SEVENTH EDITION

DEVIANCE

THE INTERACTIONIST PERSPECTIVE

EARL RUBINGTON   MARTIN S. WEINBERG

DEVIANCE

THE INTERACTIONIST PERSPECTIVE

SEVENTH EDITION

EARL RUBINGTON

Northeastern University

MARTIN S. WEINBERG

Indiana University

ALLYN AND BACON

Boston   London   Toronto   Sydney   Tokyo   Singapore

DEVIANCE

To
Sara and Alex,
Barbara, Ellana, Marion, and Caitlin

PREFACE

The purpose of this book has been to present students with recent and important work in the sociology of deviance. We have, however, limited ourselves to one particular approach to this study. We call this approach the interactionist perspective.

The interactionist approach to the study of deviance is by no means new. But until the appearance of the first edition of *Deviance: The Interactionist Perspective,* students had to search for statements of the approach as well as for studies that exemplified it. The purpose of the first edition, then, was to present the interactionist approach to the study of deviance and to make readily available the excellent studies that set forth or illustrate it. In the succeeding editions, we have updated the readings and made special efforts to make our own text more readable.

We see this book as having two major uses. As a statement on the interactionist perspective on deviance and a collection of readings employing that approach, the book can be used in deviance courses that are taught from the interactionist point of view. The second use is that of adjunct to deviance courses that are organized around other points of view. Most of the papers presented in this book can very easily stand on their own merits, and even if the book does nothing more than familiarize readers with these works, it will have served its purpose.

In this edition we have incorporated thirteen new readings and made some modifications in the book's organization and text. In this way, we have tried to continue to update *Deviance: The Interactionist Perspective.*

E. R.
M. S. W.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This book examines deviance as a social phenomenon. Central to this approach is the notion that deviance is, above all, a matter of social definition. That is, an alleged behavior or condition is "deviant" if people say it is. The social aspect of deviance becomes clear when someone perceives another person as departing from accepted norms, interprets the person to be some kind of deviant, and influences others also to regard the person as deviant and to act on the basis of that interpretation. As a *social* phenomenon, then, deviance consists of a set of interpretations and social reactions.

When people are interpreted as being deviant, they are usually regarded as being a particular *type* of deviant. These types may be general (e.g., ex-convict, mentally ill, sexually "loose," retarded), or they may be more specific (e.g., car thief, paranoid schizophrenic, call girl, Mongoloid). Whether these labels are general or specific, they usually suggest what one can expect of the so-called deviant and how one should act toward the deviant (e.g., with suspicion, avoidance, vigilance, vengeance). And in coming to terms with such labeling the "deviants" may revise their self-concepts and their actions in accordance with the way they have been labeled. For example, a child who has been typed by school authorities as having a speech problem may become self-conscious and shy, with a concomitant loss of self-esteem, because the child has been told that he or she doesn't talk properly.

At the same time, social typing does allow people to relate to one another in an organized manner. Imagine how much more complicated it would be for police officers, for example, to do their jobs if they did not have a set of categories in which to place people ("she's a hooker"; "he's a junkie"; "he looks like he might be casing that store"; "she's a teenage runaway"; "he's a derelict with no place to go").

The interactionist perspective focuses on just such issues as these—how people typify one another; how they relate to one another on the basis of these typifications; and the consequences of these social processes. As such, the interactionist perspective helps immensely in our understanding not only of the sociology of deviance but also of social process in general.

THE PLAN OF THE BOOK

The selections that follow spell out the interactionist perspective in greater detail. The first half of the book, which consists of Parts One and Two, deals with how people define some persons as deviant and act on the basis of these definitions. Part One shows how deviance is dealt with in primary groups and informal relations and how a person is singled out and assigned a deviant status by intimates such as family members. Part Two deals with these processes in the formal regulation of deviance. For example, it considers how agents of social control, such as the police, define persons as deviants, how they act on these definitions, and what some of the consequences of formal sanctions are.

The second half of the book (Parts Three and Four) discusses deviants themselves: how they respond to being typed by others, how they type themselves, and how they form deviant groups. Part Three examines how deviants develop and sustain their own subcultures and how people become involved in them. Part Four shows how persons may take on deviant identities through self-typing, how they manage deviant identities, and how they may eventually regain "respectability."

