What would you think if you were walking down the street and passed a man entirely covered in leopard spots? It would definitely make you look twice and would qualify as a deviant appearance. Would you wonder what he was thinking, how it felt to live within those spots, and why he would choose such a visible form of body modification?

Tom Leppard once held the title of the most tattooed man in the world, with 99% of his body covered in tattooed leopard spots. For more than 20 years, Leppard lived as something of a hermit in a shack with no electricity or furniture on the Scottish island of Skye. Despite his solitary lifestyle, Leppard clearly enjoyed the attention of strangers, at least to some degree. He spoke of choosing his “leopard” appearance and his visible status: “I’ve loved every minute and when you’re covered in leopard tattoos you certainly get noticed—I became a bit of a tourist attraction on Skye” (Irvine, 2008).

Photo 2.1

What would you think if you were at the grocery store and ran into Tom Leppard, who has tattooed leopard spots over 99% of his body?

Introduction

Now that you’ve been introduced to the concept of deviance and the importance of understanding deviant behavior from a theoretical perspective, we want to spend some time exploring the various forms that deviance can take. When you think about deviance, what do you typically think about? Take a moment to
quickly think of five types of deviant behavior. What immediately comes to mind? You probably came up with examples that reflect criminal behavior such as drug dealing, assault, robbery, or homicide. These are quite common responses, especially given the way the media cover crime and deviance. Yet deviance is not always criminal in nature. Nor does it always reflect an act or a behavior. There is a much broader array of what constitutes deviance in our society. In short, deviance can take many forms.

In this chapter, we discuss the diversity of deviance and explore its broad array in American society. It is our hope that by introducing you to deviance in its varied forms, you'll gain a deeper understanding of its nature before we move on to learning about how deviance is researched (Chapter 3), explained (Chapters 4–10), and responded to in society (Chapters 11–12). This chapter on the different types of deviance is a good place to begin an analysis of the sociological field of deviance and the phenomena it investigates.

A chapter on “types of deviance” is difficult to write because deviance as a field of study is very subjective. Many textbooks offer a survey or overview of different types of deviant behavior, devoting entire chapters to such topics as physical deviance, sexual deviance, drug use, mental disorders, and corporate deviance. As authors of this text, we do not necessarily agree with those categories or characterizations of different behaviors, attitudes, and physical attributes as deviant. Indeed, even between the three of us, we sometimes disagree on what is deviant and what is not. Rather than writing simply from our own points of view and trying to persuade you to adopt our perspectives, however, we offer the following as a glimpse into the field of deviance as it has been defined, studied, and treated throughout the years.

**Deviance and Its Varied Forms**

While deviant behavior and crime certainly overlap, deviance encompasses much more than crime. Sociologists who have studied deviance have researched and written about a range of topics, including the disabled (E. Goffman, 1963), the mentally ill (Link, Phelan, Bresnahan, Stueve, & Pescosolido, 1999), the voluntarily childless (Park, 2002), the homeless (L. Anderson, Snow, & Cress, 1994), Jewish resisters during the Holocaust (Einwohner, 2003), topless dancers (Thompson, Harred, & Burks 2003), bisexuals (Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 2001), anorexics and bulimics (McLorg & Taub, 1987), self-injurers (P. A. Adler & Adler, 2007), and gay male Christian couples (Yip, 1996), to name just a few. This research is in addition to the many studies of criminal deviance, too numerous to list here. You can get a sense of the range of deviant behavior and how it has been studied simply by exploring the contents of the academic journal that is devoted to this very topic: *Deviant Behavior.* In addition to this introductory chapter exploring the many forms of deviance, we include short summaries of recent research on different types of deviant behavior in each chapter of this book.

The diversity of deviance and how drastically norms and attitudes may change over time is attested to in research conducted by J. L. Simmons (1965), who, several decades ago, surveyed 180 individuals, asking them to “list those things or types of persons whom you regard as deviant.” More than 250 different acts and persons were listed. The range of responses not only included expected items such as prostitutes, drug addicts, and murderers but also included liars, Democrats, reckless drivers, atheists, self-pitiers, career women, divorcees, prudes, pacifists, and even know-it-all professors! The most frequent survey responses are listed in Table 2.1.

