

Understanding Deviance: Connecting Classical and Contemporary Perspectives

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PREFACE

Hello. My name is Gabby. I'm a supercool feedee¹ who loves life and loves pleasing you on and off the camera! I love being naughty with food, in public, and just going all out with snacking and eating. I am a growing girl and I would love if you would join my journey of showing how beautiful fat, soft rolls are and how beautiful fat really is.
<http://gaininggabi.com/index1.html>

Are feedees like Gabby deviant? If yes, how so? *Understanding Deviance: Connecting Classical and Contemporary Perspectives* dares readers to think in new and innovative ways about deviance in society. Many of us, including sociologists who study deviance, would answer “yes” to the first question and assume we could get Gabby to conform to our norms about body size. Our expectations for this are conveyed weekly on TV shows such as “the Biggest Loser.” Contestants like Megan (<http://www.nbc.com/the-biggest-loser/contestants/megan/bio/>) tries to conform to our standards, while feedees like Gabby violate them. On “the Biggest Loser” webpage, we learn that Megan sees herself as:

"fun-loving, comedic, artistic and high-spirited young adult who is *missing out on enjoying life*" because of her inability to do things that most 21-year-olds can do...Now 21 years old, 259 pounds and tired of her *weight holding her back*, she *wants to get healthy* so she can participate in rodeos again and win, train horses, and shop at *regular clothing stores*².

Gabby, on the other hand, is a 5'9," 26 year-old, heterosexual blonde that wears a 38-44 women's pant size—more than four times the average size of women her height (i.e., average is

¹ . According to [Urbandictionary.com](http://www.urbandictionary.com), a Feedee is a “male/female (typically female) that wishes to gain weight (to become more attractive to chubby chasers) through means of stuffing one's face with unhealthy food goods” <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=feedee>.

² Italics added.

between size 6-10). Sociologists have observed that feedees like Gabby are likely deviant in several respects. First, they purposefully defy norms about body size and society's aesthetic standards. Second, they also reject expectations for how individuals should take care of themselves and safeguard their own health and well-being. Third, Gabby and other feedees make no apologies for being sexually charged and assertive. Instead, they celebrate it. Gabby tells us her favorite sexual position is doggy-style and the purpose of her website is to attract chubby chasers who have sexual fetishes for large women. In fact, she is proud to host a pornographic website that invites the public to indulge.

How do we make sense of people like Gabby? Perhaps most of us would focus on the health risks associated with being obese. But putting aside health issues, how does her story provoke us to hold a mirror to the norms, values and beliefs we endorse on a daily basis? At a very basic level, deviance is the violation of norms, a breach of the standards society sets for behaviors, traits, conditions, identities and lifestyles. Gabby proudly violates them while Megan feels shamed, tries to correct her condition, and conform to our norms. Since deviance is usually viewed negatively, e.g., as a threat that can harm people, institutions, and society, it is often met with *social control*. Gabby probably ignores shows like "the Biggest Loser" and talks back to people who criticize her, while Megan buys into the show's world view and gets distraught when people humiliate her for being obese. Gabby is, in effect, a contemporary woman, while Megan is much more traditional. The classic sociological work on deviance has helped us understand Megan and her viewpoints and behaviors, but it doesn't equip us to understand Gabby.

This example illustrates the need to modernize the study of deviance. It also calls attention to one of the central tenets of this book: pairing classic and contemporary viewpoints about deviance and social control is essential because it can sharpen our critical thinking skills

and help us better understand our lives and others' today. Not convinced? Let me ask you another question.

Is being called a “bitch” a put-down or a compliment? What do you think? What would your grandmother say? Your mother? The term “bitch” has historically been a pejorative label to control and reprimand outspoken women (Hughes 2006). However, former Saturday Night Live star, Tina Fey, sees things differently. In her “Weekend Update” skit on the 2008 Presidential campaign (<http://videosift.com/video/SNL-Tina-Fey-on-Hillary-Clinton-Bitch-Is-The-New-Black>), she turns the sexist term “bitch” on its head and argues it is a badge of honor to celebrate and a compliment to those who are called it, including Hillary Clinton and other strong women.

Tina Fey’s “resistance” stance challenges gender norms (about women and political power) and the “bitch” stigma that attempts to brand unruly women. Her use of the term seeks to reverse its damaging meaning by invoking an emboldened and opposing viewpoint, which is more consistent with the newer tradition of *resistance* (Hollander and Einwohner 2004). Resistance is about the pushback against or rejection of deviant labeling or classification. With resistance, deviant labels act as a badge of honor to celebrate, not as a kiss of death or source of shame. Therefore, while our grandmothers may think being called a bitch is a terrible thing, younger women today might agree with Fey’s more modern stance and view it as a compliment.

Objectives and Content. How do these contemporary stories of deviance, labeling, shame, and resistance help explain the rationale and structure of this book for teaching? One way is by showing us how useful it is to draw connections between the old and the new. Not only do we see social life and social processes more clearly when alternative meanings are accorded to similar forms of deviant behavior, but we also learn how to appreciate and interact

with those who see things differently from ourselves. This may better equip us to reach common goals in an increasingly diverse and ever-changing world. Connecting the classic with the contemporary allows us to retain traditions while evolving with the times.

