DEGREES OF DEVIANCE

student accounts of their deviant behavior

edited by STUART HENRY

DEGREES OF DEVIANCE

student accounts of their deviant behavior

Edited by

STUART HENRY

Eastern Michigan University

For information about this book, write or call:

Sheffield Publishing Company
P. ██Box 359
██████ Wisconsin 53168
██████843-2281

To the memory of Steve Box who, in a shorter life than most, inspired so many of his students with a desire to better understand the politics of deviance.

Preface

One of the main problems when teaching sociological concepts is that, so often, they are seen as textbook issues that have little to do with real life. In many courses on deviance students are asked to read research literature so that they may understand other people's rule-breaking behavior. But the deviant behavior about which they read does not have the same content as the deviant behavior in which they are engaged. Published studies of deviant behavior are typically based on research conducted ten to twenty years earlier. The research is on people of a different age and class to themselves and is conducted by people who are as old as their parents. Because of this, conventional texts on deviance may fail to connect the deviance of others with the student's own real-life experience.

This book aims to be a bridge to understanding the wider phenomenon of deviant behavior and, in particular, to prepare students for the concepts that they will subsequently encounter in deviancy text books. It invites students to explore how deviance is socially constructed by grounding their reading in contemporary accounts of fellow students' behavior. It is a book about student involvement in various degrees of deviant behavior written in their own words. It is a compilation of student accounts of their own deviant behavior while working toward a degree. It describes the deviant activities that were carried on while the students were attending a southern, urban university in the United States. The accounts are based on the students' own experiences and on those of their friends and relatives. Student descriptions of rule-breaking behavior, as it is currently practiced, include married students having affairs, fraternity drinking parties, cocaine dealing, self-mutilation, nudism, vegetarianism and various

explosives and weapons activities. These deviant activities take place in a variety of contexts, such as during work in bars, restaurants and stores, but also in dormitories, fraternities, gyms, and in other settings, both public and private, and both on and off campus. Each account addresses the meaning of the deviant activity to the students. It describes the students' motives; the excuses and justifications they use to rationalize and explain their behavior; the reactions of other students, parents, and authorities; and the problems that students face when they are caught or when they have to manage the stigma of a deviant identity. The accounts were gathered by students in a single semester in 1986, as part of their research for a course on deviant behavior. They were trained in the methods of participant observation and interview and were asked to submit a proposed topic of deviance that they had previously, or were currently, engaged in. The interviewees were to be restricted to three members of an intimate social network; friends, relatives or fellow workers.

The high trust between myself and the students brought some very unexpected and worrying problems, not the least of which was a planned burglary with dates, times, places and method of entry and a proposal from two students who wanted to steal a car in order to "get into the deviant action scene!" Both proposals, of course, were signed by the students and contained enough evidence to guarantee a criminal conviction for all of us. When I pointed out that this was totally out of the question and insupportable on any criteria, and that the proposals had to be burned, the students concerned were genuinely disappointed and embarrassed at misunderstanding what participant observation meant!

The material I eventually included originally formed one component of their research paper. The other components comprised: a section on methods and the moral dilemmas facing deviancy researchers; a section reviewing the literature on their chosen topic of deviance; and a comparative analysis between their study and the relevant literature. The accounts have been edited and the names

of the students and places mentioned are fictitious so that anonymity will be preserved and to protect inadvertent identification of those involved in their research.

I begin the book with an introductory review of the concepts and theories contained in the social constructionist perspective on deviance; the theoretical stance from which my course was taught. I have deliberately omitted references and notes since my main objective is to introduce student readers to an understanding of the basic ideas of social constructionist thinking. The book is designed to be used in conjunction with a text book and reader; I chose to use Erdwin H. Pfuhl's *The Deviance Process* and Earl Rubington and Martin S. Weinberg's *Deviance: The Interactionist Perspective*. A selection of other recommended and related reading appears at the end of the introductory chapter.

In a work such as this the principal credit must go to the students who were prepared to share their often colorful, sometimes innovative, and occasionally sad, experiences with us all. Their contribution to our knowledge shows us that student lives are much more complex than is often acknowledged and that their deviance, like all deviance, can only be adequately understood as a confluence of personal biographical experiences as these are shaped in the wider structural matrix of society. Although student deviance may develop at a university, like their general education, it only occasionally begins or ends there. When they graduate they will not only have an academic degree but they will have experienced degrees of deviance, the range of which we have only just begun to explore.

Contents

1 Introduction
Constructing deviance

1.1 Defining Deviance and Deviants

To imagine that individual rule breakers are the villainous sole source of their deviant behavior is to credit them with too much. Worse, it is to miss much of the importance of what deviant behavior means and how it is socially constructed. Deviant behavior is a joint human enterprise. Humans construct it together; as actors and audience. They do so by making distinctions, perceiving differences, engaging in behaviors, interpreting their effects, and by passing judgments about the desirability or unacceptability of the behaviors identified.

