Stigmatization, Tolerance and Repair

An Integrative Psychological Analysis of Responses to Deviance

Anton J. M. Dijker and Willem Koomen

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Preface

How people respond to undesirable or deviant conditions such as illness or crime has always been of great interest to scientific disciplines such as sociology, social psychology, anthropology, history, or political science. Inescapably, the way these responses are studied and understood is influenced by prevailing explanatory concepts, and characteristic features of social control in the society in which scientists happen to live. Thus in modern Western society, the common and social psychological vocabulary used to describe responses to deviance strongly favors terms such as *stereotype, prejudice, labeling, stigmatization,* or *discrimination* to emphasize that these responses are primarily derived from mental constructions and malicious motives, and that deviant conditions themselves rarely pose objective problems for society and hence demand behavioral responses. These descriptions also reflect the fact that current Western society basically values tolerance or self-control as the major way of responding to deviance, while delegating the actual work of prevention, conflict resolution, punishment, or healing to formal institutions such as the police, court rooms, or centers for disease control and health promotion.

Although we believe that tolerance is a great good in our modern individualistic society, we have become increasingly concerned with certain theoretical and practical disadvantages when responses to deviance or social control are primarily analyzed in terms of modern forms of tolerance and its psychological aspects. From such a perspective, people's main business when encountering deviance seems to be to suppress their negative feelings, feel guilty about them, and intensify their normal degree of "civil inattention," to borrow an expression from Erving Goffman. Many social scientists consider perceptions and thoughts that directly address deviance, and failures to control successfully the associated negative feelings, as evidence for intolerance or stigmatization; whereas expressions of positive feelings tend to be seen as mere compliance with norms and insincere. Unfortunately, such a view prevents one from understanding the motivational implications of different types of deviance, and the social function of accurately

perceiving and distinguishing them, and from attempting to classify the multitude of potentially deviant conditions in meaningful ways. Indeed, what we see is that deviant conditions are usually treated as interchangeable and merely as objects for illustrating general psychological processes (e.g., information processing) that seem to have little basis in the reality of everyday social control processes.

There also is a practical disadvantage of not clearly distinguishing tolerance from other types of social control, such as the repair of relationships on the basis of realistic perceptions of deviance, or stigmatization and social exclusion. Specifically, programs that are aimed at stigma reduction may violate people's basic needs to engage in repair and may also make certain functional forms of social control such as crime and illness prevention less effective. Conversely, programs focusing on improving the prevention and reduction of crime or illness may unwittingly increase stigmatization. For example, current health promotion efforts that use ill people or people "at risk" for certain illnesses as "bad examples," may need to reconsider their potentially stigmatizing strategies in light of the increasing number of people in society who are unable to stay healthy, such as the elderly or chronically ill.

In struggling with these theoretical and practical issues, we have found it useful to start our psychological analysis of responding to deviance or social control in a very basic manner, adopting an evolutionary perspective according to which deviance should be seen as a threat to fitness or reproductive success. Specifically, we asked ourselves what the basic types of deviance are that any society, from hunter-gatherer to modern Western ones, needs to adaptively prevent or reduce; and which psychological mechanisms would enable or motivate individuals to generate these adaptive responses. We arrived at a remarkably small number of universal types of deviance (e.g., relatively active ones such as crime or mental illness versus relatively passive ones such as physical illness or neediness) and of underlying motivational mechanisms related to experiencing anger, fear, and care/tenderness in response to these types. To our excitement, we discovered that alone or in combination, these mechanisms, in interaction with personal, cultural, historical, and situational influences, could very well explain the great variation in thinking, feeling, and behaving with respect to individuals associated with deviance.

Our psychological analysis also allowed us to better distinguish between three basic types of responding to deviance or social control that seem characteristic for different societies or cultures: repair (characteristic for small groups of individuals related through kinship or other affective ties), stigmatization (typical for hierarchically organized societies, and for serious and permanent forms of deviance within large

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societies), and tolerance (typical for egalitarian and individualistic Western societies). Practically, our approach implies that attempts to develop interventions to reduce stigmatization first have to establish what type of social control one would like to target (is there really evidence for stigmatization?), and with what type of social control it should be replaced (with more tolerance or repair of relationships?). What our classification of deviant conditions and distinction between types of social control implies for the well-being and coping of people associated with deviant conditions or stigmas is also examined.

Most studies discussed in this book are taken from the field of social psychology and psychology in general. However, in our endeavor to test the generality of our theory, we also cover material from many other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, biology, and history. We cannot claim expertise in all those different fields and recognize that our use of sources from these disciplines may have been somewhat selective.

