**CHAPTER 1**

**WHAT IS DEVIANT BEHAVIOR?**

**CHAPTER CONTENTS**

A. Introduction

Deviant behavior is running rampant in current politics and media. The behavior of the 2016 U.S. presidential candidates as well as Anthony Weiner’s sexting scandal has caused people to question what this means for our society. Studying deviance will help to understand the social factors that impact these processes and areas of society.

B. An Academic Adventure Begins

The original author of this book, the late Alex Thio, studied deviance and deviant behavior due to horrifying childhood experiences in Malaysia and Indonesia during the 1940s. In Malaysia, the secret police engaged in Sook Ching (a rampant mass killing of hostile Chinese elements) while at the same time in Indonesia, a revolution was underway. All around Alex, people were disappearing or being beaten and killed, but this was his “normal.” One evening, the secret police stormed into their home and executed his father and older brother in front of Alex and his mother, with never an explanation. This is when Alex realized that those in power were allowed to do whatever they wanted, including killing people because they were considered deviant, even if only due to skin color or nationality. Alex dedicated his life to studying and understanding deviant behavior.

There is a great deal of disagreement as to what is deviant. One study listed 252 kinds of people as deviant. Sociologists share in this lack of consensus; they disagree more over the definition of deviant behavior than any other subject.

C. Conflicting Definitions

Sociologists have proposed a variety of definitions of deviant behavior, ranging from it being a violation of any social rule to physical or mental disabilities leading to a person’s devaluation by society to positive deviance (including geniuses and artists as kinds of deviants).

Many sociologists assume that deviance is real in and of itself and has characteristics that separate it from nondeviance. Others, following the labeling theory, point to persons who are falsely accused of or misdiagnosed as deviant. Here, what makes a person deviant is not the act itself but the label “deviant.” Deviance is the consequence of an application of rules, and deviants are persons so labeled.

Still other sociologists have emphasized the role of power in deciding who is deviant. They point out that powerful people can avoid the problem of unjust labeling and have the power to label others, especially the poor and powerless, as deviant. Deviance, for them, is composed of acts considered by the powerful to be a violation of some social rule.

These definitions of deviance are influenced by two opposing perspectives: the positivistic perspective, which is associated with the physical sciences, and the constructionist perspective, which originates from the study of the arts and philosophy. These perspectives have helped shape sociological perspectives of deviance. Positivists see deviance as intrinsically real, while constructionists see deviance as an idea imputed by society to some behavior. Each perspective has greatly influenced the definition, subjects, study methods, and theories of deviance.

D. The Positivist Perspective

The positivist perspective assumes that deviance is absolute or intrinsically real, an objective fact, and determined behavior.

a. Absolutism: Deviance as Absolutely Real

Absolutism means deviance is absolutely or intrinsically real. It assumes there are characteristics that distinguish deviance from conventionality, and that deviance is an attribute that inheres in the individual. Today’s positivist sociologists have largely abandoned the attempt to distinguish criminals from non-criminals based on biological or psychological traits. They now recognize that social factors determine a person’s status as a criminal and that statuses change across time, space, and culture. Example: a polygamist may be deviant in the United States, but is a law-abiding citizen in another country.

b. Objectivism: Deviance as an Observable Object

Deviance as an observable object is the belief that deviant behavior has an objective nature that can lead to observation and study (objectivism).

c. Determinism: Deviance as Determined Behavior

“Determined behavior” means the belief that deviance is caused by other things or events in the environment (determinism). Although positivists believe in human choice, they usually will not attribute deviance to human choice. There are concepts such as wife abuse, broken homes, unhappy homes, lower-class background, economic deprivation, social disorganization, rapid social change, differential association, differential reinforcement, and lack of social control that are causes of deviance.

E. The Constructionist Perspective

The constructionist perspective emerged during the 1960s to challenge the traditional, positivistic perspective on deviance, and it assumes that deviance is a label, a subjective experience, and a voluntary act.

a. Relativism: Deviance as a Label

Deviance as a label (relativism) means deviance does not have an intrinsic characteristic but rather comes from some people’s minds. An example is statutory rape arrests. One study shows that same-sex statutory rape cases result in higher arrests than those involving males and females, even with preexisting romantic relationships. Additionally, constructionists point out there is a relativity principle in deviant behavior that shapes how an act is interpreted and how the public reacts to it. This relativistic view says deviance is in the eye of the beholder. Another example is the hacktivist group, Anonymous. Anonymous uses deviant means for non-profit motives (they promote social justice and fight inequality by exposing crime and deceitful practices of others). The question of who/what Anonymous will target makes many in positions of power fearful.

