

THEORIES AND METHODS IN DEVIANCE STUDIES

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Engraving of Salem Witchcraft Trial, 1692

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VIEWS OF DEVIANCE

CHAPTER OUTLINE

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Deviance as Symbolic Interaction: A Sociological Approach

- Social Acts
- Focus on Observable Behavior
- Symbolic Interaction

The Sociological Promise

Summary

Key Words

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you will be able to:

1. Identify different religions that believed deviant behavior could be caused by demonic possession.
2. Discuss the idea of deviance as being “psychotic.”
3. Explain the influence cultural variation has on deviant behavior.
4. Explain the sociological approach to studying deviance.
5. Summarize the importance of a sociological understanding of deviance.

Virtually all humans make distinctions between right and wrong, good and bad, normal and weird. It is hard to imagine that we could be human—or survive as a species—without making such distinctions. The sociology of **deviance** is devoted to studying the “bad,” “wrong,” and “weird” side of these divisions: what people consider immoral, criminal, strange, and disgusting. Deviance includes the broadest possible scope of such activities—not just criminal acts, but any actions, thoughts, feelings, or social statuses that members of a social group judge to be a violation of their values or rules. This book provides a sociological understanding of deviance, as well as examining many of the major categories of deviance in contemporary American society.

Few things in life touch such sensitive nerves as seeing or hearing about things we consider deviant. Our blood rises, our tempers flare, we are flooded with disgust, and we often find

ourselves struggling to understand how anyone could do something so immoral or obscene. Even so, unless we have lived the most sheltered of lives, we also recognize that not everyone sees things the way we do. Some people approve of behaviors that we personally find reprehensible; and some acts or social statuses that we personally enjoy or participate in may be considered reprehensible by others. Even when almost all of us agree that someone is deviant or has engaged in deviant behavior, we may find ourselves disagreeing about the reasons for their deviance. We may believe the person is evil, sick, inconsiderate, or just does not know better than to behave that way.

One of the key features of deviance is its **blurred boundaries**, the often hazy distinctions between what is considered good or bad, right or wrong, and the confusion that we face when we try to explain why. We can start our journey with a few examples that give a sense of the range of things that fall under the deviance umbrella. At first blush, each of the following cases is likely to seem crystal clear as a case of deviance. However, as we probe deeper, a disquieting realization that the boundaries that separate these acts and conditions from what some may consider acceptable becomes cloudier. Further, each case may be explained in radically different ways.

BLURRED BOUNDARIES: THE DRAMA OF DEVIANCE

First, consider Jeffrey Epstein, a wealthy financier and sex offender who died in 2019, presumably by suicide, while awaiting trial on federal charges for sex trafficking of minors in Florida and New York. Epstein had pled guilty a decade earlier to procuring an underage child for prostitution, a crime for which he received a lenient 13-month sentence. Epstein's attorneys paid off dozens of his underage victims to keep them quiet, but over the following years numerous women filed lawsuits against him, and in the summer of 2019, he was rearrested, based on a grand jury indictment that he had lured and coerced dozens of underage girls, often from impoverished backgrounds, to his mansions for sexual encounters with him and other wealthy men. Epstein often flew girls to his private Caribbean island, having them dress in college sweatshirts while travelling so they looked like college students. One of his Palm Beach aides swore under oath that at one point Epstein had 22 girls who travelled with him as "massage therapists." Another of his aides reported that Epstein often had sex with several teenage girls a day (Levine 2020). Following his death in a New York jail, all charges against Epstein were dismissed, although his wealthy British girlfriend and partner in crime, Ghislaine Maxwell, has since been convicted of sex trafficking of underage girls.

Next, consider the case of a brutal murder committed in the summer of 2021 when 63-year-old Julio Aponte rode his motorcycle to a New York bus stop where his 49-year-old wife, Kelly, was waiting to catch a bus to work. As he screamed at her for cheating on him, he struck her multiple times with a crowbar. As bystanders yelled, videotaped the assault, and called 911, Aponte knocked his wife unconscious, then climbed back on his motorcycle and fled the scene. Later that day, Aponte turned himself in to the police, who charged him

with assault—a charge that was changed to murder when his wife died from her injuries a few days later (Parascandola 2021).

