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Social Deviance and Crime: An Organizational and Theoretical Approach



This book is about deviance, or deviant behavior. These terms may be confusing to you at first because the word "deviance" is not one widely used by lay persons. Citizens often think of some behaviors as being illegal, weird, bizarre, or even immoral, but rarely do they regard them as being "deviant." "Deviance" is a term used by social scientists, mainly sociologists, to denote behaviors that are socially disapproved—regarded by most people in a given group as bad or immoral, illegal, or simply subject to social sanctions. To a sociologist, the term "deviance" has a special meaning. It conveys the idea that some particular behavior is in one way or another inconsistent with the standards of acceptable conduct prevailing in a given social group. Although most sociologists accept this general conceptualization, they disagree about a precise definition of deviance because they use different approaches in trying to determine exactly what the standards of conduct are in a given group (Gibbs, 1981). At least five ways of defining standards of conduct can be used. Let us consider each of these five and then decide which, if any, seems to be most helpful in understanding human behavior.

Conceptualizations of Deviance

In this discussion keep in mind that definitions are always arbitrary. A definition is not true or false; it is simply a guideline for identifying some phenomenon of interest to the scholar. Yet, definitions are extremely important. Communication requires that the reader know what he or she has in mind is the same thing the scholar has in mind when the word "deviant" is used. Definitions serve that denoting function. Moreover, in this context no definition is inherently better than another. The idea is to focus on behaviors whose study will broaden our understanding of society. Different approaches reflect the judgment of different scholars about what is most crucial for that purpose.

The Statistical Approach

In our quest for a conceptualization of deviance, we might consider standards of conduct as empirical expressions of the way people in a particular group actually behave (Wilkins, 1965). If most people smoke cigarettes, this could be taken as proof that cigarette smoking is "normal" in that group. Conversely, failure to smoke cigarettes in a social group in which most people do smoke would qualify as atypical, or deviant, behavior from the statistical point of view. From such a perspective, skydiving, eating snails, pledging oneself to celibacy, and murder are all deviant in the United States since they are all statistically unusual. On the other hand, smoking marijuana, speeding, "fudging" on one's income tax, and adultery would possibly all be conforming behaviors since they are (presumably) currently committed by a large proportion, if not a majority, of the population. And, of course, wearing clothes, marrying, and eating with a fork would unquestionably qualify as normal. The statistical approach has the advantage of accurately reflecting an important aspect of contemporary social reality. There is a tendency for many people to assume that something that "everybody does" cannot be in violation of conduct standards. Indeed, a frequent justification for a person's action, particularly if that person is being sanctioned for the act, is to claim that everybody else, most others, or even lots of others do it. The following kinds

of rationales are frequently heard: "Everybody speeds; how can it be wrong?" "Most people pilfer from their employers; it is the accepted thing." "All Presidents lie to the people or obstruct justice (even if not caught); why pick on Richard Nixon or Bill Clinton?" And it is surely the case that some people decide what to do primarily by watching what others are doing. Furthermore, the statistical approach is relatively simple to apply, at least logically. We might simply collect information concerning the prevalence or frequency of a particular behavior, then array the data and calculate the mean (average) and standard deviation (dispersion around the mean). If the objective is to distinguish deviant from nondeviant categories of behavior, we would arbitrarily decide a cutting point, or if we wish to differentiate degrees of deviance, every act could be expressed in units of standard deviations from the mean (standard scores). One might decide that any behavior falling within two standard deviations of the mean (or one or three) is conforming, while any behavior outside that range is deviant. Or alternatively we might say that any behavior is as deviant as the magnitude of its standard score (meaning that the more it exceeds the mean in either direction, the greater its deviance). The main problem with such applications is that hard empirical evidence of the frequency or prevalence of a behavior can rarely be obtained.