To say that deviance is socially constructed by humans through an interactive process is to imply that: (1) there is not one reality but as many as there are groups constructing realities; (2) any appearance of a single dominating reality is no more than an abstraction and mystification of the multiple realities created in the interactive flux of everyday life; (3) there are many moralities reflecting these multiple realities; (4) there are numerous stereotypes constructed by groups as part of their means to control and contain human behaviors that are seen to deviate from and threaten their view of what counts as reality; and (5) deviance does not just happen but is created by human agents making distinctions and acting towards those distinctions as though they possessed object-like qualities.

People's standards as to what is ideal or acceptable behavior may be set in the face of real or imagined behavior that is feared or disliked. Acts may be banned because of a desire to promote a particular set of values or lifestyle. Standards can be precisely specified as rules or laws, or else they may be more loosely constructed as informal

1

norms and expectation. The laws, rules and norms take the form that they do as a result of being shaped by individual personal biographies, group pressures and processes, and by the wider societal context in which these individuals live.

Sometimes behaviors judged to be deviant are the product of precisely the same process of social construction as are the standards of those who are judging their behavior unacceptable; one groups' standards are another groups' deviance. When a government enacts food and drug legislation, making the unhygienic preparation of carcass meat unlawful, it is promoting a particular set of values and making deviants out of those who prepare meat in ways deemed to be unhygienic. When a group of vegetarians declare any meat preparation and consumption "killing," they are making deviants of, among other people, the Food and Drug Administration. Both groups, however, are setting norms that are designed to promote a particular, albeit different, lifestyle.

On other occasions behaviors are constructed only because there exist norms, rules and laws, banning them. It is no more the case that deviance is constructed and conducted without reference to existing standards, stereotypes and mythologies than it is that laws are constructed without reference to a perceived undesirable behavior. The two are interrelated. Deviance is co-produced by deviant actors and reactors and by its promoters and detractors. Deviance and convention are not isolated phenomena but exist in relation to each other and in relation to the wider societal and global structure in which they are set.

In order to decide whether a piece of behavior is deviant we might resort to the familiar idea of statistical deviance. How many people do it relative to the whole population? As Emile Durkheim long ago pointed out, something is only deviant in relation to what is normal. Homosexuality is clearly deviant on this criterion. Alternatively, we might consider whether the behavior violates a publicly stated law or norm. Tax evasion or high school

marijuana use are good examples here. Both are statistically normal but considered to be deviant on the criterion of illegality.

Or is deviance comprised of those behaviors that offend a particularly strong and vocal interest group? The expressed standards of government agencies, law enforcers, moral interest groups, local communities, sections of the media, and groups of academic commentators are involved in shaping standards against which such judgments could be made. But it is difficult to establish agreement between these different groups about what is to count as the appropriate standards since each group has its own particular ideas and interests about what is acceptable.

Further, what is deviant may be judged in terms of role expectations. What a doctor can do to another person because of his accepted role in society would get anyone else arrested for assault. The intimate sexual activities of two single people would be considered deviant if one of them was married. Here it is not the behavior itself that is deviant but the social expectations governing which social roles can be allowed to perform it.

The historical and social context also makes a difference as to whether a behavior will be judged to be deviant. Consider cigarette smoking. At certain historical periods this has been considered medicinal, a status symbol, a normal adult behavior, a nasty irritating habit and, increasingly, a crime. Where it is done also makes a difference. Smoking in the isolation of one's home is considered perfectly acceptable, provided other members of one's household have no objections to passive smoking effects. But smoking on school premises is often considered grounds for expulsion, while smoking during the production and preparation of foodstuffs may be grounds for dismissal. Recently smoking in some public places and on airline flights of less than two hours, has been banned and even invokes prosecution and fines.

In short, deviance is constituted only in relation to that which is not deviant. It cannot be deviance without

that comparison, or without those making it. This is why Durkheim and others have said crime is functional to society. Without it there is little opportunity afforded for the clarification, elaboration and maintenance of the boundaries of acceptability. In this regard deviance provides occasions for the celebration of order, and for the integration of groups and communities. But we should not neglect the flip side of this argument: that making rules, setting standards, and banning behavior is also making deviance. As Thomas Szasz has so vigorously shown, if deviance doesn't exist it would seem it must be created.

After differences in behavior have been identified, made significant and after moralizing judgments have been drawn about their acceptability, another level of construction work is evident in the process of constituting deviance. This involves equating the person with the behavior. Here the whole person is reduced to a stigmatized status; a caricature of their total behavior is taken to represent their most important features. Unlike much of modern society, the construction of stereotypes is not a product of the industrial revolution but of something inherently human. For example, the Elizabethans were particularly adept at it. Consider the following extract from John Awdeley's *Fraternity of Vagabonds*, written in 1561. Included in his "Quartern of Knaves," which lists twenty-five orders of bad servants, are the following stereotypes:

> 7. Rinse Pitcher ... is he that will drink out his thrift at the ale or wine and be oft-times drunk. This is a licorish [greedy] knave that will swill his master's drink and bribe [steal] his meat that is kept for him ... 16. Munch Present ... is he that is a great gentleman, for when his master sendeth him with a present, he will take a taste thereof by the way. This is a bold knave, that sometime will eat the best and leave the worst for his master ... 19. Dyng Thrift ... is he that will make his master's horse eat pies and ribs of beef and will drink ale and wine. Such false knaves oft-times will sell their master's meat to their own profit ... 24. Nunquam [never] ... is he that when his master send

him on an errand he will not come again of an hour or two where he might have done it in half an hour or less. This knave will go about his own errand or pastime.