Our third case comes from the world of professional sports where, in January 2013, the cycling legend and seven time Tour de France winner, Lance Armstrong, confessed on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* that he had used performance-enhancing drugs during his illustrious career. Rumors of Armstrong's doping, including use of human growth hormone, steroids, and EPO (a drug that increases red blood cell production) had circulated for years and in 2012 the United State Anti-Doping Agency identified him as the leader of the most sophisticated and successful doping program that had ever occurred in sports. While Armstrong admitted to Oprah that he had engaged in doping, he protested that he had not engaged in cheating, arguing that other cyclists engaged in the same behaviors (BBC 2013).

The International Cycling Union took a dimmer view, banning him from professional cycling and stripping him of his seven Tour de France titles. His sponsors also reacted negatively to his confession of doping, withdrawing a reported \$75 million in sponsorship the day after his Oprah interview (Wharton and Pugmire 2013).

While the foregoing examples of deviance involve illegal or illicit actions, the field of deviance also includes a variety of socially unacceptable or stigmatized conditions or statuses. One commonly stigmatized condition in American culture is obesity. While many of us may feel that it is unfair to look down on those who are considered "fat," we are all aware that many heavy people feel judged by a society that stigmatizes heavy bodies, as captured in the experience of author and activist, Aubrey Gordon (2020:30), in her book, *What We Don't Talk about When We Talk about Fat*.

I was in fourth grade, sitting in a doctor's office, the first time my face flushed with shame. I was, I had just learned, overweight.

"It's probably from eating all that pizza and ice cream," the doctor said. "It tastes good, doesn't it? But it makes your body big and fat."

I felt my face sear with shame. My skin was neon, hot and bright, noisy and garish. I had learned so much in that one moment: *You're eating too much junk food. You're not beautiful. You're indulging too much. Your body is wrong. You must have done it.* Something was wrong with my body. I'd failed a test I didn't even know I'd taken.

Each of the foregoing examples illustrates part of the drama of deviance. Why do people engage in behaviors that are disapproved of and often punished? And why do they allow themselves to have a status that is widely looked down upon? Before we look at deviance from a sociological perspective, it is useful to consider some of the common ways that deviance has been explained in human societies. Three popular explanations in particular provide useful comparisons. We can refer to these explanations of deviance as "the demonic," "the psychotic," and "the exotic."

Each of these views points to a different cause of deviant behavior. The demonic view argues that "The devil made him do it." The psychotic view proposes "She did it because she was crazy." And the exotic view explains "That kind of thing is okay where they come from."

How is it possible for things that we see as so clearly bad to be viewed in such different ways? This is one of the central questions of deviance at the blurred boundaries.

DEVIANCE AS DEMONIC

In the *Bible*, Eve (and then Adam) committed the first act of transgression against God by eating fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Here, early in Jewish and Christian scriptures, we see an example of perhaps the oldest explanation for deviance. Why did Eve deviate from the sacred rule of God? She did so because Satan, a demon in the form of a serpent, tempted her. Deviance, according to this view, is caused by **demonic** possession.

While other societies may have much different stories of creation and images of God or gods, many societies have held beliefs that evil acts and objectionable conditions are caused by malevolent, evil forces. Thus, we find Loki, the Norse god of guile and deception; Eris, the Greek goddess of strife; and Native American myths of Trickster Coyote who seduced women—and men—and caused general discord as he conned his way across the countryside. Indeed, belief in evil spirits has been remarkably widespread. Some of the earliest known writings, those of Sumerian culture nearly 6000 years ago, refer to demons called *gid-dim*—demons believed to cause mental problems and disordered behavior. Zoroastrianism (a Middle Eastern religion in the millennium before the Christian era) proclaimed that the evil god, Angra Mainyu, ensnared humans in sinful lust through his witchcraft. And numerous more localized folk beliefs have attributed individuals' bad and unusual behaviors to becoming possessed by malevolent spirits that inhabited the woodlands, marshes, and animals in their worlds.