b. Subjectivism: Deviance as a Subjective Experience

Deviance as a subjective experience (subjectivism) assumes that the deviant person is a feeling, thinking, and reflective subject who has worth and dignity. Therefore, sociologists should not treat deviants as immoral, unpleasant, or repulsive; rather, they should understand how the deviant thinks about himself or herself and society. Example: pop culture icon and actor, Charlie Sheen, created a multimedia frenzy in 2011 and has continued with erratic behavior due to drug use, yet his fame and wealth have increased. Constructionists would say that his celebrity status has allowed him to avoid the stigma typically associated with this problem behavior.

c. Voluntarism: Deviance as a Voluntary Act

The constructionist perspective assumes deviance is a voluntary act (voluntarism) because humans possess free will and can cause their own behavior. Here, deviants are not seen as robots or passive, but rather as those who actively interpret their actions; these insights into the subjective world of deviance lead to a non-causal, descriptive, or analytical theory.

F. An Integrated View

Both positivist and constructionist perspectives are needed to know what deviant behavior is. Deviance is both a real act and a label, and one cannot exist without the other.

The positivist perspective is more relevant to the study of serious types of deviance, such as murder and rape, because they can be clearly defined as deviant, they are committed by persons very different from the sociologists who are studying them, and they can be seen more easily as passive actors reacting to the pressures of society.

The constructionist perspective is more pertinent to less serious types of deviance because there is less consensus about this type of deviance, and these actors who are engaged in less serious behavior can be seen as more voluntary participants.

Types of deviant behavior differ in terms of the amount of public consensus: Acts that the public widely agrees are really deviant appear intrinsically real, while acts lacking a public consensus make the label more important.

Deviance is defined as any behavior considered deviant by public consensus, which may range from the maximum to the minimum.

There are two types: (a) higher-consensus deviance: studied by positivist sociologists and (b) lower-consensus deviance: studied by constructionist sociologists

G. A Word about Deviance and Crime

Deviance differs from criminology because: (a) crime always involves violating a law but deviance does not; (b) crime is the violation of a formal norm, while deviance is a violation of an informal norm that derives from a popular belief; (c) the number and varieties of deviance are infinitely greater than those of crime; and (d) some crimes are not deviant due to their acceptance throughout society.

**KEY CONCEPTS**

Absolutism: Deviance is absolutely or intrinsically real.

Crime: A violation of law.

Determinism: The notion that there is little or no human agency.

Deviance: Any behavior considered deviant by public consensus, which may range from the maximum to the minimum.

Deviant behavior: Norm breaking or rule breaking.

Genocide: The deliberate and systematic destruction of a racial, political, or cultural group.

Hactivism: Accessing computer systems and files by illegal means, for various political and socially conscientious purposes.

Labels: Characteristics assigned to an individual or a group.

Law: An explicit norm.

Objectivism: A perspective stressing deviance as empirical truth.

Positivism: Assumes that deviance is absolute or intrinsically real.

Relativism: Deviant behavior has no intrinsic characteristics.

Sexting: Using a cell phone to send and receive sexually explicit material.

Social constructionism: A view seeing deviant behavior as subjective.

Sook Ching: A rampant mass killing of hostile Chinese elements.

Subjectivism: A perspective stressing individual meaning-making.

Voluntarism: Deviance is an expression of free will.

**LECTURES AND DEMONSTRATIONS**

1. The Definition of Deviance

Illustrate the problem of defining deviant behavior by asking students to rank types of deviant behavior from most to least serious. Develop and distribute a list of 20 types of deviant behavior and have students rank them. Collect and summarize the results and discuss whether and why deviance exists. Relate the results to the text’s report of J. L. Simmons’s classic study of the general public’s attitudes toward deviance. (See the “Additional Resources” section for a reference to this study.)

2. Deviance in Other Cultures

Develop several examples of normal behavior in other cultures that Americans would see as deviant. One possible area is homosexuality, which is often not defined as deviant in other cultures. Use examples from David Greenburg’s classic study, “The Construction of Homosexuality,” to show how different cultures have viewed homosexuality. Another possibility is cultures that routinely use drugs for religion or relief of pain, or continue to practice genital mutilation. Use these examples to challenge students’ assumptions about right and wrong and to establish the relativity of deviance.

3. Positivist and Constructionist Approaches to Deviance

Develop examples that clearly show the objective, positivist view of deviance, and the subjective, constructionist view. One possibility is to use excerpts from an ethnography like David Simon and Edward Burns’s *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood* to show how researchers can live with a group of youthful drug dealers to understand their views of the world. Compare this study to a statistical study of drug dealers that analyzes family composition, ethnic background, and social class. Contrast the two approaches and show how both can help us understand deviant behavior.

