

# HOW SOCIAL DEVIANCE IS REPRESENTED AND CONTROLLED BY MASS MEDIA: A FIELD STUDY ON CHILDREN'S ANIMATED MOVIES<sup>1</sup>

## SOSYAL SAPKINLIĞIN MEDYADAKİ SUNUMU VE KONTROLÜ: ÇİZGİ FİMLER ÜZERİNE BİR ALAN ÇALIŞMASI

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**Abstract:** *The term social deviance refers to norm violations which cause negative reactions; it is a deviation from the rules of the society. Throughout history, deviants, or in other words norm violators have been labeled, stigmatized, imprisoned, and excluded. They were always subjected to a sort of control, although the means and the mechanisms of this control have changed over time. These means and mechanisms lead us to the term social control, whose primary purpose is to control deviance. This study focuses on how cartoons or animated movies, whose primary target audience is children, engages in this social control or represent social deviance, and how children are affected by the messages they are exposed to. In order to analyze these problems, a case study which consists of a focus group study with nine children at the age of six, who have seen a selected sample movie, has been conducted. After the children had seen the movie, they were asked questions whose purpose was to understand what messages they received from the story about deviance, norms and social control, and how they interpreted those messages. The responses indicate that mass media functions as an agent of social control, and that it is an effective tool to make individuals internalize the norms of the society.*

**Keywords:** *Social deviance, social control, mass media, cartoons, media effects*

**Öz:** *Sosyal sapkınlık kavramı, negatif tepkiler doğuran norm ihlalleri anlamına gelir ve toplumun normlarından sapmayı ifade eder. Sapkınlar, başka bir deyişle normları ihlal edenler, tarih boyunca etiketlenmiş, damgalanmış, hapsedilmiş ve dışlanmışlardır. Söz konusu bireyler, her zaman bir tür kontrole maruz kalmıştır; fakat bu kontrolün yöntemi ve mekanizmaları, zaman içerisinde değişmiştir. Bu yöntemler ve mekanizmalar, bizi, temel amacı sapkınlığı kontrol etmek olan sosyal kontrol kavramına götürür. Bu çalışma, ana hedefi çocuklar olan çizgi filmlerin söz konusu sosyal kontrole nasıl dahil olduğu, sosyal sapkınlığı nasıl temsil ettiği ve çocukların bu mesajlardan nasıl etkilendiği üzerinde durmuştur. Bu amaçla, aynı anaokuluna giden 6 yaşındaki 9 çocuğa seçilen örnek bir çizgi film izletilerek bir odak grubu çalışması yapılmıştır. Çocuklar filmi izledikten sonra, filmin hikayesinden sapkınlık, normlar ve sosyal kontrol hakkında nasıl mesajlar aldıklarını ve bu mesajları nasıl yorumladıklarını anlamak için çocuklara sorular sorulmuştur. Çocukların yanıtları, kitle medyasının bir sosyal kontrol aktörü olarak işlev gördüğünü ve bireylerin toplumun normlarını içselleştirmesi için etkili bir araç olduğunu destekler niteliktedir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Sosyal sapkınlık, sosyal kontrol, kitle medyası, çizgi filmler, medya etkileri*

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## 1. THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL DEVIANCE

“All social groups make rules and attempt, at some times and under some circumstances, to enforce them. Social rules define situations and the kinds of behavior appropriate to them, specifying some actions as 'right' and forbidding others as 'wrong'. When a rule is enforced, the person who is supposed to have broken it may be seen as a special kind of person, one cannot be trusted to live by the rules agreed on by the group. He is regarded as an outsider” (Becker, 1963: 1).

These outsiders, who are the main subject of this study are called *deviants*, in other words norm violators, rule breakers, or simply people who are different from others. And if we are going to define deviants as norm violators, first we have to define what norm is:

A norm is a certain kind of behavior that is expected from a member of a society or a group. They are ideal standards which tell people what is acceptable and what is not in a particular society. Norm conforming behavior and the person who behaves alongside with norms is accepted and approved while norm violating behavior and norm violators are disapproved, excluded, punished and imprisoned (Cockerham, 1995: 93).