The most extreme beliefs in demonic possession occurred in Europe in the Middle Ages, where from the early decades of the fifteenth century through the 1650s, an estimated 200,000 to half a million people, most of them women, were burned at the stake, hung, or otherwise executed for being witches (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009:144). In 1486, two Dominican priests published what was to become the key text for witch hunting for the next two centuries. Their book, *Malleus Maleficarum* (“The Witch’s Hammer”), claimed that Europe was experiencing an epidemic of women conspiring with Satan against God. When women lost their virginity, the priests argued, they became obsessed with sexual desires, thus making it easy for the devil, in the form of an incubus (a demon in human form), to seduce them. Once seduced by Satan, women became witches and turned to sorcery (rituals to cause supernatural effects) and heresy—devil worshipping and anti-religious practices such as the “Black Sabbath” or inverted Mass. In the American colonies, the Salem Witch Trials of 1692 dramatically professed the belief in the demonic possession of witches (as depicted in the painting at the start of this chapter), culminating in the imprisonment of nearly 200 Salem residents and the hanging of 20 of them.

Beliefs about the paths by which people become possessed by demons vary from culture to culture. In some, individuals who are out after dark are thought to fall prey to evil-spirited night animals such as owls or cats. In Europe during the Middle Ages, as we have seen, women were believed to be sexually seduced into conspiring with the devil. In the early twentieth century in the United States, popular Protestant evangelist Billy Sunday preached that men, not women, were the most vulnerable to the devil’s wiles, and that liquor, not sex, was the means by which he ensnared them. In his famous sermon, “The Devil’s Boomerangs,” Sunday proclaimed that the saloon was the “sum of all villainies,” and that with every drink, a man’s morality grew weaker (Sunday 1920).

As we will see in Chapter 9, Billy Sunday's sermons on "demon rum" struck a responsive chord in the era leading to Prohibition, winning him many followers—as well as many enemies. But even many who did not accept Sunday's message were enthralled by his preaching style—a dramatic and compelling fight with the devil that has yet to be matched by even the most dramatic televangelists.

It is easy for most of us to discount beliefs in demonic causes of deviance when they come from cultures far from our own. In fact, many Americans today discount belief in demons and Satanic forces entirely, preferring more secular explanations for deviance. Of course, many other Americans continue to believe that the devil is a real force in the world today. Whatever your personal beliefs, it is clear to see how demonic explanations could provide one kind of answer to the question of why people engage in deviance. Consider each of foregoing cases.

A rich man who uses his money and power to lure teenage girls into sexual activities with himself and other wealthy men can be seen as having fallen prey to the devil's lustful temptations. In the New Testament book of *Romans*, the Apostle Paul condemns sexual immorality and debauchery, counseling Christians to avoid thinking about the pleasures of the flesh (*English Standard Version Bible* 2001a *Romans* 13:14). Similarly, a man like Julio Aponte, so consumed by jealous rage that he would brutally bludgeon his wife to death on a city street, could easily be viewed as urged on by demonic forces to take his revenge. In comparison to the rich pedophile and a murderous husband, a professional athlete's willingness to cheat by using illicit performance enhancing drugs may seem relatively mild. But greed for fame and personal gain has long been associated with the devil. One of the most enduring legends in American folk culture tells of the Mississippi blues singer, Robert Johnson, selling his soul to the Devil in exchange for a superb ability to play guitar. The parallel to Lance Armstrong's use of illicit drugs to excel in professional cycling is obvious.

Finally, we have the case of the "fat" young woman. At first glance, it might seem difficult to conceive of her deviance as inspired by demonic forces. And yet one widespread view of fat people is that they are heavy because their love of food is out of control. Gluttony, or the sin of overindulgence, was considered one of the seven cardinal, or deadly sins of early Christianity. Like sexual desire and greed, it was one of Satan's temptations, to be resisted by those seeking God's salvation. In his letters to the Philippians, Paul counsels against the sin of overeating, writing of those who over indulge that, "Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame" (*English Standard Version Bible* 2001b *Philippians* 3:19). Even today the language of sin and temptation permeates our talk about food, as "sinfully delicious" and "temptingly tasty." And, as we will see later in this book, "fat" people are often stereotyped as weak-willed and lacking moral discipline.

DEVIANCE AS PSYCHOTIC

The belief that evil forces or demons cause deviance has persisted over thousands of years, making it the longest-lasting explanation of deviance in human history. But today, in America, evil is a less pervasive explanation of deviance than in the past. In the United States and other

modern western cultures, the most common explanation for many forms of deviance is illness—specifically, mental illness of one kind or another. In popular terms (as opposed to precise medical definitions), we can refer to this view of deviance as **psychotic**.

