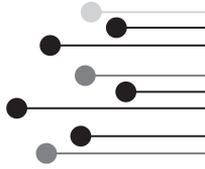


# The Dynamic Nature of Deviance



## Being Left in a Right World

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My paternal grandparents came to the United States from Italy and settled in Pennsylvania, where my grandfather taught himself to read and write English and did his best to accommodate to this new and strange land. They eventually had three children, my father being the eldest. Like many immigrants, my grandfather wanted to assimilate as quickly and certainly as possible. He expected his children to do the same. Although my grandfather's expectations for him and his family are understandable enough, his plans, or at least their implementation, fell on the hard rocks of both social reality and human diversity. My father was born left-handed, which made for a difficult situation for my grandfather (as well as for my father) especially because his two other children (a boy and a girl) were both right-handed (as were he and his wife). The responsible discharge of his parental duties, my grandfather concluded, required that he ensure that his eldest son was like everyone else, so he set about in as many ways as he could to make my left-handed father-to-be into a right-handed individual.

My grandfather insisted that my father do everything with his right hand. He used both verbal commands and physical punishments to accomplish his goal (e.g., a slap to the back of my father's head to correct him). He even went so far as to tie my father's left hand behind his back. My father grappled throughout his life with his father's coercive efforts to make him right-handed, expressing some bitterness over the whole affair. "We live in a right-handed world," he would occasionally claim, something that I as a natural righty neither fully understood nor appreciated.

In his later years, my father developed a passion for the game of golf, which he played whenever he could. He always hit the ball right-handed, using a set of right-handed clubs. (He owned a set of left-handed clubs that he rarely used.) One day, I asked him why he didn't play left-handed, thinking he would do better by employing his natural trait. He replied that he didn't golf left-handed because it would make him look stupid, a comment that tells a lot about the consequences of social differentiation and evaluation. I have met many left-handed people in my life and have discussed their experiences with them. Though a few of them did disclose that they had experienced some prejudice and discrimination from others, usually close family members, none of them had socialization experiences regarding their handedness that were at all comparable to my father's.

It is true that most people on the planet are right-handed, making the category of left-handedness a statistical minority (about 10% of the population). In this sense, my father was a deviant, and if my father had not been born left-handed, my grandfather would not have tried to change him. While this is true, it is not the whole truth. Left-handedness is not intrinsically abnormal, nor are left-handed individuals inherently degenerate or flawed in any moral, psychological, biological, or social way. The construction of social deviance, whether in regard to hand use, sexual orientation, generalized mischief, or anything else, cannot be separated from social reactions and collective definitions. It is the social context and subcultural dynamics that better explain my father's experiences than the fact of his left-handedness. The deviancy of some human quality cannot be separated from the views and understandings of those who perceive and then respond to it.

Although definitions of deviance are built on the facts of human diversity, it is these definitions (and reactions based on them) that must be at the core of *any* explanation of social deviance. Deviance is a contested terrain, and definitions of deviance can and do change for a variety of reasons. The elements we find in my father's experiences—expectations, interactions (and the associated thoughts and emotions), social differentiations, and social evaluations—are the social “stuff” from which *any* social deviance originates. This incident involving hands and human relations has much to teach us about *all* social deviance.

## Relationships and Rule Breaking

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The study of social deviance must involve an understanding of the *origination* of human attitudes, behaviors, and conditions—the ABCs of deviance (Adler & Adler, 2009)—it is true, but it must also involve an understanding of socially constructed *viewpoints* on human attitudes, behaviors, and conditions.

Deviance is not a self-evident category. It does not just float down from the skies applying itself to people who quite obviously are deviant. . . . Even the most deviant of all deviants does not just “happen”; someone has to pass judgement, to portray, to stigmatize, to insult, to heap abuse, to exclude or to reject. (C. Sumner, 1994, p. 223)

Social reactions and cultural meanings strongly affect the type of deviance that exists in society, and patterns of deviance constantly evolve and change over time. What's more, human attitudes, behaviors, and conditions don't always line up in uniform ways with characterizations of them. At one time or place, for certain kinds of people (i.e., those of a certain age or sex),

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drinking alcohol is perfectly proper, while at another time or place, it is forbidden. At one time or place, smoking cigarettes is a sign of maturity and sophistication, while at some other, it is a sign of immaturity and irresponsibility. The *deviancy* of some attitude, behavior, or condition cannot be determined simply by examining it closely (as illustrated by my father's experiences).

Very few, if any, human experiences exist in a social vacuum, and very few, if any, can be understood separately from social context.

Plainly, people throughout the ages have worried over—told tales about, made laws for, designed rituals around—situations that disturb the peace or threaten the communal fabric. Equally plainly, the coming to group attention of a specific threat has largely depended upon how that threat is publicly named, shaped, cast, categorized, and put in context. (Schwartz, 1997, p. 289)

Human beings are simply too inventive in assigning positive and negative labels to the many things that they do for us to ignore in our explanations of social deviance how groups judge and evaluate what other groups and the people in them (or in the *same* groups) are doing, thinking, feeling, and being (O'Brien, 2006; Spector & Kitsuse, 1977). Because we seek to understand deviance as a social relationship, we cannot stop with an *explanation* of human diversity. We must also examine the diversity of claims, labels, narratives, constructions, and characterizations of it.

During the New Orleans Mardi Gras, certain forms of *creative deviance* that might normally be forbidden become customary (Douglas, Rasmussen, & Flanagan, 1977, p. 238). One of these is “parade stripping,” in which women expose their naked breasts to people on parade floats so that they will be thrown glass beads and trinkets. People who are not so accepting of the practice refer to these women as “beadwhores,” and they tend to view parade stripping as unbridled exhibitionism. Those individuals who are caught up in the playful atmosphere of Mardi Gras, however, view things differently (Forsyth, 1992). Parade stripping represents a ritualized exchange of things of value. The float rider gets to see naked breasts, and the woman receives beads, trinkets, and confirmation that her breasts are grand enough to warrant a bestowing of gifts (Shrum & Kilburn, 1996). In 1935, police officers in Atlantic City, New Jersey, arrested 42 *men* on the beach because they wore swimsuits without tops. Imagine what these officers would have done at Mardi Gras (or on a nude beach)!

## Societies, Cultures, Groups, and Subcultures

Each society contains a culture, along with a multitude of groups, each with its own subculture (J. P. Williams, 2011). The word *culture* was first used in 1877 by the anthropologist Edward Tylor to describe the totality

of humans' behavioral, material, intellectual, and spiritual products. It now refers to designs for living or shared understandings that members of a society use as they act together. A *subculture* is a culture within a culture, identifiable by its distinctive constellation of information (Kluckhohn, 1949). Poker players are a subculture, as are attorneys, guitar players, and stamp collectors. A focus on culture and subculture is one of the best ways to explain why people are the same in some ways but different in others (Blackman, 2014; Demerath, 2014). Cultural tastes of individuals—the music they like, the food they prefer, the leisure activities they enjoy—directly determine the kind of social networks and friends they have, which are the locations of meaningful joint activities (Lewis & Kaufman, 2018; Lizardo, 2017).

When you follow the rules and expectations of one subculture, it almost always means that you are violating the rules and expectations of a lot of other subcultures (Sellin, 1938). For example, youth culture contradicts other parts of U.S. culture in many ways, as it gives young people an outlet for some of the insecurities and anxieties that occur during adolescence (Danesi, 2010). When adolescents follow the rules of youth subculture—a reasonable thing for them to do—it can bring them into conflict with other subcultures that encourage different behaviors from their members (Haenfler, 2013). New meanings can develop and gain acceptance up until the time is reached when they are replaced by things that seem more interesting or functional (Raud, 2016). These meanings may change in ways neither envisioned nor intended by their creators (McDonnell, 2016).

