

*An Introduction  
to the  
Sociological  
Study of Deviance*

# The Wrong Stuff

DESMOND ELLIS

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## PREFACE

*B*EFORE LEAVING England for Canada during the early 1960s, I attended Leicester University where I obtained a B.A. In the process, I received a fine undergraduate education in sociology. For this, Norbert Elias, John Goldthorpe and Percy Cohen were mainly responsible. They inculcated in students an appreciation of history, of the contributions made to the discipline by classical sociological theorists, and of the relevance of the wider societal context for an understanding of social phenomena such as crime and deviance. Implicit in their approach to teaching was the idea that good specialized work in sociology is usually done by students who are, first and foremost, good sociologists.

What I learned at Leicester has stayed with me. I hope that some of it is reflected in *The Wrong Stuff*.

In its manuscript form, this book was reviewed by a number of sociologists. Three of them in particular, Bernard Hammond, Richard Henshel and Laureen Snider, did an excellent job. Their criticisms and suggestions were most helpful. I would also like to thank the person who edited *The Wrong Stuff*, Conrad Wiczorek. His contribution went beyond editing, important as this task is. Penny Butcher did a splendid job of typing the manuscript. I would like to thank her. Finally, the La Marsh Research Programme on Violence and Conflict Resolution (York University)

deserves a vote of thanks for providing funds to undertake research projects (e.g., wife abuse, vandalism, corporate violence) that eventually became chapters in the book.

DESMOND ELLIS  
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## INTRODUCTION

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### OBJECTIVES

*T*HE PRIMARY OBJECTIVE of *The Wrong Stuff* is to introduce students to the sociological study of deviance. This involves a two-step process. The first step is to show the influence of classical and general sociological theories on four major, contemporary theoretical perspectives on deviance. The second step will be the application of all four of these theoretical perspectives to each of the following topics: Corporate Crime, Police Deviance, Wife Abuse and Vandalism.

Strain, Control, Interactionist and Conflict are the names given to the four theoretical perspectives included in this text. These are regarded as standard theoretical perspectives because each one is well established in the sociology of deviance. Most sociologists who study deviance either use one of them or some combination of elements borrowed from more than one. This does not mean that all sociologists who study deviance would place any given theoretical perspective under the same general title I have selected. Here, as elsewhere, there is a lot of room for differences in judgement.

The specific topics to which the four theoretical perspectives are applied were selected for a number of reasons. First, these topics provide an alternative to the usual array of relatively powerless,

lower class (e.g., winos, bums) and exotic (e.g., nudists, group sexists, swingers) deviants included in many deviance texts. Certainly, the relatively powerless are included in *The Wrong Stuff*, but so are those who possess a great deal of power (corporate executives) and authority (police officers).

Second, in this text the "cafeteria concept" — a little bit of many kinds of deviance — is replaced (to preserve the food analogy) with the concept of *table d'hôte* — a few selected offerings. The offerings are limited in number so that each topic can be covered in some depth. This seems necessary for the acquisition of a more than superficial knowledge of them. Third, in addition to a limited offering, topics offered *table d'hôte* also constitute a *set* of topics based on an integrating idea or theoretical notion. Thus, corporate executives, police officers, wives and youth are included because they stand in a different power/authority relation to the state, to men and to adults respectively. These differences are not trivial. They help explain why crime is endemic in business corporations, why police officers and husbands can use unauthorized force with relative impunity while youthful vandals cannot.

Finally, each of the topics included in *The Wrong Stuff* (Corporate Crime, Police Deviance, Wife Abuse and Vandalism) represents a sociological grouping of enduring significance to sociology in general and to the sociology of deviance in particular, i.e., class, gender and age. Specifically, corporate executives constitute a property owning/controlling class; police officers constitute a working class group whose job is to maintain law and order. Abused wives and the men who abuse them are grouped as members of the feminine and masculine genders. Youth constitutes a social category segregated by age. Membership in these groupings has important implications not only for the kind and amount of deviance members perpetrate, but also for the way in which the state acts and reacts to their deviance. A theoretical perspective that simultaneously embraces class, gender and age-induced reasons for deviance *and* state reactions to deviance, will probably contribute more towards understanding deviance than one that embraces one and neglects the other.

