

L'importanza delle teorie sociologiche nella comprensione e rieducazione di minori devianti

The Importance of Sociological Theories in the Comprehension and Re-education of Deviant Minors

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Abstract

La devianza è un fenomeno intrinseco alle società ed è stata affrontata in modi diversi nel corso della storia. I suoi contenuti, ciò che essa sta ad indicare, dipendono dal contesto sociale ed infatti fu proprio la sociologia a darne la definizione odierna e a trattarla nello specifico. La sociologia della devianza ha sviluppato diversi modelli per comprendere questo fenomeno, focalizzandosi anche sugli atti commessi dai giovanissimi.

Lo scopo di questo lavoro è quello di tentare di far comprendere come alcune di queste teorie, come ad esempio le teorie dell'anomia e della tensione, delle opportunità differenziali e dell'etichettamento, possano essere d'aiuto all'educatore, troppo spesso non adeguatamente formato nemmeno in pedagogia della devianza. I "devianti", non per forza criminali, sono le persone con cui più spesso egli avrà a che fare. Si considera dunque utile ricordare l'importanza del contesto sociale dei minori e come questo sia una variabile essenziale da prendere in considerazione nel lavoro rieducativo.

Deviance is an intrinsic phenomenon of societies and has been dealt with in different ways throughout history. Its expression and definition depend on the social context and indeed it was sociology that gave it its contemporary definition and came to grips with it specifically. The sociology of deviance has developed different models for understanding the phenomenon, focusing also on acts committed by very young people. The aim of this work is to help illustrate that some of these theories, such as anomie and strain theories, the theory of differential opportunities and the labelling approach, can be beneficial for the educator, too often not adequately formed even in the pedagogy of deviance. Deviants are those with whom she will have to deal most. It is therefore perhaps useful to remember the importance of the social sparring among minors and how it is an essential variable to be taken into consideration in re- educational work.

Keywords

Deviance, Sociology of deviance, pedagogy of deviance, juvenile delinquency, re-education
Devianza, sociologia della devianza, pedagogia delle devianza, delinquenza giovanile, rieducazione

Introduction: the evolution of the concept of deviance

The concept of deviance has ancient roots even if its definitions have only emerged in the contemporary world. Deviance, understood as any act that goes against rules, norms, intentions of a particular social group and negatively evaluated by the majority of the members of this group, has always existed, of course, and every society has found its way to live with it. From the Sixteenth century all deviants, sick, criminals, insane, disabled, but also vagabonds and the marginalized in general, have been incorporated into the macro category of madness (Foucault, 1963). In fact, initially there was no distinction made between the types of deviance that each individual showed. The era when the madman was inspired by the gods had already passed long ago. Each individual who was not easily imbedded in social mechanisms, more and more oriented towards industrialization and what that entails, was labeled “mad” and the same methods reserved for lepers were used for the insane: imprisonment, social exclusion. From the Seventeenth century this model was integrated with a new approach, born to face the emergency of the plague epidemic that devastated Europe. Thanks to the developments in medical sciences, experts began to focus their attention on each individual and their symptoms, with the aim not only of excluding to protect society but also to cure. In the broad sense of madness, the dimensions of care incorporated also the aspect of education and was superimposed on that of danger. What is insane is deviant, what is deviant is dangerous (Foucault, ed. 2000).

This new approach led to a greater institutional differentiation of each “folly”: the first asylums, prisons, correctional institutes were created (XVII-XVIII centuries). Jurisprudence, attempting to do justice and to ascertain the responsibilities even of apparently incomprehensible acts, allied with psychiatry, called to establish what kind of deviance was faced in the individual case. And the psychiatrist, as a doctor, tried to cure and correct. And there the concept of “correction” is associated with those of care and punishment. Exclusion from society and punishment in fact, now also had the purpose of “straightening out”, or correcting those who had failed. These associations between very different concepts and practices have consequences for the present day. The person who presents deviant behavior, who is suffering from a mental illness, is destitute or a criminal, is perceived by society as dangerous. Crime itself is associated with illness and is surrounded by an aura of paternalism and irrecoverability (Foucault, 1975).