According to Erich Goode (2005: 10) “*sociologists refer to behavior, beliefs, or characteristics that violate or depart or “deviate” from a basic norm and that are likely to generate negative reactions in persons who observe or hear about that norm violation as 'social deviance' or simply 'deviance'.*”

In this definition the words “*likely to generate negative reactions*” are very important because it clarifies that sociologically “*behavior is not deviant itself; it only becomes deviant when it is seen and reacted to in a society or in a particular social context*” (Goode, 2005: 18).

Similarly, Becker (1963: 9) says that “*deviance is not a quality of the act*”, it is constituted by social groups via creating rules and applying them to particular people. Goode (2005: 4) also says that without a negative reaction there will not be such thing as deviance.

### 1.1. Theories of Deviance

#### 1.1.1. Anomie or Strain Theory

The concept of anomie is generally associated with Emile Durkheim and Robert King Merton. According to Durkheim (2002: 275-290), when there is a sudden change in a given society, for example in times of economic depression, there is also a change in society's balance and a disorder caused by that change. This disorder, this subversion in society's norms is called anomie by Durkheim. Sudden changes distort the order, the operations and the relationships within the society, and until they are reconstructed the process is called anomie and in this process the impact of traditional rules is weakened.

While Durkheim defined anomie as “*relative normlessness in a group or a society*”, (Merton, 1968: 215) according to Merton, it is a breakdown in cultural structure, which occurs especially when there is a great excursion between culturally defined norms and goals, and socially constructed capacities of individuals to conform these norms and goals (Merton, 1968: 216).

While Durkheim believes that the order of the society prevents people from

becoming deviant, Merton suggests the thing which creates pressure on individuals and thus leads them to deviant behavior is the order of the society itself, in other words the norms which became so tight (Goode, 2005: 60-61).

According to Merton “*it is the gap or lack of congruence between the cultural order (that says we must become materially successful) and the social and economic order (which won't give us what we have been socialized to want and expect) that causes deviant behavior*” (Goode, 2005: 61).

### 1.1.2. Social Control Theory

According to social control theory, the important question is not 'why they do it?', it is 'why they don't do it?'. Social control theory does not see deviant act as a problematic behavior (Hirschi, 2002: 34).

Control theory argues that, not the norm violating behavior but the norm conforming behavior should be analyzed. In other words, the thing that should be studied is how social control makes people commit norm conforming acts. Social control theory says: “*if left to our own devices, all of us would deviate from the rules of the society*” (Goode, 2005: 70-71).

While answering the question why people commit norm conforming acts, control theory suggests different social control mechanisms which socialize people according to norms and prevent them from becoming deviants (Svensson, 2003: 302). Family, school, teachers, peers, religion, mass media are all important socialization agents.

Control theory argues that people confirm the norms according to the extent of their ties to the society. Thus, theory expects people who have less things to risk will commit more deviant acts than people who have much more things to risk. For example, married compared to unmarried, employed compared to unemployed or university students compared to their peers who are not students are less likely to commit deviant acts. Theory doesn't say that people who have much to risk will not deviate from norms, it says that it is less likely compared to people who don't (Goode, 2005: 71).

### 1.1.3. Functionalism

According to Howard Becker, functionalism sees the society as an organism. The things which distort the order or the balance of the society - are regarded as deviant. According to functionalism, deviant behavior is the behavior that threatens the sustainability of the society (Becker, 1963: 7).

Functionalism suggests that society prohibits the acts which harm itself and encourages the acts which it benefits and thus maintain itself and its order. The acts that are prohibited are generally the ones which “*generate hostility, discord and conflict and hence their enactment will thereby make the society more unstable and less viable*” (Goode, 2005: 83-84).

According to Durkheim, deviant behavior can be distinguished from others as it is punished and condemned. Durkheim suggests that punishment is not because of the harm the act causes. A behavior is punished because it violates some specific rules (Jones, 1981: 1012).