Because of its integrative nature, we hope this book will be of interest to students of a variety of scientific disciplines studying deviance, as well as to lay persons and practitioners desiring to gain a deeper understanding of the psychological basis of social control and of opportunities to influence its potentially harmful consequences. Although sometimes, our treatment of certain issues may be somewhat technical, we hope this will not discourage the reader from continuing until an impression is formed of the whole approach and its merits, including the practical implications outlined in the final chapter.

We finally note that in discussing the large number of physical, mental, and behavioral conditions that people may consider deviant, we tried to select descriptive terms that would be generally agreeable and non-offensive, sometimes using the different available terms interchangeably. However, as these terms quickly tend to change as a consequence of medical knowledge, normative considerations, or "political correctness," we may not have been entirely successful in adopting a vocabulary that is acceptable to all.

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Contents

List of figures page x
List of tables xi
Preface xiii
Acknowledgments xvii

1 Introduction 1
1.1 Introduction 1
1.2 Three types of social control: repair, stigmatization, and tolerance 3
Repair 4
Stigmatization 6
Tolerance 10
Empirical distinctions among the three types of social control 14
1.3 The present theoretical approach to social control 16
1.4 Practical implications 19
1.5 Chapter overview 21
1.6 Summary 23

2 Evolutionary origins of social responses to deviance 24
2.1 Introduction 24
2.2 The evolution of social control 27
Self-preservation and the evolution of the fight-or-flight system 30
Altruism and the evolution of the care system 34
Additionally evolved psychological mechanisms for social control? 44
Societies and social control 46
2.3 The functioning of adaptive psychological mechanisms for social control 48
2.4 Neurophysiological evidence for the FF-C network 55
2.5 From adaptive psychological mechanisms to mental content and process 58
2.6 Discussion and comparison with other theories 62
2.7 Summary 64

3 Mental representations of deviance and their emotional and judgmental implications 67
3.1 Introduction 67
3.2 The content of mental representations of deviance 69
Methods to reveal the content of people's thoughts 69
Mental representations of deviant conditions 71
The dimensional structure of rejection hierarchies 77
Emotional implications of mental representations of deviance 81
3.3 The effects of additional or salient information on perceptions of deviance 86
3.4 Effects of mental representations and behavioral information on judgments of deviant individuals 92
The effects of behavioral information on judgments of individuals with passive deviance 98
The effects of behavioral information on judgments of individuals with active deviance 104
3.5 Summary 105

4 Meeting individuals with deviant conditions: understanding the role of automatic and controlled psychological processes 107
4.1 Introduction 107
4.2 Extending dual-process models of responding to deviance 110
Dual-process views of stigmatization and prejudice 110
An integrative model of automatic and controlled processes in responding to deviance 114
Variables affecting the nature and strength of the initial motivational state and its associated expectancy 117
Motivation and opportunity to influence the motivational impact of deviance 120
Examining the social psychological literature to find support for the extended dual-process model 122
4.3 Doing what you want to do: when aggression, helping, or avoidance are possible 124
Aggression 126
Situational influences on aggression: room for displacement or scapegoating 130
Helping 133
Situational influences on triggering care and helping 137
Escape and avoidance 140
Situational influences on triggering and "displacing" fearful responses 143

4.4 Not knowing what to do during unfocused interactions between non-deviant and deviant individuals 144
4.5 The relation between automatic and controlled responses in the absence of interpersonal contact 152
How are automatic reactions to deviance measured in the psychological laboratory? 152
Why and when are automatic and controlled responses in the psychological laboratory more or less dissociated? 156
4.6 Summary 160

5 Individual differences in responding to deviance 163
5.1 Introduction 163
5.2 Individual differences in the FF and C system and ideological orientations in responding to deviance 164
5.3 Authoritarianism and social dominance orientation as reflections of the FF and C system 171
5.4 Gender, education, and negative responses to deviance 178
5.5 Summary 182

6 Variations in social control across societies, cultures, and historical periods 184
6.1 Introduction 184
6.2 Understanding how cultural and historical differences in social control emerge 188
6.3 A qualitative analysis of cultural and historical differences in responding to deviance 196
Category 1 societies 197
Category 2 societies 204
Category 3 societies 208
6.4 A quantitative analysis of differences in responding to deviance across contemporary Western and non-Western societies 212
6.5 Idiosyncratic cultural influences and temporary factors in responding to deviance 227
6.6 Summary 232