Despite the simplicity of this approach, and the fact that it apparently corresponds with the everyday thinking of many people, there are good reasons why it is not the best method of identifying standards of conduct and defining deviance. For one thing, closer observation shows that statistical standards only superficially reflect how social groups, in fact, formulate standards of conduct. Most people in the United States, for example, would feel uncomfortable in classifying behaviors like church tithing, abstinence from cigarette smoking, and maintenance of premarital sexual virginity (all atypical behaviors) as inappropriate conduct. There is an underlying feeling by most that even though they are unusual, these behaviors are somehow "good" and acceptable, even desirable and to be encouraged. Similarly, most people feel some discomfort in defining behavior like adultery, lying to one's spouse or sweetheart, speeding, or pilfering from an employer as appropriate, even though they are frequently committed by a large proportion of the populace. On the other hand, most can easily accept the inappropriateness of acts that are atypical in the other direction—more evil, unacceptable, or undesirable than the average—as being beyond normal standards of conduct. These apparent inconsistencies expressed by ordinary citizens suggest that they are mainly concerned with evaluations of conduct, not just frequency. People judge rightness and wrongness, and they think of social norms in terms of what people "ought" to do. It is not difficult to recognize that the logical end point of statistical reasoning about norms would be a conclusion that rape, murder, and child abuse could all be appropriate conduct if enough people did them. This disturbs most people—even those who actually commit these acts. It appears, therefore, that common applications of statistical standards in judging the deviance of behavior are, in reality, more likely to be rationalizations for misconduct than real normative standards. It would be misleading to accept them as fundamental defining characteristics of deviance. Moreover, there is little about atypicality of behavior that is sociologically interesting or that enlightens us about society. Consider again skydiving, celibacy, and murder. Skydiving is a recreational sport enjoyed by a few adventurers. The rest of society generally has little opinion about its appropriateness.

ness or its rightness or wrongness; it produces few consequences for society as a whole or for those who practice it; and its explanation is probably far more interesting to psychologists and psychiatrists than to sociologists. Celibacy, by contrast, usually grows out of a religious pledge made by a few who are highly honored for having done so, but beyond the psychological features of religious commitment and the sociological aspects of group influence, there is little of explanatory import or social significance. Moreover, it challenges one's intellect to grasp the similarity of celibacy and skydiving as forms of deviance. Finally, murder appears to be totally unlike either celibacy or skydiving, both in the psychology of the action and in the way the behavior is viewed by others. Unlike celibacy and skydiving, murder evokes much interest from social scientists and lay persons. But it is interesting, not for its rarity, but because most people believe murder is morally wrong or dangerous or threatening to the continuation of society. Thus, it appears that if we are to understand society we must use some method of identifying conduct standards (and thereby deviance) other than simple frequency of occurrence.

The Absolutist Approach

Another approach we might use to identify deviant behavior applies conduct standards set down by a social scientist (or group of social scientists) to all groups and individuals under study. With an absolutist orientation, we would decide what is good, useful, or just, or just, and then measure deviations from those evaluative criteria. Two prominent lines of theoretical thinking in sociology often use this procedure. The first is functionalism.

Functional theorists view society as an interdependent mechanism much like a biological organism. All parts that work together are regarded as essential, and in that sense "good," or nondeviant. But just as a human body sometimes suffers disease, malformation, or self-destructive activities, a society sometimes contains dysfunctional (dangerous or destructive) elements (see Gross, 1959). For functionalists, any behavior that they regard as bad for society would be considered dysfunctional or deviant, regardless of the frequency of its occurrence or whether the people in that society disapprove of the behavior. Most of those who use this approach assume, however, that societies will usually condone those behaviors that are inherently good and will condemn those that are inherently bad. Indeed, it has been argued that the reason contemporary societies have survived throughout history is because they, in fact, practiced and condoned useful behavior while avoiding and disapproving dangerous behavior. Presumably, social groups that failed to do this sealed their fates and were eliminated in the historical evolutionary process (Parsons, 1951).