Also, according to Durkheim, a crime-free society is impossible: “*even in a society of saints, the slightest transgression will generate punishment and condemnation*”. Durkheim argues that crime is not only unavoidable, but it is also beneficial for the society. First, the punishment of a given crime firms up society's rules, norms and moral values (Goode, 2005: 83). When a highly respected norm is violated, the other members of the community come together and express their outrage. This situation brings people together to a common sense of morality and tightens bonds of solidarity (Erikson, 2002: 31). Second, crime is a base, a sign of social change and the future values of society. Crime prevents society from becoming congeal and immutable (Goode, 2005: 83).

#### 1.1.4. Labeling Theory

In his book *Outsiders*, Howard S. Becker (1963: 31-33) argues that a person whose deviant act is learned by society and who is labeled as deviant has a new identity. This individual is now has a difference from society and has a new status. In general, members of the society think that this person will continue committing deviant acts. If a given person violates a norm, it is anticipated that he or she will violate other norms too. This person is proved to be a rule breaker.

From the moment labeling begins, this person will be perceived as deviant and thus will be led to be more deviant. “*Rejected by normals, the person may be required to find a specific deviant subculture that can accommodate the deviance*” (Cockerham, 1995: 114). Hence, it can be said that if labeling or stigmatizing occurs once, it will be permanent.

Similarly, Erving Goffman, in his book *Stigma*, (1990: 31-31) says that a stigmatized person feels lonely around normal people and believes that nobody understands his or her feelings. When that person is around a group consisting of stigmatized individuals, he or she will start feeling as *normal* because people around him or her are understanding and has been in similar situations.

According to Becker (1963: 34), when a person is labeled, excluded from the traditional groups and led to deviant groups, there comes the concept of *self-fulfilling prophecy*. This term suggests that labeling increases the likelihood of a person to commit deviant acts in the future.

Becker also argues that in some situations, a person who violates the norms and who is harmed from that violation are important factors for that behavior to be regarded as deviant or not (Becker, 1963: 9-12). “*A lower class delinquent male may be more likely to be arrested, convicted and sentenced than an upper or middle-class delinquent male committing the same offense*” (Cockerham, 1995: 115).

## 2. SOCIAL CONTROL

According to Goode (2005: 41) the concept of social control consists of defining and responding to deviance; it is the effort that is shown or the methods that are applied by members of a given society to ensure conformity to norms.

Similarly, Chriss defines social control as “*all the resources available by which members of society attempt to assure the norm-conforming behavior of others*” (Chriss, 2008: 41).

According to Cohen (1966) also, social control is the process that aims to prevent deviance. Cohen adds that norms and the cultural structure not only define what deviance is, but also how to react to deviance (Cohen, 1966: 39).

Cohen (1966: 40) suggests that there is a functional division of roles within a society to generate social control. Roles such as parents, elder siblings, friends, neighbors are responsible for social control in relatively simple societies. In more complex societies however, there are specialized control actors such as police, courts, prisons, inspectors and investigators.

### **2.1. Internal Control**

Internal control or internalization, prevents people from deviating by socializing them. The process of socialization is teaching and inculcating individuals' norms, values, beliefs and rules (Chriss, 2008: 2). This process uses agents such as family, peers, friends, schools and education, religion, and mass media.

According to Goode (2005: 43), internal control operates through socialization which is *“learning and adopting the norms of the society or a particular group or collectivity within the society”*. Goode suggests that in order to say the internalization is successful, the individual has to reject violating the norm or feel guilty when he or she violates it. Parsons (1965: 211-212) on the other hand argues that socialization operates via the system of reward and punishment.

Socialization is the process which makes people control themselves even when they are not watched by others. According to Chriss:

*“No society can properly be maintained merely by way of external constraints such as those embodied in the legal system and its means of sanctioning. The internalization of the moral code of a group by way of socialization is typically far better mechanism for ensuring social control”* (Chriss, 2008: 20).

### **2.2. Informal Social Control**

*“Informal social control takes place in interpersonal interaction between and among people who are acting on their own, in an unofficial capacity”* (Goode, 2005: 44).

Most of individuals seek approval of the other people, especially the ones they care about. They value other people's thoughts of themselves. That is why; a particular person's behavior is affected by approval or disapproval of others. This person either avoids the disapproved act or hides it from others. Informal social control reminds people that their behavior annoys or pleases others by reactions such as *“a frown or a smile, criticism or praise, shunning or being warm”* (Goode, 2005: 44).