This book, then, focuses not on people's motivations for doing things that are regarded as deviant but rather on the *sociology* of deviance—the processes that divide society into different types of people and the social effects of these processes.

DEVIANCE

CONTENTS

THE SOCIAL DEVIANT

Sociology is the study of social relations. Sociologists study how people arrive at common definitions of their situation; how they form groups based on such definitions; how they go on to set down rules of conduct, assign social roles to each other, and enforce their rules. Sociologists examine these questions as part of the larger question: How is social order produced and sustained?

Deviance refers to an alleged breach of a social norm. By looking at deviance we can come to a better understanding of the dominant social order. At the same time, the study of deviance also sheds light on the way "deviant" patterns and lifestyles are themselves organized.

There are at least two ways of studying deviance as a social phenomenon. The first is to approach deviance as objectively given; the second, as subjectively problematic.

Deviance as objectively given. Sociologists who treat deviance as objectively given delineate the norms of the society under study and regard any deviation from these norms as "deviant." These sociologists generally make three assumptions. First, they assume that there is widespread consensus in the society in the realm of norms; this widespread agreement, they believe, makes it relatively easy to identify deviance. Second, they assume that deviance typically evokes negative sanctions such as gossip or legal action. Third, they assume that the punishment meted out to the deviant reaffirms for the group that it is bound by a set of common norms. The major questions raised by this approach are the following: What sociocultural conditions are most likely to produce deviance? Why do people continue to deviate despite the negative sanctions that are brought to bear on them? and How can deviance best be minimized or controlled?

From these assumptions and questions, certain procedures have evolved for studying deviants. First list the "do's" and "don'ts" of the society or group. Then study the official records kept on persons who violate these rules. Interview persons appearing in these records, and consult agents of social control such as police and judges. Try to discover the ways in which deviants differ from nondeviants (e.g., are deviants more likely than nondeviants to come from broken homes?) in order to discern the kinds of social and cultural conditions that seem to make deviant behavior more likely. Try to derive a theory to "explain" deviance, and then apply the theory for the correction and prevention of deviance.

The strength of this approach is the sharpness and simplicity with which it phrases questions. The weak points of this approach follow from its key assumptions. In the United States there are so many different groups and ways of thinking that people often do

not agree on norms. Because of this lack of agreement, and also because of the fact that some people get caught whereas others avoid discovery, it is often very difficult and complex to identify who is deviant and who is not. Also, most social control agencies operate with selective enforcement, so that certain categories of people are more likely than others to be punished for their deviance. Thus the nature, causes, and consequences of deviance are neither simple nor uniform.

Deviance as subjectively problematic. Sociologists who focus on the social differentiation of deviants generally make another set of assumptions. First, they assume that when people and groups interact they communicate with one another by means of shared symbols (verbal and body language, style of dress, etc.). Through such symbolic communication, it is assumed, people are able to type one another and formulate their actions accordingly. Second, they assume that deviance can best be understood in terms of this process, that deviant labels are symbols that differentiate and stigmatize the people to whom they are applied. Finally, sociologists using this approach assume that people act on the basis of such definitions. Thus people treat the alleged deviant differently from other people. The alleged deviant, in turn, may also react to this definition. On the basis of these assumptions, sociologists using this perspective focus on social definitions and on how these influence social interaction. On the one hand, they focus on the perspective and actions of those who define a person as being deviant. They look at the circumstances under which a person is most likely to get set apart as deviant, how a person is cast into a deviant role, what actions others take on the basis of that definition of a person, and the consequences of these actions. On the other hand, these sociologists also focus on the perspective and reactions of the person adjudged to be deviant. They consider how a person reacts to being so adjudged, how a person adopts a deviant role, what changes in group memberships result, and what changes occur in the alleged deviant's self-concept.

Whereas the objectively given approach focuses primarily on the characteristics of the deviant or the conditions that give rise to deviant acts, the subjectively problematic approach focuses on the definitions and actions both of the deviants themselves and of the people who label them deviant, and on the social interaction between the two. Thus we call the latter approach the interactionist perspective.