Functionalists assume that an investigator can, through logic and research, actually determine what is good for a society. For example, incest (sexual relations between relatives) is thought by functionalists to be dysfunctional for society (Davis, 1950; Murphy, 1980; Westermarck, 1922; Wilson, 1978). It is said that if widely practiced, incest could lead to biological deterioration of the population and that even if there were no biological danger, incest has the potential for destroying orderly social relations and disrupting the mechanisms for efficient child rearing. A father having sexual relations with a daughter, for example, jeopardizes his authority over her and places him in competition with suitors for her affections. The absence of authority

makes effective socialization impossible, and sexual entanglement removes any incentive the father has for encouraging the daughter to mature and ultimately leave the family of origin to establish a family of her own. At the same time, the mother in such a family is cast as a competitor with the daughter for the father's affection and attention. This undermines the mother's relationship with the girl and inhibits her ability to train the child for adulthood. Under such circumstances the family may dissolve in conflict, but even if it does not, the daughter will not be successfully trained for a productive role in society. Therefore, to the extent that incest is widely practiced, it threatens the very fabric of society. According to some sociologists, therefore, it is obvious that incest is inherently deviant because it is socially dangerous. Moreover, they believe that most members of any existing society will disapprove of incest and will refrain from practicing it. This is because only those societies that in the past developed and enforced social rules prohibiting incest would have survived to be represented in the contemporary world. Similar arguments can be made for murder, rape, assault, homosexuality, child abuse, mental illness, and other behaviors.

Another set of absolutist thinkers employ a different rationale. Radical, Marxian, and humanist scholars often maintain that a sensitive and informed researcher can apply absolute moral standards to behavior in any given society or in any specific situation to decide whether various activities are unjust or evil (deviant) (Schwendinger and Schwendinger, 1974, 1983). Some believe that any behavior that results in exploitation of one person or a category of persons for the benefit of another or that threatens the dignity and quality of life for specific people and humanity as a whole is inherently evil, and thereby deviant (Simon and Eitzen, 1993). Others contend that any behavior causing people to suffer or violating any person's right to self-actualization and freedom is inherently immoral, or deviant (Platt, 1994). Marxists, for instance, point to the exploitative nature of economic relations in capitalistic societies and regard this inherent exploitation, along with the selfish and insensitive acts it breeds, as deviant or "criminal" because it corrupts human qualities (Bonger, 1916; Quinney, 1979, 1980). Similarly, humanists regard racial discrimination as deviant because it deprives a whole group of equal rights and human dignity.

Absolutist approaches have the virtue of making cross-cultural comparisons easier by providing an invariant (albeit subjective) standard of judgment. In addition, they tend to portray deviant behavior as a societal phenomenon, which gives broader sweep to the study of deviance. Absolutists do not bother with merely atypical behaviors or those disapproved by the people in a social group. Rather, they focus on behaviors that seem to have larger implications for society and the quality of life, regardless of their typicality or position on the continuum of public opinion. Hence, the main appeal of an absolutist approach to the study of deviance is that it forces adherents to wrestle with fundamental moral questions about social life.

Nevertheless, there are problems with an absolutist approach serious enough to render it inadequate for our purposes. It assumes that any trained (sensitized), careful observer can determine what is good or bad for society, what is contrary to human dignity, and what is fair or unfair. In practice, however, there is great disagreement among social scientists about these matters. What one observer believes to be functional for a society, another may find dysfunctional. Abortion, for instance, may be functional (it prevents over-

population and promotes freedom of choice for women, thereby improving the quality of life and reducing exploitation) or dysfunctional (it undermines population maintenance and threatens the fundamental value of human life, which is presumably the basis for organized society). It has even been argued that a certain amount of deviance itself may benefit society because it serves as a safety valve to release pent-up frustrations; it helps define acceptable behavior, and it promotes group solidarity (Dentler and Erikson, 1959). Clearly, deciding what is "good" for society is largely arbitrary and subjective. Furthermore, concepts like "justice," "goodness," or "exploitation" depend completely on the definer's values. One person's justice is another person's exploitation, and good or evil are necessarily in the eyes of a beholder. There is no reason to believe that the values of social scientists are in any way superior, more desirable, or more defensible than those of anyone else, or that the values of any particular social scientist are any more justifiable than those of another social scientist. Consequently, using an absolutist approach in the study of deviance in any consistent and meaningful way is impossible.