Imagine conducting a similar survey today. Which responses from this list might still occur with some frequency? Which might be less frequent? Whatever you imagined, there is little doubt that the list would look different today compared to 1965, reflecting the key point that what constitutes deviance changes depending on the historical context, something we discuss more later on in this chapter. For now, we want you to simply recognize the sheer range of deviance and its diversity.
It would be nearly impossible to describe deviance in all its varied forms. Rather than try to provide an exhaustive list of the different realms of deviance, we have chosen to highlight a few to illustrate the broad spectrum of behaviors, attitudes, and characteristics that have been deemed deviant by at least some segments of the larger society.

### Table 2.1 Most Frequent Responses to the Question, “What Is Deviant?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homosexuals</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug addicts</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcoholics</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prostitutes</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murderers</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminals</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbians</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenile delinquents</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beatniks</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentally ill</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perverts</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communists</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheists</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political extremists</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Simmons (1965).*

A student film, *55: A Meditation on the Speed Limit*, which can be viewed on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=1B-Ox0ZmVIU), illustrates a potential problem with strict conformity. In the 5-minute video, college students filmed an experiment where they managed to have cars in every lane of the freeway driving exactly the speed limit. This created a wall of traffic and frustrated drivers in the cars behind them, leading to visible road rage. Do you think strict conformity can also be a form of deviance? Why or why not? Can you think of other circumstances in which strict conformity might be considered deviant?
Physical Deviance and Appearance: Ideals of Beauty and Everyone Else

Physical deviance is perhaps the most visible form of deviance, and it can evoke stereotypes, stigma, and discrimination. Sociologists have described two types of physical deviance, including (1) violations of aesthetic norms (what people should look like, including height, weight, and the absence or presence of disfigurement) and (2) physical incapacity, which would include those with a physical disability (Goode, 2005).

Erving Goffman (1963) opens his book, Stigma, with a letter a 16-year-old girl wrote to Miss Lonelyhearts in 1962. She writes about how she is a good dancer and has a nice shape and pretty clothes, but no boy will take her out. Why? Because she was born without a nose:

I sit and look at myself all day and cry. I have a big hole in the middle of my face that scares people even myself. . . . What did I do to deserve such a terrible bad fate? Even if I did do some bad things, I didn't do any before I was a year old and I was born this way. . . . Ought I commit suicide? (reprinted in E. Goffman, 1963, first page)

As suggested by the letter to Miss Lonelyhearts, physical deviance may be viewed as a marker of other forms of deviance. In other words, passersby may notice people with numerous tattoos, heavily muscled female bodybuilders, or those with visible physical disabilities and may attribute other characteristics to those individuals. You may notice, for example, when talking to a person who is hard of hearing that others in the conversation may slow their speech considerably and use smaller words, as well as speaking louder than usual; this suggests an implicit assumption that the individual has difficulty understanding as well as hearing.

Our ideas of what is acceptable or desirable in terms of physical appearance vary widely depending on the context. You can get a sense of this by visiting a local museum or simply flipping through an art book showing paintings and photographs of women thought to be very beautiful in their time. From the rounded curves of the women painted by Peter Paul Rubens in the 1600s (which is where the term Rubenesque originated to describe an hourglass figure), to the very thin flappers considered ideal in the 1920s, to Marilyn Monroe in the 1950s, Twiggy in the 1960s, Cindy Crawford in the 1980s, Kate Moss in the 1990s, and Kim Kardashian in 2010, our ideals of beauty and the most-desired body types clearly change and evolve over time.

Along with professionally styled hair and makeup and the use of meticulous lighting and angles, editors can now touch up photographs to remove wrinkles and traces of cellulite and to make beautiful models’ already thin limbs and waists trimmer and more defined. This is of concern to sociologists because setting a truly unattainable standard for the ideal physical appearance can lead to deviant behavior, including harmful eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia, or unnecessary plastic surgeries.