Humans formulate cultural rules about “proper” and “improper” ways of thinking, acting, feeling, and being. These rules are called *norms*. The directive to “chew your food with your lips closed” is the statement of a norm, as is the sign found in many restaurants informing customers, “No shoes, no shirt, no service.” These standards help to determine what is important, what fits where, and what is deviant (Busch, 2011). Norms are usually coupled with *sanctions*. A *positive sanction* (e.g., a promotion at work or an award at college) conveys approval and encourages norm-following activities; a *negative sanction* (e.g., a ticket for speeding) conveys disapproval and is designed to discourage norm-breaking activities. Norms are an important part of culture and subculture, helping us to better understand regularities in human behavior (Becker, 1982). People in most societies work to eliminate as many uncertainties as possible. They try to accomplish this by formulating and applying extensive systems of rules and regulations to practically everything they can (Bauman, 1991, 2006, 2011).

Ferrell's (1993) study in Denver of graffiti and graffiti writers (i.e., the individuals who paint on public structures, such as walls, viaducts, buildings, trains, or fences) shows how subcultural dynamics, group processes, and social control coalesce to make social deviance. Graffiti writing requires an individual who paints well enough to be able to do it in the dark and with enough speed and daring to evade detection. This demands both technology (e.g., spray paint) and sufficient knowledge and skill to

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be able to paint a design. Graffiti writers learn from one another as they see each other's artistic products, and crews of graffiti writers may work together on a project.

At one time, the public's attitude toward graffiti, as well as that of police, was one of tolerance or even disinterest. However, this all changed starting in the early 1980s. Local politicians and business leaders worked together to generate a sense of urgency and moral outrage about the dangers that graffiti posed to society and social order. These anti-graffiti crusaders portrayed it as a growing menace that could only be stopped by extreme measures. Instead of defining it as a form of adolescent fun or an alternate art form, crusaders against graffiti branded it as a form of violence, crime, ruthlessness, irresponsibility, and vandalism of the worst kind. Graffiti writers were portrayed as immoral, uncaring, disrespectful, untrustworthy, and selfish. Both graffiti and graffiti writers were depicted as the source of ecological destruction and lawlessness, having the potential to destroy the entire city. Negative images and catch phrases were used as often as possible to condemn both the writers and the graffiti: "graffitidiots," "graffiti creeps," "gauche graffiti goons," "graffiti vandals," and "spray-can cretins" (Ferrell, 1993, p. 137). The campaign against graffiti was never widely understood by the general public for what it was: a way for business leaders and politicians to further their own interests.

One objective of the moral enterprise initiated against graffiti writers was to place them in the same category as people who paint obscenities on bridges, who wantonly break windows, and who damage cemeteries. Instead of using the more neutral verb "to paint" to describe graffiti writing, opponents and critics opted for the more inflammatory words "attack," "rob," or "destroy." The word "suicide" was even used to make it appear that graffiti writers were self-destructive because they were destroying the neighborhoods within which they lived and so, ultimately, themselves (Ferrell, 1993, p. 139). As if the branding of graffiti as a type of assault, robbery, suicide, or murder of the urban environment was not enough, the anti-graffiti campaigners had another inflammatory word at their disposal: They equated graffiti writing with rape ("We feel like we've been raped" [p. 142]). As Ferrell (1993) puts it, "It is difficult to say whether such tactics are more offensive to rape victims or graffiti writers; it is not difficult to see that such tactics are designed to locate graffiti in the worst possible context" (p. 142). The anti-graffiti crusaders wanted to generate enough outrage in the general public that any political response to graffiti, no matter how excessive, would seem justified. What these graffiti writers produced was branded as deviance principally because of the challenges it offered to governmental and economic elites who wanted to have exclusive rights to determine how public space is used and who is allowed to use it. The real deviance of graffiti writers, according to Ferrell (1993), had little to do with anything intrinsic to their artistic creations. It mostly had to do with the fact that they refused to do what they were told.

## Being Centered

As newborns, we humans are *egocentric*, meaning we are wrapped up in our own viewpoint (Piaget, 1948). We look out on the world and respond to the people in it, it is true, but early in life we have no external or outside position from which to view *ourselves* or to evaluate what we are and do. As we become more aware of others and participate in meaningful relationships with them, we start looking at our society and ourselves in new ways. We eventually come to think, feel, and act in *anticipation* of the impact we can have on others. It becomes less likely that we will intentionally hurt someone else, but it does not automatically guarantee that we won't. People—some more than others—will maintain some of their egocentricity throughout their lives. They will continue to do what is good for them *as individuals*, even if it is contrary to the wishes and interests of others or even contrary to cultural rules.

Another kind of centeredness is *ethnocentrism*, which exists when members of some society or group come to believe that their culture or subculture—the system of values, norms, and customs—is better than everyone else's. If Americans were to decide that they were better than, say, Italians, because Americans believe they play baseball better, this could easily be a reflection of ethnocentrism. A custom in one culture (baseball) is being used to evaluate and then belittle members of some other culture who have little or no knowledge of the sport. Using the values, norms, or customs of one culture to evaluate people of some other culture will usually produce a great deal of distortion and misunderstanding. Ethnocentrism makes it more likely that some people will define as inferior other people who are merely *different* from them or who do things differently. Difference is easily transformed into deviance, and deviance is easily transformed into abnormality or degeneracy.

Too much ethnocentrism or egocentrism makes it less likely that people will be able to—or willing to—look at the world through others' eyes. *Empathy* (or *role-taking*) is encouraged—but not demanded—as we interact with others and mentally project ourselves into their positions, incorporating their viewpoints into our own (Mead, 1934). Some thought-provoking and controversial research suggests that humans, albeit some more than others, have *mirror neurons* in their brains, which increase their ability to empathize with others (Iacoboni, 2009). We must be cautious not to make too much of this research. Empathy is not identical to sympathy. Just because we can identify with others, and maybe even understand their viewpoints, it does not mean we necessarily can feel their pain or that we care at all about what happens to them (Cronk & Leech, 2013).

The opposite of ethnocentrism is *cultural relativity*, which is anchored on the idea that human experiences and conditions must always be viewed and understood in the particular social and cultural contexts within which they originate and develop. Cultural relativists usually use the concept of culture only to describe and explain relationships and regularities in human experience. They are disinclined to use culture to judge people or to compare

people in different societies or groups to one another. Franz Boas, for example, would not rank cultures from good to bad no matter how primitive some cultures might have appeared to outsiders (cited in Mintz, 1982, p. 501). He insisted that no universal standard or rule exists that can be used to decide exactly *which* attitudes, behaviors, or conditions are best. Cultures for him and his students (e.g., Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Melville Herskovits) may have been separate, but they were also equal to one another.

Although Boas and his students did reaffirm the importance and value of cultural relativity, their exaggerated devotion to it blinded them to its fundamental error: Just because all cultures are proclaimed to be equivalent doesn't mean that they actually are.

Many would surely be troubled by the idea that the political systems of Iraq, Hitler's Germany, or the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia were, or are, as good as those in, say, Norway, Japan, or Switzerland. And they would probably react with disbelief to the assertion that there is no scientific basis for evaluating another society's practice of genocide, judicial torture or human sacrifice, for example, except as the people in that society themselves evaluate these practices. (Edgerton, 1992, p. 2)

As systems of power, knowledge, morality, and surveillance change, so do patterns of deviance (Ben-Yehuda, 2006; Foucault, 2003; Mills, 1943; Staples, 2000). This does not mean, however, that all human customs are equivalent to one another and identical in all ways (as Edgerton notes in the above quote). Norms forbidding slavery are different from norms that forbid nose picking or shoplifting. Some deviance is harmful and dangerous—or “hard”—while other deviance is “soft,” a form of creativity and spontaneity, posing little threat to a society or the people in it (Raybeck, 1991, p. 54). My father's left-handedness is a different type of trespass than is mass murder or child abduction.