The Legalistic Approach

A third way of identifying conduct standards that would help define deviant behavior is by reference to law. We could simply use illegality as the criterion of whether a given activity is in violation of behavioral norms. Accordingly, if the law prohibits an act, it would be deviant; and if the law requires an act, failure to perform it would be deviant. If the law is silent about or permits an act, that act would be considered consistent with conduct standards, or conforming.

The rationale for a legal criterion of deviance might differ depending on how we want to view the nature of law. We could imagine that the law expresses collective sentiments indicating that particular activities are regarded as dangerous or threatening enough to require efforts at control (see Title, 1994). Although recognizing that law-making is a political process that often reflects conflicting interests and the clash of power, we might nevertheless believe that, in the main, law reflects popular sentiment as well as efforts to promote the public good. We might assume this because power holders must, in the long run, accommodate to the opinions of their constituents and recognize public interests, or face revolt. Or we might assume collective sentiment because elites, acting in their own interests, not only make laws but also use their power to forge collective opinion favorable to those laws, thereby producing consistency between the law and public opinion. In any case, law could be regarded as the embodiment of the significant behavioral standards in a given society.

On the other hand, we might reject a consensual view of law but still accept illegality as a workable criterion of behavioral standards. From this perspective, law is almost totally an instrument by which the powerful maintain their elite positions and protect their privileges. Still, we could accept illegality as the appropriate criterion of behavioral standards because conformity and deviance are inherently whatever people powerful enough to impose their own views say they are. Norms, or conduct standards, are by their very nature products of "definitions of the situation" imposed upon a social group by power elites (McCaghy, 1976; Quinney, 1970).

Still another approach is to view law as a combination of popular sentiment and elite desires. We could contend that some law expresses consensus among the population (such as laws prohibiting assault, murder, child abuse) while other laws reflect the desires of special interests (such as laws prohibiting importation of competitive products, requiring licensing to provide certain services, or denying the right of laborers to strike). From this viewpoint, whether law is collectively or particularistically oriented is irrelevant. Whatever its character, law nevertheless expresses coercive potential—a key element of behavior norms. Thus, the conduct rules that matter are those that can be enforced. Since law reflects behavioral rules backed up by power of enforcement, it necessarily encompasses conduct norms—at least those worth social scientists' study.

A legalistic approach has the advantage of being straightforward and usually easily applied (since one need only examine the codification of laws), and it ties into an extremely important element of social life—the exercise of political power. Yet the legalistic conceptualization of deviance is not generally satisfactory. For one thing, not all societies have a clearly defined body of written statutes that can be identified as law. Primitive societies, for example, have what would be recognized as deviant behavior but no formally written law that defines it as such (Malinowski, 1926, 1927; Hoebel, 1960, 1968). A legalistic approach can be used effectively only in the study of modern, literate societies. To use it elsewhere requires decisions about what law is, thus assuming the resolution of a prior definitional problem. For instance, among the Cheyenne Indians who lived on the American plains, the ultimate wrong was to kill another Cheyenne, because it was believed that such an act bloodied the sacred arrows, thereby jeopardizing the ability of the entire tribe to survive and prosper (Llewellyn and Hoebel, 1941). Actual cases of such killings were managed through a routinized procedure and decisions were enforced by coercive power (Grinnell, 1972; Hoebel, 1960, 1968). Many would say this treatment indicates a legal process; therefore, killing of one Cheyenne by another was illegal and thereby deviant. But not all social scientists would agree, since there were no codified statutes among the Cheyenne.

What of the case of a Cheyenne woman who absconded with a lover? A Cheyenne woman's first husband was chosen for her by a brother, and marriages were usually arranged in consideration of a bride's price. Some women occasionally overcame a bad fraternal choice by running off with the man they really wanted to marry. In such cases the angered husband might do any number of things, but by the time the offending couple returned to camp several weeks later, he had usually cooled off and was willing to accept compensation. Observers report that the Cheyenne people regarded such behavior by a woman as inappropriate and bad, with great potential for causing disruption and problems for the tribe as a whole. But whether it was illegal and thereby deviant by a legalistic definition is debatable.