4. The Changing Definitions of Deviant Behavior

The relative and changing nature of deviance can be illustrated by tracing the history of one type of behavior that once was seen as deviant but has become accepted today. One obvious possibility is the history of drinking, which was widely practiced during the revolutionary era, banned during Prohibition, became widely popular during the 1950s, and is more negatively valued today. Show how the definition of drinking has changed and how different groups have come to label drinking in positive and negative ways.

5. The Current State of Deviance in the Media

The highly debated and highly publicized 2016 U.S. presidential campaign portrayed both candidates as not only exhibiting deviant behavior, but of labeling their opponents with deviant labels. Anthony Weiner, a political figure, used his cell phone to participate in deviant behavior. Charlie Sheen, a famous and wealthy actor, has displayed deviant behavior and yet continues to be famous and wealthy. How does media play a part in (a) defining deviance and (b) encouraging or destroying such behavior? Are there contemporary forms of media that have caused shifts in what is seen as deviant? Does media influence what society views as deviant? What are some examples?

6. Sexual Deviance in Hollywood

The Harvey Weinstein scandal that came to the attention of the public in 2017 started small and snowballed into allegations of sexual deviance that began decades ago, and involves dozens of people affected by Weinstein’s deviant behavior. With so many women and men coming forward with allegations of sexual harassment and assault in Hollywood, what kind of far-reaching consequences do they expect for this to have on the nation outside of Hollywood?  Where/how might we be impacted the most, and why?

**STUDENT ACTIVITIES AND RESEARCH PROJECTS**

1. The Brief Ethnography

Have students undertake a brief observation of behavior they or others view as deviant. Such activity often occurs on campus or in nearby areas. Have students carefully observe the behavior and record what they saw. Also, ask them to discuss their feelings and whether their observations were objective or not. Ask them to relate their observations to some of the problems of defining deviance presented in the text.

2. The Mass Media and the Definition of Deviance

Students can better understand the relativity of deviance and the labeling perspective by studying the presentation of deviance by the media. Have students view a television news program or discussion show such as “60 Minutes,” “48 Hours,” “The Jerry Springer Show,” or reality TV shows such as “Dance Moms” or “Keeping up with the Kardashians” and analyze the norms used and images of deviance created. Have students describe the show and analyze the impact of the media on images of deviant behavior. Show how these images contribute to the problems of defining deviance.

3. Social Media and Deviant Behavior

Using social media, discuss how quickly a person can be considered deviant. What happens when the picture/video of a person goes viral? What are some examples/situations where a person was doing something innocent that quickly became deviant and society turned on them?

4. Newspaper Editorials

Have students examine a historical series of newspaper editorials to discover the changing nature of deviance. One possible issue might be abortion. Have students begin with the 1960s and trace attitudes toward abortion as stated in a newspaper’s editorials through the 2010s. Ask students to summarize their findings and analyze how views toward abortion have or have not changed.

5. A Norm-Violation Experiment

Students can better understand the subtleties of deviance by engaging in a very mild norm-violation experiment. Have students form small groups and devise a situation in which a norm can be violated and observed. Some famous examples are very sloppy eating in the cafeteria, bizarre or loud behavior in a public place, or trying to buy one page from a 100-page notebook. Have one student undertake the norm violation and others observe reactions. Make sure students use care when violating the norms and fully explain their activity when the experiment is over. Have them write up their experiences and connect it to perceptions and definitions of deviance. See Rebecca L. Bordt’s article listed in the “Additional Resources” section for a description of a bad experience with this experiment.

6. The Feature Film

Use a movie to help teach students about the definition of deviance. Choose a movie that fully depicts a type of deviant behavior and ask students to analyze it. Have students establish why the behavior in the film is deviant and how they might approach it from the positivist and constructionist perspectives. See the article by Dana Bickford Lipton and Kathleen A. Tiemann, “Using the Feature Film to Facilitate Sociological Thinking,” listed in the “Additional Resources” section for ideas about how to use feature films in class. Explore the relation of the movie presentation to deviance in real life.

