

## Chapter 2: Explaining Deviance: The Act

### LECTURE OUTLINE

1. Although some people perceive theory as somewhat impractical, it is actually a very practical enterprise. Why do we need theory? We need theory because it explains the world to us. In the context of this course, theory explains the how's and why's surrounding deviance.
2. Multiple theories coexist within the sociology of deviance, and although some sociologists of deviance might claim that a particular theory is the "best" one, **each theory has its strengths and weaknesses**. Because each theory shines its analytical spotlight on specific aspects of deviance, it may explain those aspects very well, but other aspects very poorly. Thus, some theories will be more useful than others, depending upon the nature of the particular research questions
3. The various theories that are used in the sociology of deviance, as well as those that are used in sociology as a whole can be categorized in a number of different ways. In this textbook, the theories are categorized as **positivist**, **interpretive**, and **critical**, although recent efforts at theoretical integration have created some overlap between these categories.
4. The different approaches to deviance discussed in Chapter 1 are associated with different theories.
  - a. Those sociologists of deviance who lean toward the more **objective** end of the objective-subjective continuum find **positivist** theories to be the most useful in their emphasis on the deviant act, characteristic, or person.
  - b. Those sociologists of deviance who lean toward the more **subjective** end of the continuum find **interpretive** and **critical** theories to be the most useful in their emphasis on the processes of social construction and social typing that influence perceptions of and reactions to deviance.
5. This chapter explores positivist theories of deviance, and the next chapter explores interpretive and critical theories of deviance. The positivist theories that will be addressed are **functionalist theories**, **learning theories**, and **social control theories**.
6. **Functionalist theories** propose that the social structure creates deviance. These theories are based on the assumption that each of society's structures fulfills functions (both **manifest** and **latent**) that are necessary to the maintenance of the social order. Problems emerge for society when a certain structure is no longer able to fulfill its functions. The functionalist theories of deviance that have been the most utilized and have had significant impacts on the sociology of deviance include the following:
  - a. Durkheim's theory of anomie
  - b. Merton's anomie and strain theories

- c. Cloward and Ohlin's differential opportunity theory
  - d. Agnew's general strain theory
  - e. Cohen's theory of status frustration
7. Emile Durkheim is considered to be one of the founders of the discipline of sociology. He created a substantial body of work, and within that work addressed deviance in two different ways.
- a. First, he suggested that a **certain level of deviance is functional** for society, helping to maintain social order. A certain level of deviance does the following:
    - i. It **increases social solidarity** by motivating people to join together when faced with deviance in their midst (e.g. aftermath of shootings at Virginia Tech).
    - ii. It enables society **to determine what its moral boundaries are**, by observing what the consequences of various actions are (e.g. prohibiting theft because of the value of private property).
    - iii. It enables society to **test its boundaries** by pointing out that certain rules have become dysfunctional and must be changed in order to maintain social order (e.g. Anne Hutchison was charged and sanctioned for criticizing the minister's Sunday sermons. Later, she came to be seen as a champion of women's rights and religious freedom).
    - iv. It **reduces societal tensions** by either
      - providing a **scapegoat** for society's problems (e.g. "witches", "terrorists"; Communists), thus removing the pressure for society at large, or
      - allowing people to **let off some steam** in relatively harmless ways and then return to their normal roles in society (e.g. Mardi Gras).
  - b. Second, Durkheim proposed that at some point deviance may exceed the level at which it is functional for society. At some level, deviance becomes **dysfunctional**.
    - i. Preindustrial societies were characterized by **mechanical solidarity**, with people bonded together by their similarities. Industrialization created societies characterized by **organic solidarity**, with people bonded together by differences that create interdependence.
    - ii. If social change occurs too rapidly, **anomie** (i.e. normlessness) results. Social bonds weaken, people become unsure of what the "rules" are, and deviance increases to dysfunctional levels. Thus, deviance is the result of characteristics of the **structure of society**.
    - iii. Durkheim applied this analysis to the study of suicide and the study of crime.
  - c. Although Durkheim's theory emerged during the process of industrialization, it can still be applied today within the context of the continuous rapid social change that characterizes the 21<sup>st</sup> century (e.g. alcohol abuse in post-Soviet Russia).

