major theoretical proposition (in this case a class-deviance hypothesis) depends more on having a sufficient number of cases at each level of deviance variable than it does in maintaining a perfect representative sample, the self-report and official measurement techniques complement each other. That is, when both methodologies are used together they facilitate the construction of stratified samples which ensure that a full range of variation in the deviance variable is preserved.

Each measurement device serves as a validity check for the other, e.g., a low interscale correlation might reflect either the amount of official selection bias or the degree to which subjects are unwilling to respond to questions concerning their deviant activity. An in-depth interview might then provide the answer, but an important research question is how disjointed is the self-reported behavior from what the officials say it should be? Knowledge of this variable can only be derived through joint application of self-report and official measures of deviance.

To conclude, future research attempting to uncover the relationship between class and deviance would benefit by employing multiple measures of the class variable and by attempting to retain the full interval properties of this variable. Progress could also be made by reconsidering the measurement problems involved with deviance scaling and by the future use of both self-report and official report techniques in class-deviance research.

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