This book adopts the interactionist perspective, approaching deviance as subjectively problematic rather than as objectively given. In this book, then, deviants are considered simply as people who are socially typed in a certain way. Such typing usually involves an attempt to make sense of seemingly aberrant acts. As people seek to make sense of such acts, they generally employ stereotypical interpretations that define the actor as a particular kind of person (a kook, a drunk, a psychopath, etc.), that include a judgment about the moral quality of the deviant or his or her motives, and that suggest how a person should act toward the deviant. The social definitions of deviance, then, consist of a *description,* an *evaluation,* and a *prescription.* For example, a "kook" is a person who is mildly eccentric (description). The term connotes that "kooks" are odd but not particularly evil or dangerous (evaluation). Thus one may display dislike or friendly disrespect toward them (prescription). A person who comes to be defined as a "psychopath," on the other hand, is considered to be both odd and severely unpredictable (description). The psychopath is often regarded as self-centered, evil, and dangerous (evaluation). And the psychopath is to

be taken seriously at all times; a person who shows dislike or disrespect toward a "psychopath" does so at great personal risk (prescription). Thus the definition of a person as a particular type of deviant organizes people's responses to that person. And the more people who share the definition that a person is a particular type of deviant, the greater the consequences.

Taking the subjective approach to deviance, Part One of this book examines such phenomena more specifically. The topics treated in this part of the book include how people type, or label, others as deviants; the cultural context of typing; the accommodations people make to the so-called deviance; and how people may collaborate to exclude deviants from their midst.

THE PROCESS OF SOCIAL TYPING

Sociologically, deviance is approached here in terms of social differentiation. This differentiation arises from the perception that something is amiss. If a potential typer, or labeler, ignores or excuses the alleged aberrant quality of a person or event, it goes unlabeled as deviant. For instance, a person who works hard is expected sometimes to be tired and cranky, and in such situations people may not attach any particular importance to this behavior. Once an act or a person is typed as "deviant," however, a variety of social phenomena may come into play. These phenomena include who types whom, on what grounds, in what ways, before or after what acts (real or imputed), in front of what audience, and with what effects.

Let us for a moment consider the conditions that seem to make typing more effective. First, typing generally has the most effect when the typer, the person typed as deviant, and other people all share and understand the deviant definition in their social relationships. The typer and others act toward the "deviant" in accord with their shared understanding of the situation. Aware of having been so typed, the deviant, in turn, takes that shared understanding into account in relating to people. Thus, willingly or otherwise, all parties may subscribe to the definition. When all agree in this way, the definition of the person as a particular type of deviant is most socially effective, or confirmed. As an example, Frank Tannenbaum, one of the fathers of the interactionist perspective on deviance, has said: "The process of making the criminal...is a process of tagging, defining, identifying, segregating, describing, emphasizing, and evoking the very traits that are complained of.... The person becomes the thing he is described as being." Tannenbaum says that "the community cannot deal with people whom it cannot define" and that "the young delinquent becomes bad because he is defined as bad and because he is not believed if he is good."[1]

Second, social types are generally more apt to be accepted by other people if a high-ranking person does the typing. Effective social typing usually flows down rather than up the social structure. For example, an honor bestowed by the President of the United States is more likely to be consequential than an honor bestowed by a low-ranking official. Conversely, a denunciation by a very high-ranking person such as the president of a company will usually carry more weight, and be confirmed by more people, than a denunciation by a low-ranking person such as one of the company's janitors.

Third, deviant typing is also more apt to be effective if there is a sense that the alleged deviant is violating important norms and that the violations are extreme. For instance, if

factory workers are tacitly expected to turn out only a limited amount of work, a worker who produces much more than the norm may be singled out and ostracized as a "rate-buster." On the other hand, a person who jaywalks is unlikely to be typed and treated as a deviant.

Fourth, it also seems that negative social typing is more readily accepted than positive typing. For one thing, "misery loves company"; people find comfort in learning about the frailties of others. In addition, norms seem to be highlighted more by infraction than by conformity. Also, negative typing is seen as a valuable safeguard if the type indicates an aberrant pattern that will probably continue and that has major consequences. Some police officers, for instance, expect upper-class adolescents to misbehave in their youth but later to become influential and respected citizens, while they expect slum adolescents who are vandals, troublemakers, or delinquents to become hardened criminals in adulthood; thus such police officers are more likely to negatively type slum youths than upper-class youths who break the same laws.

