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# Deviant Heroes: Nonconformists as Agents of Justice and Social Change

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Sociologists usually define deviance as a fluid construct, relative to given social circumstances, and something that is neither negative nor positive in and of itself. Despite the rejection of absolutist approaches, the vast majority of texts and studies concerning deviant behavior implicitly or explicitly present deviance as either a morally bad or morally neutral behavior. Such literatures wrongly conflate deviant behavior with villainous actions. We argue that some of the most important deviants have been at the leading forefront of positive social change and the creation of a more just, fair, and humane society. Deviant heroes are those individuals who violate unjust norms and laws, facing the repercussions of social control, while simultaneously effecting positive social change. This article considers the theoretical role of the deviant hero within classical and contemporary sociological traditions and identifies new directions for social research.

If . . . the machine of government . . . is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law.
    —Henry David Thoreau, *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*, 1849

While typical, everyday understandings of criminal behavior and deviance generally associate such terms with that which is bad, evil, or detrimental to society, both history— and most scholarly definitions of deviant behavior—show that such is not inherently the case. In various contexts, rules and instruments of social control can represent an unjust and oppressive social force. Thoreau's principled argument quoted above, that one has a moral duty to violate laws promoting injustice or suffering, has been put into practice by a host of admirable leaders and morally driven rebels throughout history. Their deviance may have been labeled criminal at one time, but they ultimately served to increase justice or decrease suffering, often at great risk to themselves. At first these types of people are labeled deviant or condemned as criminals by

many of their contemporaries, and certainly those in power, but eventually their non-conformist actions come to be recognized as profoundly good and ultimately heroic.

Well-known examples of heroic deviants include icons of the Civil Rights movement like Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr., who were treated as outcasts by the established structures of social control in their own day, only later to be vindicated by justice and history. Other societies and historical epochs are full of similar people ranging from Gandhi to Margaret Sanger, Phoolan Devi to Sophie Scholl, Chico Mendes to Harvey Milk, and from Frank Serpico to John Brown. Often, such deviant actions are at the leading front of social change that is later celebrated as heroic. Indeed, the activist, the civil disobedient, the whistle-blower, the rebel, the heretic, or the freedom fighter can be seen as both deviant and ''heroic,'' given the social context of their actions.

The selfless acts of individuals who challenge unjust laws and resist oppressive norms are rarely considered in the sociological literature on crime and deviance. Criminology has been even less willing to consider how law-breaking may represent a social good or source of beneficial social change. Given most definitions of crime and deviance, however, noble, altruistic, or saintly actions could very easily be considered deviant or criminal in varying social contexts (Heckert and Heckert 2002; West 2003; Jones 1998; Wilkins 1965; Lemert 1951; Katz 1972). For example, violating unjust laws of a system of apartheid or challenging an oppressive system such as patriarchy, represent clear examples of deviant behavior. Yet such actions are seldom considered or even presented in even the broadest discussions of deviance. Do such deviant people and their actions belong in the literature on the sociology of deviance? Are such actions consistent with the theoretical underpinnings of the major traditions in the sociology of crime and deviant behavior? We assert that the answer is Yes to these questions. We further suggest that a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena of crime and deviant behavior cannot be fully established, without including such actions and such heroic individuals. Expanding on the concept of ''positive deviance'' and drawing from classical theoretical traditions, we argue that the deviant hero fulfils a social role as an important agent of progressive social change. Consequently, heroic deviance warrants recognition in sociological discussions of crime and deviance. This article considers such actions within the existing literatures on the sociology of deviance and proposes a reconceptualization of the term deviance along with several new avenues for social research.

## THE VILIFIED REPRESENTATION OF DEVIANCE

It is difficult to challenge the perception that deviant behavior is a social evil given popular definitions of the term and examples of deviant behaviors in sociology texts. If one were to ask an ordinary person, ''What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word 'deviant'?'' you are likely to get a description of a ''bad guy'' or someone who is clearly a villain. Common answers we get from that question range from serial killers and pedophiles to tobacco smokers and rebelling teenagers. On the surface, it seems commonsensical that the study of deviance and crime would focus on the bad types of deviance—or at least the kind that would elicit a negative social reaction. However, as stated above, most conceptions of deviance lend themselves to being understood as good and bad as well as morally neutral. If an unjust norm or law is predominant within society or a group, then violating or resisting it—given that unjust social context—would be considered ''deviant,'' but it might also be regarded as a good or heroic

act. Despite this obvious fact, nearly all examples, contemporary theories, studies, and analyses of deviance and crime seem to converge on detrimental acts or norm violations that are considered bad, or at least bizarre.