8. Robert Merton has had his greatest influence on the sociology of deviance with his **anomie** and **strain theories**, which apply functionalist assumptions in a slightly different way than Durkheim's theory did. However, as with Durkheim, Merton claims that the **structure of society** contributes to deviance.
  - a. Modern North American society is characterized by certain **institutionalized goals** (i.e. wealth, status, prestige) and **legitimate means** of achieving those goals (e.g. education; hard work). However society is structured in such a way that there is unequal access to those legitimate opportunities (e.g. consider the different opportunities for children in an inner city neighborhood compared to an upper-class neighborhood).
  - b. As a result of the gap, or **strain**, between institutionalized goals and the legitimate means of achieving those goals, people can utilize five different **modes of adaptation**.
    - i. **Conformity**: People accept both the goals and means (e.g. they follow the rules in pursuit of wealth, status, and prestige).
    - ii. **Innovation**: People pursue the institutionalized goals, but through illegitimate means (e.g. obtaining wealth by selling illegal drugs).
    - iii. **Ritualism**: People give up hope of ever achieving the institutionalized goals, but continue going through the motions of legitimate means (e.g. the TV character Drew Carey).
    - iv. **Retreatism**: People give up hope of achieving the institutionalized goals, and even stop going through the motions. Instead they "retreat" into their own worlds (e.g. alcoholism).
    - v. **Rebellion**: People seek to replace the goals and means with a new set of goals and means (e.g. Louis Riel was executed for treason; hippies; civil rights movement).
  - c. North America is also characterized by **anomie**, wherein attaining the goals has become more important than the means by which those goals are attained. This has resulted in a **deinstitutionalization of the means**.
9. In Cloward and Ohlin's functionalist-based **differential opportunity theory**, they expand on Merton's theory by proposing that the structure of society creates differential access to both **legitimate opportunities** and **illegitimate opportunities**. The nature of illegitimate opportunities in particular lower-class neighborhoods contributes to the emergence of **criminal gangs** (seeking financial opportunities), **retreatist gangs** (heavily involved in substance abuse), or **conflict gangs** (involved in the violent pursuit of power).
10. Robert Agnew's **general strain theory** proposes that there are multiple sources of strain: inability to achieve goals (e.g. failing a course), removal of valued stimuli (e.g. divorce), or presence of negative stimuli (e.g. parental conflict). However, strain is not sufficient in itself to produce deviance. Strain must be accompanied by **negative affect**. Strain is most likely to be accompanied by negative affect when it is perceived as unjust, when it is severe, and when the individual lacks control over the situation (e.g. bullying). More recently, Agnew (2006) has

- developed a more macro-level strain theory, which postulates that the principles of general strain theory can be integrated with structural factors. Here he suggests deviance will be more prevalent in certain location within the social structure (e.g., low-income neighborhoods) because of the large number of people who are experiencing strain (due to unemployment, low wages, or low education).
11. Albert Cohen's theory of **status frustration** proposes that lower-class boys are unable to live up to the **middle-class measuring rod** that characterizes the school system. As a result, they create oppositional standards of behaviour (i.e. **reaction formation**) and join with other lower-class boys (i.e. **mutual conversion**), in non-utilitarian, malicious youth gangs.
  12. A number of **criticisms** have been directed at functionalist theories, although more recent theorizing has made efforts to overcome some of these limitations. The most common criticisms include the following:
    - a. its **tautological** and **teleological reasoning**
    - b. its **conservative bias** that inherently supports the status quo
    - c. the tendency of some functionalist theories (e.g. strain theories) for emphasizing **crime/deviance as a lower class phenomenon**
  13. Theoretical and empirical research has responded to some of these criticisms by analyzing non-criminal forms of deviance that extend beyond the lower class (e.g. using strain theory to analyze the pursuit of celebrity/fame), and by analyzing gender differences (e.g. microanomie; differential experiences of strain and negative affect).
  14. **Learning theories** propose that deviance is learned from others. The learning theories that have been the most utilized and have had significant impacts on the sociology of deviance include **differential association theory**, **neutralization theory**, and **social learning theory**.
  15. Edwin Sutherland's **differential association theory** states that deviance and conformity are both learned through the same process. Within **small, intimate groups**, individuals are exposed to the **techniques** of and **motives** for deviance and/or conformity. If the individual is exposed to relatively more "deviant" than "conforming" techniques and motives, that individual is likely to become deviant. These small group interactions are influenced by
    - a. **frequency** (i.e. how often an individual interacts with a particular group)
    - b. **duration** (i.e. how long the interactions with a particular group typically are)
    - c. **priority** (i.e. how early in life these interactions occur)
    - d. **intensity** (i.e. how important a particular group is to an individual)

