

PART I



Defining Deviance

In order to study the topic of deviance, we must first clarify what we mean by the term. What behaviors or conditions fall into this category, and what is the relation between deviance and other categories, such as crime? When we speak of deviance, we refer to violations of social norms. Norms are behavioral codes or prescriptions that guide people into actions and self-presentations conforming to social acceptability. Norms need not be agreed upon by every member of the group doing the defining, but a clear or vocal majority must agree.

One of the founding sociologists, William Sumner (1906), conceptualized norms into three categories: *folkways*, *mores*, and *laws*. He defined folkways as simple everyday norms based on custom, tradition, or etiquette. Violations of folkway norms do not generate serious outrage but might cause people to think of the violator as odd. Common folkway norms include standards of dress, demeanor, physical closeness to or distance from others, and eating behavior. People who come to class dressed in bathing suits, who never seem to be paying attention when they are spoken to, who sit or stand too close to others, or who eat with their hands instead of silverware would be violating a folkway norm. We would not arrest them nor would we impugn their moral character, but we might think that there was something wrong with them.

Mores are norms based on broad societal morals whose infraction would generate more serious social condemnation. Interracial marriage, illegitimate

childbearing, and drug addiction all constitute moral violations. Upholding these norms is seen as critical to the fabric of society, so that their violation threatens the social order. Interracial marriage threatens racial purity and the stratification hierarchy based on race; illegitimate childbearing threatens the institution of marriage and the transference of money, status, and family responsibility from one generation to the next; and drug addiction represents the triumph of hedonism over rationality, threatening the responsible behavior necessary to hold society together and to accomplish its necessary tasks. People who violate mores may be considered wicked and potentially harmful to society.

Laws are the strongest norms because they are supported by codified social sanctions. People who violate them are subject to arrest and punishment ranging from fines to imprisonment. Many laws are directed toward behavior violations that used to be folkways or, especially, mores but became encoded into laws. Others are regarded as necessary for maintaining social order. Although violating a law (for instance, traffic violations) will bring the stigma associated with arrest, it will not necessarily brand the violator as deviant.

This discussion returns us to the question about the relationship between *deviance* and *crime*. Are they identical terms, is one a subset of the other, or are they overlapping categories? To answer this question, we must consider one facet at a time. First, do some things fall into both categories, crime and deviance? The overlap between these two is extensive, with crimes of violence, crimes of harm, and theft of personal property considered both deviant and illegal. Second, are there types of deviance that are not crimes? Actually, much deviance is noncriminal, such as obesity, stuttering, physical handicaps, interracial marriage, and unwed pregnancy. Deviance is not a subset of crime, then. Finally, is there crime that is nondeviant? Although much crime is considered deviant, and derives from various lesser deviant categories, some criminal violations do not violate norms or bring moral censure. Examples include some white-collar crimes commonly regarded as merely aggressive business practices, such as income tax evasion, and forms of civil disobedience, where people break laws to protest them. Thus, crime is not a subset of deviance. Crime and deviance, then, are overlapping categories with independent dimensions.

People can be labeled deviant as the result of the ABCs of deviance: their *attitudes*, *behaviors*, or *conditions*. First, they may be branded deviant for alternative attitudes or belief systems. These beliefs can fall into the religious or political category, with people who hold radical or unusual views of the supernatural (cult members, satanists, fundamentalists) or who hold extreme political attitudes (far leftists or rightists, terrorists) considered deviant. Mental illness also falls into the deviant attitudinal category, for people with deviant worldviews are often consid-

ered mentally ill and people with chemical, emotional, or psychological problems may be considered deviant.

The behavioral category is the most familiar one, with people being regarded as deviant for their outward actions. Deviant behaviors may be intentional or inadvertent and include such activities as violating dress or speech conventions, engaging in kinky sexual behavior, or committing murder. People cast into the deviant realm for their behaviors have an *achieved deviant status*: They have earned the deviant label through something they have done.

People regarded as deviant because of their condition often have an *ascribed deviant status*: It is something they acquire from birth. This would include having a deviant socioeconomic status, such as being poor; a deviant racial status, such as being a person of color (in a dominantly Caucasian society); a congenital physical handicap; or a height deviance (too tall or too short). Here, there is nothing that such people have done to become deviant and nothing they can do to repair the deviant status. Moreover, there is nothing necessarily inherent in these statuses that makes them deviant: They become deviant through the result of a socially defining process that gives unequal weight to powerful and dominant groups in society. On the other hand, a conditional deviant status can also be achieved, such as when people burn or disfigure themselves severely, when they become too fat or too thin, or when they cover their bodies with adornments such as tattoos, piercings, or scarification. Some of these may also be changed, moving the deviant back within the norm.

With all of these categories, we can see the differentiation between the deviant and the conventional. Our first selection, “On the Sociology of Deviance,” by Kai Erikson, examines the way groups and communities are formed and forge their social definitions. One of the crucial aspects of society is its boundaries—the lines that separate the cherished inner sanctum from the undesirable outer realm. Behavior falling on the inside is judged morally acceptable; that on the outside morally repugnant. Much work revolves around specifying and marking these boundaries, maintaining them when it is necessary, and modifying them when that is necessary. Deviance is critical to this task, as it shows the limits of the acceptable, and its sanction reinforces norm-abiding behavior. Individuals stepping outside of the bounds are specially marked through closely watched “commitment ceremonies” that often serve as moral one-way streets: Removing the deviant label is not easy. Individuals so labeled are often marked by self-fulfilling prophecies; they are expected to commit further acts of deviance and are even pushed into these roles by individuals and agencies of social control. Erikson notes that the quick assumption that societies strive to eliminate their deviance should not be made rashly because the forces supporting deviance are strong. Key elements of

society promoting the opposing features of conformity and diversity are interconnected, with deviance a natural part of the societal landscape.

Our second selection, “Deviance as Crime, Sin, and Poor Taste,” by Alexander Smith and Harriet Pollack, examines various features of the realm of deviance. Drawing on Sumner’s three categories of norms (folkways, mores, and laws), Smith and Pollack categorize different types of norm violations. Although some violations, such as violent assault, are nearly universally rejected, some deviance is judged by a relative standard. Many forms of deviance, they suggest, could be considered acceptable if these deviant forms were seen as artifacts of religious, moral, or cultural ideals. Smith and Pollack use excellent examples to point out that although a small classification of acts are inherently deviant, there are many other acts that are only defined as such relative to their context.

Finally, differences of opinion exist concerning the definition of deviance: Must it necessarily involve the realm of the undesirable, or can it point to acts or conditions that differ from the norm in a positive way? Although some regard positive deviance as an oxymoron, Druann Heckert argues for the concept in a persuasive article that not only lays a functional and relativistic groundwork for the notion but articulates its parameters as well. Illustrating the idea with a variety of examples, Heckert categorizes assorted types of positive deviance, discussing how they differ, yet all fall within this framework. She concludes that people accord stigma and often distance themselves from those they mark with the halo effect, indicating a distinct social ambivalence toward this category of deviants.