Second, many activities that are illegal are sociologically uninteresting, particularly since illegality may express antiquated sentiments of both the general population and the ruling elites. For instance, most states in the United States have laws prohibiting sale of tobacco products to minors. Yet such products are easily available in vending machines to all who care to purchase them; minors are officially accorded the right to smoke in designated areas by many schools; it is rare for the police to arrest anyone for selling tobacco to minors; and most people may not regard such sales as bad, danger-

ous, or abnormal (although public opinion about this appears to be undergoing a change). On what grounds, then, could one claim it to be deviant in a sociologically meaningful sense? The problem is that laws are rarely repealed, so when they become obsolete they simply fall into disuse.

Third, many activities are sociologically interesting because they seem to have important implications for society and because they appear to be inconsistent with general conduct standards, yet they are not illegal. For instance, it is not a crime to lie to one's spouse or sweetheart. Yet a three-state survey in 1972 showed that a large proportion of the people disapproved of it (Titte, 1980b). Similarly, it is not illegal in many places to operate a topless bar, yet when such an establishment opens, it is frequently met with scorn, protests, and sometimes violent opposition by neighbors. Further, rarely do legal statutes prohibit eating human flesh, yet it is clearly outside the bounds of acceptable conduct in the United States.

Finally, although the legal process is an important one, it is not the only realm of human interaction. Conduct norms are ubiquitous at all levels of social organization from the interpersonal to the societal. Much can be learned about social organization and human behavior by studying violations of social rules that characterize nonpolitical entities. A legalistic approach, therefore, narrowly focuses attention on one tier of a multitiered system.

The Reactive Approach

A fourth way of defining conduct standards is by the social reaction to behavior. According to the advocates of this definition, when a social reaction to some behavior is condemnatory, punitive, or simply disapproving, it indicates that the behavior is in violation of behavioral standards in that group and is therefore deviant. Several variations of the reactive approach are possible. One is to emphasize the "typical" reaction to a class of behaviors. Another is to stress social reaction to particular instances of behavior while assuming that this particular reaction implies nothing about the deviance of the entire class of behaviors of which the particular case is an instance. Such basic differences are complicated by questions concerning which part of the social system must react negatively to qualify something as deviant. Some emphasize negative reactions by official agents and functionaries, but others accord more importance to informal reactions by a collective social audience.

Probably the best-known reactive approach to deviance is that embodied in the "labeling perspective." Labeling theorists are not all in agreement about what they are focusing on, and they are sometimes ambiguous in presentation. Nevertheless, most scholars agree that the predominant concern of the labeling perspective is legal reaction to *specific* acts, particularly the reaction of agents of the criminal justice system (such as police) to particular instances of behavior disapproved of by power holders, whose interests are embodied in the legal codes (Gove, 1980). Accordingly, some labeling proponents recognize no categories or classes of deviant behavior. To them, murder, rape, child abuse, or smoking marijuana are not necessarily deviant in the United States. Rather, specific acts of murder, rape, child abuse, or marijuana use may or may not be deviant depending upon whether officials arrest the perpetrator and label him/her as deviant. When labeling occurs, the par-

ticular act of murder, rape, child abuse, or marijuana use is deviant; otherwise, it isn't.

Some labeling theorists are more restrictive in what they define as deviant. They maintain that an act is not deviant unless and until a collective social audience has accepted the label of deviant for the act and/or the perpetrator. It is said that a label attached by officials must "stick"; that is, it must be recognized by the social audience and serve as the vehicle through which the group attributes bad character to the actor, or attributes badness to the act (Becker, 1963; Kitsuse, 1962).