Research on the jamband subculture suggests that some of these factors may have more of an influence than others.
  16. In Sykes and Matza's **neutralization theory**, the emphasis is on those "motives" of deviance that Sutherland referred to. They claim that people are able to rationalize their deviance with certain **techniques of neutralization**. The use of

these techniques has been found among competitive cyclists who use performance-enhancing drugs, “keener” university students, mothers of child beauty pageant contestants, and more.

- a. **denial of responsibility**: “It’s not my fault!” (e.g. claiming that there is nothing else to do in a small town)
  - b. **denial of injury**: “I’m not hurting anyone!” (e.g. cross-dressing)
  - c. **denial of the victim**: “He deserved it!” (e.g. Matthew Shepard)
  - d. **condemnation of the condemners**: “Who are *you* to tell me that I’m doing something wrong?” (e.g. Hippies)
  - e. **appealing to higher loyalties**: “I did it for a higher purpose.” (e.g. terrorism)
17. **Social learning theory** proposes that deviance emerges on the basis of **definitions** (i.e. attitudes about the acceptability of behaviours), **differential association** (i.e. with whom one associates), **imitation**, and **differential reinforcement** (i.e. rewards and punishments). Social learning theory is easily observed in daily life (e.g. giving children a “time out”; arresting someone that has committed a crime; concerns over violence in the media; having school mentoring programs to provide children with “role models”).
18. Specific learning theories have faced particular criticisms. Differential association theory has been criticized on methodological grounds, and its use of escape clauses and qualifications. Neutralization theory has been criticized on two grounds. First, it has been criticized for not considering variations across groups of people and normative contexts; researchers have responded to this critique by looking at such variations, finding different techniques being used by different groups of white-collar criminals, and by people purchasing fireworks in two different contexts. Second, questions have been raised about whether the techniques are those of pre-act neutralization or post-act justification; one of the responses to this question has been the use of vignette designs where research participants are asked to imagine being a certain situation and what their thoughts and behaviours would be.
19. In addition to functionalist theories and learning theories, **social control theories** are also considered to be positivist theories. Two of the social control theories that have had the greatest influence on the sociology of deviance include Hirschi’s **social bonds theory** and Gottfredson and Hirschi’s more recent **self-control theory**.
- a. Functionalist and learning theories hold deviance under a microscope, and try to explain its origins. In contrast, social control theories shine a spotlight on conformity, or the lack of deviance, and try to explain its origins. Why doesn’t everyone engage in deviance?
  - b. The answer to the question of why everyone isn’t deviant is **social control**, mechanisms that restrain most of us from deviance.
20. Travis Hirschi’s **social bonds theory** suggests that four different types of social bonds restrain most of us from deviance. This theory has been applied to substance use and youth crime.