Another form of physical deviance is self-injury—cutting, burning, branding, scratching, picking at skin or reopening wounds, biting, hair pulling, and bone breaking. P. A. Adler and Adler (2007) found that most self-injurers never seek help from mental health professionals, most of the self-incurred wounds do not need medical attention, and the majority of self-injurers thus remain hidden within society. Why would anyone purposely hurt themselves? P. A. Adler and Adler explain the reasoning like this:

Although self-injury can be morbid and often maladaptive, our subjects overwhelmingly agree that it represents an attempt at self-help. They claim that their behaviors provide immediate but short-term release from anxiety, depersonalization, racing thoughts, and rapidly fluctuating emotions. . . . It provides a sense of control, reconfirms the presence of one’s body, dulls feelings, and converts unbearable emotional pain into manageable physical pain. (p. 540)
P.A. Adler and Adler (2007) suggest that self-injury is currently being “demedicalized”—shifting out of the realm of mental illness and categorized instead as deviance, characterized by the voluntary choice of those involved.

While there are certainly other forms of physical deviance, body modification is the last example we will discuss. **Body modification** includes extreme tattooing, like Mr. Leppard from the opening story who paid to have more than 99% of his body covered in inked leopard spots. It also includes piercings, scarification, and reconstructive and cosmetic surgery. The reasons for body modification vary, but more than 3,500 people have joined the Church of Body Modification and view their physical changes as a way to spiritually strengthen the connection between body, mind, and soul.

Individuals choose to engage in body modification, but the choice may not be respected by the larger society. In September 2010, a 14-year-old freshman girl, Ariana Iocono, was suspended from school for wearing a small stud in her nose and violating the school’s dress code, which forbids piercings. The girl and her mother were members of the Church of Body Modification and claimed that the nose ring was a religious symbol, but school administrators were unsympathetic, arguing that Ariana had not met the criteria for a religious exemption (Netter, 2010).

**DEVIANCE IN POPULAR CULTURE**

A wide variety of deviance can be examined by paying careful attention to popular culture. Below are a number of documentary films and television shows that offer concrete examples of specific cultural norms, different types of deviant behavior, and how individuals cope with stigma. What messages about norms and acceptable behavior are portrayed in each of these examples? What is the deviant behavior in each film/episode? What does the reaction to the deviant behavior tell you about the larger culture?

**Films**

*Devil’s Playground*—a documentary following four Amish teenagers through the experience of Rumspringa, when they are given freedom to experience the outside world before deciding whether or not to commit to a lifetime in the Amish community.

*Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*—a documentary investigating white-collar crime and the greed that toppled what was once the seventh largest corporate entity in the United States and left 20,000 employees without jobs.

*Deliver Us From Evil*—a documentary investigating sexual abuse within the Catholic Church. The focus is on Father Oliver O’Grady, a pedophile who sexually assaulted dozens of children.

*Dark Days*—a documentary featuring people living in the tunnels under the subway system in New York City; filmed in black and white, it shows how one segment of the homeless population built homes and a community under the city.

(Continued)
Sexually unconventional behavior is another central topic of discussion when it comes to deviance. As a society, we are generally intrigued with others’ intimate relationships and sexual practices. Goode (2005, p. 230) asks, Why are there so many norms about sexual behavior? And why are the punishments for violating sexual norms so severe? Concerning the first question, Goode rightly claims the ways that we violate mainstream society’s norms by engaging in variant sexual acts are almost infinite. The realm of sexual deviance may include exotic dancers, strippers, sex tourism, anonymous sex in public restrooms, bisexuality, online sexual predators, prostitutes, premarital chastity, and many others. As with virtually every kind of deviance, sexual deviance is largely determined by the community, culture, and context.