*“Informal social control consists of all those mechanisms and practices of ordinary, everyday life whereby group pressures to conform”* (Chriss, 2008: 44).

### **2.3. Formal Social Control**

Informal control is not always enough due to the fact that people can ignore others' disapproval. In situations like this, formal control steps in. Formal social control uses justice system via legal institutions such as police and courts to lead people conform norms or in this sense, law (Goode, 2005: 44).

Justice system, which is the base of formal social control, consists of three sub-systems which have different functions to generate control and which work cooperatively. These systems are police, law and the courts, and corrections. *“The police detain suspects and make arrests, the court pass judgment on whether or not a person actually committed the crime or crimes with which he or she is being charged, and the corrections system punishes those convicted of crimes in criminal courts”* (Chriss, 2008: 87).

Ross (1918: 106-107) on the other hand, defines the law as *“the most specialized and highly finished engine of control”*. Ross argues that the law has two functions in regard of the disturbers. First, they aim to avoid further harm from -those disturbers and second, they aim to guard the society against would-be offenders.

Thus, there are two important factors in defining the - severity of a punishment. First the penalties should be harsh enough to discourage individuals with a tendency of deviance from the norms or break the rules; but also they should not be *“so harsh as to outrage the natural sentiments of fair play and humanity”* and *‘they must not outrun the approval of the community’* (Ross, 1918: 109).

#### **2.4. Medical Control**

Medical control bases on the perspective which suggests that deviants are sick and therefore they need treatment rather than punishment (Chriss, 2008: 65). Zola (1972: 487) argues that medical control has become an important social control mechanism and it has taken the place of more traditional control mechanisms such as religion or law. Medicine, in a sense has become the new source of knowledge and doctors as specialists, who are believed to be objective, make absolute and final judgments on subjects such as sickness and health.

A very important concept in medical control is medicalization, which refers to the process of social and individual problems becoming medical and psychiatric problems (Chriss, 2008: 68). Conrad (1992: 224) suggests that medicalization personalize the social problems and takes the heed away from patriarchal order and social inequality.

On the other hand, it can be said that medicalization interferes in individual's own choices. Zola argues that:

*“The debate over homosexuality, drugs or abortion becomes focused on the degree of sickness attached to the phenomenon in question or the extent of the health risk involved. And the more principled, more perplexing, or even moral issue of what freedom should an individual have over his or her own body is shunted aside”* (Zola, 1972: 500).

#### **2.5. Mass Media as an Agent of Social Control**

According to Ericson (1991: 222), *“mass media technologies not only make dramatic cultural representations of reality, they participate in the constitution of reality and particular configurations for social relations.”*

As mentioned above, Durkheim suggests that crime brings solidarity, but in order to function in this way, crime needs to be publicly known. In relatively simple societies, this information flow takes place from mouth to mouth, in more complex societies however, mass media is responsible for this task (Knight & Dean, 1982: 144).

Erikson (2002: 32-33) argues that exposing, punishing or hanging deviants in public, such as in town square has disappeared with Reform movement, but it made a comeback with the discovery of newspaper, radio and television. Similarly Goode (2005: 85) argues that exposing deviants in mass media has a very similar function of hanging them in town square. In both situations, the whole society sees what happens to norm violators.

According to Gerbner and Gross (1976: 173-194) social resources such as ritual or mythology, transfer norms and values to people and thus socialize them. Gerbner and Gross also argues that, today mass media, as a specialized storyteller, functions like these rituals and myths, and replaces the more traditional methods of religion and education. Today's television is in a relationship with the regime like the church used to have with the state.

Gerbner et al (1984: 285-297) argues that, television makes a cultural cultivation and therefore has an important political power. Television programs which are politically centered, represent deviant acts as behaviors which should be prevented or avoided. Their work suggests that heavy TV viewers' beliefs and values are parallel to the definitions of reality and political views imposed by television. Their research found that there is a significant and positive relation between the hours spent watching television and people defining themselves as politically centered, liberal and conservative.