## PLAN OF THE TEXT

This book is about deviance. Some sociologists define deviance objectively. Others offer subjective definitions. In Chapter 1, these two kinds of definition are described. Their strengths and weaknesses are then discussed in the context of defining terrorism. An

alternative definition of deviance, one that rejects the subjective-objective dichotomy, is also presented.

In Chapter 2, four major theoretical perspectives are identified. These are Strain, Control, Interactionist and Conflict. Each perspective is described in relation to the classical/general theory from which it was, more or less directly, derived. Where Chapter 1 dealt with the question, "What is Deviance?", Chapter 2 describes the way in which each of the four theories answers why and how questions relating to deviance and deviants. A brief summary concludes this chapter.

All four of the perspectives described in Chapter 2 are applied to each of four substantive topics. Each topic has a chapter to itself. Chapter 3 is devoted to Corporate Crime; Chapter 4 covers Police Deviance; Chapter 5 deals with Wife Abuse; and Chapter 6 with Vandalism. Each of these four chapters commences with objective and subjective definitions of the topic being covered. Then all four theoretical perspectives are sequentially applied to the topic. A summary concludes each chapter.

The final chapter, Chapter 7, is reserved for conclusions.



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## *DEFINITIONS OF DEVIANCE*

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### *THREE CLASSIC TALES OF DEVIANCE*

*T*HIS BOOK IS ABOUT deviance. But what is deviance? Do deviance and the deviant refer to the same thing? And what about crime and criminals? Are they the same as deviance and deviants? Then, where does conformity fit into the picture? Is it simply the opposite of deviance, in the sense that deviance is bad, harmful and unusual, while conformity is good, helpful and usual in societies? Is it possible for the same behaviour to be both conforming and deviant?

One way of giving preliminary answers to these questions is to provide examples that deal with them. For this purpose, three fairly well-known cases have been selected. In one, a career outlaw hung around Nottingham Forest; in the second, a hunchback in love made his high-rise home in Paris; and in the third, a career murderer lived in London.

Robin Hood, as you may recall, "stole from the rich and gave to the poor." Does his conduct constitute deviance? Was he a deviant, a criminal or both? What about the Hunchback of Notre Dame? He looked funny, lived in a cathedral bell tower and fell in love with a young woman who lived in a suburban home with her mom and dad. Consider next, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Here the same individual is as nice as Kermit the Frog by day and a serial killer by

night. Does what these individuals did constitute deviance? Are they deviants, criminals or both?

To these questions, sociologists have formulated a number of answers. Some would remind us that Robin was a criminal, an outlaw because he violated laws made by the state, i.e., King John. Others would regard King John as a criminal, because he arbitrarily changed the customary law of the land regarding deer killing by local, rural residents. Under customary law they were permitted to kill forest deer. Rural residents were quite law abiding with respect to deer-killing. When the law was changed to legally limit deer hunting to the land-owning aristocracy, formerly legal behaviour suddenly became illegal. Rural folk, generally, regarded this change as illegal and immoral. Robin was actually conforming with widely held social norms when he continued to hunt deer. For this reason, the Inlaws (the state) declared him an Outlaw. He then became a career outlaw, stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. To local rural residents he was a hero because, at some risk to himself, he conformed with social norms relating to helping others whose access to food had been unfairly restricted.

The Hunchback of Notre Dame elicits answers of a different kind. As in the previous example, social norms or rules constitute the basis for judgments regarding conformity and deviance. However, sociologists such as Goffman (1965) identify not one, but two sets of rules which apply in this case. The first of these is "body norms." Insofar as most of us deviate from ideal North American body norms (Mr. and Mrs. Universe), most of us are deviant. However, a few individuals deviate quite markedly and in obvious ways from norms defining normal bodies. These deviations are referred to collectively as stigma. The large hump on his back is the Hunchback's stigma. Because Quasimodo did not conform with widely held norms regarding how the body ought to look, he was labelled a deviant.