## Sociological Relativity

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### A Relativizing Motif

Peter Berger, in his *Invitation to Sociology* (1963), showed the value of a *relativizing motif*. This demands that we keep foremost in our explanations of human experience the fact that identities, ideas, and customs are specific to a particular time and place and that things are never (or rarely) what they seem.

The sociological frame of reference, with its built-in procedure of looking for levels of reality other than those given in the official

interpretations of society, carries with it a logical imperative to unmask the pretensions and the propaganda by which men cloak their actions with each other. (p. 38)

To fully explain—and therefore to fully understand—we must develop and then nourish whatever capacity we have to alternate from one perspective to another and to take account of meaning systems that stand in opposition to one another. This leads neither automatically nor inevitably to a greater tolerance of group or cultural differences. What it does lead to, however, is the willingness to scrutinize and then call into question what most other people take for granted (Bauman & May, 2001; Portes, 2000).

Practically anything that can be done with the human body has been done, either as a source of individual pleasure or as a matter of group custom, by somebody (or somebodies), somewhere, sometime. This means an incredible diversity exists in human attitudes, behaviors, and conditions. An even greater diversity exists in the *judgments* and *evaluations* humans make of attitudes, behaviors, and conditions that they find (Cohen, 1974). Definitions of deviance change over time and as we move from one group to another at the same point in time (Adler & Adler, 2006). In other words, deviance is defined up and down all the time (Krauthammer, 1993; Moynihan, 1993). Things that were mightily upsetting to one generation are trivial to the next (i.e., defining deviance down) and vice versa (i.e., defining deviance up). Serious deviances in one group are routine and regular happenings in some other group. Goffman (1963) asserted that “normal” and “stigmatized” are not inherent qualities of individuals but *perspectives* on individuals (p. 138). If anything intrinsically real or objective may be found in the human condition, it is the intrinsically situational nature of both rules and reactions, producing a dynamic, negotiated social order (Becker, 1973, p. 196).

Most U.S. shoppers want to know the price of an item before they purchase to decide if they can afford it. What shoppers in other parts of the world want to know, especially in Indonesia or the Arab world, is what the lowest price is that a seller will accept. Buyers in these countries never pay the listed price, no matter what the item is and no matter how much they want it (Welsch & Vivanco, 2015). It would be insulting to the sellers if the buyers were to do so. The custom is to bargain or haggle over an item's cost, sometimes for several hours. Buyers may break off negotiations several times, heading out of the store, only to be stopped by the sellers for further negotiations until a price acceptable to both seller and buyer is agreed upon. (Sellers, knowing how the game is played, will set the listed prices of items much higher than what they expect to get.)

Deviance is not a quality of the act a person commits, Becker (1963) instructs. It is a function of the application of rules and sanctions to a suspect individual. Those traits individuals possess that are objects of reverence to their friends are—or can be—objects of disgust to their enemies.

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The traits have not changed, but the meanings of them have. Such assessments depend as much or more on *who* is doing the evaluating than they do on *what* is being evaluated (as my father's experiences with his father show). "No trait is normal or pathological in itself but only acquires the quality of normality (or deviance) with regard to the environment in which it arises" (Horwitz, 2008, p. 366). How things look and get defined depends a lot on where you're standing and who is there with you. If any human universal has relevance for our understanding of social deviance, then it must surely be the human inclination to construct social differences and then to persecute anyone who seems to be too out of step with everybody else (Moore, 1987).

## Doing Relativity

Sociological relativity demands that social scientists who want to understand groups of people, even ones that are very different from their own, must suspend their moral judgments and look at the world through the eyes of the people they wish to understand. This requires the "practice of putting yourself in your adversary's shoes, not in order to wear them as your own but in order to have some understanding (far short of approval) of why someone else might wear them" (Fish, 2001, p. A23). The principal objective of relativists is to understand customs and cultural beliefs by looking first and foremost at the social and historical contexts. Relativists may be less inclined to be ethnocentric or egocentric because taking the roles of others and looking through their eyes may increase relativists' tolerance for practices different from their own. Goffman (1961) shows how this can work in the following: "[T]he awesomeness, distastefulness, and barbarity of a foreign culture can decrease to the degree that the student becomes familiar with the point of view to life that is taken by his subjects" (p. 130). Goffman's assertion is true, but it's not the whole truth. Although some things that initially seemed foreign or strange may become less so with greater familiarity, it is also possible for things that once seemed ordinary to look strange as an observer's familiarity with them increases.

The *decrease* in ethnocentrism and the *increase* in tolerance that can come from a relativistic approach must be tempered by the knowledge that some of the things that an individual may find in the groups he or she is studying may be too maladaptive or damaging for them to be overlooked. Relativity is difficult to defend if it demands acceptance of things such as murder, rape, slavery, mutilation, or assassinations, all under the banner of a doctrinaire acceptance of cultural equivalency and celebration of diversity. If relativity becomes too relativistic, it invites criticism and rejection from non-relativists for its moral indifference (Gibbs, 1966).

Contrary to the cultural relativity of Boas and his students, all outcomes are not equivalent. A well-played basketball game is different from a poorly played one; a well-run company is not identical to one that is

inefficient; stealing other people's money is not the same as earning it; a badly written novel is not the same as a well-written one; getting a ship safely to port is not the same as smashing it into an iceberg; dishonesty is different from honesty; an interesting lecture is different from a dull one; and a silk purse is not the same as a sow's ear. Meanings are not necessarily randomly or capriciously attached to human attitudes, behaviors, and conditions (Lemert, 1972). A sociological relativist is unlikely to believe that anything goes just because a majority of people says it does. However, he or she is likely to believe that a wide range of things *could* go. It is the belief in human potentialities, coupled with a determination to explain correctly, that characterizes sociological relativity.

## The Social Construction of Reality

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### Making Sense of Common Sense

Some human activities can exist independently from a socially constructed system of rules. Eating, drinking, sleeping, and waste elimination are *regulated* in all places and at all times by rules, but these activities would occur even without them. For example, humans cough due to an involuntary muscular spasm in the throat that clears air passages. Things get stuck in the throat or irritate it, and a cough occurs. In U.S. culture, expulsion of air from the body that makes a cough, however, is regulated by rules. Years ago (in the United States), the “correct” or “proper” way to cough was to expel air into an open hand that covered the mouth. The H1N1 (swine flu) virus, which first appeared in 2009, was an impetus to change how we cough (or, more correctly, how we *regulate* how we cough). Now, it is the crook of the elbow that is the “correct” or “proper” target of the expelled air because it apparently works better to reduce the spread of germs. However, some kinds of human activity are *constituted* by rules, not merely regulated by them. If the rules were nonexistent, the activity in question would be as well. For example, if you refuse to follow the rules of chess, then you are not playing the game correctly (Searle, 1995).

Although all cultural rules—both regulative and constitutive—have a provisional quality (Troyer, 1992), their conventional nature is sometimes easy to miss. The social world (or parts of it) can reach the point where it “thickens” and “hardens” so much that its members think and feel it is natural and inevitable, more like a force of nature than a socially constructed reality amenable to change (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Kraaykamp & van Eijck, 2010). Some cultural ideas endure so long that they attain the enviable status of “common sense,” something that seems to be true beyond dispute. If these ideas weren't true, conventional wisdom instructs, why do so many of us believe them? Decisions made on impulse and with little thought can sometimes be as good as decisions made carefully and deliberately (Gladwell, 2005).

*Common sense* is actually a constellation of inconsistent and often incoherent ideas, each of which seems right at a given time but carries no guarantee of being right at any other time. Common sense makes us think we know and understand more than we do (Watts, 2011, 2014).