## 2.6. Children and Mainstream Cartoons

Walt Disney: *"I think of a child's mind as a blank book. During the first years of his life, much will be written on the pages. The quality of that writing will affect his life profoundly"* (Giroux, 1999: 17).

Today most of children watch television in their leisure time and mostly they watch cartoons. In this sense, cartoons function as a socialization tool (Leaper, Breed, Hoffman, Perlman, 2002: 1653). Henry Giroux (1999: 2-3) argues that big media companies like Walt Disney, has an important role in shaping children's culture. These big companies have control on producing and exchanging information *"has been matched by the emergence of new technologies that have transformed culture, especially popular culture, which is the primary way in which youth learn about themselves, their relationship to others, and the larger world".* Thus, media culture *'has become a substantial, if not primary, educational force in regulating the meanings, values, and tastes that set the norms that offer up and legitimate particular subject positions"*.

Kirsh (2006: 555), *on the other hand, states that according to field research, children are more likely to show aggressive behavior towards peers after they watch non-comedic violent cartoons. Similarly, upon her research on violence in children's cartoons, Wilson (2008: 109) found that media's effect on children's fear and anxiety is "common throughout childhood"*.

*In a study conducted by Leaper et al. (2002: 1658-1660)), it was shown that cartoons provide information on gender roles. According to the study, in the cartoons, women tend to be frightened, romantic, polite and supportive significantly more than men. Men, on the other hand, tend to engage in violent activities*

significantly more than women.

Similarly, Thompson and Zerbinos (1997: 428) suggest that in the cartoons “male characters were more likely to have some sort of real jobs and females were more likely to be cast in the role of caregiver” In another study, Gökçearslan (2010: 5207) focused on TV programs for children and found that although they appear innocent, cartoons reproduce the gender roles. Gökçearslan (2010: 5207) found that female characters had lower status jobs than male characters, and also they were lower in number.

Likewise, according to a study conducted by Mayes and Valentine (1979: 44-47) with 30 children after they watched Saturday morning cartoons, it was shown that children perceived stereotypical gender roles. Children were asked to evaluate the characters on the shows and results suggest that they detected sex-type behavior.

On the other hand Giroux (1999: 17-18) also suggests that Walt Disney has become of the symbol of childhood innocence. In the contrast of violence we see in everyday life, cartoons provide a safe and romantic world, in which dreams come true and happiness reigns. This metaphor of innocence is “constructed within particular maps of meaning in which children and adults could define themselves through a cultural language that offers them both modest pleasure and a coherent sense of identity”.

### 3. CASE STUDY

This study aimed to analyze how children’s mind were affected by mass media, therefore, nine children at the age of six who attend the same preschool are selected as a sample group. These children have seen a sample animated movie called *Bee Movie* (2007), which has a deviant hero, as a lead role, and then talked about their interpretations of the story.

The storyline of the movie starts with Bee Barry and his best friend Adam graduating from high school. We immediately learn that Bees start working in the same day they graduate. Barry and Adam take a tour with the others inside the hive and learn that they will do the same job they chose that day until the day they die and they will not have a single day off. While the others are happy and they totally accept it, Barry starts to struggle. He thinks that he is not ready and he does not know whether he wants to be in the honey business until the day he dies. So he doesn’t choose a job that day. And of course he is subjected to informal social control from his best friend and his parents. His friend says “*why are you questioning? We are bees; the best functioning society in the world*”. His parents cannot accept the fact that he is not like every other bee. They pressure and they even decide instead of him.

The next day, Barry decides that he at least has to see the world outside, before he starts working. Even though it is forbidden to go out for the bees except a specialized team, he manages to get out of the hive, and immediately violates another rule: He talks and befriends a human being, Vanessa, who sells flowers.

After he goes back to the hive and finds himself under continuous pressure of his parents, he visits Vanessa again and while they are in a supermarket, Barry sees that



honey is canned and sold to humans, and he gets really angry. He thinks it is unacceptable for people to eat, to sell, and to make profit out of honey for which bees work until they die. Thus, he decides to sue the entire humanity and his main target was food companies and honey industry. Barry manages to convince other bees and is backed by them and also by Vanessa.