Medical explanations for objectionable behaviors and conditions are not new, but they expanded enormously in their influence during the twentieth century, in tandem with the rise of medical science in general, and psychiatry in particular. Psychology courses titled “Abnormal Psychology” exemplify this kind of explanation. Broadly speaking, abnormal psychology scholars explain mental disorders and deviance as caused by either biological defects or problematic psychological development. Behavioral genetics, for instance, is widely discussed among psychologists and psychiatrists as a cause of disorders such as schizophrenia, depression, criminality, and mental retardation (Sarason and Sarason 2017). Alternatively, psychological theories of abnormality may focus on problematic psychological development resulting from traumatic experiences or unresolved psychological conflicts. In each of these explanations, whether due to defective genetics or unhealthy psychological development, deviant behavior is a sign of sickness.

The American Psychiatric Association’s (APA) diagnostic manual provides the most comprehensive list of mental and behavioral disorders in the United States. According to the APA, there are hundreds of mental illnesses, ranging from classic cognitive and emotional disorders from schizophrenia and depression to illnesses revealed primarily in behavior, such as drug addiction, paraphilias (abnormal sexual attraction), and childhood conduct disorders. Many behaviors that had previously been classified as sin came to be defined and treated as illnesses during the twentieth century. This shift in explaining deviant behaviors has been so common that sociologists have given it a name: the **medicalization of deviance** (Conrad and Schneider 1992).

But the notion of deviance being caused by mental illness is not just a medical phenomenon. It also shows up regularly in everyday language, particularly when we refer to those who do objectionable things as “psycho,” “sick,” or “perverted.” The idea that mental illness causes deviance is also a staple of popular culture and the American movie industry, reflected time and again in psychological horror movies. In *Psycho* (1960), the most famous psychological thriller of all time, we witness two grisly murders in an out-of-the-way motel, and watch with horror as the murderer is revealed to be the deranged young hotel proprietor who lives with a split personality—half his own and half that of his dead mother, who he murdered and has preserved in the motel basement. Many more recent movies play on similar themes of mental illness causing violent and bizarre behavior.

As the foregoing discussion shows, the notion that deviant individuals are psychologically sick is common in psychiatric medicine and in popular culture. Each of the examples of deviance earlier in this chapter could be explained as caused by psychological illness. Jeffrey Epstein’s decades long obsession with, and sexual abuse of, young girls might be diagnosed as caused by paraphilia, a psychiatric disorder involving strong deviant sexual attraction—in his case to teenage girls. Along a similar line, Julio Aponte’s lethal beating of his wife might be explained as resulting from an impulse control disorder that impaired his ability to manage his anger when he learned of his wife’s infidelity. Similarly, while steroid drug use is clearly linked

to athletes' hopes of improving athletic performance, the National Institute of Drug Abuse reports that steroids are often used by male—and female—body builders who suffer from a behavioral syndrome called body dysmorphic disorder which causes them to have a distorted image of their bodies. Finally, the large young woman quoted at the start of this chapter might well be considered a victim of binge eating disorder, a mental illness characterized by recurrent and obsessive binge eating without purging (itself a symptom of another deviant eating pattern called bulimia).

DEVIANCE AS EXOTIC

Where the two preceding popular explanations for deviance are centered on the deviant individual—say, a young woman with an eating disorder or an athlete manipulated by the devil—the final popular explanation of deviance looks at the broader cultural environment in which deviance occurs. This explanation argues that different cultures often have very dissimilar beliefs regarding right and wrong, normal and weird, and that much of deviance is simply a matter of cultural variation. Just as plants that seem exotic to us grow in natural environments different from our own, so do human behaviors that seem exotic to us develop in social environments that are distant from ours.

The view of deviance as **exotic** is cosmopolitan in its scope, looking far beyond our own localized experiences to acknowledge and appreciate the diversity of human behavior across the globe. The person who did the most to popularize this explanation was one of the great world travelers of all time: Robert Ripley, the founder of “Ripley’s Believe It or Not!” For over 30 years, Ripley traveled the world in search of mind-boggling oddities to bring to readers of his syndicated comic panel, which continues to run in newspapers even today. While some of his “discoveries” were biological oddities, like two-headed animals and human “giants,” many of the tales that Ripley reported in his illustrated newspaper panels were stories of unusual human customs from distant parts of the world. One of the most famous human rituals that Ripley reported was the “headshrinking” practices once common among some indigenous Ecuadorians. As the Ripley’s website states, “The practice of shrinking heads was once common amongst the Jivaro Indians of Ecuador. It was a ritual that had been handed down through generations. The heads of slain warriors were valued as trophies or symbols of bravery” (Ripley’s 2023).

