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The Critical Role of Deviance in Society

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It has been nearly two decades since Sumner (1994) rang the death knell for the sociology of deviance. Several notable scholars, in particular, have debated the vibrancy of the field – from the liveliness of its empirical and theoretical contributions to its interest to students, scholars and publishers (Ben-Yehuda, 1990, 1994, 2006; Best, 2004a, 2004b; Goode, 2002a, 2003, 2004, 2005; Hendershott, 2002; Liazos, 1972). We believe in the continuing vitality of the intellectual and empirical contributions of the field of deviance in the early 21st century. There are many reasons to make such a claim.

Here we are, almost 20 years after Sumner’s proclamations, textbooks in their tenth (and beyond) editions still doing well, and newer ones cropping up on the horizon (see, e.g., Curra, 2011; Dotter, 2004; Goode, 2002b; Hall, 2012; Jacobs, 2002; Pontell and Rosoff, 2011; Prus and Grills, 2003; Terrell and Meier, 2001; Vandenburgh, 2004; Weitzer, 2002). Our courses are filled and a seemingly endless number of empirical cases have arisen that solidify our strong stance about how social power creates new categories of deviants. Goode reminds us that interest in deviance is high, although Best argues that enrollments are not an accurate measure of vitality. When we began teaching the course (to over 1,000 students a year) in the 1980s, students were mostly attracted to the deviant (exotic) aspects of the curriculum. During the 1990s, students’ purpose became geared more toward pre-law enforcement. The 2000s and 2010s, however, have witnessed a healthy mix of the two groups. As Erikson (1966) noted, ever since the earliest years of American settlement, the discovery, apprehension and punishment of deviants have held a central place in the public interest. We do think that the continued popularity of the courses and the research to support them are signs of deviance’s continued contributions to sociology.
We are no more theoretically bereft than any of our counterparts. Theoretical and conceptual advancements come in increments. Heckert and Heckert (2002) augmented positive and negative typologies of deviance with analysis about the relation of deviation to the norms and how it is socially received. They constructed a matrix integrating normative expectations (whether deviance “flips out” into nonconformism or “flips in” into overconformism) with society’s collective evaluation of that deviation. This enabled them to offer conceptual insight into why some instances of overconformism are negatively received and some types of underconformism are positively received. In subsequent works they examined the relationship between their matrix of deviance types and Tittle and Paternoster’s (2000) ten middle-class norms (Heckert and Heckert, 2004), and between high achievers (positive deviants and rate-busters) and techniques of neutralization theory, advancing their contributions to positive deviance by connecting this to the traditional categories of neutralization along with two new ones: guilt and shame (Schoenberger et al., 2012). Although it is rare that we witness the kind of Kuhnian (1962) revolutions that paradigmatically change our disciplines, one new meta-narrative, still in its infancy, is the cultural studies or postmodern theory of deviance, which focuses on the social creation and historical context for the generation of meaning (Dotter, 2004; Foucault, 1977).

Building on the interactionist perspective, Dotter (2004) focuses on the creation and contestation of stigma by importing concepts from the metaphor of film. He argues that stigmas are conferred in screenplay scenarios in three interactive layers. The first layer is the deviant event, involving acts, actors, normative definitions and societal reaction. The second layer involves media reconstruction, where media, law enforcement and other audiences offer interpretations of the deviant event. The third layer is the stigma movie, where mediated reconstructions become ideologized as social control narratives. Deviance, defined and applied, becomes a commodified cultural representation that is consumed through the celebrity-drenched popular culture and mediated through modern power structures. At the levels of individual concepts, process and structural models and broad theories, conceptualization about deviance remains strong. Studies abound, grants are received, dissertations are produced and the area remains one of the core foundations of sociology.

Deviance is all around us. It is ubiquitous. Now, more than ever, we see a barrage of case studies that stretch our imaginations of how far deviance can go, how far beyond the evolving limits of human (in)capacity.