With the evolution of knowledge many disciplines have tried to explain deviants and their behaviors. In the Eighteenth century the notion of instinct was introduced, whereby each person could potentially become deviant or criminal and it became therefore necessary to observe individuals from an early age. It would take time for pedagogy to acquire the role it deserves. Those who dealt with the educational aspect of these subjects were, in fact, considered caregivers who had to accomplish the orders of other professionals (Barone, 2011).

In the Nineteenth century, psychoanalysis became prominent. Having its roots in medical and biological sciences, it still attributed great importance to the internal causes of the action, to the impulses and the ability to control them. A significant change of perspective was brought by social psychology, which was the first discipline to move the focus to the influence that society has on the identity’s formation and on one’s actions. Social context began to assume importance and institutions started to feel an educational weight on the formation of the individual, to the point that for some authors they were the fundamental starting point (see for example, Adler, 1927). Family, school, church, institutes: in each of these contexts there are educational figures, significant others in the developing subject’s life, who can dictate their choices. Pedagogy could no longer be considered a handmaid of philosophy or psychology but needed the construction of an autonomous knowledge, although enriched by other disciplines. However, if pedagogy and educational sciences have adopted some concepts deriving from philosophy and psychology, it is found a poor evaluation of a knowledge that could be extremely useful for its purposes: sociology. If, in fact, social psychology shifted its attention from the internal to the external of the individual, if psychiatry and jurisprudence had already tried to try to distinguish deviance and deviants, it was sociology that gave today’s definition of this concept and to introduce new

means, qualitative and quantitative, to study it (Williams & McShane, 2000). By introducing methods such as ethnography and statistics, the sociology of deviance, with particular reference to the Chicago school (20th century) faces the problem of different forms of deviance from a broader perspective, representing an indispensable model for its understanding. The study of the general social context of a subject and the possible ways in which this, according to a sociological perspective, can even cause deviant acts, could contribute to the drafting of an educational and re-educational plan comprising more variables and could therefore be more likely to succeed.

Clinical criminology, which in Italy sees its concrete application in jails, on prisoners who are very complex to understand and for whom it is more difficult to establish a better penalty, uses sociological theories as a basis, integrating them with those of psychological derivation. Therefore, the educator, who is the one who has the task of understanding the subject and deciding upon the methods that could be the best for an effective “pro-social” change, should not ignore these models.

1. Founding theories explaining juvenile delinquency and their possible pedagogical aspects

Experts in education who have chosen to deal mainly with the pedagogy of deviance do not omit overviews or treatises on some sociological theories aimed at explaining juvenile delinquency (Barone, 2011; Bertolini & Caronia, 2015). The topic, however, is treated marginally: it is not the main aspect that the educator must deal with and within a manual of deviance’s pedagogy there are many other peculiar aspects that need a more complete explanation.

However, it is believed that giving more space to these models of interpretation, in continuous evolution, in the appropriate venues, could also contribute to giving greater tangibility and application to pedagogical theories themselves. Of course, it would be highly desirable that every university course in science of education would provide future educators with a course on the pedagogy of deviance, since they will often deal with that, which is anything but taken for granted

Starting from the School of Chicago, the city where the first faculty of sociology was born, several authors focused their studies on various forms of juvenile delinquency. Here are chosen those that could more easily enrich the educator in the knowledge of the minor.

2. Anomie and strain theories

The concept of anomie was introduced by Durkheim. With this term, he wanted to indicate the emptying of the meaning and effectiveness of social rules, written or not. He sought, therefore, the treatment of social deregulation that takes place without any formal change. What changes is the perception of these rules by the people, who no longer know what to expect from each other and struggle to understand their place within society. Anomie is reinforced at a time of particular socio-economic crisis and widens the possibility of deviance phenomena.

