LABELING WOMEN DEVIANT

Gender, Stigma, and Social Control

EDWIN M. SCHUR

Labeling Women Deviant
Gender, Stigma, and Social Control

Edwin M. Schur
New York University

Labeling Women Deviant

Gender, Stigma, and Social Control

To My Daughters
Amy and Sarah

Preface

This book appears at a time when many of the topics it covers have moved to the forefront of public attention. The women's liberation movement has promoted an increased consciousness of sexism in general, and of its many specific manifestations. Both scholarly research and academic courses on women have reached an all-time high. As a combined result of activist efforts and social research, most of the patterned ways of labeling women deviant that are discussed in this text have now come under significant challenge. The time may not be too distant when it will be possible to discuss many of these patterns in the past tense. By and large, however, that time has not yet arrived.

The text is intended for use in courses on deviance, women, gender, sex roles, social problems, and contemporary American society. It is in part an outgrowth of seminars I have conducted recently—for undergraduates and graduate students—on the relation between gender and definitions of deviance. In trying to organize and teach these courses, I have found existing texts inadequate. Recently, several texts and readers concerned with women and crime have become available. But no book has systematically developed the broader deviance perspective as it relates to women, or covered the correspondingly wider range of substantive problems that I treat here.

Given the burgeoning nature of the field of women's studies, the literature on women's issues has become enormous. In this book I have opted to discuss a wide range of topics and to provide a general theoretical framework for analyzing them—either separately or in combination. Because of the scope of coverage attempted here, it has not been possible to explore all of the topics in the greatest depth or detail. I have, necessarily, been selective rather than encyclopedic—with respect to research data, interpretations, and even the choice of the topics themselves. I hope that readers will find the selections I have made and the theoretical framework I have developed to be useful and thought-provoking.

The analysis here grows out of my previous and rather extensive work on deviance, which for the most part has been informed

by a "labeling" or social reactions perspective. It also reflects my long-standing experience in teaching courses on the family—with a special emphasis on gender conceptions and women's situation. Although I am not by temperament an activist, my early critiques of restrictive abortion laws (beginning in the 1950s) may have been a precursor of any underlying feminist advocacy revealed in the pages below.

During the several years in which these materials were being developed, I have received many helpful suggestions from colleagues and friends. I am especially grateful to Arlene Kaplan Daniels and Meredith Gould for their detailed and critical comments on an earlier, related paper. I appreciate too the suggestions and words of encouragement I received from, David F. Greenberg, Daphne Joslin, Edward W. Lehman, Joan Brodsky Schur, and Patricia Cayo Sexton. The book no doubt also reflects ideas developed by various students in my seminars. Specific contributions by two of them, Philip Kasinitz and Nancy Larkin, are cited in the text. Detailed critiques of an earlier draft of this manuscript by Robert M. Emerson, Victoria Swigert and two other anonymous reviewers proved extremely helpful. I want finally to thank Jane Carey for her scrupulous typing of the manuscript, Ruth Flaxman for her copyediting, and Bert Lummus and Cindy Spiegel for their professional assistance and guidance in the production of this book.

Edwin M. Schur

Contents

PART I

Theoretical Framework

CHAPTER 1

Women and Deviance: A Sociological Perspective

One way or another, virtually every woman in our society is affected by the dominant definitions of deviance. If we were to look only at the officially recorded statistics on major criminal offenses, we might be led to conclude that being labeled deviant is overwhelmingly a male experience. However, such a conclusion would be quite unwarranted. Today sociologists recognize that deviance-designating goes well beyond such publicly proscribed and formally processed wrongdoing. It includes as well the numerous informal processes of routine social interaction through which individuals may be personally discredited or placed "in the wrong."

Once we adopt this broadened perspective, we are led to recognize that in our society being treated as deviant has been a standard feature of life as a female. With great regularity women have been labeled—and they still are being labeled—"aggressive," "bitchy," "hysterical," "fat," "homely," "masculine," and "promiscuous." Judgments such as these, and the social reactions that accompany them, represent a very potent kind of deviance-defining. They may not put the presumed "offender" in jail, but they do typically damage her reputation, induce shame, and lower her "life chances." These informal ways of defining and reacting to women should be of great interest to the sociologist. They help us to recognize perceptions and ideas that frequently dominate interaction between males and females. They also show how such

daily interaction reflects, and in turn reinforces, the overall disparities in social and economic power between the sexes.