Another way of applying a reactionist definition would be to accept the deviant nature of general categories of behavior, and use group attribution as the defining characteristic. Accordingly, if a social collectivity or its chief representatives *typically* react negatively to some behavior or *typically* attach a stigma to those who are caught, that kind of behavior would be deviant even if a particular perpetrator escapes being labeled; if people typically commit the behavior; if the conduct is unimportant for societal maintenance; or if the act is, in fact, legal. For instance, if a social group usually shows its condemnation of some class of behaviors by punishing specific acts of that class, or if it usually attributes bad character to those who commit such acts, then theorists would assume that in that social group those behaviors are deviant. Using this approach, we would treat apprehension and punishment, or group attribution of bad character, for a specific act as problematic—not as defining traits. For instance, if, in a given community, horse thieves are usually caught by mobs when caught, using a reactionist's approach, we would consider horse theft to be deviant behavior in that community. And any particular act of horse thievery would be deviant even though the thief escaped, or if caught, managed to persuade the mob through bribery to let him get away.

A reactive definition has much to recommend. It identifies as deviant behavior acts that are clearly disapproved, either by officials or by group members. Moreover, these acts are at least considered important enough by key functionaries of the social system to warrant attention; that is, people think they need to "do something about" the behavior in question. This approach is conceptually clear, since it is relatively easy to think in terms of actual reaction to behavior. In addition, most things identified as being deviant by any other approach to deviant definition are usually also identified as deviant by a reactive approach—at least by the broader versions of that approach that recognize *categories* of deviant behavior.

There are problems, however, with a reactive definition of deviance that make it less useful for our purposes than might at first appear. The main one is that many sociologically interesting behaviors that appear to be in violation of conduct standards are not necessarily the focus of negative reaction. For instance, adultery in the United States is almost never dealt with by the police or the courts, and it rarely results in a deviant label for the actor. Even when there are citizen complaints, the police normally refuse to make arrests (LaFave, 1965). Yet surveys show that most people believe adultery to be wrong, bad, or inappropriate, and it is thought by many sociologists to have crucial implications for a major social institution—the family.

Second, the police frequently arrest people, and courts sometimes impose severe penalties, for behaviors that are not widely disapproved and do not seem to be sociologically important. An example is marijuana use, particularly during the 1970s when casual use of marijuana was widespread, not

only among college students but among working adults as well (Goode, 1993).

Third, the narrower reactive definitions create unusual conceptual inconsistencies. If murder is regarded as deviant only when discovered and re-acted against by official agents, then it must also be regarded as conformity if the perpetrator escapes punishment—regardless of the number of group members who may disapprove of it, how socially dangerous it might be, or how many people do it. Moreover, according to this kind of reactive definition, deviance can only be studied on a case-by-case basis after the fact, thereby making generalization or consideration and explanation of categories of deviance impossible. Common sense suggests that something is wrong with such a formulation.

Finally, the difficulty of ascertaining, empirically, when labeling has occurred (is an arrest a labeling act, or must one be convicted?) or when a label sticks (how do we know the boundaries of a social audience, how many must accept the label?) renders some versions of the reactive approach completely unworkable.

The Group Evaluation Approach

A fifth method of identifying conduct standards is by reference to the beliefs or opinions of group members. According to this approach, behavior regarded as unacceptable, inappropriate, or morally wrong in *the opinion of the* members of a group would be deviant. Quite simply, deviance is behavior held in disrepute by the people in a given group. Underlying this conception of deviance is a general approach that assumes consensus among group members about rightness or wrongness and about how people ought to behave. If this assumption is correct, social disapproval indicates that some behavior is outside acceptable standards of conduct. And such disapproval would suggest deviance regardless of the typicality or prevalence of the behavior, whether anything is actually done about the offense, or whether the shared concepts about rightness or wrongness grew out of common experiences or out of careful socialization by particular interest groups with an investment in promoting specific ideas. For example, if adultery is negatively evaluated by most people in a defined social context, it is classified as deviant behavior even if most people in that same context actually practice it. Moreover, adultery is still considered deviant even if it is fully tolerated by the members of that group without any form of sanction being imposed or there being any law against it.

