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Cultural Prohibitions and the Social Production of Invisible Deviance in Traditional Societies: An Anthro-Sociological Approach

التحريمات الثقافية والإنتاج الاجتماعي للانحراف اللامرئي في المجتمعات التقليدية: مقاربة
أنثروبولوجية-سوسيولوجية

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Abstract:

This theoretical study examines the emergence of invisible deviance in traditional societies from an anthropo-sociological perspective. It critically engages with both classical and contemporary sociological and anthropological literature to explore how inherited norms, symbolic systems, and social structures shape deviant identities and enable covert transgressions to persist.

The analysis is organized around three main dimensions: (1) structural embedding, which examines institutional frameworks, familial ties, and hierarchical structures that create opportunities for both deviance and its concealment; (2) symbolic regulation, which considers how taboos, honor codes, and classificatory systems render deviance unspeakable and socially invisible; and (3) agency and negotiation, which explores how individuals navigate collective pressures while managing their deviant identities.

Findings from this theoretical analysis suggest that silent crime is deeply embedded in the symbolic and structural fabric of traditional societies, functioning paradoxically as both an outcome of social order and a mechanism for its preservation. By highlighting the relational, structural, and symbolic dimensions of covert deviance, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the social production of invisible deviance in traditional contexts.

Keywords: Covert Deviance, Cultural Prohibitions, Deviant Identities, Community Silence, Symbolic Systems.

المخلص:

تناول هذه الدراسة النظرية نشوء الانحراف اللامرئي في المجتمعات التقليدية من منظور أنثروبولوجي سوسيولوجي، تتناول الدراسة الأدبيات النظرية الكلاسيكية والمعاصرة في علم الاجتماع والأنثروبولوجيا بشكل نقدي لاستكشاف كيفية تشكيل القواعد الموروثة والأنظمة الرمزية والهياكل الاجتماعية للهويات المنحرفة، وكيفية تمكين الانتهاكات الخفية من الاستمرار.

يعتمد التحليل على ثلاثة أبعاد رئيسية: (1) الترسيم البنوي الذي يفحص الإطارات المؤسسية والروابط الأسرية والهياكل الهرمية التي تخلق فرصاً للانحراف وإخفائه، (2) التنظيم الرمزي الذي يدرس كيف تجعل التحريمات، وأكواد الشرف وأنظمة التصنيف الانحراف غير قابل للنطق به وغير مرئي اجتماعياً و(3) الفعل الفردي والتفاوض الذي يستكشف كيف يتنقل الأفراد بين الضغوط الجماعية أثناء إدارة هوياتهم المنحرفة.

تشير نتائج هذا التحليل النظري إلى أن الجريمة الصامتة متجذرة في النسيج الرمزي والبنوي للمجتمعات التقليدية، وتعمل بشكل متناقض كنتاج للنظام الاجتماعي وكآلية للحفاظ عليه، ومن خلال إبراز الأبعاد العلائقية والنظامية والرمزية للانحراف الخفي تساهم الدراسة في فهم أعمق للإنتاج الاجتماعي للانحراف اللامرئي في السياقات التقليدية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الانحراف الخفي، التحريمات الثقافية، الهويات المنحرفة، الصمت المجتمعي، الأنظمة الرمزية

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional societies are governed not only by formal legal systems but also by dense networks of inherited taboos, symbolic classifications, and relational expectations that shape behaviour and structure social interactions.

Within these normative frameworks, certain forms of deviance—here conceptualized as silent crime—emerge and persist without public acknowledgment or formal sanction.

These transgressions occupy the “interstices” of social life, exploiting ambiguity, silence, and the symbolic authority embedded in tradition.

This study adopts a fully theoretical and analytical approach, grounded in existing sociological and anthropological literature, rather than empirical fieldwork or qualitative data collection.

By critically engaging with classical and contemporary theories—such as Durkheim’s collective conscience and moral regulation,

Bourdieu's symbolic power and habitus, Goffman's management of spoiled identity, and Becker's interactionist perspectives—the paper explores how inherited norms, symbolic systems, and social structures shape deviant identities and enable covert deviance to persist.