Robert Merton (1964) took the concept and deepened it. He outlined what is meant by social values, distinguishing in them culturally recognized goals and the means to achieve them. In fact, it is under the eyes of all that society exalts some goals and some life choices rather than others: economic satisfaction, psychophysical well-being, work, study, family. Those who obtain these results are considered successful and are respected by their peers. However, not everyone has access to these goals nor the means to reach them. Especially in times of economic crisis, resulting in unemployment, migration and social frustrations, people hardly live a social rise and their own realization. Some of them decide to try to reach those goals by illicit means, modifying them radically or renouncing them. Specifically, Merton identifies several categories:

- Conformity: a strategy adopted by the majority of the population. Goals and means are accepted as limited and not questioned.

- Innovation: the most common type of deviance. The goals proposed by society are accepted, but not having the means, some people resort to illegitimate means to reach them.
- Ritualism: means are adopted, such as work and study, but goals are abandoned and perceived as unattainable.
- Renunciation: any attempt to reach both goals and means is abandoned. Individuals who make this choice are usually the marginalized of society: drug addicts, vagabonds and alcoholics.
- Rebellion: there is an alienation from the dominant parameters and a substitution of the means and goals with others.

It is necessary to underline that this theory, like many other originated by sociology, imply a pathologizing of society. Society is “sick” and causes deviant acts. From a psychological point of view, the motivation that drives the people to act takes on a fundamental role (Williams & McShane, 2000). They have goals that they feel as so important that they commit deviant acts.

This theory has been continuously revised and is widely used also in contemporary research. In fact it can also be used to explain many forms of juvenile delinquency and crime in general.

Usually a teenager does not have the means to get what society poses as values and can choose to commit some crimes to get it. This allows a link to another theory, developed by Agnew (1992), called General Strain Theory. Incorporating also a psychological variable, Agnew emphasizes that a positive goal in itself also consists in avoiding negative situations. Above all, boys might have the desire to get a diploma but can’t bear the stress of studying, to have a partner but are too afraid of rejection and relationships with their peers. This theory has been used also to explain the hikikomori phenomenon.

2.1 The culture of the gang by Albert Cohen and the Differential Opportunities

One of the sociologists who dealt most with the phenomenon of juvenile crime was Albert Cohen (1955). Leaning on the theories of anomie and social tension, the concept of subculture was taken into consideration too. He believed, in fact, that young people who were in similar socio-economic conditions and could therefore share the same type of access to the social goals and means, would constitute, easily, a real sub-culture. These adolescents, united by the same status perception and longing for social recognition, speak the same language within the same value system. They may also be able to create an alternative one. In fact, according to Cohen, minors perceive the discrepancy between their real chances of reaching a goal and those of their peers, who are in the most advantageous condition since school. This can lead, as seen above, to different degrees of frustration. It is precisely this frustration that can activate the same mechanisms mentioned by Merton but with some peculiarities, all typical of adolescent crime. In fact, Cohen noted that the youth gangs, had different characteristics from those of adult crime. These were groups with short-term, hedonistic and versatile goals. Versatile not only in the objectives but also in the methods with which to achieve them. This actualizes crimes of different types: from theft to aggression, from drug dealing to vandalism. It is of considerable interest to note that minors commit crimes even for mere demonstration purposes. Vandalism, physical and verbal aggression are often nothing but different ways of attracting attention and trying to assert a strong self-identity. An identity search, typical of the adolescent phase (Sartarelli, 2008). But again, the reasons that lead to such acts are to be traced back to society and to the goals that it places on everyone indiscriminately and regardless of the real differences between individuals. These teenagers can create real criminal subcultures to compensate for their frustration.

Cloward and Ohlin (1960) investigated these theories further, inserting other social variables that can explain the concrete type of deviant subculture. According to the authors, it is essential to check whether the society in which these phenomena are realized is organized or

disorganized. By organization we mean its functioning as a whole, the integration between the different aspects that compose it.