In addition to these body norms, there are also widely held social norms relating to how stigmatized persons ought to behave when interacting with normal people. Above all, they must demonstrate that they know their place. They should not push too hard in the direction of getting normals to regard and treat them as normal, that is, as a person without the stigma they obviously display. Falling in love with a beautiful gypsy girl contravenes social norms that apply to stigmatized individuals. The Hunchback of Notre Dame, then, is a double deviant. He violated body and behavioural norms. However, as neither set of norms constitutes a law, i.e., a rule made by the state, he is not a criminal.<sup>1</sup>

However, Quasimodo, ugly on the outside but a beautiful per-

son inside, became a criminal when he killed a number of citizens, including his former companion Frollo, the archdeacon of Notre Dame, who intended to harm his beloved Esmeralda. It was Esmeralda, the beautiful, innocent gypsy girl, who offered water to the bound and beaten Quasimodo, while righteous Christians stood by and celebrated his pain. Who is the deviant? Frollo, a person of learning and a holy, righteous man on the surface, kept his involvement in necromancy and alchemy a secret. Was he deviant? Of all the main characters in the book *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1831), only the surface ugly Quasimodo; Esmeralda, a member of a stigmatized social group, gypsies; and surface ugly Notre Dame, the cathedral, emerge as beautiful inside. They conform with norms, social and aesthetic respectively, that Victor Hugo believes human beings everywhere should share.

The third case, Jekyll and Hyde, elicits answers of a radically different kind. Dr. Jekyll is a normal person by day. During the night, however, a radical transformation takes place. Nice Dr. Jekyll becomes Mr. Hyde, a serial murderer. So long as no one knows of Dr. Jekyll's secret, can we call him a criminal or a deviant? Some sociologists would answer, no. They believe that these labels can only be applied if and when others, e.g., family members, neighbours and/or the police become aware of and react to Jekyll/Hyde as a murderer or weird or both.

In contrast to this, other sociologists provide more traditional and common sense answers. There is, they would say, a law prohibiting murder as well as rules regarding mental health. Because he violated the former, he is a criminal and because he violated the latter, he is a deviant. The difference between these two labels arises because of differences in the kinds of norms that were violated. Deviants violate the non-legal norms of the groups to which they belong. Criminals violate legal norms. Norm transgressions are common to both.

Returning now to the questions with which we began, these case studies suggest the following answers. Deviance appears to refer to behaviour that violates social norms. Crime is a sub-category of deviance. It refers to behaviour that violates legal norms. A deviant is an individual (or group) that has been publicly labelled as deviant by a social group. A criminal is an individual (or group) that has been officially labelled as a criminal by the state. Alternatively, deviants are individuals (or groups) that contravene social norms, criminals are persons who violate that sub-set of social norms called laws. Behaviour that conforms with one group's norms may violate the norms of another group and vice versa. Conformity is not the opposite of deviance. Both can be harmful or



helpful to society. Moreover, as members of groups with different or conflicting norms use their own group's norms as a standard of judgement, the presence of conformity entails the presence of deviance.

The answers given to the questions raised by these case studies represent two major ways of defining deviance. One is objective. Objectively defined, deviance refers to behaviour that violates rules or norms. The existence of these rules constitutes objective standards used by group members in making judgements. That is why this definition is referred to as being objective. The other way of defining deviance is subjective. Subjectively defined, deviance denotes the reactions of others that result in the successful application of the label deviant. It is because these reactions involve such subjective processes as interpretation and assigning meaning to behaviour, that the definition emphasizing reactions is called subjective.

Objective and subjective conceptions have a history. Contemporary formulations of them are characterized both by similarities and differences, strengths and weaknesses. The primary goal of this chapter is to describe these in greater detail. The second task is to locate the first goal within the broader and conceptually prior goal of clarifying the relation between conformity and deviance.

## CONFORMITY AND DEVIATION

A discussion of the relation between conformity and deviation is important for a number of reasons.<sup>2</sup> One of the most significant of these is that it will show the need for giving conflict a more prominent place in sociological attempts to explain both conformity and deviation.

### *Conflict, Conformity and Deviation*

Moral evaluations are central to definitions of conformity and deviation. Group members who do what the group says or believes they "ought to do" are conformists, while those that do what they "ought not to do" or not do what they "ought to do" are deviants.<sup>3</sup> These judgements apply not only to individuals but also to groups themselves. Thus the Toronto branch of the Humane Society and the Animal Liberation Front use their own values – animals have a right to be treated properly – as the standard for judging researchers who mistreat animals for research purposes as deviant. These scientists respond by calling their accusers "radicals" and