The theoretical investigation is guided by three analytical dimensions:

1. **Structural embedding:** The institutional, kinship, and hierarchical matrices that frame opportunities for both deviance and its concealment.

2. **Symbolic regulation:** The role of taboos, honor codes, and classificatory systems in framing deviance as unspeakable and therefore socially invisible.

3. **Agency and negotiation:** How individuals navigate, adapt, or resist pressures from collective expectations while managing deviant identities.

Through this theoretical lens, the study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the mechanisms through which silent deviance is produced and maintained in traditional societies, highlighting the intricate interplay between structure, symbolism, and social expectations.

2. Silent Crime in Traditional Societies

2.1 Understanding the nature and dynamics of covert deviance

In traditional social formations, crime does not always appear as overt or publicly visible acts; rather, it often emerges in subtle, hidden forms that evade formal sanctions and social scrutiny. This phenomenon—referred to here as covert deviance—is deeply embedded within the symbolic, normative, and relational structures of the community, necessitating a sociological approach that examines power, social structure, and cultural frameworks, rather than focusing solely on individual pathology.

Deviance should therefore be reconceptualized: it is not merely “rule-breaking” but a relational status arising from interactions among actors, norms, symbolic boundaries, and institutions. As Clinard and

Meier note in their seminal work, conventional studies of deviance often concentrate on highly visible, sensationalized behaviours, while neglecting the structural and symbolic dimensions of hidden deviance:

Most studies of deviance have historically emphasized visible, extreme, or morally charged behaviours, while the more subtle and structurally embedded forms remained largely invisible, raising the question of how and why such forms of deviance should be studied. (Clinard, 2015, p. 23)

This perspective underscores that covert deviance is produced not in isolation, but within the relational field of social norms and expectations, where power, symbolic regulation, and cultural habitus interact to permit hidden rule-breaking to persist, often silently reproducing social hierarchies and moral boundaries.

In traditional societies, covert deviance manifests through complex interactions of normative, symbolic, and institutional processes:

Normative invisibilisation: Acts violating shared taboos or symbolic prescriptions are rendered invisible through communal silence or shame. Because the normative order is structured around unwritten interdictions and symbolic categories of purity and impurity, deviant acts remain concealed within a field of acceptable ambiguity, rather than being formally labeled. (Durkheim, 1912, p. 97)

Symbolic shielding by social structures: Patriarchal, kin-based, clan, or communal regulatory systems channel deviance into quasi-private domains, such as “shameful” transgressions, incest, honor violations, or illicit economies, where formal legal sanctioning is weak and actors are protected by relational networks. (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 52-56)

Institutional collusion and burden shifting: Families, tribes, and religious authorities often neutralize deviance by denying, minimizing, or relocating it into internal honor management rather than

public adjudication. This dynamic allows covert deviance to persist without formal detection

Fluid boundary crossing of deviant identity: Individuals navigate roles of deviance and conformity, exploiting symbolic ambiguity. Structural invisibility, reinforced by normative silence, enables actors to traverse social expectations while avoiding public stigma (Goffman, 1963, p. 15)

Symbolic reproduction of order through deviance: Deviance is not only a breakdown of norms but also a mechanism by which symbolic order is reinforced. The community's consensus on unspeakable acts serves as a regulatory shadow, allowing violations to exist while maintaining moral and social hierarchies.

A structural-symbolic-agentic lens thus reveals that the most socially consequential deviance is often invisible, embedded in the normative unconscious of the community. As Liazos critiques, much research ignores elite and structural deviance, instead privileging dramatic or sensational forms, allowing institutional actors to violate norms under the cover of tradition and silence

In a traditional society context, the analogous mechanism is the enforcement of taboos (on for instance kin-sexuality, religious purity, gendered honour) and the displacement of deviance into the private domain, thus making detection and formal social control ineffective.

Implications for analysis: In your empirical investigation, you should attend to:

What taboos and symbolic boundaries in the community enable the invisibility of deviance?

