

PRIMARY DEVIANCE

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Primary Deviance

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Sociology, Criminology, Social Psychology

1. Core Definition

Primary deviance refers to the initial, often isolated, act of norm violation or rule breaking that occurs before an individual is publicly labeled as deviant. It is the initial act that deviates from the established rules of society, often taking the form of deliberate non-conformity by an individual who, up to that point, had been compliant with society's rules of conduct. Crucially, the individual performing the act does not yet internalize a deviant identity; they typically rationalize the behavior, view it as a momentary lapse, or commit the act in secret, thereby maintaining their conventional self-image and social roles despite the infraction. For example, the source content provides the illustration: "Russell's primary deviance was his refusal to attend church regularly with his peers," highlighting an act of non-conformity that is isolated and does not necessarily define Russell's entire identity.

The defining characteristic of primary deviance is its transitory nature and its lack of significant impact on the individual's long-term social status or self-perception. In the vast majority of cases, these acts are minor, quickly forgotten by others, or even remain undetected by formal social control mechanisms. The individual's commitment to their conventional lifestyle--their job, family, and community affiliations--remains strong. Primary deviance is often described as polygenetic, meaning it stems from a wide variety of causes, including situational pressures, temporary psychological stress, curiosity, or minor social alienation, making a single explanatory theory for its occurrence impractical.

Sociologists consider primary deviance to be widespread and ubiquitous across all segments of the population. Most people engage in some form of rule-breaking throughout their lives, whether it involves minor legal infractions, breaches of professional ethics, or social etiquette violations. The sociological interest in primary deviance lies less in the specific etiology of the act itself and more in the societal reaction to it. It is this reaction--the application of a formal or informal label--that determines whether the individual amends their behavior and returns to conformity or continues the deviance, potentially leading to the restructuring of their life around the deviant label.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The conceptual distinction between primary and secondary deviance was formally introduced by American sociologist Edwin Lemert in his influential works, beginning with *Social Pathology* (1951) and refined in *Human Deviance, Social Problems, and Social Control* (1967). Lemert developed this concept as a foundational element of what became known as Labeling Theory. Prior to Lemert, much of criminological and sociological thought focused almost exclusively on identifying the

structural, biological, or psychological causes that predisposed individuals to commit deviant acts in the first place, regardless of societal response.

Lemert challenged this traditional approach by arguing that the initial cause of the deviant act (primary deviance) is sociologically less important than the subsequent social processes that maintain and solidify deviance. He contended that focusing on the cause of the initial, random act obscured the more critical process by which institutions and communities transform someone who commits an act of deviance into a person who adopts a deviant identity. The introduction of primary deviance thus served to isolate the initial behavior, allowing analysts to focus on the subsequent reaction, which, in Lemert's framework, is the true independent variable leading to chronic deviance.

Historically, the establishment of this concept marked a significant shift from positivist and functionalist approaches to deviance towards interactionist and social constructionist models. It highlighted the power of social control agents--police, courts, schools, and even family members--to define reality for the individual. By characterizing primary deviance as widespread and often temporary, Lemert provided the theoretical leverage necessary to argue that chronic deviance is often a consequence of the societal response to the initial transgression, rather than an inevitable progression driven by internal pathology. This intellectual development positioned Labeling Theory as one of the dominant theoretical frameworks for understanding social control in the latter half of the 20th century.

3. Key Characteristics

Primary deviance possesses several defining sociological characteristics. Firstly, it is characterized by **low frequency and intensity**. The acts are typically isolated or infrequent and do not constitute a core component of the individual's routine activity set. This low frequency means the behavior is not yet recognized by the individual or others as a stable pattern or a characteristic trait. Secondly, the behavior is often **excusable or rationalized** by the individual. They employ various techniques of neutralization--such as denying responsibility, denying injury, or condemning the condemners--to minimize the perceived harm or wrongness of their actions. These psychological defenses prevent the individual from internalizing the label associated with the act.

A third crucial characteristic is the **absence of formal reaction**. Most primary deviance either goes undetected or is met only with informal sanctions, such as mild parental disapproval, peer ridicule, or self-admonishment. If detected by formal agencies (e.g., police), the response is typically minimal, such as a warning or a minor citation, which does not involve public shaming or the affixing of a permanent record. This lack of a formal, public labeling event is what allows the individual to escape the path toward a deviant career. The fact that the individual "amends their behavior" after recognizing their deviation is contingent upon avoiding this formalized societal

response.

Finally, primary deviance is **non-identity forming**. The individual retains their self-concept as a conventional, conforming member of society. While they may acknowledge that they committed a bad act, they do not accept the social identity of a "bad person." Their primary identity remains tied to their conventional roles--student, employee, parent, or neighbor. This conventional self-concept serves as a powerful psychological barrier against the organization of one's life around the deviant act, which is the hallmark of the progression to secondary deviance.