Part 1 of *Understanding Deviance* highlights parallels between classic deviance terms and contemporary concepts from a wider range of sociological theories and traditions. Some of these include:

Classic Term	New Term
Functionalism, Anomie	General Strain Theory
Social Disorganization	Collective Efficacy
Social Pathology, Degeneracy	Medicalization
Labeling	Resistance and Edgework
Stigma	Carnival of the Grotesque
Deviant Careers	Lifecourse Criminology,
Moral Panic	Risk Society
Critical Criminology	Culture of Control/ Mass Incarceration

The nine sections in Part 1 each include older and modern reprinted papers considered pivotal in the field of deviance. Connections between them are offered in an original “Connections” essay—written exclusively for this book—that feature a type of deviance to elucidate the differing viewpoints of the reprinted materials. In these “Connections” essays, and the short section introductions, the learning goals of this book are introduced and developed.

Part 2 includes three sections with readings that raise interesting possibilities for the future study of deviance. They suggest we cease focusing narrowly on individuals and broaden our view to institutions and communities. Moreover, when we do talk about “deviant” or “marginal” people, Section 9 asks us to look at them not simply as “others” to be ostracized or controlled, but instead, as Kitsuse (1980) claims, individuals demanding citizenship for unique cultural and social expressions as well as novel lifestyles and identities. This will require us to employ a multidisciplinary framework that reveals deviance as a political, social, anthropological, psychological, and medical phenomenon.

Taken together, the 12 sections in Parts 1 and 2 cover a wider range of deviant behaviors, traits and conditions. The readings address underage drinking and drunk driving, doping in elite sports, gang behavior, community crime, juvenile delinquency, hate crime, prison violence and transgender prisoners, mental illness, drug-using women and domestic violence, obesity, tattooing, sexual fetishes, prostitution, drug epidemics, viral pandemics, crime control strategies and racial inequality, gay neighborhoods, HIV and bugchasers, and youth, multiculturalism and music scenes.

Enhancing Critical Thinking Skills

A main objective of this book is to sharpen students’ critical thinking skills by having them consider that deviant behaviors, traits or conditions can be viewed from opposing or alternative perspectives. By learning to see deviance from multiple perspectives, students will better understand their own and other’s behavior and experiences and be able to anticipate future trends. Balancing multiple perspectives may also assist students in their practical work in social service, criminal justice and other agencies and institutions that deal with populations considered “deviant” in one way or another.

The concepts introduced in each of the 12 sections are a useful way to develop and strengthen critical thinking. Embedded in the stories of deviant acts and individuals that run throughout the book, the conceptual parallels and connections often showcase at least two sides of the very stories that characterize our lives. As the building blocks of theory, these concepts also teach us about the present and future, alert us to potential dangers, and help us find solutions to move society forward. In short, they enable us to see patterns and make predictions to improve life. These concepts are also the easiest way for students to see how theory works in everyday life. This novel conceptual approach to the study of deviance, which links classical ideas to contemporary behaviors and identities should, not only serve to help revitalize the field in academic circles, but also increases the value of studying deviance to people's lives in societies near and afar.

Another goal of *Understanding Deviance* is to help students see how social processes work in everyday life, including how various forms of inequality (race, class, and gender) are maintained by defining deviance and administering social control. For example, norms have distinct meaning by race, ethnicity, gender and class identities and status. Because norms are always based on power disparities, certain race, class or gender identities, expressions, or behaviors are favored and often shape what is defined as acceptable or normal in society. "Other" individuals are deemed marginal and subordinated. Therefore, deviance teaches a great deal about social inequality.

One way I provoke my students to think about deviance and inequality is through my term "switch it out." This phrase refers to how people's viewpoints are not primarily about a certain behavior or trait, but more about the demographic characteristics of the person in question. Consider any deviant behavior – for example, promiscuous sex, selling drugs, or cage

fighting/mixed martial arts. Does your opinion about these activities differ depending on who commits them? Is it the same thing for males and females to engage in promiscuous sex, sell drugs, and perform mixed martial arts? Are these behaviors less deviant for middleclass white males than they are for poor black ones? What if the main characters in the hit TV series *The Sopranos*, *Dexter*, or *Breaking Bad* were not all white males, but were instead black or Hispanic males or females? Would the public root for them the same way? Put simply, some “deviant behaviors” are not considered bad if the “right” person, (i.e., those having more socially valuable race, class, and gender identities), commits them. *Understanding Deviance* helps to teach students to look at deviance in this way. The development of critical thinking skills also helps students to probe and understand the complexities of deviance, which includes developing a more finely tuned sensitivity to political, cultural, economic, and social matters. The structure and approach of *Understanding Deviance* helps students to acquire these sensitivities, stimulating their intellectual curiosity and promoting their continued learning over time.

References

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