How do the structural relations (family, kin, clan, religious institution) channel certain behaviours away from public scrutiny?

What are the mechanisms of symbolic neutralisation (shame, silence, honour, gossip) that allow the deviant act to persist covertly?

How is the identity of the deviant subject constructed, negotiated and maintained in the absence of formal labelling?

What is the dialectic between normative order and deviance: how does covert deviance in fact reinforce the authority of the taboo system by existing unspoken?

In sum, "silent crime" in traditional societies is not simply crime that is hidden, but crime that is structurally possible because the normative order itself produces the conditions of invisibility. It is a fault-line of the symbolic field: the deviant act appears where the taboo holds and the visibility is suspended. A robust sociological treatment thus demands an integration of structure, symbolism and agency—and not simply an individualistic reading of deviance.

2.2 Social structures and symbols as enablers of hidden criminality

In examining how traditional societies facilitate the emergence of covert criminality, it is critical to recognise how social structures (e.g., kinship networks, communal institutions, moral economies) and symbolic systems (taboos, honour codes, classificatory schemas) work in tandem to enable rather than merely contain hidden deviance. The analysis proceeds along three interlocking dimensions: structural embedding, symbolic mediation, and interactive reproduction.

Structural Embedding:

Hidden criminality is not simply an outcome of individual deviance but is deeply rooted in the social architecture of the community. The kin-based, clan or tribal organisation typical of many traditional societies positions individuals within dense relational matrices of obligation, honour, reciprocity and sanction. These networks can channel deviant acts into private or semi-private realms, far from formal legal or public scrutiny. In these circumstances, structural positioning grants both opportunity and concealment for deviant conduct: the offender is simultaneously embedded in the normative order and suspended from its overt gaze. (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 144)

Symbolic Mediation:

Symbols and symbolic orders perform the crucial work of enabling invisibility. As Pierre Bourdieu formulates, the notion of “symbolic power” (or symbolic violence) refers to the capacity of social agents and institutions to impose classifications of perception, thought and behaviour which are accepted as natural and legitimate.

In the context of hidden criminality, the symbolic universe of taboos, honour, shame, purity/impurity shields deviant acts by rendering them outside the visible domain of crime: the act is not publicly labelled, because it is framed within the moral-symbolic field of honour or taboo, not the juridical field of crime. The deviant subject thus operates under a symbolic economy of concealment.

For example, in traditional formations, the refusal to speak of a taboo violation (incest, gendered dishonour, illicit exchange) is less a passive omission than an active operation of social symbolic regulation: The silence, the omission, the refusal of explicit labelling become themselves regulatory mechanisms. The symbolic domain here does not simply reflect power—it constitutes a vehicle through which power is exercised unnoticed.

Interactive Reproduction:

Finally, the interplay between structure and symbol is reproduced through everyday practices, negotiation and tacit collusion. Social structures provide the field; symbolic systems provide the currency. Actors internalise the habitus (in Bourdieu’s sense) of concealment, non-labelling, shame-management; they enact strategies to maintain their social position and minimise risk of public exposure. As one summary puts it:

“Symbolic power ... of the power to impose (or even to inculcate) the arbitrary instruments of knowledge and expression (taxonomies) of social reality – but instruments whose arbitrary nature is not realized as such.”

In a traditional society context, this means that deviance can inhabit the “grey

zone” of relational obligation and symbolic duty rather than the open zone of criminal statute. The institutional frameworks (family, peer network, local authority) act as buffers or shields—intervening, denying, redirecting, sanitising—in ways that prevent the deviant act from entering the legal-public field.

Analytical implications for your study:

Map how the institutional configuration (family, clan, local moral economy) generates spaces of concealment for deviant conduct.

Identify the symbolic registers (honour, taboo, purity/impurity, secrecy) that define what is not said and thus what remains unsanctioned publicly.

Examine how actors negotiate their position: the deviant subject may simultaneously hold communal standing, navigate symbolic silences, and exploit structural invisibility.