7 A focus on persons with a deviant condition I: their social world, coping, and behavior 234
7.1 Introduction 234
7.2 Social world 236
Obesity 236

Homosexuality 240
Mental illness 243
Physical disabilities 244
Old age 246
7.3 Disclosure 250
The reveal-conceal dilemma 250
Disclosing one's deviant condition: to whom, how, and when? 253
7.4 Ways of coping with one's deviant condition and negative reactions 257
Coping responses to specific negative reactions 257
Long-term strategies of coping with one's deviant condition 259
7.5 Perceiver-dependent and other negative reactions of deviant persons in social interactions 267
Self-fulfilling prophecies in social interactions between persons with a deviant condition and others 267
Interactional difficulties of persons with a deviant condition and their determinants 272
7.6 Summary 276

8 A focus on persons with a deviant condition II: socio-economic status, self-esteem and well-being 279
8.1 Introduction 279
8.2 Mechanisms mediating lowered outcomes 280
Affiliation and power loss 280
Discrimination 283
Stigma endorsement 284
Performance deficits 285
8.3 Outcomes of having a deviant condition 290
Socio-economic status 291
Self-esteem 294
Subjective well-being 301
8.4 Summary 304

9 Theorizing about interventions to prevent or reduce stigmatization 307
9.1 Introduction 307
What is the nature of the response that we would like to influence? 308
What should be the ultimate goals of interventions aimed at reducing or preventing stigmatization? 310
What are the proximal psychological mechanisms responsible for stigmatization and stigma reduction? 312
9.2 Tailoring stigma-reduction interventions to type of deviance 313

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Type 1: Uncontrollable-active deviance 313
Type 2: Controllable-active deviance 316
Type 3: Uncontrollable-passive deviance 317
Type 4: Controllable-passive deviance 318
9.3 Common intervention strategies and their underlying assumptions 319
Perceiver-directed strategies 319
Target-directed strategies 325
Focusing at interpersonal contact between perceiver and target 327
9.4 Reconciling stigma reduction with basic principles of social control 331
Tailoring stigma reduction strategies to current social control practices 331
Raising awareness of basic principles of social control as a generally acceptable and useful strategy of stigma prevention and reduction 338
Exploring the usefulness of negotiation as a general strategy to prevent or reduce stigmatization 340
9.5 Summary 343

Notes 345
References 363
Index 402

Figures

2.1 Four basic types of deviance, commonly used labels, and major emotional responses. *page* 32

2.2 A psychological mechanism for adaptively responding to deviance. 48

3.1 Two-dimensional configurations of deviant conditions obtained in six multidimensional scaling studies.

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B Deaux, K., Reid, A., Mizrahi, K., & Ethier, K. A. Parameters of social identity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 68*, pp. 280–291 (Figure 3, p. 289), 1995, American Psychological Association, adapted and reprinted with permission. 73

4.1 Schematic representation of factors that influence the extent to which responses to deviance are unitary (or integrate automatic and controlled aspects) or dissociated. 115

6.1 Combined rejection scores for the six deviant conditions (based on data from the World Values Survey). 214

6.2 Rejection as neighbor of six deviant groups, compared to responses to immigrants (based on data from the World Values Survey). 216

6.3 Variables used to explain the rejection patterns shown in Figure 6.2 (based on data from the World Values Survey). 218

Tables

6.1 Social control in three categories of societies. *page* 191

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

People are regularly confronted with a wide variety of features and behaviors in others that they may find undesirable or deviant, such as a bleeding wound, a missing leg, a harelip, depression, bullying, leprosy, cowardice, theft, unwillingness to work, low intelligence, or some threatening feature of a racial or ethnic minority or outgroup, to name only a few examples. Different deviant conditions may evoke different kinds of responses. For example, individuals who display selfish behavior such as hurting others, stealing property, or lack of motivation to cooperate, tend to be punished; others who are incapable of cooperating and contributing to group life due to illness or injury, usually receive care and medical treatment; and still others with abnormal facial features, may primarily evoke fear and avoidance rather than punishment or care and protection. Furthermore, the same deviant condition may also trigger widely different responses in different situations, historical periods, and cultures, ranging from extreme moral outrage and harsh physical punishment to "softer" treatment and forgiveness, and from extreme tenderness and care to "less soft" and more aggressive and authoritative forms of nurturance and therapy. Pretending not to be affected by a particular deviant condition, and the suppression and indirect expression of one's emotional reactions to the condition, or the consistent avoidance of a deviant individual in order to prevent experiencing these emotions, may be considered as further variants of how individuals respond to deviance.