4. Relationship to Secondary Deviance

The significance of primary deviance is inextricably linked to its counterpoint, **secondary deviance**. The transition from one to the other represents a major crisis in the life of the individual and a key area of study in sociology. Secondary deviance occurs when the individual responds to the formalized and repeated negative sanctions of society by accepting the deviant label and structuring their subsequent identity and behavior around it. This is typically precipitated by repeated acts of primary deviance being discovered and formally processed by social control agents.

The pathway involves the primary deviance being publicized and becoming a master status--an overriding characteristic that defines the individual in the eyes of others. Once labeled, the individual faces systematic exclusion from conventional opportunities (e.g., being fired, denied housing, or prevented from joining certain social groups). This exclusion generates intense pressure on the individual, making conformity more difficult and deviant behavior more attractive. They may then seek out other labeled individuals, reinforcing the new deviant identity and creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In essence, primary deviance is the act, while secondary deviance is the career or role. The theoretical model suggests that while primary deviance might be caused by any number of factors, secondary deviance is primarily caused by the social control mechanisms intended to prevent deviance. Therefore, the crucial difference is one of focus: primary deviance deals with the motivations behind the initial transgression, whereas secondary deviance deals exclusively with the effects of social reaction and the process of identity crystallization.

5. Significance and Impact

The concept of primary deviance has had a profound impact on both sociological theory and applied social policy. Theoretically, it provided the necessary foundation for the development of Labeling Theory, which fundamentally shifted the focus of deviance research from the individual to the systems of social control. This framework generated significant academic interest in institutional bias, power structures, and the subjective nature of rule enforcement. It encouraged

researchers to investigate why certain acts are labeled as deviant, and certain populations are disproportionately subjected to this labeling, rather than assuming deviance is an objective reality.

The policy implications of recognizing primary deviance are substantial, particularly in the fields of criminology and juvenile justice. If chronic deviance is a result of labeling and not merely the initial act, then policy efforts must focus on minimizing the formal societal reaction to minor, transient rule-breaking. This understanding provides the theoretical justification for **diversion programs**, which aim to redirect minor offenders away from the formal court system (thereby avoiding a criminal label) and toward community-based rehabilitation. It also supports policies advocating for the sealing of juvenile records and the decriminalization of certain offenses, all designed to prevent a single act of primary deviance from escalating into a lifelong pattern of secondary deviance and marginalization.

Furthermore, in educational and mental health settings, the concept encourages early, low-level intervention. Recognizing a child's initial acting-out behavior as primary deviance allows educators and clinicians to address the behavior through counseling, support, and behavioral modification techniques without resorting to formal, stigmatizing labels like "troubled student" or "delinquent." The goal is always to treat the act as an isolated event that can be corrected, thereby preserving the individual's conventional self-concept and maximizing the likelihood of a return to full conformity.

6. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its utility, the conceptual separation of primary deviance attracts several theoretical criticisms. One major critique is the inherent vagueness surrounding the causes of primary deviance. By describing the origins of initial rule-breaking as "polygenetic," Lemert is often accused of creating a sociological 'black box,' avoiding the responsibility of explaining why certain structural, economic, or psychological factors lead some individuals, and not others, to commit initial acts of deviation. Critics argue that this neglect creates a significant gap in the overall etiology of crime and deviance.

A second, related criticism concerns the practical application of the concept, particularly regarding the severity of the act. The framework works best when dealing with minor, non-violent primary deviance. However, sociologists often debate whether an act of extreme violence (e.g., a sudden, severe assault or murder) can be meaningfully classified as primary deviance. Such profound acts automatically elicit immediate and severe societal labeling, essentially skipping the phase of non-identity formation. For these types of high-impact crimes, the societal reaction is guaranteed, and the notion of the individual quietly self-correcting becomes unrealistic, limiting the explanatory power of the concept to minor forms of rule-breaking.

Finally, critics from structural and conflict theory perspectives often argue that the distinction

between primary and secondary deviance, while theoretically useful, minimizes the role of systemic inequality. They contend that what qualifies as primary deviance for a wealthy individual might immediately qualify as secondary deviance for a marginalized individual, due to differential policing and unequal power distribution. Thus, the decision to label, which transforms primary deviance into secondary deviance, is not neutral, but is deeply biased by socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity, factors that the original concept does not fully account for.

Further Reading

[Sociology \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Criminology \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Edwin Lemert \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Labeling Theory \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Master Status \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Conflict Theories \(Wikipedia\)](#)

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