This negative association of deviance may be endemic to a larger bias within the sub-field to envisage deviant behavior as villainous behavior. For example, a brief survey of the deviance chapter in fifteen commonly used introduction to sociology textbooks revealed that each book covers similar topics ranging from the disturbing to downright evil (see Appendix A). Nearly every textbook lists similar items as examples of deviance, these examples include items such as FBI indexed crimes, prostitution, drug use, mental illness, and white-collar crime. We conducted a further content analysis of the examples covered in commonly used deviance texts/readers and found that the topics and examples given are most invariably similar to those in the introductory texts (Appendix B). Common themes in deviance texts and readers include street criminals, prostitution, drug use, family violence, mental illness, sexual deviance and white-collar crime. Similar items are covered in nearly all of the books, usually centering on bad or downright malicious things people can do to themselves and others. They all unambiguously frame the matter of deviance as something that is socially wrong or harmful, even though initially stating that deviance is neither good nor bad. In other words, in a somewhat schizophrenic manner, Intro texts and deviance readers tell students on the one hand that deviance is not intrinsically bad or bizarre, and then on the other hand, present examples of deviance that are nearly all bad or bizarre.

Not all topics covered in many of these textbooks are things that everyone, including the authors of these textbooks, would not consider either good or bad. Instead they represent actions that could be deemed morally neutral. Deviant actions such as homosexuality, nudism, tattooing, religious cults and certain types of substance use may be considered as neither good nor evil. These topics, however, are usually included alongside villainous topics, such as white-collar crime, street crime, family violence, and sex offending. For instance, ponder Kanagy and Kraybill's (1999:7) introductory text, *The Riddles of Human Society*; the authors openly describe deviants as ''bad guys'' and inform us that deviance includes ''anything from raping to speeding to burping in class.'' The tendency to conflate examples of morally repugnant activities with morally neutral activities results in an incomplete understanding of what crime and deviance represent within a larger sociological context.

Focusing the lens of inquiry concerning crime and deviance on morally disdainful behaviors such as child rape and serial homicide, or on morally neutral behaviors such as nudity or homosexuality, implicitly constructs law and norm violation as unjust or bad, while simultaneously giving the impression that conformity and law-abiding are intrinsically good or just. Presenting these topics as examples of deviance is thus problematic because it establishes an association between rule-breaking and bad, malevolent, anti-social behavior. It teaches students to think of rule-breaking as intrinsically detrimental or sociopathic (Jones 1998). Such conceptions of crime and deviance reinforce the inaccurate but popular idea that crime and deviance are indeed social problems and something that should be avoided at all times and in all places. This approach reifies the concept of deviance in the minds of those who study the sociology of deviance and crime that conformity is always a good thing, and that deviance is always a bad thing—while ignoring deviance that one would characterize as heroic, altruistic, or beneficial. This problem leaves a dialectic of deviance and conformity only partially explored, while failing to challenge the ideology that views crime and norm violation as affronts to society.

Despite this ostensible consensus on the topics of deviant behavior, several of the major theoretical traditions in sociology do not support this one-sided approach to the understanding of deviance and crime. We assert that these topics cannot be simply lumped together without having a much broader discussion of what exactly constitutes deviance: the bad *and* the good. But how should sociologists consider people—labeled criminals—who are actually fighting against unjust regimes? Here we argue that a more nuanced understanding of crime and deviance needs to revisit the ideas about what constitutes deviant behavior and the reality of the ''deviant hero'' within the literature on deviance, crime, and justice.

## THE INTERACTIVE CONSTRUCTION OF DEVIANT AND CONFORMIST BEHAVIOR

As it is not possible to find specific actions that are universally condemned at all times and in all places, absolutist definitions of deviance are not particularly helpful to sociology (Tittle and Paternoster 2000). The discipline has long argued that notions of good and bad, right and wrong, vary between time and place; that deviance can only be fully understood as existing within a given social context (Goode 2011). In the words of Ben-Yehuda (1990:221), ''Deviance is not an objective, eternally true, essence. Deviance is the product of complex and dynamic processes of interaction, power and legitimacy.'' More useful to sociology are constructionist approaches that may be situated within a variety of traditions. For instance, interactionist perspectives are ideally suited for this task as they incorporate an understanding of the process of deeming a behavior deviant and that definitions of deviance may change over time. The interactionist perspective incorporates contextual factors used in the defining and labeling of deviant behavior; interactionism also demonstrates how social responses shape the application and meanings associated with deviance. This perspective helps demonstrate how a behavior may be labeled by a dominant group as deviant in a specific social context, but also recognized as altruistic and ultimately heroic by differing audiences or epochs.