- a. The bond of **attachment** refers to the emotional bonds we have with significant others in our lives.
  - b. The bond of **commitment** refers to the investment that we have in the conventional world, such that we have “too much to lose” to seriously consider engaging in deviance.
  - c. The bond of **involvement** refers to the amount of time we spend in the conventional world, which makes most of us “too busy” for deviance.
  - d. The bond of **belief** refers to the extent to which most of us accept the norms, values, and assumptions of the conventional world.
21. More recently, Travis Hirschi has developed a new social control theory with Michael Gottfredson, **self-control theory** (which was previously known as the **general theory of crime**). This theory proposes that self-control prevents most of us from becoming deviant. An individual’s level of self-control is the result of the effectiveness of parenting he or she has grown up with, although other influences in life may modify that influence to some extent. This theory has been applied to criminal and analogous behaviours (e.g. risky driving; unsafe sexual practices), as well as adventure-seeking behaviours (e.g. skydiving).
22. Social control theories have been criticized for failing to address peer influence. The response has been theoretical integration (e.g. combining self-control theory with differential association theory to explain the differential origins of criminal behaviours and adventure-seeking behaviours). Self-control theory has also been criticized as tautological. For example, some studies have been criticized for measuring the concept of self-control behaviourally. In one study that applied self-control theory to impaired driving, self-control was measured by the occurrence of other forms of risky driving. They found that people who engage in other forms of risk driving are more likely to drive while impaired; risk driving behaviours are treated as both the cause and the effect. In response to the perceived problems in measurement, others have measured self-control psychologically. Using this approach, low self-control is treated as a personality trait and is determined via personality inventories.
23. Although functionalist theories, learning theories, and social control theories significantly diverge from each other, they are all positivist theories that seek to explain variations in deviant behaviour—why some people act in deviant ways, while others do not.

## TEACHING SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTIVE LEARNING

1. The *Ask Yourself* questions located throughout the chapter can be used as discussion points in class, or as a journaling exercise.
2. The *Exercise Your Mind* boxes located in the chapter can be used as discussion points in class, or as short written assignments.

3. Go to the website for Statistics Canada to find the most recent data on hate crimes. Discuss different theories to explain the trends (e.g. race and ethnicity as the most common reason for victimization; hate crimes based on sexual orientation as far more violent; adolescents and young adults as the most likely perpetrators).
4. To illustrate Parnaby and Sacco's (2004) application of strain theory to the pursuit of celebrity/fame, clips from YouTube can be shown in class; alternatively, students (individually or in groups) can be assigned the task of finding clips that reflect each of the modes of adaptation. In some cases, aspiring actors and musicians place videos on the site in the hopes that their talent will be discovered (*innovation*). For example, one well known case was of a young woman suffering from depression, who kept an online video diary on YouTube; it was later discovered that she was an actress who was not suffering from depression at all. In other cases, people who have videos on the site may be engaged in *ritualism*, having abandoned dreams of fame and fortune, but continue to go through the motions. Ritualism is also apparent in the many personal video blogs on the site, ranging from how to apply eye makeup to rants on social issues and current events.
5. The website for *The Sociological Cinema* ([www.thesociologicalcinema.com](http://www.thesociologicalcinema.com)) includes a segment on Merton's strain theory in the critically-acclaimed TV show *The Wire*. There are two video clips that can be shown, and the accompanying discussion describes the different modes of adaptation that are reflected in specific characters in those clips.
6. Prior to discussing the research done on social solidarity before and after the mass shootings at Virginia Polytechnic Institute in 2006, instructors can show one of the numerous tribute videos that can be found on YouTube. Students should be directed to look for signs of social solidarity in the tribute video, such as diverse groups of people holding hands or hugging each other, candlelight vigils, memorials, people signing tribute walls, signs from other universities proclaiming "We are all Hokies today", and more. The sheer number of tribute videos (many of which are created by people who are not even affiliated with Virginia Tech) can be considered reflective of solidarity in itself. Although there are many videos to choose from, one particularly powerful video is "Tribute to Virginia Tech—'Forever Changed' " (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksd8-zIuYXs>); it includes an original song written as part of the tribute, which can also be considered reflective of solidarity.