Bad things happen not because we forget to use our common sense, but rather because the incredible effectiveness of common sense in solving the problems of everyday life prompts us to put more faith in it than it can bear. (Watts, 2011, p. 23)

We must not confuse commonsense notions with empirically correct descriptions and understandings. The Ongee people live on the Andaman Islands (in the Indian Ocean). They learn early in life—so it is common sense—that environmental catastrophes (e.g., tidal waves, hurricanes, or earthquakes) are caused by their long-dead ancestors. This cultural belief works for them but probably not for members of other societies. What these people view as knowledge that is clear, taken for granted, and commonsense would be challenged or even scoffed at by people from other cultures who hold very different commonsense understandings about how the world works.

Benjamin Franklin wrote that honesty is the best policy, and individuals are encouraged to “always tell the truth.” Even a bit of fortune cookie philosophy for the wayward reaffirms honesty’s importance: “Never forget that a half truth is a whole lie.” However, the cultural encouragement of honesty may be mostly rhetoric. Ruane and Cerulo (2015) emphasize the following: “Clearly, we would be lying to say that our culture firmly endorses honesty as the best policy” (p. 197). As we learn that lying is wrong (and give lip service to honesty’s importance), we also can learn how to lie, when to lie, how to excuse and justify the lies we’ve told, and who deserves to hear the truth and who does not. In fact, Stephens-Davidowitz (2017) insists that people lie about practically everything, and they lie to practically everyone: friends, bosses, relatives, physicians, and even to themselves, principally to make themselves look better and increase their social desirability.

Social context has a substantial impact on the whole process of lying: whether lies are told and even what qualifies as a lie in the first place. While honesty is one way to achieve life’s goals, dishonesty may be an easier, more effective, or less stressful way to achieve them. Whenever greater emphasis is placed on achieving goals than on how they are achieved—“winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing”—deviance becomes more likely (Merton, 1938). The Josephson Institute (2012) surveyed 23,000 high school students and reported that 76% of the sample had lied to a parent about something significant, while 55% had lied to a teacher. Ruane and Cerulo (2015) conclude that the normal lie is a crucial mechanism for maintaining the flow of social interaction. It practically goes without saying that what qualifies as normal lying is open to interpretation.

## Creating Deviance

The existence of social deviance in human societies cannot be separated from the human ability to create and internalize symbols. A *symbol* is a physical gesture or sound (e.g., a word) that represents something specific because of group agreement. Humans do not live only in a physical world of smells, sights, sounds, tastes, and touches. We live in a world of “hot and humid”; “felonies and misdemeanors”; “pepperoni pizzas”; “governments by the people and for the people”; and many other things, material and nonmaterial, that are identified and represented in a culture or subculture. Symbols make it possible for individuals to become active and interactive members of a society or group.

In U.S. culture, an important difference exists between a “wink” and a “blink” (or a twitch) (Geertz, 1973). If an individual were to get something in his or her eye, the sufferer might blink or twitch the eyelid several times to remove the irritation. A blink is fairly automatic and has no symbolic meaning. A wink, however, is enacted on purpose to convey some intent to another person or persons and to elicit a particular response. In order for a wink to work, everyone—the creator of the wink as well as all who see it—must understand the purpose or meaning of the eye movements in the same way. So, in U.S. culture, we might wink to show others that we are in on the joke or to attract the attention of someone we’d like to know better. The proverbial Martian, being ignorant of the ways of U.S. culture, would see no difference between a wink and a blink, but to those in the know (because they’ve been taught), a world of difference exists between blinks and winks. Symbols only work if two or more people understand them in the same way.

Deviants can be symbolized in ways that prevent their deviances from posing any serious threats to the dominant construction of reality and the shared understandings on which it is based. If anything, the existence of deviance is used by supporters of the status quo to encourage an allegiance to conformity and conventionality (Reiman & Leighton, 2010). Deviance is branded as sick, evil, or abnormal, rather than as a cultural alternative or functional group difference. The definition of alternate realities as inauthentic, pathological, or just plain nuts reinforces the dominant view of reality and makes the status quo appear more immutable, concrete, and commonsensical than it actually is. The construction of deviant labels and their assignment to particular individuals serves to mask social conflicts, making labelers more confident that their way is the only *right* way (Parsons, 1951). Because deviance is a contested social terrain, different people, both individually and in groups, may have vastly different ideas about what it is and what ought to be done about it.

Westboro Baptist Church (WBC) was formed in Topeka, Kansas, in 1955, by Fred Phelps (who died in March 2014). He had a strict and fundamental view of God and Christianity, and he attracted people to

his congregation who held beliefs as rigid and fundamental as his own. Members of WBC are fervently convinced that God is hell bent on punishing anyone who commits sexual trespasses. They believe that God's distaste for sexual deviances knows no bounds, and so transgressors should be punished, both in this life and in the hereafter for all eternity (Baker, Bader, & Hirsch, 2015). Church members view homosexuality as the baddest of the bad, being both unnatural and immoral. More specifically, their core belief is that any society that tolerates homosexuality is committing a major sin, inviting God's damnation and punishment. Members of WBC publicly protest homosexuality whenever they can, because they believe it shows their obedience to God and respect for Christian values. In addition, by participating in protest activities, it confirms—in their own eyes at any rate—that they are among God's chosen, individuals who one day will enter the kingdom of heaven (Barrett-Fox, 2016).

Their condemnation of homosexuality does not make members of WBC much different from other fundamentally conservative religious groups, but their political activities do. Phelps and his followers were continually “upping the bar” in their public protests to garner more and more attention for their denunciation and condemnation of homosexuality and homosexuals. They showed their contempt by protesting at funerals for AIDS victims; at lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) pride events; and at funerals for prominent supporters of LGBT rights. In 1998, they even protested at the funeral for Matthew Shepard, a victim of a homophobic hate crime. However, what put them on the radar screen of so many people who wanted to end their campaign of hate and disrespect was that members of the church protested at funerals of U.S. soldiers killed in Afghanistan and Iraq. The parishioners' rationale was that the U.S. military itself was a sinful abomination and affront to God, deserving nothing other than damnation because it was allowing gay men and women to serve. Members of the church broke widely shared rules with respect to emotional displays and public behaviors in order to produce a dramatic effect (Powell-Williams & Powell-Williams, 2017).

The protest activities of the church grew increasingly irritating and objectionable to more and more people. Their protests at soldiers' funerals, which regularly involved burnings of U.S. flags, were more than an affront to the memory of the deceased soldier. They were a desecration of both the American identity and the entire U.S. social fabric (Baker et al., 2015). WBC and its members were increasingly defined as the problem, not what they were protesting, and fewer and fewer people had any sympathy for the protesters and their activities.

Although the actions and claims of WBC may have been offensive, if not thoroughly contemptible, one problem remained: They were entirely legal. Members of WBC know the law, and they scrupulously refuse to do anything to violate it. WBC always followed local ordinances in regard to when and where they could protest, and they always acted in a peaceful

manner. However, as they became increasingly mean-spirited—or were defined that way—they reached a point where they could no longer be overlooked and ignored. They generated enough adverse publicity and hostility that politicians at several levels of government moved to regulate and restrict them and what they were doing.

In 2006, the Respect for America's Fallen Heroes Act (H.R. 5037) was introduced and was overwhelmingly supported by both the House and the Senate. It was signed into law by then-President George W. Bush on Memorial Day. It gave each state the power to restrict demonstrations at any military funeral. Within 2 years, most states had passed laws that defined funeral protests as forms of disorderly conduct, making it possible for protesters to be corralled and their protests to be almost entirely neutralized. However, laws, even harsh ones, can do nothing more than *restrict* Westboro's protest activities. They cannot completely eliminate them.