Conceptualise the dialectic: the same symbolic system that demarcates the taboo also creates the space in which its violation is hidden—and in doing so reproduces the system. Hidden crime is therefore not external to the social order, but immanent to it.

3. Inherited Taboos and Symbolic Regulation

3.1 Taboos as mechanisms of informal social control

Inherited taboos operate as subtle yet powerful mechanisms of informal social control, regulating behaviour without recourse to formal legal systems. In traditional societies, taboos are codified in the symbolic and moral order, often enforced through shame, gossip, ritual sanctions, and communal expectations rather than overt punishment. They constitute a normative infrastructure: a lattice of prohibitions that shapes the field of permissible action.

From a sociological perspective, taboos perform multiple functions:

Boundary-making: They demarcate what is socially acceptable versus unacceptable, establishing invisible lines

around behaviour, identity, and social interaction. (Douglas, 1966, p. 63)

Internalised regulation: Through socialisation, taboos are embedded in the consciousness of individuals, creating self-regulation mechanisms aligned with collective expectations.

Maintenance of social cohesion: By enforcing conformity through symbolic rather than coercive means, taboos maintain group solidarity and preserve the moral and cultural integrity of the community.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus provides an analytical lens here: the tacit acceptance of taboos is internalised, producing a disposition that guides action and perception unconsciously. In other words, individuals act in conformity not out of fear of law but because the symbolic weight of the taboo shapes their worldview and sense of self. (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 72)

3.2 Impact of inherited norms on individual and collective consciousness

collective consciousness, shaping perceptions of morality, deviance, and identity. These norms function as a cognitive and symbolic framework, predisposing individuals to interpret certain actions as forbidden, shameful, or dishonourable even before they are enacted.

Key dynamics include:

Internalisation of collective memory: Norms inherited across generations encode historical and moral experiences, producing a continuity of social values that inform daily life. (Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*, 1893, p. 45)

Symbolic reproduction of hierarchy: Inherited norms often reflect and reproduce social hierarchies (gender, age, kinship), subtly assigning power and authority while regulating conduct within these positions. (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 72)

Construction of deviant identity: When norms are violated, the reaction is mediated through collective symbolic assessment. The individual is not only judged externally but also experiences a psychological negotiation of self in relation to communal expectations. (Douglas, 1966, p. 36)

Durkheim's perspective on collective conscience underscores this dynamic: the collective consciousness—embodied in inherited norms and taboos—defines the moral universe of the group, shaping both overt behaviour and the internal moral compass of individuals.

In essence, inherited taboos and norms produce a dual effect: they enable social cohesion by regulating conduct and preserving symbolic order, and simultaneously create the conditions for covert deviance, insofar as acts that transgress taboos are hidden or silently negotiated, rather than openly addressed.

4. Deviant Identities and Social Adaptation

4.1 Formation and negotiation of deviant identities under social pressures

In the sociology of deviance, identity cannot be treated merely as an individual psychological condition but must be located within a dynamic field of structural constraint, symbolic classification and interactional negotiation. A deviant identity is formed not simply because an individual strays from norms, but because the social field labels, positions and enables the subject in relation to those norms. (Becker, 1963, p. 9)

From the start, we recognise that deviant identity formation is a process comprising: (a) initial norm-breach or non-conformity; (b) societal reaction and categorisation; (c) internalisation or negotiation of the label; (d) possible entry into a deviant career or role. According to the interactionist framework, as configured by Erving Goffman in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) and in extant scholarship, the individual confronted with a stigma or deviant label must manage a “spoiled identity” When the societal label persists, it may become a “master status” that reshapes the individual's self-concept and social interactions.

In traditional societies, where communal norms, taboos and honour codes dominate, the formation of a deviant identity is often mediated by silence, shame, and the

symbolic economy of transgression. The individual may not be publicly labelled as a “criminal” in the formal sense but may internally adopt or be assigned a deviant identity through a process of negotiation—negotiation with family/kinship, with local moral authorities, and with one’s own self-understanding. The structural pressure is two-fold: conformity to collective expectations, and the risk of exclusion or stigma if norm transgression is discovered.