Even within the United States, there is considerable disagreement about what sexual activities should and should not be allowed. The issue of gay marriage is one current example where community values are being tested and defined on political ballots across the country. Another example where context matters is prostitution. While considered a crime in most of the country, prostitution is legal in many areas of Nevada. Certain counties in Nevada are allowed to regulate and license brothels, a multimillion-dollar industry based on legalized prostitution.

While societal norms shape our conceptions of appropriate sexual behavior, those boundaries are regularly tested by new fads and businesses and by many different subcultures making up their own rules as they go along. The Ashley Madison Agency, for example, bills itself as the world’s premiere discreet dating service; it is marketed to those who are married and wish to have affairs. The agency’s slogan captures the intent succinctly: “Life is short. Have an affair.” The Ashley Madison Agency courts publicity, advertising widely on billboards, in magazines, and on television commercials. Interested adults can go on the website and purchase the “Affair Guarantee” package; if they do not find a suitable partner within
3 months, they can get a refund. With over seven million anonymous members, it is clear that there is widespread interest in relationships outside of marriage. The need for anonymity and discretion also suggests that there is still enough stigma attached to such relationships that it is preferable to shop for a partner before identifying oneself.

**Polygamy** is another frequently discredited form of relationship. In the United States, monogamy is the legal norm, yet some religions and subcultures still allow and encourage men to take multiple wives. The conflict between a subculture’s values and the larger societal norms came vividly into play in 2008 when the state of Texas conducted a military-style raid on the Yearning for Zion Ranch, a polygamous religious sect of the Fundamental Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Warren S. Jeffs, the leader of the Fundamental Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, had been convicted a year earlier on felony charges as an accomplice to rape for his role in coercing the marriage of a 14-year-old girl to her 19-year-old cousin. When the raid on the Yearning for Zion Ranch took place, Jeffs was in the early phases of a 10-year-to-life sentence while awaiting trial on other sex charges in Arizona.

On the basis of an accusation of sexual abuse from an anonymous 16-year-old girl, SWAT teams raided the Yearning for Zion Ranch and forcibly removed more than 400 children from their homes and families. Texas child welfare officials believed that the children were in danger; they suspected young girls were being made into child brides among other physical and sexual abuse within the polygamous community.

This clash of cultures and values played out dramatically in the media. After being removed from their homes and the insular community in which they were raised, the children of the ranch were suddenly exposed to many strangers, different foods, varied styles of dress, and a new set of norms. When some of their mothers voluntarily left the ranch to be with the children, they were visibly out of their element in their prairie dresses and old-fashioned hairstyles, forced to move to the suburbs and shop at Walmart rather than tend to their gardens and livestock on the ranch.

In the end, the telephone calls that set the raid in motion may have been a hoax or a setup, but the damage was irreparably done. The children of the Yearning for Zion Ranch were returned to their parents approximately 2 months later, but the trauma inflicted on the families from such a forced separation could not be taken back. While this was clearly a difficult situation for all involved, it presents sociologically interesting questions about what is deviant and who gets to decide. Those living at the Yearning for Zion Ranch were nearly self-sufficient and seemed to live quietly by their own rules and norms within its bounds. At what point do you think it would be appropriate for the state of Texas to step in and take the children away from their families? Who should ultimately decide? Who are the deviants in this case—the polygamous families or the state of Texas for breaking up those families and traumatizing a whole community? These are interesting and complex questions without easy answers, which is part of what makes deviance such a fascinating—and ever-changing—field of study.

▲ Photo 2.2 Community members from the Yearning for Zion Ranch react after the state of Texas forcibly removed more than 400 children from their homes and families.
Deviance in Cyberspace: Making Up the Norms as We Go

One way to clearly see that our ideas about deviance and deviant behavior change over time is to consider the creation of whole new categories of deviant behavior. As new technology has developed, brand-new forms of deviance have also taken shape. Cyberdeviance, for example, is a relatively new phenomenon, but it already has many different forms, including the online pedophile subculture, cyberbullying, online misbehavior of college students, “sexting,” and the illegal downloading of music, movies, and readings.