## Theoretical Views: The Old and the Not-So-Old

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### Bad Actors and Bad Acts

One of the earliest conceptions of deviance and deviant was founded on a belief that deviants could be separated from nondeviants on the basis of inherent or intrinsic characteristics of the individual rule breaker (Devroye, 2010; Rafter, 1997). Usually, some biological or psychological factor, such as body chemistry, intelligence, or brain dysfunction, was identified and then blamed for the trespass (Bernard, Snipes, & Gerould, 2010; Lilly, Cullen, & Ball, 2019; F. P. Williams & McShane, 2018). Because the deviance was almost always viewed as unacceptable, correctible, and unnecessary, the temptation to see defect, abnormality, or degeneracy in the biology or psychology of deviants was too great to resist. Simply put, deviants were viewed as both distinct (identifiable and all alike) and inferior, so deviance was anything that abnormal people did (or were). This claim, however, of uniform and universal inferiority was based on both bad logic and bad science (Merton & Ashley-Montagu, 1940).

The belief developed that with certain kinds of deviance (e.g., crime), the deviant had inherited physical traits or markers of his or her degeneracy. Furthermore, these could be recognized by observers if they knew what to look for (e.g., asymmetry of the face, twisted noses, receding chins, too-large jaws or cheekbones, too-large or too-small ears, abnormal teeth, too-long arms, extra fingers or toes) (Lilly et al., 2019, p. 19). This kind of marginal thinking that deviance was inherited was not restricted to marginal thinkers. Former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes

Jr., in a 1927 case (*Buck v. Bell*), upheld the forced sterilization of an adolescent female. She was deemed, using the language of the times, to be both retarded and a deficient mother. Holmes reasoned that

it is better for all the world if, instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind. . . . Three generations of imbeciles are enough. (Schnakenberg, 2009, pp. 46–47)

Some theorists focused on deviant acts instead of deviant individuals, classifying these acts as inherently or intrinsically deviant. For example, Parsons (1951) insisted that deviance produces a disturbance in the equilibrium of interactive systems, and Schwendinger and Schwendinger (1975) asserted that deviance is behavior that is harmful. As sociologists and anthropologists demonstrated the great array that exists in human customs and conditions, the meaning of deviance changed. Attention was less on deviants and what they did and more on the relativity of reactions and relationships (Best, 2004).

The concept of *relativity* is found in the works of both Karl Marx and Émile Durkheim. Marx (1846/1978) was inclined to believe that the economic forms within which humans produce, consume, and exchange are transitory and historical. No final conclusion, theory, or premise exists that applies universally to all times, places, and circumstances. However, the first thorough-going application of relativity to an understanding of deviance is found in Durkheim's *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895/1938), where he contrasts the “normal” with the “pathological.” Durkheim asks us to imagine a society of saints, where each individual is exemplary, so crimes such as murder, rape, or assault will not exist (pp. 68–69). This does not mean, however, that crime will be unknown. Offenses that might seem trivial and ordinary to us would appear quite scandalous in this saintly society. Durkheim was indicating that it is the *attitude* about, and *reaction* to, some social arrangement that is responsible for its categorization as criminal.

Relativity also appears in his *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893/1933), where Durkheim asserts that many acts are regarded as criminal, even though they are not intrinsically harmful, such as touching a forbidden object, allowing a sacred fire to die out, or failing to make a required sacrifice (p. 72). Although we might now refuse to classify normative violations like these as crimes, Durkheim's point stands: Crime is whatever people say it is, and it is social reaction that establishes what is harmful, not the other way around. Deviance as an analytical and empirical category may be nearly universal, but the particular form that deviance takes is not (Ben-Yehuda, 1990, 2006).

## The Chicago School

In the United States, a group of sociologists in the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago were the first to use a relativistic approach to deviance. Known as the Chicago School, they were to exert a tremendous amount of influence on practically all subsequent approaches to deviance and crime that had any sociological leanings (Lanier, Henry, & Anastasia, 2015). Bernard et al. (2010) declare that the Chicago School is a gold mine that continues to enrich the study of crime even today. For representatives of the Chicago School, neither absolutes nor universal rules of human behavior existed (F. P. Williams & McShane, 2018).

The Chicago School emphasized the powerful role played by context and social setting in the creation of deviance and crime by showing that coexisting and yet incompatible subcultures could spur different ways of acting, thinking, and feeling. The Chicago School also showed that different groups could evaluate the same conduct or social arrangement in different ways. As these Chicago sociologists moved from one area to another in the urban milieu, they found different group customs and subcultural meanings. They concluded that deviance and crime were highest in zones or natural areas with the highest levels of deregulation and social disorganization.

The Chicago School, embodied particularly in the work of Edwin Hardin Sutherland (1947), clarified how differential association makes it possible for some individuals to learn things that other individuals do not. By focusing on symbolic interaction and learned behavior, Sutherland developed a social and interactive understanding of the development of crime, while he offered a contextual understanding of shared rules and social values. This transformed the meaning of social disorganization into something closer to what actually exists in the real world: differential social organization. This helped to erode even further the idea that deviants were degenerate and that deviance was inherently abnormal.

The principal factor in understanding why some people break the law, Sutherland (1947) insisted, is to be found in the meanings or definitions they give to events in the social world. Most juvenile delinquency, for example, is learned from others with whom the juvenile has meaningful and rewarding contacts. It is rarely an outcome of fractured interpersonal relationships or a response to isolation and despair (Smångs, 2010). Having delinquent companions is one of the best and most consistent predictors of a teenager's own delinquent activity (Chapple, Vaske, & Worthen, 2014; Menard & Johnson, 2015; Warr, 1993, 2002). Delinquent acts may be an expression of *subterranean values*, such as autonomy, daring, street smartness, aggressive masculinity, and conspicuous consumption (Matza & Sykes, 1961).

Sutherland (1947) believed that face-to-face interaction was the only way that definitions favorable to violating the law could be learned. However, in this day and age, where the information superhighway is so wide

and long, television, movies, and cell phones play a prominent role in our lives. Many of us are now part of *portable communities* (Chayko, 2008, p. 8), networks of interactants who are connected through online and mobile technologies, regardless of whether we meet face-to-face frequently, infrequently, or never (Ling, 2012). The chance that an individual will engage in deviant behavior is an outcome of learning favorable definitions about such behavior, the reinforcement one receives for it, and the chances that exist to observe and copy the deviance of others (Alleyne & Wood, 2014). Deviance is more likely when an individual's friends engage in it too (Tedor, 2015).

With the passage of time, Sutherland's view of learning was fleshed out by adding newly developed (and still developing) ideas from psychology and social psychology about how humans learn (Tibbetts & Hemmens, 2010). One of the more important reformulations of Sutherland's differential association theory has been done by Burgess and Akers (1966), which itself was expanded by Akers (1985). These theorists contributed additional (and valuable) information about how humans acquire deviant behaviors through imitation and vicarious learning (F. P. Williams & McShane, 2018).

## Norms and Naughtiness

By the middle of the twentieth century, more and more sociologists had reached the conclusion that deviance was never going to be suitably understood by looking at intrinsic or essential qualities of deviants that distinguished them from nondeviants. Attitudes, behaviors, and conditions are simply too relative and dynamic to be pigeonholed into two mutually exclusive categories of normality and abnormality. The concept of *norm* was adopted as a better way—or so it seemed—to explain and understand the nature of social deviance.

William Graham Sumner's (1906) discussion of *folkways*, a type of norm, had indicated that they are inherited from the past and direct human behavior almost automatically. When rules are followed, they facilitate the adjustment of individuals to life conditions and to each other. It was an easy leap to the view that deviance is a normative departure and that norms could make anything right or wrong, depending on the particular demands of time and place (Gibbs, 1966; W. G. Sumner, 1906). Becker (1963) retained the idea of norm but changed the thinking about responsibility. It was no longer the rule breaker who was at fault for failing to follow the rules. Becker reasoned that it is the group *itself* that creates deviance by making rules whose violation qualifies as deviance, identifying rule breakers, and treating them as outsiders.