Today, more than 70 years after Ripley’s death, Ripley Entertainment, Inc. continues to publish their famous cartoons, along with books, blogs, and videos. In its nearly 30 museums worldwide, aptly dubbed “odditoriums,” it offers visitors a tour through a wealth of exotic oddities, including many that most of us would classify as deviance. If you visit the Ripley’s Odditorium in Orlando, for instance, you will see displays that illustrate various forms of ritual cannibalism around the world and such striking body modification practices as Padaung women in Burma who used brass rings to elongate their necks and natives from the Chad in Africa who inserted wooden plates in their lips to stretch them to as much as eight inches in diameter.

In addition to illustrating the notion of deviance as exotic, the tremendous success of Ripley's *Believe It or Not!* demonstrates how our interests are often piqued by the bizarre and deviant. Indeed, travelers' tales of strange doings in distant lands—from Marco Polo's account of "the Orient" to modern anthropologists' reports on "primitive societies"—have long fascinated listeners. Even *National Geographic*, a source that many of us turn to for nonsensationalized reporting from around the world, found an audience for its long-running television series *Taboo* which recounted stories of deviations in human behavior in different cultures around the globe.

The notion of deviance as exotic challenges our belief that we can easily distinguish good from bad or normal from strange. While it does not necessarily challenge the correctness of our beliefs regarding right and wrong in our own culture, it clearly suggests that beliefs regarding what is appropriate can only be made within a specific cultural context. The exotic behaviors reported by Ripley and *National Geographic* were considered normal, not deviant, within their own cultures—although they were often misunderstood by early travelers. According to Ripley, it simply was not deviant for the Jivaro Indians of Ecuador to engage in activities that we have come to describe as "headshrinking." Nor was it deviant for members of Yanomamo society in Brazil to eat parts of their deceased relatives' bodies. On the other hand, serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer did violate the norms of American culture and engaged in deviant behavior when he killed, dismembered, and at times ate parts of his victims.

As the preceding examples illustrate, the view of deviance as exotic behavior sensitizes us to the variability of **social norms**, illustrating that what is deviant in one context may not be in another. This is a valuable insight, revealing that our ways of looking at things are not the only ways of looking at things. Such an approach can be taken in regard to the cases of deviance with which we started the chapter—arguing, that is, that behaviors and conditions similar to them have been viewed as acceptable and appropriate in cultures other than our own. So, for instance, while we look with revulsion at Jeffrey Epstein's coercing poor young girls to have sex with him and other wealthy and powerful men, in classical Greece respectable Athenian men often owned young slave girls who they used and shared with other men for sexual gratification (Keuls 1993). Similarly, while those who witnessed Julio Aponte's attack on his wife were horrified by his behavior, many societies have allowed the practice of "honor killing" by men whose wives have committed adultery.

Nor is it difficult to find examples of cultures in which performance-enhancing drugs have been widely accepted. The leaves of the coca plant (from which cocaine is derived) have long been used by llama herders on the high plateaus of the Andes mountains to increase their strength, endurance, and resistance to the cold (Plowman 1986). And amphetamines were widely used to enhance European and Japanese soldiers' alertness and performance in World War II, as illustrated by the headline of a major British newspaper in 1941 that proclaimed, "Methedrine Wins the Battle of London" (Escobotado 1999:93). Finally, many heavier women whose bodies are stigmatized in America today would have been viewed as highly sensual and beautiful in seventeenth century Holland where the attraction of full-figured voluptuous women was provocatively captured in the paintings of Peter Paul Rubens.

DEVIANCE AS SYMBOLIC INTERACTION: A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH

Each of the preceding explanations for deviance provides a way of looking at the world and explaining what seems otherwise inexplicable: why people act in ways that violate our sense of right and wrong. This book provides a fourth kind of approach: a sociological view of deviance.