A group evaluation definition is advantageous in several respects. First, the approach is conceptually clear. The idea of collective sentiments is straightforward and easily grasped. Moreover, it has intuitive meaning for most scholars and students alike. Second, this approach provokes sociologically interesting questions. Contemplation of how behavior is evaluated immediately evokes the traditional question of why some people do disapproved things; it also suggests investigation of the social processes by which opinions come to be shared and changed, or come to activate collective responses to behavior. The evaluational perspective invites explanation of why some behaviors generally thought to be wrong are not prohibited by law or why some are prohibited by law while not generally being considered inappropriate. Moreover, a group evaluation approach leads to queries about why

a majority might consider some behaviors wrong, despite their being frequently committed, or why some acts that are considered wrong elicit sanctions or other social reactions while acts similarly inappropriate are ignored. Third, the group evaluational definition allows deviance to be treated meaningfully as a continuous variable. Some actions are considered wrong by almost everybody while others are regarded as wrong by only a small proportion. Thus, behaviors can be more or less deviant, depending upon the proportion of group members who believe them to be unacceptable, or upon the intensity of disapproval. From a scientific standpoint, this kind of precision is desirable.

But, like the other approaches, there are defects in this one as well. The major problem is that the evaluational definition treats all group members' opinions as equal. But clearly the opinions of some components of any social system are more important than the opinions of others because some people can implement their opinions with coercive action, and some are more influential in persuading other people to their points of view. Second, one can question the usefulness of a definition of deviance that treats as a violation of conduct standards some act about which nothing is ever done and for which no sanctions are brought to bear. Third, efficient application of this approach requires survey data, that is, public opinion information about perceptions of conduct. Such information is rarely available for all the acts that one might want to consider as potentially deviant, and in some societies no survey data about any behavior are available. Finally, this approach assumes that the boundaries of groups are clear enough to permit scholars to ascertain the thoughts of most people within those boundaries about the appropriateness of various behaviors. In reality, however, group boundaries are seldom unambiguous, particularly in a heterogeneous society with overlapping subcultures and diverse group identities. Where one group ends and another begins is often an arbitrary decision, and so are decisions about group opinion of behaviors.

A Synthetic Approach

Although each of the methods for defining deviance just discussed has some merit, none provides an unambiguous, sociologically meaningful, or completely desirable method for identifying violations of conduct standards. The reactive and the group evaluation approaches appear to be the most attractive because they have intuitive appeal; they evoke sociologically interesting questions, the answers to which reveal a great deal about society; and they are conceptually straightforward and clear—although not necessarily clear-cut in application. These two approaches are especially salient in getting right to the essence of group processes. In reference to the everyday world, two things about behavior make it interesting for discussion as deviance: most people believe it is wrong and/or there are usually negative sanctions associated with the behavior. Therefore, this book espouses a definition of deviance combining elements of a reactive and group evaluation approach.

Specifically, deviance is defined as *any type of behavior that the majority of a given group regards as unacceptable or that evokes a collective response of a negative type*. In this definition, "unacceptable" means the behavior is disapproved, wrong, inappropriate, bad, abnormal—in short, behavior that a group evaluates negatively. "Majority" means that over half of the people in a

specified, bounded group regard the behavior as unacceptable. This is an arbitrary cutoff point, but the main objective is not to classify behavior as simply deviant or conforming but rather to array behavior on a continuum from very nondeviant (hardly anybody considers it unacceptable) to very deviant (almost everybody in the group considers it unacceptable), with any particular act falling somewhere on the continuum. Collective response of a negative type implies that the majority of the specified group typically does something to express its displeasure, or the officials who possess coercive power over the members of the group typically respond to the behavior in a way that expresses negative evaluation. The four key components to this definition of deviance, then, are as follows:

1. A demarcated group
2. Behavior (not an individual's thoughts or state of being) or a category of similar behaviors, and either
3. Majority disapproval or
4. Negative action by
 - a. The collectivity as a whole, or
 - b. Components of the group with power or authority to coerce

In applying this definition, note that behavior is classified as deviant when the climate of opinion in a group reflects general disapproval of the behavior. If most people in Alabama think that photographing a nude person is a bad thing, then that act will be, by our definition, deviant in that state, regardless of anything else. Citizens of Alabama need not do anything about nude photography, nor do the police have to arrest anybody for it. The fact of attitudinal disapproval qualifies the behavior as deviant and worthy of our attention. Behavior will also be classified as deviant when officials typically respond in negative ways to it. For example, if the police in Kansas City usually arrest people when they discover them smoking marijuana, by our definition marijuana smoking is deviant in Kansas City, regardless of anything else. If Kansas City marijuana smokers are usually ostracized by most other people in Kansas City, then it can be concluded that marijuana smoking is deviant behavior in that place. Furthermore, some behavior may be deviant in speci-