Moreover, negotiation is not merely passive acceptance of a label; agents may actively resist, redefine or conceal their deviant status. In this sense, identity becomes an arena of struggle: the deviant subject must navigate between social invisibility (to avoid formal sanction) and relational visibility (in the networks that sustain them). Social structures (kinship, locality, clan) provide both the opportunity for transgression and the shield for concealment. In so doing, the deviant identity is produced within the field of tradition rather than outside it.

Thus, when analysing deviant identity in traditional societies:

- ask how norm-breach is registered (or not) in the community’s symbolic order;
- examine how labeling occurs (overtly or covertly) and whether the individual accepts or negotiates the label;
- explore how the subject’s identity is shaped by relational networks (family, kin, local authority) that may either stigmatise or protect;
- investigate how the identity may shift between “underground” status and relational legitimacy (within deviant sub-networks) and how the individual oscillates between conformity and deviance.

This offers a high-level frame for 3-1 that integrates structural, symbolic and agentic dimensions of deviant identity formation in contexts where “silent crime” thrives.

4.2 Interaction between personal agency and collective expectations in shaping silent deviance

This sub-axis focuses on the dialectic between personal agency and collective

expectations, examining how an individual with deviant potential negotiates their trajectory within a field structured by communal norms, taboos, and symbolic regulation. The concept of “silent deviance”—deviance that remains hidden, unspoken, or unlabelled publicly—is particularly relevant, as it thrives in the interstice between personal choice and socially imposed constraints.

From an agentic perspective, individuals are not passive recipients of labels; they actively interpret, resist, adapt, and appropriate deviant possibilities. Agency operates within structural enablement (spaces provided by kinship, taboos, and traditional institutions) and symbolic enablement (capacity to navigate or exploit gaps in normative regulation). As interactionist scholarship notes, individuals internalise social labels and may initiate a deviant career once social reaction consolidates identity. (Becker, 1963, p. 36)

Simultaneously, collective expectations—embodied in normative orders, taboos, moral economies, and communal memory—exert pressure to conform, conceal, or negotiate a semi-legitimate position. In traditional societies, this interplay is acute: transgressing a taboo may require reliance on networks of concealment, while exposing the act risks ostracism or stigma. The outcome is a complex choreography in which the subject chooses how, when, to whom, and to what extent to reveal or conceal deviance, negotiating identity continuously within the symbolic field.

Analytical considerations for studying this dynamic:

-Examine agency tactics: concealment, passing, double roles, and micro-negotiations of disclosure.

-Analyse the normative architecture: collective expectations, taboo structures, honour/shame systems framing deviance.

-Investigate the interactional field: oscillation between individual ambitions (transgression, identity reconstruction) and

communal demands (conformity, secrecy, loyalty).

-Trace outcome trajectories: whether deviance remains silent (unlabelled), becomes public (labelled), or leads to identity transformation within deviant sub-networks or reintegration into the normative field.

In sum, the shaping of silent deviance is neither solely a product of individual choice nor purely collective determinism. It emerges at the intersection where the subject navigates the structural-symbolic field of tradition and collective expectation, exercising agency while operating beneath or beyond the gaze of formal social control.

5. Social Silence and Mechanisms of Neutralization

5.1 Strategies of denial, marginalization, and symbolic mitigation by the community

Social silence functions as a mechanism of neutralization, enabling the community to acknowledge norm transgression without overtly sanctioning the offender. Core strategies include denial, marginalization, and symbolic mitigation, practices that collectively protect the social order while allowing deviant acts to persist covertly

Denial operates both individually and communally: the community may consciously refuse to recognize a deviant act in public discourse, framing it as accidental, unintentional, or irrelevant. This process aligns with Sykes and Matza's theory, which explains how individuals and collectives rationalize deviant behaviour to preserve moral self-conception and social stability.