If such behavior is prevalent, particularly among younger people and hidden populations, should it still be considered deviant? That question is difficult to answer; norms and laws are being created and modified all the time, even as technology improves and offers new possibilities for deviant behavior.

STUDIES IN DEVIANCE

Examining the Virtual Subculture of Johns


An example of a deviant subculture that crosses the boundaries between cyberdeviance and criminal deviance is the online subculture of “johns” or male heterosexual clients of sex workers. In their qualitative study, Blevins and Holt (2009) explored Web forums in a number of U.S. cities in an attempt to identify the norms and values in the mostly hidden world of the client side of sex work. The authors analyzed Web forums where heterosexual “johns,” or male clients of prostitutes, shared questions and information while minimizing exposure to law enforcement.

Blevins and Holt (2009) particularly focus on the “argot” or specialized language of the virtual subculture of johns, and they use extensive quotes to illustrate their points. Three themes related to argot emerged from their analysis. The first theme was “experience,” which, among other things, categorized the “johns” across a hierarchy of novices or “newbies” to the more experienced “mongers, trollers, or hobbyists” (note that the derogatory term *john* was not used in the argot of the subculture). The second theme was “commodification”—the notion that the prostitutes themselves and the acts they wanted were a commodity that came with a cost. This issue brought a great deal of discussion over how much different prostitutes or different sexual acts were worth or likely to cost. Finally, a related theme of “sexuality” or the various sexual acts desired or experienced was posted with a unique argot for a host of sexual activities. The language and subject matter are crude but offer a glimpse at the subcultural norms and values of these online communities or subcultures of “johns.”

Subcultural Deviance

The virtual subculture of johns is just one example of many subcultures that might be considered deviant by at least some segment of the population. While the johns are generally a hidden population, as you can see from the earlier example of the Yearning for Zion Ranch, some subcultures are easily identifiable and can be singled out for holding different norms and values than the larger society. That case is particularly dramatic.
as children were taken from their parents and homes, but many other subcultures draw strong reactions from the outside community.

Research on subcultures has been wide-ranging. Hamm (2004) studied terrorist subcultures, examining the “complex ways in which music, literature, symbolism and style are used to construct terrorism” (p. 328). Others have written about “fat admirers,” men who have a strong, erotic desire for obese women (Goode, 2008b); radical environmentalist organizations (Scarce, 2008); and the subculture of UFO contactees and abductees (Bader, 2008).

The Amish are another example of a subculture, but the question of deviance becomes quite complicated—particularly during the time when Amish youth are encouraged to go outside of the community and explore the “English” way of life. In this case, some types of deviant behavior are sanctioned for a short time before the teenagers choose their adult path and decide whether to be baptized and become an Amish adult in good standing or basically be ostracized from their parents and communities. We include with this chapter a very interesting article by Denise Reiling on this topic: Amish youths' response to culturally prescribed deviance.

Elite Deviance, Corporate Deviance, and Workplace Misconduct

Elite deviance is an important topic, but one that does not generally receive as much attention as the potentially more dramatic violent acts and property crimes (“street crimes”) that affect individuals on a personal level. While individuals tend to actively fear being victimized by street crimes, they probably do not realize the enormous impact elite deviance may have on their everyday lives. Mantios (2010) offers a strong statement/indictment on how the corporate elite gain and maintain their status:

Corporate America is a world made up of ruthless bosses, massive layoffs, favoritism and nepotism, health and safety violations, pension plan losses, union busting, tax evasions, unfair competition, and price gouging, as well as fast buck deals, financial speculation, and corporate wheeling and dealing that serve the interests of the corporate elite, but are generally wasteful and destructive to workers and the economy in general.