Barry wins. The court decides that humans should return the honey to the bees. All of a sudden, bees have lots of honey and they don't have to work. And for the first time in history, bees stop working and start enjoying the life.

However, there was a consequence no one had thought of. After bees quit working pollination stops, plants and flowers start to die and life on earth is threatened. Barry understands that what he did was a mistake and that he created a disaster. Barry tells Vanessa that all of this is his fault and he convinces her that he can fix it. So they find the last flower on earth, Barry organizes the bees, and pollination starts again. Bees let humans take the honey, they restart working and producing so that everything goes back to how it was before the trial.

Barry, however, does not go into the honey business, he becomes a lawyer of animals and he has an office within Vanessa's shop. In the last scene we see him getting bored of listening seemingly meaningless complaints of animals and going out to do something to help Vanessa.

We can say that Barry is a person who did not internalize the norms of the society properly, and was not socialized enough. So in order to make him conform to the norms, other control mechanisms had to function. These mechanisms were mostly informal and they were not enough to change Barry's behavior. He had to learn it the hard way, because he didn't listen to other members of his society. He has seen that his behavior was not part of the system and trying to change the order of society can result in disaster.

After this point he had to fix what he had done and try to make the order of society function the way it functioned before. From now on internal control would be working for Barry, because he was socialized. Maybe he did not end up in honey business. We can say he was excluded or we can say that was what he wanted. But in either case, the message was, he should not have tried to change the system, because it only creates disaster.

The first question asked to the children was "Do you think it is a good thing that bees work and produce honey?" There were few children saying "yes". When it is reminded that bees work so hard and they do not have a single day off, one of them said "If there were no bees, there won't be any flowers".

When they were asked what happened when bees quit working, they all agreed that flowers died and there was no honey. And they also agreed that bees should work and give humans honey because otherwise humans can't benefit from it. They were also in consensus that humans eating honey is not harmful to bees, because honey is healthy.

When they were reminded for the second time that bees work really hard to produce honey, they still thought bees should work. One of them said: "They get tired. It is not good for them, but it is good for humans."

All of them also thought that bees should not go out of the hive because it was dangerous, and they should act and work together in groups, not as individuals.

It is very important that all children thought bees should work. This means children internalized the message of the movie that if bees don't work there will be a disaster. The message here is "if you disturb the order of the society, it will only bring disaster". What's more, bees not working take honey away from humans. So even if bees get tired, they should work and produce honey because it is good for humans.

This relationship between bees and humans can be interpreted as the relationship between working class and upper consumer classes. Here functionalism would say that hard work of the working class is beneficial for the society. So we can say that children internalize that hard working is an important and valuable behavior as it is vital for society to function.

Children also thought that bees should act together and stay in the hive. In this sense, we can say that the movie's message about importance of social life and collaboration, and also the danger of going far away and the safety of being home is successful.

If we think about deviance theories, we can say that as Merton's anomie theory suggests, Barry was led to deviance by the pressuring norms of the society. According to social control theory, on the other hand, Barry's ties to the society were not tight enough and he also did not have much to risk. Functionalism would say that Barry's acts were deviant because his behaviors was disturbing the balance of the society and threatened the society's order, that is why he was subjected to negative reaction.

According to labeling theory, Barry's minor deviances in the beginning of the story evolved in major deviances partly because the negative reactions he got. He was labeled and excluded because he said he was not sure whether he wanted to be in honey business until the day he died. So he went out of the hive again to the person who he thought would understand him.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

If we go back to what Gerbner *et al.* (1984) says about people watching too much television, this would result in imposing very similar values on them which is caused by mass media. Or go back to what Giroux (1999) says about how big companies like Walt Disney shape children's culture. And if we think that today's children watch television much, we can say that, it is only possible that children will be affected by cartoons like this one and the values they represent.

The messages coming from mass media often stay in our minds even if we are not aware of it. If, as Walt Disney says, the minds of children are blank books and if they are loaded by the content of mass media, it cannot be easily denied that children are socialized by media and mass media's role on children's perspective on social deviance and social order is very important.

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