## VIDEO SUGGESTIONS

- ❖ Hook, H. (Director), & Golding, W. (Writer). (1990). *Lord of the Flies*. Metro Goldwyn Mayer.
- ❖ Polak, H., & Celinski, A. (Directors & Producers). *The Children of Leningradsky*. National Film Board of Canada.

## WEBSITE SUGGESTIONS

- ❖ <http://www.thesociologicalcinema.com>

This website contains video clips and accompanying discussions that instructors can use to demonstrate a variety of sociological concepts, including those related to crime/law/deviance.

- ❖ <http://www.youtube.com>

This website contains an endless supply of people who are pursuing their own 15 minutes of fame and celebrity status.

## MySearchLab with eText

This student resource features an online interactive version of the textbook, as well as chapter quizzes, Deviance in Print (a list of key readings), Deviance at the Movies (a list of recommended videos), and a series of short video/audio clips to accompany the textbook. It also provides writing and research tools, discipline-specific readings, Associated Press news feeds, and access to a variety of academic journals.

### *Chapter 2 Audio Clip: “Crime Study Challenges Past Assumptions” (5:04 minutes)*

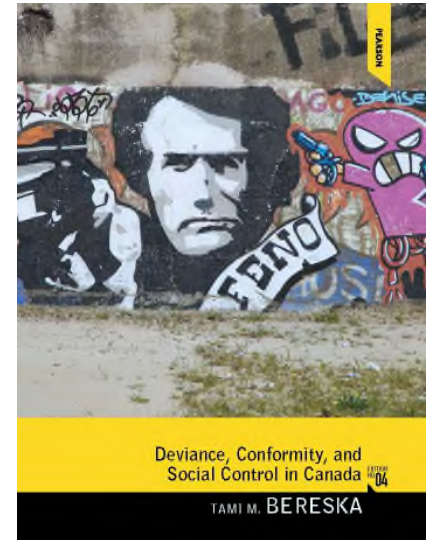
In this audio clip, Dr. Felton Earls, from the Harvard School of Public Health, is interviewed on National Public Radio (NPR) in the United States. The results of his \$51 million study of urban crime challenge the common assumption (as well as some functionalist theories) that crime is more prevalent in lower-class, rundown neighbourhoods (which is broadly referred to as “broken window theory” in the audio clip). Earls found that urban crime is not associated with the socioeconomic status or racial composition of a neighbourhood, but rather the level of social cohesion among people living there. Social cohesion was measured, in part, by respondents’ answers to questions about how adults in the neighbourhood would respond if they saw a child in need or a teenager spraying graffiti on a wall; Earls found that social cohesion was also not related to the socioeconomic status or racial composition of a neighbourhood. Social cohesion is enhanced in a variety of ways, including community policing, after school programs, community programs, and community gardens; of particular importance is engaging youth ages 10 through 17.

Students are directed to this video clip at the end of Chapter 2 in the textbook, and asked the following question: *How do the findings of Dr. Earls’ study on urban crime contradict sociological theories of deviance? Can you think of some explanations to account for Dr. Earls’ results?*



For use in class, additional questions can be posed:

- The audio clip refers to the “broken window theory” of deviance. Which of the theories in the chapter most closely correspond to that concept?
- Dr. Earls emphasizes the importance of high levels of social cohesion in a community, in order to prevent crime. Which of the theories in the chapter does that claim best fit into?
- Dr. Earls proposes that a variety of community programs for those ages 10 through 17 is associated with lower crime rates. Which of the theories in the chapter best explains that relationship?