It is no wonder Americans cannot think straight about class. The mass media is neither objective, balanced, independent, nor neutral. Those who own and direct the mass media are themselves part of the upper class. (pp. 240–241)

Elite deviance has been defined as “criminal and deviant acts by the largest corporations and the most powerful political organizations” (D. R. Simon, 2008, p. xi). In the introduction to his book on the topic, D. R. Simon (2008) explains that elite deviance refers to acts by elites or organizations that result in harm; he distinguishes between three different types of harm: physical harms, including death or physical injury; financial harms, including robbery, fraud, and various scams; and moral harms, which are harder to define but encourage distrust and alienation among members of the lower and middle classes (p. 35). Simon further breaks the topic of elite deviance down into three types of acts: economic domination, government and governmental control, and denial of basic human rights.

The reading at the end of this chapter by Bandura, Caprara, and Zsolnai (2000) discusses corporate transgressions through moral disengagement. It offers an interesting analysis of how corporations adopt
in institutional practices that violate laws and harm the public. The authors briefly highlight four famous cases, including an industrial disaster in Bhopal, India; the Ford Pintos that burst into flame on impact; Nestle’s selling of infant formula to developing countries—a practice that led to the malnutrition of babies in Third World countries; and the Three Mile Island case, the most severe accident in U.S. commercial nuclear power plant history. Unlike most elite deviance, these cases garnered widespread public attention and brought notice—at least temporarily—to harmful corporate practices.

A much more common and smaller scale form of deviance is workplace deviance. Employee misconduct undoubtedly leads to business failures and higher consumer costs; studies estimate that as many as two thirds of workers are involved in employee theft or other forms of employee deviance. Table 2.2 documents the percentage of employees taking part in the “invisible social problem” of workplace misconduct (Huiras, Uggen, & McMorris, 2000).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2.2 Employee Deviance in the Previous Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage Reporting Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Got to work late without a good reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Called in sick when not sick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gave away goods or services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claimed to have worked more hours than really did</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Took things from employer or coworker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Been drunk or high at work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lied to get or keep job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misused or took money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purposely damaged property</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Positive Deviance**

Even within sociology, there is some debate as to whether such a thing as positive deviance exists. Goode (1991), for example, believes that positive deviance is a contradiction in terms or an oxymoron; Jones (1998) and others disagree. We encourage you to try the exercise on random acts of kindness in the box on the next page and compare your results with your classmates. In conducting your own small research project, you are addressing a research question (does positive deviance exist?), collecting data (observing your own feelings and the reactions of others), and drawing conclusions. As a social scientist, what are your thoughts on positive deviance? Which side do you land on in the debate?
While the exercise on random acts of kindness gives you a chance to think about positive deviance on an individual level, scholars have recently been studying the idea of positive deviance at the organizational or corporate level. Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2004) define positive deviance as follows: “intentional behaviors that significantly depart from the norms of a referent group in honorable ways” (p. 841). An example from Spreitzer and Sonenshein’s article helps to clarify the concept:

In 1978, Merck & Co., one of the world’s largest pharmaceutical companies, inadvertently discovered a potential cure for river blindness, a disease that inflicts tremendous pain, disfigurement, and blindness on its victims. The medication was first discovered as a veterinarian antibiotic, but it quickly created a major dilemma for Merck when its scientists realized the medication could be adapted to become a cure for river blindness. Because river blindness was indigenous to the developing world, Merck knew that it would never recover its research or distribution expenses for the drug. In addition, the company risked bad publicity for any unexpected side effects of the drug that in turn could damage the drug’s reputation as a veterinary antibiotic (Business Enterprise Trust, 1991). Departing from norms in the pharmaceutical industry, Merck decided to manufacture and distribute the drug for free to the developing world, costing the company millions of dollars. Consequently, Merck helped eradicate river blindness, at its own expense. (pp. 834–835)

Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2004) argue that Merck’s action in this case is an excellent example of positive deviance. The organization faced great cost and risk to develop, manufacture, and distribute the drug, yet Merck chose to depart from corporate norms prioritizing profit and gains and, in doing so, prevented further suffering from river blindness.