It is essential to see deviance as an outcome of a process of interaction between people, some of whom in their own interests make and enforce

rules that catch others who are doing (or being) something that gets them labeled as deviants and treated accordingly.

A successful, and enforceable, social construction of a particular label of deviance depends on the ability of one, or more, groups to use (or generate) enough power so as to enforce *their* definition and version of morality on others. . . . Deviance . . . always results from negotiations about morality *and* the configuration of power relationships. (Ben-Yehuda, 1990, pp. 6–7)

Some of these moral crusades are very successful, having enduring effects, while others are short-lived, dying quickly and with little fanfare.

No longer were norms necessarily viewed as reflective of a society-wide consensus or a universal morality. C. Wright Mills (1943), one of the most influential sociologists in the history of the discipline (Oakes, 2011), showed that the prevailing norms always reflect some specific group's biased view of what is proper or improper; norms reflect the power, interests, and outlooks of the groups that create them. Under Mills's gaze, not only did norms produce efficiency and predictability in human behavior, but they also served as smokescreens to hide the wellspring of power and class interests. Norms are "propaganda for conformity," embodying and demanding adherence to standards that are biased, reflecting a confluence of class, status, and power (p. 179).

## The Labeling or Social Reactions Perspective

Once theoretical explanations of deviance were sensitive to the role played by the "other" in the construction of deviance, a whole new world of possibilities was opened. It could be maintained with credibility and confidence that social control *itself* has the ironic effect of actually creating deviance and channeling the direction that it takes (Lemert, 1972). Tannenbaum (1938) insisted that social labels (and other social reactions) actually create deviance: "The process of making the criminal, therefore, is a process of tagging, defining, identifying, segregating, describing, emphasizing, making conscious and self-conscious; it becomes a way of stimulating, suggesting, emphasizing, and evoking the very traits that are complained of" (pp. 19–20). A new wrinkle had been added: The understanding of social deviance required an analysis of the processes by which persons are defined and treated *as deviant* by others. The definition of deviance changed to reflect this new understanding: "Deviance is not a property *inherent in* certain forms of behavior; it is a property *conferred upon* these forms by the audiences which directly or indirectly witness them" (Erikson, 1962, p. 308).

How can social control create deviance? One way is by naming, labeling, or categorizing some attitudes, behaviors, or conditions as types of

deviance, separating them from other attitudes, behaviors, or conditions that are considered to be proper or even desirable.

Deviance may be conceived as a process by which the members of a group, community, or society (1) interpret behavior as deviant, (2) define persons who so behave as a certain kind of deviant, and (3) accord them the treatment considered appropriate to such deviants. (Kitsuse, 1962, p. 248)

A second possibility is that the *reactions* of other people to an individual's initial or primary deviance—what these others say, do, or believe—can powerfully impact the nature and form of all subsequent deviant behavior of the labeled individual.

[W]e start with the idea that persons and groups are differentiated in various ways, some of which result in social penalties, rejection and segregation. These penalties and segregative reactions of society or the community are dynamic factors which increase, decrease, and condition the form which the initial differentiation or deviation takes. (Lemert, 1951, p. 22)

According to Lemert's (1951, 1972) *secondary deviance proposition*, an individual's deviant behavior evolves to the point where it is constructed principally as a means of defense, attack, or adaptation to the problems created by the real or anticipated disapproving, degrading, or isolating reactions of others.

About the same time that Lemert was exploring the role of secondary processes in human deviance, Merton was exploring how collective events (i.e., human actions, decisions, or beliefs) can have unanticipated consequences. One possibility, which Merton (1948) called the “self-fulfilling prophecy” (p. 195), is that a *false* or *incorrect* definition of a situation changes subsequent events sufficiently that it actually becomes true. Students, for example, convinced that they are destined to fail an exam, become so nervous and anxious that they worry more than they study, and they do fail. Merton (1968) also acknowledged—though he spent no time developing the idea—that beliefs (and reactions based on them) can be self-destroying, an idea he credited to John Venn, a nineteenth-century logician. Merton (1948) called this a “suicidal prophecy” (p. 196). The suicidal prophecy prevents, or “kills off,” the fulfillment of an outcome that would otherwise have developed. The hare in the famous fable about its race against the tortoise demonstrates a suicidal prophecy. The rabbit was so certain that it would beat the slow-moving reptile that it behaved imprudently, and it did not win the race. Another example is found in the situation where a teacher tells a student that he or she will never amount to anything, which results in the pupil working hard to prove the teacher wrong.

These two prophecies have not been treated equally in subsequent analyses of deviance. Becker (1963), for example, only felt obliged to use a self-fulfilling prophecy in his analysis of deviant careers (failing to credit Merton when he did), ignoring the suicidal prophecy entirely. This gave the false or at least distorted impression that the only situations of importance to an analysis of deviance are when social mechanisms work together to shape individuals into the images that people have of them. Although it is true that sometimes an individual's deviance is amplified by the reactions of others, this is not the only possibility.

## The Normality of Deviance

Deviance came to be viewed as an inevitable and rather ordinary feature of life in a pluralistic society, and deviants came to be viewed as more sinned against than sinning. In fact, siding with deviants became as defensible as siding with representatives of conventional society, such as police, judges, or psychiatrists. The deviant's right to be different and to be free from stigma and harassment was actively defended. Deviance was defined increasingly in political terms. Power—the power to label and the power to legitimate one's own view of proper and improper—emerged as a central explanatory variable in understanding deviance (Young, 2011). Deviance was conceptualized more than ever before as a name, label, category, definition, vocabulary, discourse, typification, or narrative that was applied to individuals and what they think, do, and are (Dellwing, 2011). It is even possible that state intervention will create more crime than it eliminates (Lilly et al., 2019; Reiman & Leighton, 2010).

The emergence of a radical view of deviance meant that some theorists took the side of deviants with a vengeance. Not only did these theorists defend the right of deviants to be different, but they also condemned representatives of conventional society, branding them as the dangerous, odd, or misguided ones. Life in an unequal, competitive, insecure, acquisitive society, they believed, was brutalizing for some people, and brutal conditions generate brutal behaviors. Radicals viewed deviance as one of the choices that people consciously make in order to manage some of the difficulties posed for them by life in a contradictory society (Taylor, Walton, & Young, 1973). These theorists focused more on the process of law making than on law breaking. The principal reason is that they were inclined to view official definitions of crime as one of the tools that privileged and powerful groups use to maintain their own positions while restricting the social mobility and power of the less privileged (Miller, Schreck, Tewksbury, & Barnes, 2015; Quinney, 1974; Tibbetts, 2019).

Radicals insist that the control of deviants and the suppression of deviance are principal ways that threats to the economic and political systems are counteracted so that the status quo is preserved for the benefit of the privileged and powerful (Quinney, 1970, 1974; Reiman & Leighton,

2010). Quinney (1973) went so far as to claim that the really bad people in a society are those who make laws to protect their own interests and to legitimate the suppression of threatening or disliked groups. Radical deviance theorists and conflict criminologists now are inclined to use the term “postmodern” to identify their work (Cote, 2002; F. P. Williams & McShane, 2018). (Arrigo and Bernard [1997], however, concluded that postmodern criminology is an independent orientation despite having some areas of agreement with conflict criminology and radical criminology.) An important contribution to the postmodern approach is known as *cultural criminology*, whose representatives work to understand how culture and crime interpenetrate one another in a world that is unequal, exclusionary, ambiguous, and constantly changing (Ferrell, Hayward, & Young, 2015).