The kind of subculture presented by Cohen would be considered, for example, conflictual and typical of societies that are not well organized nor integrated. In this type of company, in fact, neither lawful nor illicit means function well and are regularized. Crime is not strongly structured and efficient precisely because it respects the surrounding situation. It is easier to note the commission of violent crimes and that strong control is not exercised even over juvenile crime, which in an integrated society would be exploited (and thereby controlled) by the adult one. It is in this model of society that young gangs can be allowed to be hedonistic, versatile, autonomous and aggressive. In a well regularized community, professional criminals have no interest in attracting attention or in wasting resources. Consequently, young people who choose to undertake that kind of professionalism have easier access to a sort of “apprenticeship” by which, if they are considered capable, they can “make a career”.

The values pursued are therefore presented as longer term and a sort of specialization is required. These youths are placed in a mechanism where no autonomy is possible. This is called a criminal subculture.

It will be seen in the concluding paragraph how these considerations can be useful in the development of educational and re-educational work.

2.2 The labelling approach and the social bond

The Labeling Theory, one of the most famous in the field of criminology and used also by other disciplines, was born in the social context of the movements of the 1960s and 1970s. In that era, as is known, an aversion towards some aspects of society, which was perceived as unjust and oppressive developed in several western states. Society was seen as sick and the main cause of people’s acting out and feelings.

Taking its bases from symbolic interactionism, labeling theory states that certain behaviors are defined and perceived as deviate by the system and / or by people. Individuals who show those behaviors are therefore labeled as deviant (Ponti & Merzagora, 2008).

The deviant assumes the role of scapegoat: negative emotions and blame are polarized on him and other deviant acts, such as those of the dominant classes or certain offenses (for example the economic ones), are not noticed. But how does it happen that certain behaviors are defined as deviant? The consolidation of deviance is a process that, according to the theorists of this model, takes place in several phases (Lemert, 1967): (a) some actions provoke a social reaction, which can be punitive, of marginalization or censorship; (b) this reaction is reinforced each time the action is repeated; (c) the greater the reaction, the more the perpetrator is stigmatized; (d) the subject stigmatized, affected by the label, shows an increasingly oppositional attitude, making it become a habit. The labeled individual tends to adapt herself to that role, integrating it into her identity. This is how a deviant ego is born.

Another distinction is then made between primary and secondary deviance. Primary deviance includes that set of deviant behaviors which, despite being such, do not elicit social reactions and are therefore not sanctioned. The implementation of these behaviors does not entail the application of a label on those who perform them nor do they change their sense of identity. This facilitates a natural return to conformity. With secondary deviance, on the other hand, there is a social response that leads to those particular fixation and identity-making effects mentioned above (Zanetti, 2018).

This theory is well suited to situations of deviance not deemed criminal, which is less serious, and most typical of young people. Several authors have found that the stigma deriving from formal penal sanctions (juvenile prison, correctional institutions) is related to a chronic deviant behavior (for example Lopes et al., 2012).

If society can be considered an essential variable for the perception of one’s own identity,

it is logical to ask whether it could also prevent deviant behaviors. This is precisely what the authors of social control theories wondered: why do people NOT offend?

The answer given by these sociologists is: control. The most important form of control is seen in socialization, understood as a process that teaches what to do and how to do it. Control in fact, can be understood as something internal, that is, self-control, or as something external, such as the stops that the social environment poses. People would choose to not commit a crime not for lack of motivation but because they would be able to contain deviant impulses or because they are inserted in a context capable of doing so. The theories believed to have more relevance in this context are Travis Hirschi's Theory of Social Control and the General Theory of Criminality (or self-control), proposed again by Hirschi in collaboration with Michael Gottfredson (1983).

The concept of social bond, deepened by Hirschi in his theory, is of great importance and is considered an essential variable for the individual's self-control. Behaviors reflect different degrees of morality and people, by internalizing social norms and pursuing recognition and approval, feel discouraged from implementing deviant behavior. The connection perceived with one's own social identity makes the subject value the rules and the opinions of her significant others (the most important people in the life of an individual). When this social bond fails, the chances of assuming attitudes and later deviant behavior increase.