Fifth, typing will be accepted more readily if the audience stands to gain from the labeling. Endorsing attention to another person's deviant behavior, for example, may divert attention from one's own. It may also sustain a status difference between oneself and the so-called deviant.

When social typing is effective, there are three kinds of consequences that most often follow: self-fulfilling prophecy, typecasting, and recasting. In the self-fulfilling prophecy, typing is based on false beliefs about the alleged deviant, but the actions other people take on the basis of these false beliefs eventually make them become a reality. For example, both black and white police officers believe that it is more difficult to arrest blacks than whites. As a result, they tend to use more force in arresting blacks, and in turn they experience more resistance from blacks. In typecasting, the deviant stereotype is so widely accepted that confirmation of the typing proceeds rapidly, and typer, audience, and the person typed relate to each other in an automatic manner. For instance, if one person types another as a thief, any audience can generally predict and understand the typer's attitudes and actions. In recasting, the most complex of the three consequences, the deviant is expected to behave conventionally and is encouraged to disprove the deviant typing (e.g., to reform). Probation officers, for example, may encourage conventionality by restricting the opportunities of their probationers to continue their deviant ways. In the first two consequences of typing, the typer and audience restrict the deviant's opportunities to disprove the deviant typing. In recasting, the typer and the audience restrict the deviant's opportunities to confirm the deviant typing.

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

The process of social typing occurs within a cultural context. Each culture, for example, has its own assortment and corresponding vocabulary of types. Thus in our own culture we no longer talk about "witches"; consequently, no one is so typed. Similarly, if we had no word for or concept of "psychopath," no one would be so typed. The culture's repertoire of deviant types and stereotypes is ordinarily created, defined, sustained, and controlled by highly valued realms of the culture (e.g., psychiatry, law, religion). In addition, it should also be noted, different categories are used in different subcultures. "Sinners," for example, are typed only in the religious sector.

Because different groups and cultures have different ideas about deviance, however, typing often has an ethnocentric bias. People in one culture or subculture may be quick to type an outsider as deviant, for instance, simply because the outsider's lifestyle is so different from their own. Among persons within the same culture or subculture, on the other hand, the risks of being typed deviant are usually smaller.

Once a person has been labeled, the question of how to relate to the deviant is more easily resolved when cultural prescriptions exist. These include the prescriptions, for example, that sick people should be treated and evil people punished. In sum, typing is easier to act on when cultural guidelines exist.

ACCOMMODATION TO DEVIANCE

As noted previously, sociologically, deviants are persons who have been effectively labeled as deviant, and *effectively* means simply that the label does in fact affect social relations. The person who has been typed as a deviant, for example, acquires a special status that carries a set of new rights and duties or changes in old ones, and a new set of expectations about future conduct. Thus when people type a certain person as deviant, they imply, "We now expect you to engage in deviant actions." In some cases, this expectation amounts to a license to deviate, as when a group may not only tolerate but actually shelter a deviant in its midst. More often, however, the expectation of deviant conduct gives other people license to treat the deviant in a demeaning way.

The pace of events in labeling is one of the critical factors in this entire process. If aberrant conduct occurs only gradually and irregularly within a small, intimate group, deviant typing may not take place at all. Even if the events place some immediate strain on relationships, members of the group may adjust to the strain without perceiving the person any differently. Eventually, though, some critical point may be reached at which the group becomes aware that things are not what they used to be. Sometimes the members of the group have long entertained suspicions of deviance, and their accommodation represents an acknowledgement that the deviation is here to stay. In other instances, though, even as they type the person as deviant, group members may be optimistic that the deviance is only temporary. In any case, the group's accommodation to the so-called deviance has usually been going on for some time before labeling actually occurs.

THE ROLE OF THIRD PARTIES

As already noted, in intimate, primary groups, people are usually slower to type one of their members as deviant than are outsiders. Such in-group labeling does happen at times, however, particularly if the deviant's aberrant behavior has begun to cause considerable strain for the rest of the group. When such strain exists, the typing of the person as deviant is often facilitated or precipitated by some outsider or outside agency—in short, by some third party.

In some cases the third party may act without solicitation. A wife, for example, may fail to recognize that her husband is involved with another woman until the community gossip (the third party) so informs her; she may then type her husband as a "son of a bitch" and may, through separation or divorce, exclude him from the family.