The main goals of this book on responding to deviance can be summarized in three words: classification, explanation, and application. The general goal of this book is to present a theory that enables us to classify the many deviant conditions that are possible, to explain people's responses to them, and to indicate how this theory can be applied in influencing these responses. In our approach, classification and explanation are closely linked scientific activities. Specifically, in explaining responses to deviance, we will look for a limited set of

universal psychological mechanisms that cause people to respond in the way that they do. For example, we will argue that some deviant conditions activate a psychological response mechanism that causes people to experience fear and hence motivates them to protect themselves against the deviant individual. In contrast, other deviant conditions may activate in people a mechanism for feeling tenderness and a tendency to protect and care for the deviant individual. We will use knowledge about these and other psychological mechanisms to classify the wide variety of deviant conditions in a psychologically meaningful and universal way. That is, we argue that in any relationship, social group, society, or historical period only a limited number of universal *types* of deviance are possible; and that different conditions that can activate the same (combination of) psychological mechanisms can be assigned to the same type of deviance. To put it differently, our psychological mechanisms can be seen as universal *concepts* that allow people to interpret and classify the wide variety of deviant conditions that are possible, and to provide meaning to the specific language that they use to describe these conditions and their reactions to them. For example, on the basis of the above mechanisms for experiencing fear and tenderness, people are able to distinguish a type or category of relatively uncontrollable and threatening conditions (e.g., madness, contagious disease, a strange group encroaching the territory) from a type of relatively uncontrollable and more passive or dependent conditions (e.g., various instances of illness and neediness).

Our explanation, however, does not only serve to develop a typology and semantic theory of people's representations of deviance, but also to account for variation in people's responses to deviance as a function of type of deviance, differences in personality, and situations or societies. The psychological mechanisms that we use to classify deviant conditions can be more or less strongly activated in particular individuals or societies. For example, some individuals tend to feel more easily threatened by a particular type of deviance (seeing more crime around them), and therefore respond with more fear and aggression, than others. In a similar way, situations, societies, cultures, and historical periods influence the likelihood with which relevant psychological mechanisms in people will get activated. For example, in some situations or societies, the psychological mechanism responsible for reacting with fear to a threatening deviant condition, may already be strongly "primed" or activated (e.g., due to famine, plague, warfare, more permanent structural and cultural features, or simply having seen a scary movie), increasing the chance that an encounter with that condition actually results in fear and defensive aggression. We will not only examine in detail how people respond to deviance in different

situations, but also distinguish three characteristic ways in which societies tend to deal with deviance or engage in social control – repair, stigmatization, and tolerance.

Although we emphasize in this book the perspective of the perceiver who responds to deviance, we will also pay attention to the responses of the target. This will give a more complete picture of responses to deviance with their antecedents and consequences. Targets, for example, may affect responses of the perceiver, and they often have to cope with negative responses, which may determine their psychological and social fate. In addition, we add to the perspective of the target relevant elements from our perceiver framework, such as differences between types of deviant conditions.

In sum, the theory we propose in this book systematically explains responses to deviance as a function of type of deviance, individual differences, and contextual influences of situations, societies and historical periods. In addition, responding to deviance or social control is analyzed in terms of three major types of social control – repair, stigmatization, and tolerance. This theory not only integrates a wide variety of facts about responding to deviance, but also has important practical implications for developing interventions to influence people's responses to deviance. We start with introducing and discussing the main concepts and terms that have been used to describe and explain social responses to deviance.

1.2 Three types of social control: repair, stigmatization, and tolerance

Scholars from such diverse research disciplines as sociology, anthropology, history, evolutionary biology, and social psychology have used a wide variety of terms to describe and explain social responses to deviance, often without clearly defining them and distinguishing them from one another. To anticipate an important conceptual disagreement in this field of inquiry, some disciplines such as social psychology and sociology vigorously deny the usefulness of the term *deviance* – a term that we find essential as our book title suggests – and would like to replace it by terms such as *stigma* or *label.* These disciplines similarly advocate to analyze responding to deviance entirely in terms of *stigmatization* or *labeling,* rather than, for example, *social control.* In contrast, in other disciplines that have shown interest in describing how small communities respond to deviance, such as anthropology, we rarely encounter the terms *stigma* or *stigmatization.* So let us look in greater detail at the main explanatory terms in the relevant research disciplines, and try to unravel their different and common meanings.

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