Moving from a perspective that closely resembles the *homo homini lupus* by Thomas Hobbes, Hirschi (1969) presents a vision of the world in which human beings are moved only by selfish interests, in an attempt to obtain the greatest possible number of advantages. If society, the holder and distributor of shared values, fails to put enough limits on this craving, selfish behavior emerges. The stops, constituted precisely by social bonds, are characterized by four elements:

- Attachment: the strength of bonds to institutions and to significant others.
- Involvement: amount of time and energy that is invested in every behavior, compliant or not. The more a person is engaged in legitimate activities, the less she can think of illegitimate ones.
- Commitment: this is the investment that an individual has made to conform to society. The level of education pursued, the choice to undertake public activities, means having too much to lose if caught in deviant acts.
- Belief: to truly believe in the validity of social values and norms.

The likelihood of embarking on a deviant career increases with the weakening of every single element.

2.3 Contemporary theories: the entry of economic aspects

Before explaining how these theories could be used in educational work, it is necessary to report some aspects related to the contemporary world. Over the years, importance has been given to various variables in the explanation of deviant behavior, variables that are often repeated or correlated to each other.

These theories, although elaborated a long time ago, considering the speed with which knowledge evolves today, are always considered current and are enriched with new considerations. The most recent models of crime explanation are, for example, called "economic theories". The origin of deviant behavior is no longer sought only within or outside man in a continuous attempt, sometimes masked, to set deviance as a pathology whose etiology must be understood and treated.

Today, most of the offenses are seen as the result of a mere cost-benefit calculation. The writing of these theories dates back to the 70s - 80s but today more than ever they are used for the understanding and prevention of many crimes. For example, what is taken into considera-

tion are the necessary elements for a crime to take place: the absence of a capable guardian, a designated victim and a motivated offender. By focusing on any of these elements it is possible to work to understand an aspect of the crime and try to prevent it.

But the economic aspects that have invested some of the classical theories do not end with the cost-benefit calculation. Merton's Anomie Theory for example, has been revisited and expanded from this perspective and recently the so-called Theory of Institutional Anomaly (IAT) has been much discussed (Hövermann et al., 2015; Gross et al., 2018). IAT tries to explain cross-national variation in crime by considering the relative influence of different social institutions (e.g., the family, economy, polity) across societies. Each society, would be "characterized by a distinctive arrangement of social institutions that reflects a balancing of the sometimes competing claims and requisites of the different institutions, yielding a distinctive institutional balance of power" (Messner and Rosenfeld 2007, p. 74). It is argued that the economy, or a marketized mentality, dominates other social institutions, such that economic roles and functions (e.g., paid labor) crowd out non-economic ones (e.g., caregiving to family members). They posit, as Merton (1938) suggested, that this institutional arrangement is particularly criminogenic because the legitimate means for economic success are not equally distributed across the social structure, leading people to seek illegitimate means (e.g., crime) to fulfill monetary goals (Weid & Roche, 2016). Thus, if the economy dominates the institutional balance of power, the rates of serious crimes are highest. This is also because this mentality, if shared, means that some groups are perceived as useless because they are not profitable and that each group has prejudices about the other. The groups most affected by the prejudice, or labeling, of the market mentality are the weakest, from a socio-economic point of view. Some studies have shown that the prejudice deriving from this perception can also be a predictor of delinquency carried out by students in schools (Gross et al., 2018).

Theories related to the subculture have been extended as well, bringing out different issues, such as the dependence of youth gangs on the type of social context and the "co-offending" that is the problem linked to the commission of more crimes within a group and what this entails in several respects (McCord & Conway, 2018).

The explanation models related to labeling and social strain have been taken up to understand even the phenomenon of deviance at school and the way in which adults can act to interrupt the mechanisms that lead to an effective deviant career (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012; Zanetti, 2018).

It seems clear, therefore, that although these theories may appear dated, they are, in fact, constantly updated and modernized and can be used to understand some variables linked to criminogenesis and criminodynamics of certain crimes and, consequently, to the contextualization of minors by educators and to the drawing up of a more complete re-education plan.