Postmodernists (Arrigo & Bernard, 1997; Ferrell, 1999; Henry & Milovanovic, 1991, 1996; Katz, 1988; Milovanovic, 1997) conceptualize deviance as a joint construction of social actors, and a core theme is postmodernists’ refusal to reduce social deviance down to the concrete and discrete action of any one individual (Henry & Milovanovic, 1991). Postmodernists assert that the meanings, definitions, discourses, and narratives used to describe and understand both deviance and its control are always problematic and contentious, just like the social world itself (Henry & Milovanovic, 1996; Lyman & Scott, 1989). Postmodern theorists look at the linguistic constructions (i.e., words, statements, or narratives) made about social deviance and crime by influential representatives of official institutions (Lilly et al., 2019). The principal reason is that knowledge, they assert, is inseparable from language and human discourse. We must always know who the individuals are that are deciding that something is deviant, why they are making their claims about it, and their level of success in convincing others that what they claim is true (Best, 1990; Spector & Kitsuse, 1977). We must also have a clear understanding of how these discourses or narratives change those individuals who make them, as well as how they change the individuals about whom they are made (Meyer & Rohlinger, 2012).

Agents of social control try to make what they do to control others appear to be the only reasonable way for them to proceed, a way for them to be able to help the people being controlled to lead better, more productive lives (Coyle, 2013). This is a fiction, according to postmodernists, who believe that the primary objective of control agents is to regulate and manage any troublesome population wherever and whenever it is found. This is an enterprise in which a constellation of interlocking agencies from different institutions work together to maintain the status quo (Foucault, 1977, 2003; Henry & Milovanovic, 1991).

It may be the *functionality* of both deviance and the deviant that is a central reason for their existence. Conventional groups do many things, both intentionally and unintentionally, to ensure that deviance exists because, despite surface appearances or public proclamations, deviance contributes

in many ways to preservation of the status quo. The war on crime, for example, justifies the existence of police, courts, and prisons (Reiman & Leighton, 2010). It is the same for other kinds of deviance. Groups and organizations that have the mandate to eliminate deviance usually benefit too much from its existence to do the job well enough to make much of a difference. Deviants can be used as scapegoats to explain away continuing or worsening social problems (Gamson, 1995). Both underconformity (being too “bad”) and overconformity (being too “good”) can evoke negative reactions from powerful individuals when these reactors conclude that their interests are being threatened (Heckert & Heckert, 2002; Herington & van de Fliert, 2018). (Being too bad, however, is more likely to be defined as a problem than being too good.)

## Relativity and Social Deviance

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### Harm, Deviance, and Human Rights

Preservation of basic human rights emerged as a global concern, mainly in response to the Holocaust and World War II. These rights were formalized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of the United Nations (1948). This document is premised on the idea that all human beings should have the same fundamental rights no matter where they live. The UDHR was ratified by each member country of the United Nations in 1948, and it continues to be an important standard against which human decency is measured.

Some nations further their economic, political, and cultural interests in ways that are destructive to the sanctity and well-being of people in other nations (Ritzer, 2008; Turner, 1997). In addition, the actions of some groups within a given society threaten fundamental human rights of other groups in that *same* society (Gross, 2010; Lovell, 2012). Some groups in a society are treated well by state representatives, receiving the full measure of human rights, while others in that same society are not (Berkovitch & Gordon, 2016).

We must be able to identify how and when human rights are being violated, by whom, for what reasons, and with what consequences. Attention to the existence of harm is a valuable contribution to our understanding of social deviance (Costello, 2006, 2009). It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that a harm-based conception of deviance invalidates sociological relativity. A government, because of its monopolization of power, can blame individuals for harms that are really no different from the harms imposed by the government itself (Kennedy, 1976). It can also blame individuals for harms that are really not their fault. Decisions about what qualifies as harm and who is responsible for it are often in the eye of the beholder, being subject to a great deal of manipulation and fabrication (Ghatak, 2011; Presser,

2013; Savelsberg & King, 2011). Global media interests, political pressures, and diplomatic concerns coalesce to define and redefine what qualifies as a human rights or humanitarian issue (Savelsberg, 2015).

Being a relativist does not inevitably dull one's moral sensibilities, and relativists can be as passionately committed as anyone else to ending human suffering. As Berger (1963) notes, a use of relativity to better understand human experience frees no one from finding his or her own way morally. For example, even though we might be able to understand that one nation's terrorist is another nation's freedom fighter, it certainly does not mean that we must cast an approving eye toward the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001. Likewise, even though we can understand that laws against theft are culturally specific and historically based, reflecting some groups' interests and power more than others', it does not mean that we have to grin and bear it when our homes are burglarized and our possessions taken. In addition, as Berger points out, it would be "possible to be fully aware of the relativity and the precariousness of the way by which men organize their sexuality, and yet commit oneself absolutely to one's own marriage" (p. 159). We can still commit to the intellectual position of sociological relativity and yet be passionately committed to one course of action instead of another.

Relativity does not require moral indifference, and it does not mean that we can never be upset or horrified by what we see or experience in a group or society (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). Relativity just reminds us that our personal beliefs or our cultural understandings are not necessarily found everywhere. If we condemn some practice, we must be certain that we are doing it for reasons other than our own particular ethnocentric or egocentric biases. Our biases cannot be avoided completely, it is true, but relativity allows us the best chance to recognize them for the partialities that they are. We do the "right" thing because we can, justifying it on the basis of neither nature nor necessity.

## The Serious Implications of Taking Relativity Seriously

According to Matza (1969), the sociology of deviance encourages an appreciation of human diversity and a rejection of the simplistic notion that deviants are inherently pathological.

The growth of a sociological view of deviant phenomena involved, as major phases, the replacement of a correctional stance by an *appreciation* of the deviant subject, the tacit purging of a conception of pathology by new stress on human *diversity*, and the erosion of a simple distinction between deviant and conventional phenomena, resulting from more intimate familiarity with the world as it is, which yielded a more sophisticated view stressing *complexity*. (p. 10)

Social scientists, just like the humans they study, must be able to deal with—and construct theories that make sense of—the ambiguity, uncertainty, and fluidity of social life (Crewe, 2013). Sociology itself, Goode (2003) asserts, is “wedded” to the concept of deviance. If the marriage works, it is due in no small part to the relativity that is at the core of both.

Humans have a remarkable capacity to make practically anything proper or improper as the case may be. The world is constantly in flux, and people have done, are doing, and will continue to do a multitude of things that will lead to the delight, indifference, or dismay of others (Gibbs, 1994). A colleague of mine once observed that the ties that bind—traditions and customs, ways of doing things, standard notions of proper and improper—also qualify as the ties that *blind* (Winther, 1994, personal communication). Human beings assign meaning to practically everything that can be seen, felt, smelled, tasted, or heard. Once this is done, it tends to blind them to other possibilities and to alternate ways of thinking, feeling, acting, or being. One individual’s object of outrage or disgust might be, and probably is, another individual’s object of reverence, worship, or desire; one individual’s revulsion might be another individual’s attraction; and the object or objects of hatred for members of one human society just might be, and probably are, the objects of adoration for members of another society.

*Culture shock* is the feeling of disorientation or uneasiness that one might experience when traveling to a different place and being forced to accommodate to new ways of thinking, feeling, or acting. Sometimes the culture shock is mild. If you went from a hot climate, such as one finds in Southern California or Florida, to a much colder climate, such as one finds in Illinois or New York, you might experience things in the winter to which you were unaccustomed. People would appear to be dressing in unusual ways and doing unusual things, such as buying snow blowers and snow shovels, but it would be easy to adjust to these cultural changes. They would be only temporarily disorienting. What if you were told, however, that the stew you had just eaten was made with dog meat, horse meat, sheep eyes, or the flesh of recently killed rattlesnakes? How would you feel if you were told that the crunchy snack you had just eaten was not a party mix but baked locusts and termites? Could an American really keep from vomiting (or feeling extremely nauseous) if this person was told that he or she had just finished eating rotten shark flesh (a delicacy in Iceland), a stew made with buffalo penis (a dish popular in Thailand), or caterpillars (a culinary delight in Zambia)? In these cases, culture shock may be acute and quite unsettling. It is an experience that an individual does not want to remember but can never forget.