People whose behavior is taken to be deviant are often involved in rejecting, deflecting, managing, or accepting this stereotyping or labelling of their identity. They do so because it is their whole person, not just the behavior, that is now morally questionable.

In considering deviant behavior, therefore, we need to examine each of the constituent aspects of the deviancy construction process. We need to explore: (1) why and how rules are made; (2) why people break rules; (3) the process that leads from their behavior being taken as deviant to it coming to represent their identity; (4) how they reject, avoid, resist, manage or accept the deviant labels conferred upon them by others; and (5) how they develop new lives, either incorporating or transcending that which others would have them be.

1.2 Why People Ban Behavior

Perceived differences that are negatively evaluated are the source of much banning. The difference perceived may be in behavior. Identifying and defining a behavior draws it out from the vast array of possible behaviors as a special kind of behavior; one about which something needs to be done.

But it is not only behaviors that are seen as deviant. Ideas judged to be too extreme may also be banned. Communism and fascism are two obvious examples. Similarly, appearances can be banned and stigmatized. Obvious examples are the disabled, such as the blind or crippled, the disfigured, like the Elephant Man, and those who wear outrageous clothes or hairstyles.

Although banning may be accomplished in the course of asserting a particular positive direction and intention, it is more common to think of banning as a reactive, rather

than proactive, behavior done by audiences against something real or imagined. Audiences may be made up of ordinary citizens or interest groups or others organized to lobby, which Howard Becker eloquently described as "moral entrepreneurs." Such groups are no less social types than the social types their banning creates, but are simply people who perceive or feel threatened, powerless, offended or unsettled. As Steven Box has said, they become people who have the power, and sometimes the authority, to impose their judgments on others.

The process of banning and rule-making may begin with fear but quickly moves to a shared sense of danger and a belief among the fearful that the behavior in question is not going to go away by itself. Moreover, it is seen as controllable, and its control can be implemented by creating new rules, or by strengthening existing ones by extra enforcement. It is not clear why people believe that rules can directly control people's behavior, especially when much of the behavior that is reacted to is already breaking them.

Alternatively, a more symbolic motive may underlie rule-making activity, such as establishing or under pinning a particular social group's position in the society, as Joseph Gusfield has forcefully demonstrated in the case of the early twentieth century Prohibition laws.

Whether it is instrumental or symbolic, the conversion of some groups' private moralities into public issues is necessary if their concern is to gain sufficient legitimacy to warrant more formal rule making. In this process, a principal partner is the media. They can act either as a forum for the display of concern or as an instrument for agitating it.

Clearly the range of strategies for mobilizing moral support is as wide as that available to candidates in a political campaign. Moral entrepreneurs can promote their case for a behavioral ban by associating their proposed rules with positive values or benefits to society. Particularly popular are those bans claimed to increase health or freedom. A similarly powerful impact can be

achieved by associating the continued existence of questioned behavior with negative values, pointing up its threat to the mental, physical or moral fabric of organized society. Groups of moral entrepreneurs can draw respectability from the public by establishing alliances with respected members of society or by recruiting these people's testimonies, if not their person. Any endorsement by public officials takes the rule-making case towards a complete ban. Any myth-making which can be employed to exaggerate aspects of the behavior or to help hang the activity on the backs of already recognized undesirable social types, will help the cause.

Ultimately, of course, the goal of banning a behavior will be met if the state can be "captured," such that laws are passed. This will empower the major law enforcement agencies to act, in the name of the whole society, on behalf of those groups with immediate concerns. At this point, the interest group can be said to have established an official ban against the behavior.

If law is not the outcome, captured institutions such as science, religion, education and public opinion, are a significant creative accomplishment in the social construction of deviance. But it must not be forgotten that all of these institutions and agencies are themselves groups with interests and they may divide on the issue depending whether these interests are advanced or threatened by the existence of a particular proposed ban. At the very least such groups are likely to graft their interests onto the proposed ban such that what emerges is some compromise position, not necessarily that which the original banners had in mind.

Not surprisingly, the chances of resisting the ban are considerably advanced if those engaged in the behavior, or those who wish to see us remain free to choose it, engage in a counter political campaign. In this context, controversy, rather than consensus, can be claimed. In such circumstances, the law, as Austin Turk has shown us, becomes a weapon in the battle between competing