

Midterm Paper: A Deviant Experience

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Introduction

Deviance can take many forms, from small rule violations to behaviors that seriously challenge moral and legal standards. In this paper, I will reflect on an experience involving a friend from my teenage years who began using and dealing drugs, including marijuana and other narcotics. This experience had a lasting effect on our friend group and shaped how I understand social norms, peer influence, and labeling. The situation was clearly deviant because it involved violating both legal laws and moral expectations of acceptable behavior. It also revealed how deviance is not only about individual choices but also about the social environments that encourage or discourage certain actions. Watching this person's situation unfold from experimentation to selling drugs and eventually being incarcerated showed me how society reacts to and defines deviant behavior, and how those reactions can permanently change a person's life.

Description of the experience

The experience took place during the later years of high school and into the early years after graduation. Our friend group was close; we often hung out on weekends, went to the mall, and watched movies together. One of our friends, who I will call Marcus for privacy, was outgoing and well liked. At first, his use of marijuana seemed casual, something he did occasionally to be able to destress from school and family problems. Over time though, his behavior changed. Marcus began using more frequently, skipping class, and spending time with people who associated themselves with gang members. What began as occasional use soon evolved into dealing marijuana and later experimenting with other narcotics such as pills and cocaine. As his involvement grew, his personality started to shift. He became more defensive and careless, and the group dynamic changed. Some friends still hung out with him, attracted by the "coolness" about being able to obtain the product. While others, including myself, began to pull away to not be a part of the situation. Teachers and his mother noticed the change but no

one intervened seriously. After high school, Marcus continued his involvement in gangs, and then soon we knew nothing about him. Eventually, he was caught by police with a large amount of drugs and charged with possession and intent to distribute. He was arrested and later sentenced to serve time in prison. From that point, everything changed-the way that society viewed him, our group's reputation, and how people in the community viewed our generation.

Sociological Analysis

The norms violated in this situation included formal norms, such as laws against drug use and distribution, and informal norms, such as expectations of responsibility, honesty, and lawful behavior. The reactions were intense. Some people expressed disappointment and judgement, while others were sympathetic, blaming his circumstances or peer pressure. Among our group, the event created distance and reflection. Many of us began to rethink our own choices after seeing how quickly things could spiral out of control. This experience clearly represents formal deviance, as it involved breaking criminal laws concerning drug possession and distribution. However, it also reflects informal deviance, since Marcus's actions violated the social expectations of his peers, family, and school community. To better understand this experience, it can be analyzed using Labeling Theory and Differential Association Theory. Two major sociological frameworks that explain how deviance develops and is reinforced.

Labeling Theory developed by Howard Becker, argues that deviance is not just about the act itself but about how society reacts to it. Once Marcus was caught and labeled a "drug dealer," that label became his identity in the eyes of others. Even before his arrest, rumors and gossip spread quickly, shaping how teachers, classmates, and neighbors treated him. After his arrest, the label became official-his name appeared in public records, and that stigma became nearly impossible to escape. This label affected how people treated him and limited his chances for reintegration. Becker and other labeling theorists emphasize that such reactions can create self-fulfilling prophecies, where the individual begins to internalize the deviant identity and act

according to it. In Marcus's case, the more he was shamed and excluded, the less he identified with conventional society and the more he aligned himself with people who accepted or shared his deviant label. This shows how labeling is not just a description-it actively shapes a person's future opportunities and sense of belonging. Labeling Theory suggests that when people internalize the deviant label, they may continue or deepen their involvement in deviant subcultures because mainstream society has rejected them. In Marcus's case, once he was labeled, it seemed almost impossible for him to escape that identity.

Differential Association Theory, proposed by Edwin Sutherland, helps explain how Marcus' involvement in drug use and distribution developed over time. According to this theory, deviance is learned through communication and interaction with others who already engage in or approve of deviant behavior. Marcus's shift from occasional marijuana use to selling drugs coincided with him spending more time with older friends who normalized and even celebrated that lifestyle. Through frequent association, he learned the techniques, rationalizations, and values that supported drug dealing. The influence of these peers outweighed the conventional norms that school, family and community tried to instill. Essentially, Marcus's deviance was not created in isolation, it was learned behavior shaped by his social environment.

Social power also played a critical role. Once the criminal justice system became involved, Marcus experienced formal social control through arrest, trial, and incarceration. Meanwhile, informal mechanisms like gossip, rejection, and exclusion reinforced his deviant label. These combined forces are examples of what Michel Foucault described as the "disciplinary society," where institutions monitor and punish to maintain conformity. The system's response aimed to deter future crime, but in many ways, it isolated Marcus even more, reducing his ability to return to a conventional lifestyle after release. The interplay between formal punishment and social stigma reveals how deviance is maintained and reproduced across multiple levels of society.

This experience highlights how deviance is influenced by structural factors such as inequality, community resources, and opportunity. Marcus came from an environment where jobs were scarce and where drug dealing appeared to offer both status and income. Differential Association Theory helps explain this connection: the social learning process takes place in a context that rewards deviance when legitimate means are limited. In this way his actions reflected not only personal choices but also broader social conditions that encourage deviant alternatives. Understanding this link between environment and behavior helps illustrate why deviance persists across certain communities and generations.

Personal Reflection

At the time, witnessing Marcus's decline and eventual arrest was confusing and painful. He had been a close friend to the group and seeing how quickly his choices led to life changing consequences was difficult to understand. I remember feeling both angry and sad-angry that he threw away opportunities that could've brought him stability and success, but sad that no one seemed to help until it was too late. Within our group, his situation served as a wake up call about how peer influence and environment can steer someone toward destructive paths.

Looking back now, I understand the situation differently. Learning about deviance in a sociological context has helped me see that Marcus's behavior did not develop out of nowhere; it was learned, reinforced, and eventually punished within a larger social system. Differential Association Theory makes sense of how peer influence shaped his actions, while Labeling Theory explains why his life became even harder after being labeled a criminal. Once society defined him as a deviant, there were few chances for redemption or reintegration. This experience also made me more aware of how stigma can prevent rehabilitation. Instead of focusing solely on punishment, society should address the social environments and inequalities that contribute to drug use and dealing. I now recognize that deviance is a social process, not just an individual failure. While Marcus's choices were his own, his behavior was also influenced

by surroundings, the people he spent time with, and the way society responded to him. Learning about these theories has changed how I interpret what happened-not just as a tragic story of one person's fall, but as an example of how deviance is constructed, labeled, and managed in society.

Reference

Anderson, L. (2024). *Deviance: Social constructions and blurred boundaries* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.