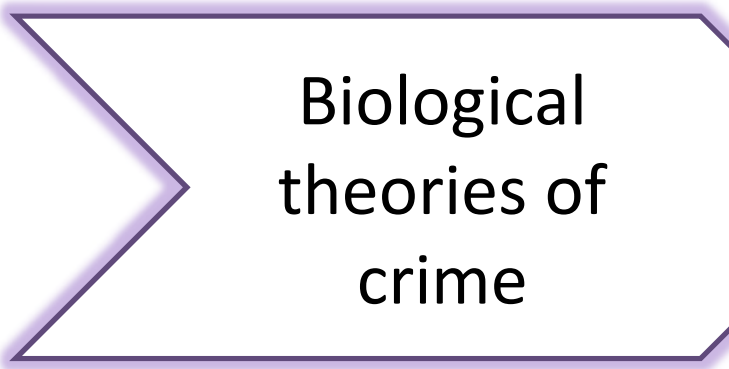
# Chapter 2

## Explaining Deviance : The Act



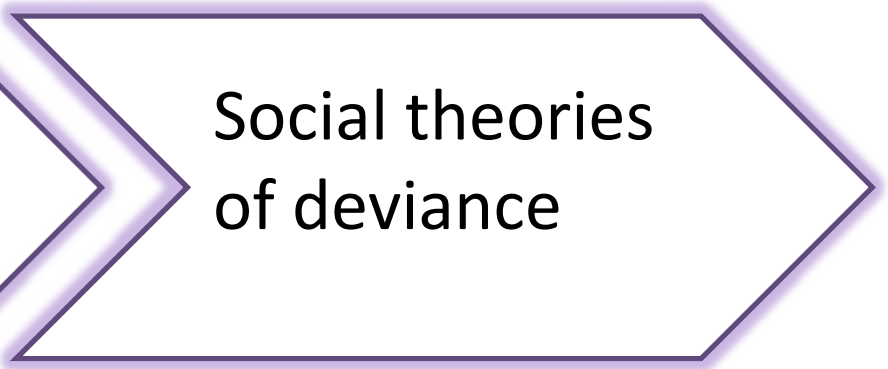
# Theorizing Deviance

Early 20<sup>th</sup>  
century



Biological  
theories of  
crime

Mid-20<sup>th</sup>  
century



Social theories  
of deviance



# Theories of Deviance

- The sociology of deviance uses:
  - General sociological theories (e.g., conflict)
  - “Criminological” theories (e.g., strain)
  - Interdisciplinary theories (e.g., feminist)
- Which theory is best?
  - Depends on the research question



# Objective-Subjective Continuum

- Those with more *objective* interests
  - Study the deviant act, person, or trait
  - **Positivist** theories
- Those with more *subjective* interests
  - Study social construction and social typing
  - **Interpretive** and **critical** theories



# Positivist Theories

(A) Functionalist

(B) Learning

(C) Social Control



# (A) Functionalist Theories

- **The social structure creates deviance**
- Core assumptions:
  - Social structures fulfill functions
  - Society is based on consensus
  - Concern with maintaining the social order





# Durkheim's Anomie Theory:

## *Too Much Social Change*

- A certain level of deviance is functional:
  - Increases social solidarity
  - Helps determine moral boundaries
  - Tests society's boundaries
  - Reduces societal tensions





# Durkheim (continued)

- Beyond a certain level, deviance becomes dysfunctional
- Structure of society creates deviance
  - Mechanical solidarity → organic solidarity
  - Rapid changes creates anomie (normlessness)
    - e.g., post-Soviet Russia



# Merton's Anomie & Strain Theories:

## *The American Dream Gone Awry*

- Institutionalized goals + legitimate means
- Anomie = goals more important than means
  - *deinstitutionalization of the means*
- Strain = normative social order creates unequal access to legitimate means

