Definition: **deviance** from *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*

Generally, any pattern of behaviour that is markedly different from the accepted standards within a society. The connotation is always that moral or ethical issues are involved, and the term is typically qualified to indicate the specific form of deviance being referred to, e.g. sexual deviance.

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Summary Article: **Deviant behaviour**

from *The Social Science Jargon-Buster*

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Core definition

Behaviours that do not conform to societal expectations.

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Longer explanation

Deviant behaviours are behaviours that ‘deviate’ from something. The question is what that something is and who gets to define it. Now deviant behaviours are often thought of as inherent to an individual, but they’re actually socially (and often legally) defined. Take adultery as an example - is it a deviant act? Well it all depends on who is setting the standards of acceptability. When the Taliban sets the standard, adultery is so deviant it's punishable by stoning. Even in the USA, the original (and often still existing) penal codes of most states find adultery both deviant and illegal (punishable by imprisonment and even treatment of insanity). Today, however, adultery has actually become the norm (think Hollywood). So while the religious right might still see adultery as deviant (and sinful), in many places it’s actually become common, expected, and even accepted. Remember - deviant behaviours are labelled by a society's norms. So just as these norms are broad-ranging, constructed, and ever-shifting, so too are the behaviours we consider deviant (i.e. what’s eccentric, immoral, and illegal).

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Debates and controversies

The world would be a better place if we could stop deviant behaviour. Well, maybe not. Many social theorists believe that deviance is functional (see functionalism) for a society. When we see others as weird, eccentric or immoral, it allows us to see ourselves as mainstream, normal, and perhaps even righteous. Deviance also bonds societies together. We tend to strengthen our bonds when we percieve a common threat. Finally, deviant behaviours can open a path for societal evolution. In the USA 50 years ago, sitting at the front of a bus or trying to get served at a lunch counter were considered deviant if you were black. But the persistence of, and frustration over, these forms of deviance was a catalyst for much needed social change.

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Practical application

As long as we have people, places and power we will have norms... and therefore deviance. And this is as true in the playground as it is in global politics. Deviance is thus a fascinating window for exploring our past values, our current values, what we may value in the future, as well as the values of others.

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Key figures
While deviance has been explored by any number of sociologists, criminologists and social psychologists (see Recommended readings), a classic figure here is Durkheim. Through his study of norms and normlessness, Durkheim was one of the first to articulate deviance, in this case anomie, as a product of societal forces. Durkheim also explored deviance as a normal and, in fact, functional part of society that allows the majority to bond through shared legal, ethical, moral, and social norms.

You have to be deviant if you're going to do anything new.

David Lee TV Producer, co-creator of Frasier

Recommended readings
For contemporary introduction, I like Deviant Behavior (Humphrey 2005). For a broader array of readings, try Social Deviance: Readings in Theory and Research (Pontell 2004) or Deviant Behavior: A Text-Reader in the Sociology of Deviance (Kelly and Clarke 2003). If you're interested in Durkheim, you can delve into Suicide (1897 1997), which discusses deviance from social norms, or The Rules of Sociological Method (ch 3) (1895 1982), which discusses the functions of ‘pathology’.

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