**FILMS RECOMMENDATIONS**

“Abortion: The Moral Dilemma”

This film presents two sides of a very emotional issue by interviewing participants on both sides of the movement. It shows how the same behavior can trigger labels of normality and deviance. It also reviews the history of the abortion controversy. (1994, ffh.films.com)

“The Way We Live: Against the Grain: Deviance”

This film includes statements from several sociologists regarding the problems of defining deviance. It explores different views about sexuality and violence and examines how morality, religion, and psychological factors play a role in defining deviance. (2005, https://www.kanopystreaming.com/product/against-grain-deviance)

“Bluegrass, Blackmarket”

This film raises excellent issues about the nature of deviant behavior. It traces the marijuana trade in eastern Kentucky. Poor, unemployed, and relatively harmless farmers survive by growing pot, while zealous police officers try to stop them. Some police officers become involved in the marijuana business and get arrested. The different moral positions of the farmers and police are clearly illustrated. (1994, appalshop.org)

“Crime and Deviance”

This film explores how sociologists conduct research on crime and deviance and illustrates the difference between these two related fields. (2003, onlineclassroom.tv)

“Deviance and Social Control”

This presentation discusses how society defines and controls deviance. It looks at biological, psychological, and sociological explanations for deviant behavior and at the criminal justice system. (2002, www.insight-media.com)

“The Psychology of Criminal Behavior”

This film considers a variety of criminal and deviant behavior from a psychological point of view. It compares biological and sociological factors, but most importantly it shows a contrasting explanation of criminal behavior. (2001, www.insight-media.com)

“Taxi Driver”

This famous film focuses on one man’s reflections on his world and those of his passengers. It describes his life and those of persons living a straight life. He joins a violent subculture in which he attempts to cleanse the world through violence. It is a good treatment of deviance and how it is generated. (1983, available through many online outlets for rental and/or purchase, and available in some local movie rental stores)

“Thirteen Reasons Why”

This book-turned-Netflix series is the story of a young high school student who committed suicide and left an audio diary with a friend. The diary describes the thirteen reasons why she committed suicide, brought on by betrayal and bullying of those around her. There is a wide array of deviant behavior (some of it criminal) displayed throughout the show. ([www.netflix.com](http://www.netflix.com))

“Deviance-Sociology”

This TedEd lesson shows that deviance does not have to mean criminal behavior. It shows behaviors that are norms in our U.S. society and how they can be perceived as deviant.

(https://ed.ted.com/on/zvBqUC0k)

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

Adler, Patricia A. 2006. “The deviance society.” *Deviant Behavior*, 27: 129–148. Arguing that the sociology of deviance continues to be a vibrant subfield of sociology.

Bendle, Mervyn F. 1999. “The death of the sociology of deviance?” *Journal of Sociology*, 35: 42–59. A critical analysis of the problems besetting the sociology of deviance and the emergence of a new paradigm for the field.

Best, Joel. 2004. *Deviance: Career of a Concept*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. An attempt to argue that deviance is no longer a thriving field of study in sociology.

Conrad, Peter, and Joseph W. Schneider. 1992. *Deviance and Medicalization: From Badness to Sickness*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. An analysis of the changing definitions of deviance, from religious to criminal to medical definitions.

Curra, John O. 2010. *The Relativity of Deviance*, 2nd ed. Newbury Park, CA: Pine Forge. This title explores various aspects of the labeling process, as well as the intervening social processes that negotiate this powerful social construct.

Dodge, David L. 1985. “The over-negativized conceptualization of deviance: A programmatic exploration.” *Deviant Behavior*, 6: 17–37. Argues that sociologists would do well to start studying positive deviance.

Goode, Erich, and Nachman Ben-Yehuda. 2009. *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance*, 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. A constructionist analysis of how societies periodically overreact with excessive fear or outrage to such social events as witchcraft, drug abuse, and Satanism.

Henslin, James M. 1988. “Structuralism and individualism in deviance theory.” *Deviant Behavior*, 9: 211–223. Illustrating an example of the difference between the positivist and constructionist perspectives in the sociology of deviance.

Konty, Mark. 2007. “‘When in doubt, tell the truth’: Pragmatism and the sociology of deviance.” *Deviant Behavior*, 28: 153–170. Arguing that the study of deviance is about the rules that govern people’s lives as well as the effects of rule breaking on them and others.

Lauderdale, Pat (ed.). 2011. *A Political Analysis of Deviance*, 3rd ed. Toronto: de Sitter Publications. A collection of articles dealing with the political nature of deviance and the various aspects of political deviance.

Lyman, Stanford M. 1995. “Without morals or mores: Deviance in postmodernist social theory.” *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 9, 197–235. A critical analysis of the constructionist view that the concept of deviance reflects an unjustifiable attempt to distinguish one group from another.

Pfohl, Stephen J. 2009. *Images of Deviance and Social Control: A Sociological History*, 2nd ed. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press. Re-issue of a classic work that presents nine perspectives of deviance, ranging from the earliest view of deviance as a demonic act to the conception of deviance as a way of “asserting lost power.”

Simmons, Jerry L. 1965. “Public Stereotypes of Deviance,” *Social Problems*, 13: 223–224.

Thio, Alex, Thomas C. Calhoun, and Addrain Conyers (eds.). 2012. *Deviance Today*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon. An anthology that includes articles on various specific forms of deviant behavior.