Sociology is the study of human societies and social interactions. It is directed toward gaining a better understanding of the organizational patterns and social processes through which people enact social life and create and sustain societies. For the moment, we can consider two basic characteristics of the sociological approach, especially as compared to the preceding explanations of deviance. First, sociology is focused on human *social acts*. Second, sociologists seek to test and refine their understanding of social life through close *examination of observable human behaviors*.

Social Acts

The sociological focus on social acts refers to all human actions that take others' behaviors, feelings, and ideas into account and are influenced by them. Social acts are the building blocks of society, linking individuals with other individuals and with social groups. Social institutions, from families to schools to international corporations, are created through human beings fitting their behaviors together with other people. This is not to suggest that all social acts are cooperative or consensual—far from it. The use of force, trickery, and violence are as much social acts (i.e., needing to take into account others' behaviors) as are acts of love, compassion, and sharing. A burglar sneaking into a home while the family sleeps must be closely attuned to the potential behaviors of their victims. Social acts cover a wide range of human behavior, from a quick greeting between two people passing on the sidewalk, to a courtroom trial, and even your reading of this book. Sociologists seek to understand different kinds of social acts, how they are organized, and what their consequences are for individuals, social groups, and societies. In terms of understanding deviance, a focus on social acts directs us toward (1) the ways in which people come to define certain behaviors or conditions as deviant, (2) the processes through which some individuals are identified and treated as deviants, and (3) the ways in which “deviant” individuals and groups respond to their treatment.

When we look at deviance from a sociological angle, we can see important aspects of human behavior that are not seen as clearly (if at all) by the other kinds of explanations we have discussed. At the same time, a sociological understanding of deviance does not address some of the central issues focused on by these other explanations. The difference between sociological and demonic explanations of deviance is obvious. From the demonic perspective, deviance is caused by the evil influence of supernatural beings. While the demonic view may call for a social response to deviants (e.g., punishing them or praying for them), deviance itself is not, in essence, seen as a matter of social interaction. The sociological perspective, on the other hand, does not address the “reality” of spiritual beliefs that are central to a demonic explanation of deviance. Sociology certainly considers the important influence of religions in human societies, but as a social science it does not presume to address whether or not any particular set of religious beliefs are justified.

The sociological approach to deviance can also be distinguished from the view of deviance as psychotic. From the psychotic perspective, deviance is a matter of individual sickness, caused by such things as defective chromosomes and traumatic psychological experiences. The focus on biological aspects of deviant behavior in the field of abnormal psychology (discussed more in Chapter 3) clearly directs attention away from the social acts that interest sociologists. Social developmental theories of abnormal behavior, on the other hand, at times overlap with the sociological approach to deviance since they focus on the impact of various kinds of problematic social interaction (e.g., unresolved familial conflicts or social trauma). But insofar as a psychotic view locates deviance as a problem within the individual, attention is directed toward the individual's psychological experience and away from social interaction.

The exotic view of deviance seems at first glance to share more similarity with a sociological approach to deviance than the other two kinds of explanations. It is true that the view of deviance as exotic acknowledges the role of culture in defining behaviors and conditions as deviant. But few treatments of deviance as exotic attempt to provide any significant analysis of how and why social acts we treat as deviant in our society are considered normal and honorable in other cultures. Robert Ripley, for instance, built his reputation and fortune by condensing the exotic practices of other peoples into comic strip *Believe It or Not!* factoids that reported the existence of strange behaviors, but never explained them in any detail. In contrast, the goal of sociology is not simply to describe deviance, but also to provide an explanation of the social processes through which deviance is constructed.

Focus on Observable Behavior

The way in which sociologists develop their explanations of deviance (as well as other kinds of social acts) also distinguishes the sociological approach. Sociological theories are developed and refined (or rejected) through a close *examination of observable human behavior*. In the next chapter, we will consider the challenges and techniques of sociological research, but for the moment, it is sufficient to consider simply the sociological commitment to evaluating ideas about human behavior by looking closely at observable human acts. Like other sciences (both natural sciences and behavioral sciences), sociology is based on the belief that rigorous examination of observable phenomena (in this case, human acts and artifacts) can provide insights that help us understand patterns of activity in the world around us. As a mode of inquiry, sociology emphasizes the tentativeness of our understandings of social life and the importance of challenging our beliefs about how people act by comparing those beliefs with observable behavior. This emphasis on trying to observe things that could contradict or challenge our beliefs clearly distinguishes a sociological approach from a religious approach to deviance. Religious traditions encourage faith as, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (*English Standard Version Bible 2001c Hebrews 1:1*). In contrast, sociology is limited to observable human behaviors—people's talk, actions, interactions, and artifacts.