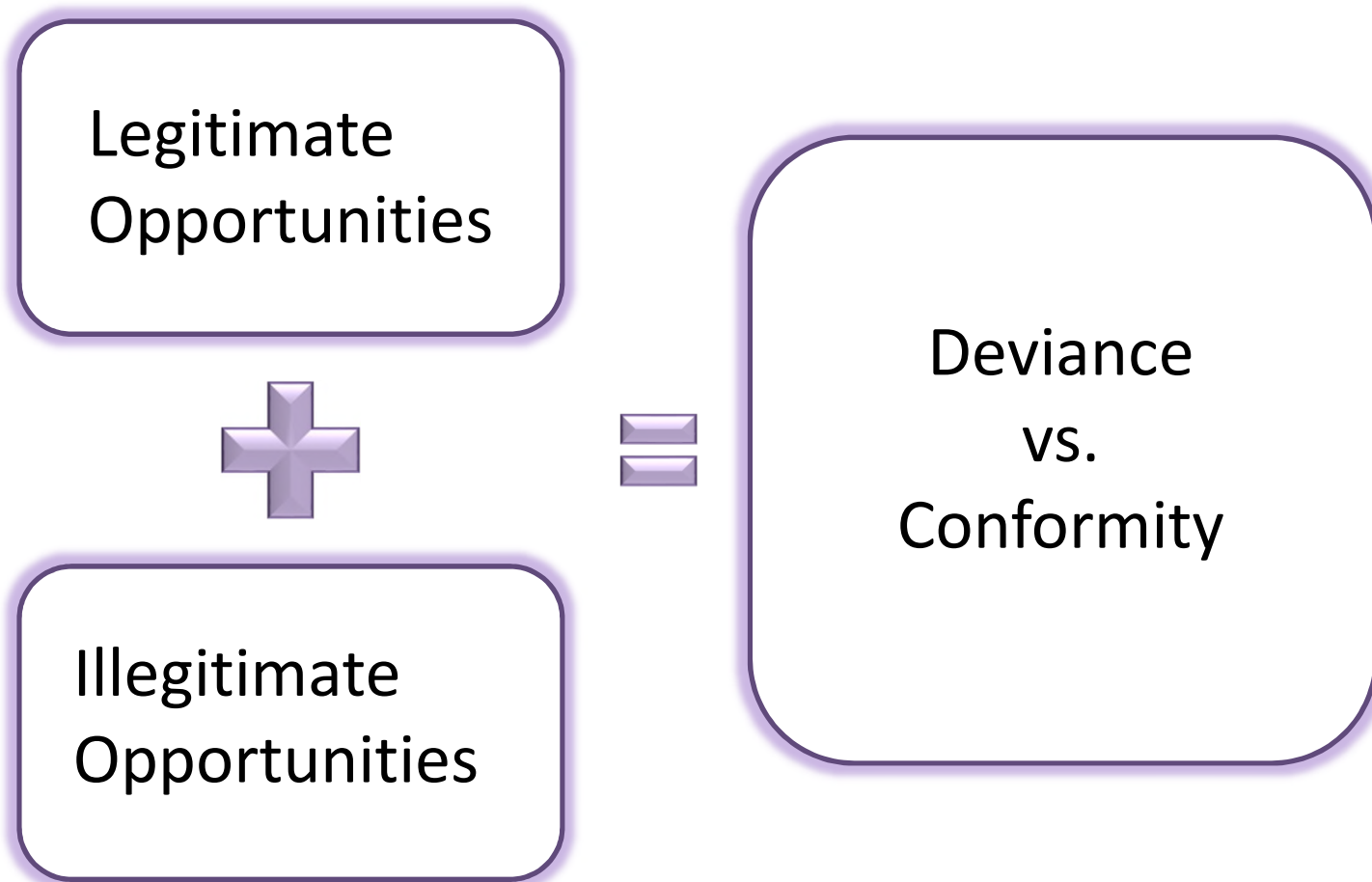


# Merton: Modes of Adaptation to Strain

Mode of Adaptation	Example
Conformity	Work hard to succeed
Innovation	Take performance enhancing drugs to win
Ritualism	Work hard, but with no hope for success
Retreatism	Addiction
Rebellion	Louis Riel

# Differential Opportunity Theory:


## *Access to the Illegitimate World*





# Differential Opportunity Theory (continued)

- Nature of opportunities determines type of deviance
  - Criminal gangs; retreatist gangs; conflict gangs
- As context changes, deviance changes
  - e.g., FOB and FK gangs in Calgary