Berger (1963) observed that sociological discovery is culture shock without geographical displacement. Just as travelers to another land may experience a sense of uneasiness, disorientation, or surprise when faced with people whose customs are different from their own, so can we be

shocked by seeing regular happenings in our own society in a new and disturbing way. This culture shock may propel us in the direction of greater ethnocentrism. No way, we tell ourselves, would we ever do *that*; we would have to be sick, crazy, or out of our heads. Yet we must make every effort to understand the context of action. We must understand that if we had been raised in a culture where people eat dogs, horses, sheep eyes, rattlesnakes, locusts, buffalo penises, caterpillars, rotten shark, or termites, we would, in all likelihood, be eating and enjoying them too.

Viewing deviance as something that can produce culture shock, but that is not intrinsically bad or inherently sick, is valuable. Just as we might study any form of behavior in a foreign land, we can study deviance “at home”—even in our own homes—as part of changing social relationships and alternating cultural or subcultural meaning systems. Because our goal is to understand social context and how and why behavior is defined and evaluated the way it is, we will not spend much time trying to decide if deviance is abnormal or sick, in need of cure or correction. Just as it would be too ethnocentric to conclude that eating dog meat instead of cow meat is abnormal or sick, it is too ethnocentric to conclude that people who inhale certain kinds of substances (e.g., marijuana) are more abnormal or sicker than people who inhale other kinds of substances (e.g., tobacco). Deviance in practically all its forms is a normal feature of human societies, and we must fight the temptation to equate deviance with disease, abnormality, or degeneracy. Some deviance is unsettling or shocking to people who are unfamiliar with it, but this does not mean that deviance is essentially or necessarily sick, abnormal, or degenerate everywhere and at all times.

## Whose Side Are We On?

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The concept of sentimentality (Becker, 1963, 1964, 1967) offers a powerful reminder that sides exist in deciding who or what is deviant, and it matters greatly whose side is taken. Becker (1964) defined *sentimentality* as a disposition on the part of a researcher to leave certain variables in a research problem unexamined or to refuse to consider alternate views of some social happening or distasteful possibilities. Becker borrowed the term from Freidson’s (1961) study of physicians and their patients. Freidson was willing to give credibility and authority to patients’ views of their physicians even when those views were at odds with what physicians thought of themselves. Sides exist even in the seemingly straightforward relationship between physician and patient, and it is possible that a patient’s view is more credible and correct than the physician’s.

Sometimes, a researcher’s bias is to side with representatives of the official world (e.g., police, judges, or psychiatrists), in which case he or she is adopting *conventional sentimentality*; at other times, a researcher’s

bias is to side with representatives of deviant worlds (e.g., criminals or the mentally ill), in which case he or she is adopting *unconventional sentimentality* (Becker, 1964, p. 5). Researchers are sentimental when they over-identify with either conventional or unconventional human beings only because they do not want to face the possibility that some cherished sympathy of theirs could be shown to be untrue (Becker, 1967). Alternation between these two different sides will increase the chances of developing an actor-relevant, empirically correct understanding of both rule breakers and rule makers.

Social scientists are required by the demands of their disciplines to understand as fully as possible the social systems they are studying. This means that they will almost always have to uncover and critically evaluate the myths, ideologies, and verbal smoke screens that humans use to hide, distort, or legitimate whatever they are doing (Berger, 1963). Carried to extremes, romanticizing or glorifying diversity will have the unfortunate outcome of making it more difficult to see and deal with the extreme suffering that deviance can cause in the lives of people who are adversely affected by it. We must not be relativistic in the extreme, because it would hamper our ability to understand social deviance (Goode, 2015; Rafter, 1992).

The social construction of values and norms is often accidental and arbitrary, it is true, but it is also (or can be) rational and reasonable (Bloom, 1987). By restricting ourselves to one particular group and time, the acts, attributes, ideas, and identities can be ranked in some rough fashion from good to bad, appropriate to inappropriate, or injurious to benign. To act as if it is unimportant exactly *what* attitudes, behaviors, and conditions individuals profess, display, or have would be a mistake. Feeding a dead chicken to an alligator is identifiably different from, and morally superior to, feeding your infant son to it. The issue gets murky, however, when you try to compare customs from different cultures and subcultures or time periods to one another along some universal dimension of goodness and badness. What one group calls a “freedom fighter” or “martyr,” another group calls a “terrorist,” and it does little good to try to figure out who is right, independent from a consideration of who exactly is making the determination and why.

The concept of relativity, which was developed partly to encourage an awareness of, and respect for, human variability and diversity, has returned to haunt us. Relativity has been used to justify the differential treatment of indigenous groups, women, and minorities, as well as to excuse human rights abuses (Moyn, 2010; Nagengast, 1997). Countries that violate the human rights of their populations most often are the ones that justify their actions in the international arena by claims of sovereignty and cultural relativity. Their rulers defend practices such as corporal or capital punishment, the abuse of women (including genital mutilation), sexism and racism, and violence by asserting that their critics are ethnocentric or indifferent to the integrity of local customs.

Self-interest can be masked as the common good, and socially constructed roles can serve as alibis for acts of personal cruelty or cowardice (Berger, 1963). It is quite proper—and not at all inconsistent with sociological relativity—to be critical of sovereign nations whenever they have institutionalized practices that interfere with human rights for reasons unrelated to community survival or the safety and security of their citizens. Customs that are a product of ideological thinking (e.g., male dominance) or stark economic inequalities are the ones that are most in need of a relativist analysis.

## Conclusions

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Understandings of deviance have evolved over time. Early views were based on a belief that intrinsic characteristics separated both deviants and deviance from their opposites. They assumed that deviance is what abnormal people do. Attention ultimately shifted to norms and then to labels and social reactions. Social deviance came to be viewed as a regular feature of life in a pluralistic society that could be caused by social control itself. Deviance emerges from social differentiation, social conflict, and social disagreement; the meanings of deviance are always problematic and contentious.

A great deal of diversity can be found as we move from society to society or group to group. Relativity is a way of examining standards and customs by understanding their context. Deviance, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. It exists because some groups decide that other groups ought not to be doing and being what they are, in fact, doing and being. Deviance results from dynamic relationships among many people; it is not an unchanging or immutable trait with intrinsic or inherent qualities. We must remember that all things are transitory and impermanent, including human understandings about proper and improper ways of acting, thinking, feeling, and being.

The author Victor Hugo claimed that nothing is as powerful as an idea whose time has come. This is certainly true for sociological relativity. Sometimes, examples of deviance will be found—glaring examples of inhumanity and incivility—that will shock our sensibilities so much that we will be inclined toward intolerance and a quest for harsher and swifter penalties for deviants. Some individuals or groups will do things that are so harmful or outlandish that they push practically everyone else into a strong defense of the status quo and conventional morality. However, it is relativity that offers social scientists—especially sociologists—the best hope for understanding the social construction of both reality and social deviance.

Sociological relativity is just too powerful an idea and too much a part of what makes the sociological imagination important and valuable for it

to be dumped in the intellectual waste bin. A relativistic approach to social deviance will enrich us in countless ways. Sociological relativity's vision of society (socially constructed), vision of human nature (broad and flexible), scientific methodology (actor-relevant and empathic), and moral stance (unsentimental) all offer great power and potential to anyone who wants to understand the world better.

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