Deviance in Everyday Life

In probably most of the United States it is not considered "deviant" to act like one who holds and practices the Jewish faith. Being a member of the Jewish faith is considered to be no different from being a Protestant or Catholic. In some areas, for example certain sections of New York City, Jews make up a majority of the local population, and acting non-Jewish may be considered "abnormal." In Troy, Alabama, however, those practicing the Jewish faith may be seen and treated as deviant. At least that's what the family of Sue and Wayne Willis probably feels. Their 14-year-old son Paul Herring was required by the public school's vice-principal to write an essay on "Why Jesus Loves Me." When his brother David did not bow his head for a Christian prayer during a school assembly, a teacher forcefully lowered it for him. It is also alleged by the boys' parents that a teacher asked Paul to remove a Star of David lapel pin he was wearing one day because she said it was a prohibited gang symbol. When Mrs. Willis complained about the treatment her children were receiving, one teacher allegedly replied, "If parents will not save souls, we have to." In the overwhelmingly Christian schools of Troy, Alabama, then, acting in accordance with the Jewish faith may constitute deviant behavior. (Pressley, 1997)

fied groups both because popular opinion disapproves of it and because there is a collective negative reaction. For instance, most people in Iowa believe that stealing something worth fifty dollars is wrong, and the police typically arrest the thieves they discover. Hence, in Iowa stealing something worth fifty dollars is deviant because it is disapproved, but it is also deviant because it is collectively reacted against.

From our definition, it is clear that an act may be deviant by either of two criteria, perhaps by both, but not necessarily by both. For instance, most citizens of a particular state may regard adultery as wrong but do nothing about its occurrence, and the police may rarely or never make an arrest for this offense. Still, adultery would be deviant in that state by our definition because people disapprove of it. On the other hand, police may routinely arrest people for selling alcoholic beverages in a particular state although most citizens of that state may not regard the sale of alcoholic beverages as bad or wrong. Nevertheless, that behavior would still fit the definition of deviance set forth because of the typical police reaction. In many cases, of course, group opinion will match collective response. This is generally true everywhere in the United States for murder, rape, burglary, incest, and cannibalism. But there are numerous instances where the two do not match—such as gambling, marijuana use, manufacturing dangerous products, and polluting the environment. To understand these divergences is part of the challenge of our study of deviance.

Legality and Deviance

In this same vein, it is important to recognize that mere illegality is not a reliable guide to whether some behavior is deviant. Law does not necessarily reflect public opinion. Indeed, it often, if not usually, expresses the desires and interests of special power groups who are able to mobilize legislative support, many times in direct opposition to majority views. Moreover, even when law does embody collective sentiment at the time it is enacted, it may not do so at some later point in time. As noted before, laws are seldom modified quickly in response to changing circumstances. As opinion changes, a particular law may become more and more inconsistent with the views of the majority, and sometimes its enforcement becomes lax or completely ignored. By our definition, if this occurs, the prohibited behavior would not be deviant although it would continue to be illegal. An illustration is marijuana use in many U.S. communities. Although illegal, it is nevertheless not disapproved and seldom is the object of police efforts at enforcement.

Finally, some laws may actually be consistent with public opinion but may not be enforced. Laws prohibiting prostitution in many communities in the United States do express collective disapproval, but only rarely are they enforced. This is true sometimes because the difficulty of controlling prostitution makes it a low priority for police; sometimes there are simply too few resources for enforcement; and sometimes the police are in corrupt collusion with the practitioners. In this case, then, prostitution would be deviant because it is generally disapproved, but its illegality would not be the key determinant. Illegality must be thought of as a variable that may or may not characterize deviance, but it cannot be regarded as a crucial characteristic on the basis of the definition proposed in this book.