Throughout this book, we shall be seeing some of the ways in which this routine devaluation adversely affects females specifically and our patterns of social life more generally. As a consequence of the women's liberation movement, many women now are speaking out to document and condemn such treatment. These personal testimonies come from females who have been informally discredited, as well as from those who have been subjected to public and official deviance labeling.

Thus, a young woman notes of being scorned as overweight: "I always felt, when I went into some boutique, that all the salesgirls were staring at me and snickering, knowing that nothing in the store would fit me" (in Millman, 1980, p. 79). A (female) former mental patient asserts: "I was punished for questioning, for wondering, for trying to figure out who I was and what I should do and what it all meant" (Chamberlin, 1975, p. 45). Commenting on her male clients, a prostitute states: "What they've bought is being able to pay us, a piece of degradation, our degradation" (Jaget, ed., 1980, p. 103). And perhaps as an ultimate expression of their devaluation, even women who have been raped are often discredited and made to feel shame. One such victim reports that "I felt like I was a criminal when I was up there [testifying]" (in Holmstrom and Burgess, 1978, p. 224).

DEVIANCE AND STIGMA

These statements highlight some of the specific responses to women that we will be considering at length later in this text. As the statements begin to suggest, exploring the relation of women to definitions of deviance requires more than just research on female behavior. At one time, sociologists were heavily preoccupied with the study of individual "offenders." They believed that through such research they could unearth the causes of deviance. It is true that if we could obtain valid samples of persons who engage in a given behavior and of those who do not, comparative analysis might help us to answer certain kinds of causal questions. For example, we might learn which kinds of people were engaging in the behavior, and we could then determine in what respects, if any, they differed from those who were not.

However, from the standpoint of meaningfully and comprehensively understanding deviance, such an approach has serious limitations. This is so because "deviance" is a designation, a way of characterizing behavior. Often it is the very process of defining and reacting to the behavior or condition *as* deviant that is of greatest interest to the sociologist. Howard S. Becker emphasized this point in his oft-quoted statement:

> . . . *social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance,* and by applying these rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is *not* a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an "offender." The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label (Becker, 1963, p. 9; italics in the original).

These ideas, and the companion notion of stigma, or "spoiled identity" (Goffman, 1963), direct our attention to the devaluation phenomenon itself as the core ingredient common to all deviance situations. Women's deviance, like any deviance, is a social construct. It results, as Becker's statement indicates, from a particular kind of definition and response. The acts and individuals are not intrinsically deviant (Kitsuse, 1962; Erikson, 1962). Rather, they acquire their "deviantness" (Schur, 1979) through a characteristic process of meaning-attachment. In many respects, then, how people perceive and react to a given behavior or condition is what "counts most" socially. This is so because the very same behavior or condition may be defined and responded to differently by different persons.

A good example would be "promiscuity." Suppose that a particular unmarried woman maintains an active and varied sex life. While some people may condemn her as "promiscuous," others may view her and her behavior as "liberated." Note that these highly divergent designations do not stem from differences in the sexual behavior itself. On the contrary, the behavior has been the same; it is only the evaluation of it that has varied. Clearly, then, stigma does not automatically or unvaryingly attach to behavior. When tarnishing of a woman's reputation does occur, this outcome necessarily reflects the responses of specific other persons.

The outlook on deviance that we have briefly sketched out so far is usually referred to as the "labeling" perspective (for a variety

of interpretations see Schur, 1971; Hawkins and Tiedeman, 1975; Suchar, 1978; Schur, 1979; Gove, ed., 1980; Rosenberg, Stebbins, and Turowetz, eds., 1982). Unfortunately, the concept of labeling is sometimes interpreted too narrowly. Thus critics of the approach (e.g., Gove, ed., 1980) often construe it as referring only to the direct stigmatization of particular individuals. At times in this book we will be exploring—as labeling-oriented analysts often have done—the nature and impact of the stigmatization process. But recent perspectives on deviance point to other aspects or dimensions of labeling as well. Becker begins, after all, by noting that "social groups create deviance by making the rules." Thus the "labels" themselves, the dominant concepts as to what constitutes deviance, become a major focal point for research and interpretation.

Once this "collective definition" aspect is brought under study, it is evident that the perspective urged by Becker is not a narrow social-psychological one. Indeed, as he points out in another, less frequently quoted passage, labeling is largely a matter of some persons or groups imposing their rules on others. Ultimately, then, who will be defined as deviant, and for what, is "a question of political and economic power" (Becker, 1963, p. 17). Contemporary deviance theory therefore stresses power and intergroup conflict as key determinants of deviance outcomes (Lofland, 1969; Schur, 1971; Hawkins and Tiedeman, 1975), and examines the development and conduct of collective struggles over public definitions of deviance (Horowitz and Liebowitz, 1968; Spector and Kitsuse, 1977; Edelman, 1977; Schur, 1980; Gusfield, 1981).