# Agnew's General Strain Theory: *The Effect of Negative Emotions*

- Multiple causes of strain
- Strain + negative affect = deviance
- Deviance more likely if strain is *unjust*, *severe*, and *unable to be controlled*
  - e.g., victimization by bullying



# Status Frustration Theory: *The Middle-Class Classroom*

- Structure of society is reproduced in the classroom
- Middle-class measuring rod
- Lower-class boys will engage in
  - Reaction formation
  - Mutual conversion



# Functionalist Theories: Critiques

- Criticisms of logic
  - Teleological and tautological reasoning
- Criticisms of ideology
  - Conservative bias
  - Androcentric bias
  - Deviance as a lower-class phenomenon





# Responses to Critiques

- Analyze criminal and non-criminal deviance
  - e.g., pursuit of fame (Parnaby & Sacco, 2004)
- Explore gender and ethnic differences
  - e.g., **microanomie**
    - More common in males than females



## (B) Learning Theories

- **People learn to be deviant**
- **Core assumptions**
  - Processes of learning create deviance
  - Different processes identified by various learning theories



# Differential Association Theory:


## *Learning from Family & Friends*

- Same learning process for deviance and conformity
- Small, intimate groups
- **Techniques** and **motives** for deviance versus conformity → e.g., stealing cars versus getting good grades



# Differential Association Theory (continued)

- Interactions are influenced by:
  - Frequency
  - Duration
  - Priority
  - Intensity
- e.g., “jamband” subculture



# Neutralization Theory: *Rationalizing Deviance*

- Deviance is rationalized by techniques of neutralization
  - Denial of responsibility
  - Denial of injury
  - Denial of the victim
  - Condemnation of the condemners
  - Appealing to higher loyalties



# Neutralization Theory (continued)

- Techniques of neutralization used by:
  - Competitive cyclists who use performance-enhancing drugs
  - University students who are “keeners”
  - Mothers of child beauty pageant contestants





# Social Learning Theory:

## *Rewards, Punishment & Imitation*

- Likelihood of future actions is based on:
  - Definitions
  - Differential association
  - Imitation
  - Differential reinforcement





# Social Learning Theory (continued)

- Social learning theory is used to study many phenomena → examples:
  - Adolescent alcohol use
  - Academic dishonesty
  - Property crime
  - Effects of media violence





# Learning Theories: Critiques

- Differential association theory
  - Methodological critiques
  - Critique of “escape clauses”
- Neutralization theory
  - Failure to address normative contexts
  - Techniques of *neutralization* or *justification*?



# Responses to Critiques

- Neutralization theory
  - Analyses of normative contexts
    - e.g., using illegal fireworks
  - Use of *vignette designs*
    - e.g., MBA students and drug recalls



## (C) Social Control Theories

- **Most of us are restrained from deviance**
- Core assumptions:
  - Deviance is inherently attractive, yet most of us don't engage in deviance
  - Focus attention on what causes *conformity*, instead of what causes deviance



# Social Bonds Theory:

## *Social Bonds Restrain Us*

Attachment

Commitment

Involvement

Belief



# Self-Control Theory: *We Restrain Ourselves*

- *aka* general theory of crime
- Self-control restrains us from deviance
- Self-control is determined by parenting → early in life
- Self-control is relatively stable throughout life



# Using Social Control Theories

## **Social Bonds Theory**

- Adolescent sexual behaviour
- Changes in deviance with maturation

## **Self-Control Theory**

- Criminal behaviour
- Risky driving
- Risky sexual behaviour
- Thrill-seeking behaviours (e.g., skydiving)



# Social Control Theories: Critiques

- Definition of self-control is tautological
- Peer associations are ignored
- Unable to explain the pursuit of anti-social deviance vs. pursuit of thrill-seeking behaviours
  - Requires theoretical integration