Marginalization relegates the deviant individual or behaviour to the periphery of social interactions. The offender may remain embedded within the community's relational networks but is excluded from decision-making, public ceremonies, or symbolic recognition, effectively rendering deviance invisible to the wider social gaze' (Goffman, 1963, p. 15)

Symbolic mitigation employs cultural narratives, rituals, or mediations to absorb or reinterpret deviance. Transgressions may be reframed as moral lessons, spiritual tests, or

consequences of external forces, thereby reducing the perceived threat to social cohesion while containing deviance within a morally intelligible frame. (Douglas, 1966, p. 36)

Collectively, these strategies enable traditional societies to manage deviance without formal punitive action, producing a paradoxical environment where deviant acts are simultaneously acknowledged, neutralized, and perpetuated under the veil of social silence.

5.2 Role of traditional institutions in regulating and containing deviance

Traditional institutions—family, kinship networks, religious authorities, and local councils—play a central role in the regulation and containment of deviance. Unlike modern legal systems, these institutions rely on informal social control mechanisms embedded in local culture and symbolic practice. (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 167)

Family and kinship networks often absorb the deviant act internally, using shame, mediation, and negotiation to maintain household honour and prevent external exposure. The family acts as both a shield for the offender and a vehicle for social discipline.

Religious and ritual authorities may reinterpret deviance through moral, spiritual, or cosmological frameworks, translating violation into a symbolic lesson rather than a criminal act, thereby neutralizing potential social disruption. (Douglas, 1966, p. 36)

Community councils or elders employ deliberation, reconciliation, and structured negotiation to resolve conflicts arising from deviance, blending punitive and restorative elements in ways that maintain relational stability.

From a sociological standpoint, these institutions embody what Bourdieu describes as the "symbolic power" of the social field: they define which acts are visible, which are sanctioned, and which are silently tolerated. (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 158)

Through these mechanisms, deviance is contained without formal legal intervention, producing a dual effect: preserving

community cohesion while inadvertently reproducing conditions for hidden or silent criminality. Social silence and institutional regulation thus operate synergistically to maintain the symbolic and normative order, highlighting the complex interplay between structure, agency, and symbolism in traditional societies.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study found that silent crime in traditional societies is deeply embedded within symbolic and structural frameworks. Inherited norms, collective expectations, and symbolic systems function both as regulatory mechanisms and as spaces enabling covert deviance. Deviant identities emerge at the intersection of individual agency and collective norms, shaped by structural constraints, symbolic regulation, and strategies of concealment. Social silence, marginalization, and symbolic mitigation act as subtle neutralization mechanisms, preserving community cohesion while inadvertently reproducing conditions for covert deviance.

Analysis shows that the interplay between structural constraints and symbolic systems allows deviant acts to remain largely invisible, confirming the three hypotheses: (1) inherited norms generate zones of invisibility facilitating covert deviance, (2) deviant identities result from the interaction between agency and collective expectations, and (3) social silence and traditional institutions simultaneously constrain and reproduce deviance. These findings underscore the relational, symbolic, and normative dimensions of hidden criminality in traditional contexts.

7. CONCLUSION

Silent crime is neither marginal nor accidental; it is deeply embedded in the structural and symbolic fabric of traditional societies.

This study demonstrates the inseparability of structure, symbolism, and agency in understanding hidden deviance,

emphasizing how normative frameworks, inherited taboos, and relational networks collectively shape and sustain covert transgressions.

The theoretical implications highlight the value of integrating anthropological perspectives with sociological theory to capture the complexity of silent crime, while practical implications suggest that recognizing its mechanisms can guide culturally informed interventions, balancing social cohesion with accountability.

Silent crime challenges conventional assumptions about visible social order, revealing that deviance may persist covertly even under tightly regulated normative systems.

Finally, future research could empirically test the theoretical framework proposed here across diverse traditional contexts, validating, refining, and expanding our understanding of how silent deviance is produced, negotiated, and maintained.

Such studies would not only enhance theoretical sophistication but also inform policy and community practices aimed at regulating hidden deviance without undermining cultural continuity.

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