In this text, we are going to consider the situation of women in relation to several different aspects of deviance-defining. However, it is not possible in a brief work of this sort to give every aspect full or equal attention. As the reader should already suspect, the traditional focus on individual etiology—in this case, the "causes" of women's behaviors (some of which are deemed deviant)—is not a major one here. Our emphasis throughout this book will be on processes and patterns of deviance labeling.

The discussion will be organized around four main subtopics. To begin with, in Chapter Two we shall examine basic aspects of the stigmatization process itself. In daily interaction, women are often perceived and responded to primarily in terms of their cate-

gory membership—as females, first and foremost. Such response may itself carry a certain degree of stigma, since relatively speaking femaleness appears to be a devalued status. Indeed, this dominant way of "seeing" and responding to women—whatever their behavior or situation—displays all the key features of stigma-laden typing which we find generally in reactions to "deviants."

Such categorical devaluation is reflected in and reinforced by numerous applications to women of substantively specific deviance labels. In this sense, we might even say that women have served as "all-purpose deviants" within our society. A large section of the book (Chapter Three) is devoted to a broad overview of these occasions for (or, a critic might say, pretexts for) labeling women deviant. What we will be looking at will be the proliferation of distinctively female "deviances." These presumed offenses emerge when women are perceived as having violated specific gender system norms—by behaving or even presenting themselves in ways deemed inappropriate for females.

Following this overview, we shall turn in Chapter Four to a counterpart phenomenon: the fact that major offenses *against* women, which we *profess* to consider deviant, in practice have been responded to with much ambivalence. That the female victims in such instances as sexual harassment, rape, and woman-battering have themselves often been treated as though *they* were the "deviants" again reflects the overall devaluation of women.

A fourth general topic—one of more traditional interest in sociology—also receives consideration. In Chapter Five, we will see how the classifying and processing of "cases" affects recorded deviance statistics, especially male-female rate differentials.

As sociologists recently have emphasized, recorded rates and trends in deviance are partly determined by the nature and extent of the deviance-classifying and processing activities and apparatus (Erikson, 1966; Kitsuse and Cicourel, 1963; see also Hawkins and Tiedeman, 1975). Such statistics necessarily reflect the policies and practices of agents and agencies of social control. Sociologists now define these terms broadly so as to include not only policers, punishers, and correctors, but also certain supposedly "helping" professionals and organizations. That most deviance-classifiers and processors have been men, and that the definitions and classificatory criteria they have applied have largely been developed by men, are obviously relevant to understanding the types and rates

of recorded female deviance. We shall examine in particular two major examples: the role of psychiatrists in classifying women as mentally ill; and the influence of the criminal justice system in shaping women's officially recorded crime rates.

Two central themes will underlie our analysis of all these topics. One is the already suggested relation between stigma and social power. Women's vulnerability to stigmatization rests on their general social subordination, their relatively poor power position. At the same time, when women are effectively stigmatized, that reinforces their overall subordination and makes it more difficult for them to achieve desired goals. This is part of what labeling analysts mean when they note that stigmatization can become self-propelling or snowballing in its impact.

However, few if any of these analysts claim that stigma is fixed, invariant, absolute, or irreversible. On the contrary, most sociologists recognize that there are always variations in susceptibility and impact, based largely on the individuals' pre-existing power resources. And we know that individuals and especially organized groups may sometimes be quite successful in their efforts to counter stigmatization. Throughout this text, we shall be noting many points on which women's recent collective action has helped to produce change in specific patterns of deviance labeling. Unfortunately, a more general discussion of collective struggle and social change is beyond the scope of this work. A few preliminary comments on these matters are included in the book's brief concluding chapter.

A second and related underlying theme is signaled by inclusion of the term "social control" in this book's subtitle. As Becker's comments on power, cited earlier, imply, definitions of deviance operate to impose control. Some people control others by defining the latter's behavior as deviant. Many current definitions of deviance and ways in which they are used function to keep women under control, or in their "place", regardless of whether anyone has consciously intended that effect. Contemporary sociologists of deviance place a special emphasis on social control. Not only do they see control agents and agencies as being in a sense "contributors" to deviance problems, but they also recognize the extent to which deviance-definers may benefit through the labeling of others as deviant.

We must then take into account the various ways in which