3. The impact of sociological theories in writing re-educative plans: drawing up educational paths

As is known to those in the field of education and re-education, in close contact with the legal system, it is essential, initially, to observe the subject's behavior and their capacity to relate to others. Informative and other types of interviews are held to learn more about the individual and their history (Sartarelli, 2008). The observation should aim to identify the physiopsychic deficiencies that led to the deviant behavior, paraphrasing the Italian Penitentiary System. Unfortunately, we can still note the great preponderance of the medical or psychological approach, which tends to absorb all the other aspects of the individual and to consider deviance as a pathology. It can never be reiterated enough that the implementation of a deviant or criminal act is not a pathology and does not always have internal causes linked to some malfunction. Deviant phenomena, especially if involving group dynamics as is typical of youth, can also be understood and battled by a sociological approach. An example of this, is the adoption of sociological models to combat bullying (e.g. Morcom, 2015). Psychoanalysis is not always necessary to

understand and help an individual. Indeed, this approach alone can easily prove to be unsuccessful: everyone will always be inserted into a specific social context, certain dynamics and a specific culture, such that a treatment plan that aims exclusively at therapeutic help, interviews and educational activities can hardly work. Contact with educators in different contexts is often given temporally and once the stay in the community or in prison is over, the young person, will return to their world (Caracausi, 2016). What then, can the educator draw from these theories when he sets up work with minors? Take the theory of anomie; Useful work could be to help the person understand and accept pro-social values, without imposing them. Educators could try to explain to adolescents why some means and goals are better than others even if illicit ones often reach their aim earlier. It would also be useful to illustrate what the means actually can be as they often have no idea of the reality of the things they could have access to.

A well-structured team, in which various professional figures were present, could also work on self-esteem and resistance to frustration linked to status. Group dynamics and how these could affect them could also be illustrated, as well as what really constitutes a strong or weak person.

It is also important to understand the type of deviant subculture from which the minor comes and whether she is part of an integrated or disintegrated community. The distinction between a young man placed in a violent gang and one who's grown up in the context of organized crime is of great importance. Knowing that in some contexts, such as the mafia, the youth is most likely permeated with values opposed to the preponderant ones, precisely because of the family, can completely alter the concept of the rehabilitation plan. Educational work without the support of the minor's family makes it more complex and calls for a change in some variables.

In the case of a criminal subculture, the educator will know that there could easily already be educational figures in the child's life who aim to train him (see the interesting and in-depth work of Giorgi, 2019). They will know that the youth has easier and more immediate access to illicit means than others and that, more likely, he will exercise violence less and only as a means.

Instead, a boy who comes from a conflictual subculture will tend to use violence as a form of expression and a goal in itself and will have access to far fewer resources than a peer in organized crime. The peer group will be the one that has the most influence on him and will probably be the one of those with less means, aware of having less.

The Labeling Theory has been further extended and can teach how essential it is to try to avoid that the child assumes negative labels and therefore a negative identity is formed. The collaboration with teachers in schools could be useful (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012).

Finally, the social bond shows what is perhaps a more immediate fact: it is useful and fundamental that the minor is engaged in different activities, that they find a passion so that pursuing it, on one hand means less time for illegal activities and on the other hand allows them to perceive how the renunciation of it could make her suffer. Helping the youth to integrating into a positive social network and to surround themselves with people whose opinion matter to them can be an important deterrent.

Conclusion

The history of the concept of deviance allows us to understand how it is in continuous evolution and how it depends first of all on society and on the reaction that the majority of people have to certain acts. Deviance, understood primarily as a pathology, by psychiatry, jurisprudence and then by psychology, was in danger of being considered in the same way by sociology. The disease was no longer in the individual but in society. These are the presuppositions from which many of the theories that have been summarized here are born. Today, however, also thanks to the contribution of the economic perspective, the sociological models have been partially deprived of the aspect linked to pathology.

The human being is now interpreted through all the variables that are believed to compose it, starting from a philosophical and epistemological perspective. The educator, therefore, who

perhaps more than all the other professions must understand and also manage in practice the human beings she works with (Santerini, 1998), can find her knowledge enriched by the models presented by sociology. As it has been seen, although they are models that show deviance from a broader perspective, they can also be applied to the individual and increase the possibilities of a better growth path.

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