The limitation of sociology is also one of its greatest strengths because these observations, or **empirical data**, provide sociologists with a way to test and refine their ideas. To understand why this is a strength, consider for a moment our common everyday approach to life. We live our daily lives with a multitude of assumptions about how the world works. We

take it for granted that a grocery store clerk will sell us what we take to the check-out stand, that our doctors will give us good health advice, and that our friends will not rob us. We seldom question these assumptions because they “work,” which is to say that they enable us to achieve our goals, from taking care of our physical needs to maintaining harmonious relationships with our families and friends. Typically, the only time we question our assumptions is when they no longer help us achieve our goals. So, for instance, we are likely to question our assumptions about a romantic partner when they consistently fail to return our phone calls. In such circumstances, we often seek out new information that can help us modify our assumptions—say, to confirm that our romantic partner has unexpectedly had to leave town for an emergency, or that they have lost interest in us. Guided by new information, our new assumptions are likely to enable us to better achieve, or revise, our goals.

In our daily lives, we would find it extremely hard to live if we continuously questioned our assumptions, but a skeptical attitude and a focus on empirical data have big advantages for developing sociological theories. By comparing our ideas about social life with the actual behavior of human beings, sociologists are able to better comprehend whether or not their beliefs and assumptions accurately represent the social acts that they seek to understand. Further, as social scientists share and compare their observations to those of other scholars, they are able to work together to deepen our knowledge of social life. This book is an attempt to organize and present a sociological understanding of deviance that is based on observations by hundreds of sociologists across a diverse range of deviant topics.

However, just because sociologists focus on observable behavior does not mean that they all see exactly the same things or that they all agree on why people act in the ways they do. Different fundamental beliefs about the nature of social life and human behavior direct attention to different aspects of our complex and multifaceted social world. Various sociological theories or paradigms provide powerful insights into a certain range of social acts (e.g., social class conflicts, or the integrative functions of social structures), but they often fail to acknowledge other social dynamics and processes.

Symbolic Interaction

Among **sociological paradigms**, the theoretical perspective of **symbolic interaction** stands out as especially multifaceted in its approach to human behavior. Symbolic interaction offers both an analytic perspective on social life and guidelines for how best to study it. It is also the sociological paradigm that is drawn upon most consistently in this book. You will learn much more about symbolic interaction in the following chapters, but for now it will be sufficient to understand a few of the basic principles. Perhaps the most succinct and widely quoted explanation of symbolic interaction’s principles was provided by one of its most important founders, Herbert Blumer (1969), who laid out three basic premises of this perspective. The first premise is that people act toward things based on the meaning those things have for them. The second is that the meaning of such things is created in social interaction. The third premise is that the meanings we attach to things is modified through our interpretation of what we encounter.

Blumer’s three premises have major implications for understanding social life in general, and certainly for explaining deviance. To begin with, Blumer argues that in order to understand

human behavior, we must know how people define things. Deviance, according to this view, does not inhere in specific kinds of behaviors, but in the meanings that people attach to those behaviors. Second, our understanding of the meanings of things develops through social interaction. Even the languages that we use to think about our world and communicate with others are learned through social interaction. While humans clearly have a unique biological ability to use symbols in complex ways, children who are deprived of social interaction fail to develop that ability in anything more than rudimentary ways.

A further important implication of Blumer's premises is that people are active interpreters and responders to the world around them. We do not blindly and robotically react to stimuli in our environments. Rather, we endeavor to make sense of occurrences and respond to them according to the meaning we attach to them. Think back to the example of the romantic partner who does not return your phone call. Your response to their silence will depend on how you define it. If you know that they have a seriously ill relative, you are likely to feel concern for them and leave a comforting message on their phone. On the other hand, if you have worries that they have been dating someone else behind your back, your next phone message—if you even leave another one—may well be antagonistic and condemning. In each case, the stimulus (their failure to return your call) is the same, while your interpretation of it makes all the difference for your response.