The idea of positive deviance is growing, at the individual, organizational, and community levels, and new research continues to stretch the concept and add to our understanding of how this “oxymoron” may play out in everyday life. Tufts University even hosts its own Positive Deviance Initiative; the initiative takes as its starting point:

Positive Deviance is based on the observation that in every community there are certain individuals or groups whose uncommon behaviors and strategies enable them to find better solutions to problems than their peers, while having access to the same resources and facing similar challenges. (http://www.positivedeviance.org/)

NOW YOU . . . TRY AN EXPERIMENT IN POSITIVE DEVIANCE!

One way to explore the idea of positive deviance is to conduct your own small-scale experiment and then decide whether you think positive deviance exists. For this exercise, your task is to go out and commit random acts of kindness—arguably, a form of positive deviance.

Many introductory sociology classes ask students to conduct a breaching experiment by breaking a norm and then observing the reactions of those around them. In this case, the goal is to perform a face-to-face act of kindness for a stranger and to take note of the reaction to your behavior.

(Continued)
PART I
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF DEVIANCE AND SOCIAL CONTROL

Question: So Who Are the Deviants? Answer: It Depends on Who You Ask

We cannot emphasize enough how much context matters in any discussion or explanation of deviant behavior. You simply can’t discuss forms of deviance without some reference to culture, context, and historical period. What some people regard as deviant, others regard as virtuous. What some might praise, others condemn. To say that deviance exists does not specify which acts are considered deviant by which groups in what situations and at any given time.

Conclusion

We hope that after reading this chapter—and delving further into this book—your ideas about deviant behavior and social control will have greatly expanded. The more commonly studied types of deviant behavior, such as criminal deviance (including street crime) and elite deviance (including corporate and white-collar crimes), are explored further throughout the book. Our goal in this chapter is simply to help
broaden your understanding of what constitutes deviance and to realize the question, “What is deviance?” must be followed by the qualifier, “According to whom?” We realize that this chapter and this book will not resolve these issues for you and may very well raise more questions than it answers. Still, our goal is to broaden your understanding of deviance and its many forms.

With that goal in mind, we provide a few extra exercises and discussion questions in this chapter to help you explore boundaries, conduct your own experiments, form your own analyses, and begin to think about deviance and social control very broadly. Chapter 3 delves much more specifically into the art and science of researching deviance—you’ll soon see that deviance is a very interesting topic to study and research. For now, we hope you will take a close look at the norms and behavior of your community and the larger society; we think you will soon discover an enormous amount of diversity in the deviance that is all around you.

EXERCISES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Look again at Table 2.1, compiled by Simmons in 1965. Ask several friends or family members the same question Simmons used: “list those things or types of persons whom you regard as deviant,” and compile the responses. Do any of the categories from your small study overlap with those that Simmons found? Do any of the categories from 1965 disappear entirely? How would you explain this?

2. Pay attention over the next 24 hours and see what kinds of deviant behavior you notice. It can be behavior you witness, you commit (hopefully nothing that will get you in trouble!), or you hear about on the news or media. What did you notice? How many different types of deviance were you exposed to in one day?

3. To explore the idea of stigma and how a physical trait can deeply affect an individual’s life, you might try imagining a day with a disability. This exercise will begin with a diary entry: record a typical day (e.g., what you did, the interactions you had, etc.), and then assign yourself a visible attribute typically associated with deviance (e.g., being blind, obese, missing a limb). Rewrite your diary entry to reflect what you imagine would be different that day given your stigma. What obstacles would you face? Would people treat you differently? What did you learn about deviance, social norms, stigma, and coping by completing this exercise?

4. In a recent example of a polygamous lifestyle, the reality television show Sister Wives portrays a polygamist family and begins at the point where the husband is courting his fourth wife. His motto is “Love should be multiplied, not divided.” Do you think this kind of polygamy—where the relationships are consensual and the brides are all adults—is deviant? Why or why not?

KEY TERMS

Body modification  Polygamy  Sexual deviance
Elite deviance  Positive deviance  Stigma
Physical deviance  Self-injury  Subcultures