Finally, Blumer's basic principles of symbolic interaction clearly suggest that the most valuable research for sociologists will be closely attuned to the meanings people give to things and the processes through which those meanings are created and sustained in human interaction. The importance of this point for the study of deviance is enormous since deviance exists at the intersection of conflicting beliefs regarding right and wrong, good and bad, acceptable and reprehensible. In order to understand deviance, we must grasp the meanings that guide the actions of and interactions among different people, including, most prominently, (1) those who seek to ban, punish, or otherwise control deviance; and (2) those who become identified and treated as deviant. Among the research methods used by sociologists, two are particularly well suited for the task of investigating meaning: participant-observation and in-depth interviews. Taken together, these two methods are often referred to as **ethnography**, or the detailed description of people acting and interacting in social worlds.

This book is designed to provide you with an analysis of deviance that is grounded in symbolic interactionist sociology and ethnography. We will focus on understanding the **social constructions**, or meanings, that people create to define what is deviant and what should be done about it. We will examine in close detail the roles of social groups and social selves in creating the meanings of deviance, both for those who are identified as deviants and for those who label them. In the process, we will come to see that the line between moral and immoral behavior is much more of a blurred boundary—a hazy and shifting distinction—than we often recognize in our daily lives. This does not mean that the boundaries between good and bad are any less important—far from it. Humans would not be fully human without a sense of right and wrong. But the boundaries of deviance and morality are fluid, shifting, and at times confusing. In order to understand deviance, it is not enough to simply feel confident in our own values, expectations, and behaviors. We must find ways to understand the values, expectations, and behavior of others as well.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL PROMISE

Today, topics related to deviance pervade public debates and private lives. The sheer pervasiveness of deviance in our society offers one good reason to take a course on it. Issues related to deviance are likely to touch many aspects of your life in the years ahead. At the personal level, you or family members and friends may experience deviance firsthand, whether as victims of criminal behaviors or as people who are stigmatized as deviants yourselves. You may also find yourself called upon to handle issues related to deviance in your professional life. Today in many—perhaps most—kinds of work, from teaching and law enforcement to medical services and business, professionals find themselves confronting people who are classified in various deviance categories, or being called upon to develop policies that define what is deviant in their workplaces. And at the public level, informed citizenship in the twenty first century demands an understanding of both the general processes through which deviance is constructed and the history of debates and human struggles surrounding various deviance categories.

If you take this course seriously, you will gain a deeper understanding of many critical issues in contemporary social life. That is the sociological promise. The knowledge and analytic tools that you will be called upon to develop in this course will prepare you to confront issues related to deviance in an informed and more effective manner. Taking full advantage of this opportunity, however, requires discipline, hard work, and—perhaps most importantly—a willingness to move beyond your personal comfort zone. In the study of deviance, we are all forced to examine some of our most deeply held assumptions about right and wrong and about why people act in the ways they do. Hopefully, you will find the hard work in the course more than offset by the interesting nature of the topics we will cover and the compelling stories that sociologists have gathered in their studies of deviance.

SUMMARY

- All societies distinguish some behaviors and conditions as objectionable. Sociologists seek to understand the activities of both those who define behaviors and conditions as objectionable and those who become identified as deviants.
- All societies have beliefs about the causes of deviant behavior.
- The demonic explanation views deviant behavior as caused by evil forces that compel people to engage in immoral acts.
- The psychotic view of deviance asserts that mental illness causes deviance.
- The view of deviance as exotic explains what appears to be deviance as a product of living in a culture with different beliefs and values about good and bad, normal and strange.
- The sociological approach to deviance focuses on analyzing social acts and the close examination of observable behavior.

- Within the field of sociology, the symbolic interactionist perspective focuses on the meanings that people attach to their and others' behaviors. The definitions that people create for what is right and what is wrong may shift over time and across cultures.
- The sociological study of deviance promises to help us broaden our understanding of social life today in the "deviance society."
- A sociological understanding of deviance offers valuable insights for personal life, professional careers, and informed citizenship.

KEY TERMS

blurred boundaries

deviance

demonic (view of deviance)

empirical data

ethnography

exotic (view of deviance)

medicalization of deviance

psychotic (view of deviance)

social constructions

social norms

sociological paradigms

symbolic interaction

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