Our consideration of deviant heroes is an important factor in demonstrating the construction deviance, particularly how the label deviant may be applied to the heroes' behaviors in their respective social context. Social interactionist approaches to deviance are especially well suited to embrace a flexibility that accounts for changes in normative structures and reactions across time, place and audience. Social definitions and behaviors deemed deviant are the product of complex and powerful societal processes and perceptions of certain behaviors transform across various social circumstances. The label of deviance is the product of interactive social mechanisms that Adler and Adler (2006) call *attitudes, behaviors*, and *conditions* (ABCs). Deviance may be achieved by embracing alternative belief systems or acting outside of accordance with accepted norms, or it may be labeled based on the normative structures or conditions of a society. Despite varying conceptions and definitions of the word, most demonstrate that deviance is a fluid or relative term and a product of changing norms, reactions, laws, and power structures. Deviant heroes may be social actors on the leading edge of these social transformations, challenging entrenched normative environments that ultimately prove at variance with new social conditions.

Deviance is often defined as behaviors or beliefs that create an adverse response or violate a norm or law that is presumed to promote a social good. Interactionist approaches seem especially well suited to appreciate the dynamic interplay between the deviant hero and a normative order

that is constantly in flux. Interactionist perspectives, especially as promulgated by Becker (1963/1972) and Goffman (1963) emphasize how ideas and meanings associated with specific behaviors may change and vary over time and place. These works enable an understanding of how actions may be vilified in one context, and celebrated in another. At the heart of the interactionist perspective is the idea that deviance is a social creation. The process of creating deviance involves a linking and assigning of meaning to behaviors among a variety of social components: actors, acts, rules and norms, audiences, and social reactions (Dotter and Roebuck 1988). Rules and laws are open to a constant state of negotiation between these various components. The construction and application of the label ''deviant'' is the result of social actions and reactions involving a multitude of iterations. The label deviant may be applied to a myriad of nonconformist behaviors that can be good, bad or neutral. Of course, not just any behavior, heroic or otherwise, is labeled deviant randomly or haphazardly. Rather, the meanings tied to a deviant behavior are a product of complex social intereactions between various social roles including the deviant actor, the audience, rule enforcers, moral entrepreneurs, and society as a whole (Becker 1972). The definition of deviance, or the application of the label ''deviant'' to a specific behavior may depend on a variety of factors, including changing social norms, statuses, and the self reflexivity of the deviant. For Becker and other interactionists, the process of defining and labeling deviance, and the consequences of this, are more important than the acts themselves.

Precise descriptions of what constitutes deviance are likely to provoke much debate among any circle of sociologists (McCaghy et al. 2010). The term is a broad and amorphous concept, both inside and outside of the academy. Some sociologists prefer normative definitions, simply describing deviance as a phenomenon that is relative to the norms of a given society (Clinard and Meier 2008). Others are inclined to take a reactivist approach, looking at behaviors that are stigmatized by a group (Goode 2011). For our purposes, in-line with social constructionist approaches, deviance is best defined simply as nonconformity resulting in a social response. Nonconformist behaviors could be good, bad or neutral depending on the social context. For example, Germans who, during the Holocaust, chose not to shoot Jews when ordered were considered nonconformists, considering that social and historical context, by most normative definitions of deviance (Browning 1992). Likewise, a black woman sitting in the front of a bus in the Jim Crow South was deviant and criminal, which would be indicated by a strong social response. In both of these cases, given the time, place and audience, these nonconformist behaviors were clearly deviant. Nowadays most people would regard these items as brave noble acts, positive things, despite being deemed deviant and criminal in the social and historical context they occurred in. The interactionsit perspective demonstrates how meanings associated with deviance may change with time and place. Within this framework, the deviant hero represents a symbolic impetus for much needed social change.

Our conception of deviance is not limited, however, to strictly interactionist perspectives. Founding sociologist, Emile Durkheim, was one of the first social scientists to argue for the social relativity of deviance (crime) stating that: ''We do not condemn it because it is a crime, but it is a crime because we condemn it'' (1895:163). He argued that actions that are considered deviant are based on what the collective conscience says is a crime, and not because of anything inherent to the act itself. Durkheim makes it clear that deviant behaviors are not necessarily detrimental to group life and deviant behaviors may strengthen social cohesion and challenge existing norms. Erikson (1962) offers a bridge between structure and the individual in stating that

''Deviance leaks out where the social machine is defective, it occurs where the social structure fails to communicate its needs to human actors'' (313). Erikson (1962) echos many of Durkheim's sentiments and mentions how laws and norms are in a perpetual state of renegotiation, squaring beliefs about conformity with changing beliefs and collective sentiments. Having acknowledged the relative and ever-changing character of deviance, we can work toward a sociological definition of deviant heroism.

## BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL: UNDERSTANDING AND DEFINING DEVIANT HEROISM

The opposite of villainy is, of course, virtuous heroism. Heroes represent important mythologies and realities within almost any culture (Wright 2001). The type of heroes, or the lack thereof, may be indicative of the nature of a culture as a whole. If you were to ask a North American child who their heroes are, they are likely to give you the names of fictional characters, as opposed to real people. Adults may report not having any heroes at all; indeed, a Gallup poll found ''a lack of major heroes among Americans,'' and that two-thirds of Americans did not think there were any living heroes anymore (Saad, 1998). We assert that heroes are indicative of larger moral and cultural values; their causes clarify ideals and embody personal traits a collectivity finds important and therefore sociologically significant. Heroes may not be explicitly mentioned in many sociological accounts of deviance, yet their stories form subtexts that penetrate many aspects of social life. Crime narratives, like fiction, are often filled with heroes and villains, dueling in a dramaturgical fashion for a conclusion that solidifies a public's perception of good and evil. Applying the insights of Goffman (1959), we can see that contentions between heroes and villains may play out as a two-act drama where a weaker group is victimized in the first act and later vindicated through the restorative justice bestowed by a strong hero in the second. Conformist heroes are easy to praise as they work within existing social structures to champion a cause. Deviant heroes may be more challenging, as they violate laws and norms with their actions that only later may bring awareness of their heroism.

Our conceptual definition of heroic deviance is *nonconformity that increases justice, decreases suffering, or violates oppressive rules with the intent of changing normative contexts*. Further, these deviant acts are law-breaking and rule-violating done intentionally, altruistically, and without regard to the personal benefit or detriment to the norm violator. The deviant hero usually prompts an initial response in the form of some type of social control. Consistent with the constructionist approach to understanding crime and deviance, the person may be a criminal in one context but not in another. The deviant hero may be stigmatized in their day, but later vindicated by history, and celebrated. In other words, deviant behavior has been a driving force of positive social change, and the deviant hero represents a person who violates norms that bring about this change.

Our advocacy for the recognition of the deviant hero does have some support in other definitions of deviance. The concept of ''positive deviance'' has been proposed, to some debate, as an antidote to overly negative conceptions of deviance (West 2002). For instance, Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2004) define positive deviance in a normative perspective as ''intentional behaviors that depart from the norms of a referent group in honorable way.'' In contrast, Dodge (1985) suggested a more reactive approach to the definition specifying positive deviance as deviant actions receiving a favorable social response. While the debate surrounding the definition and

conception of positive deviance is relevant to our discussion (see below), we advocate a social justice oriented approach to deviance that considers the deviant as a virtuous hero, especially concerning people who challenge unjust norms effectively making deviance a source of social change. Next, we situate the deviant hero in the debate over the viability of positive deviant behavior.

## OXYMORON OR PARADIGM SHIFT? REVISITING THE POSITIVE DEVIANCE DEBATE

Despite the association of deviance with the villain and the tendency to concentrate on negatively stigmatized behaviors as examples of nonconformity, the concept of heroic deviance is affirmed in scholarly literatures defining and explaining nonconformity. For instance, a handful of contemporary theorists have sought to expunge the exclusively negative association with the term deviance. A number of renowned and routinely cited scholars have issued calls for research related to the subject of heroic or positive deviance including Clinard (1974:15), Lemert (1951:23–24), Wilkins (1965:46) and Katz (1975:1384). Coser (1962) saw deviance as creating a ''normative flexibility'' in society, while Tittle and Paternoster (2000) mention how notions of deviance may be tied to social change. In the existing literature, the concept of ''positive deviance'' or good norm-breaking comes somewhat closer to our conception of the deviant hero.

In the broadest sense, contemporary debates surrounding the possibility of good deviance center on a proposition sparked by David Dodge in this journal [*Deviant Behavior*]. Dodge's work argues that limiting the scope of deviance to overly negative conceptualizations was problematic and overlooked the totality of deviant behavior (1985). He offered a description of positive deviance as actions departing from normality that bring about positive sanctions. Dodge suggested guidelines into the study of positive deviance and identified conceptual and definitional issues related to deviance that needed to be reworked. Ben-Yehuda (1990) echoed Dodge's sentiments adding that incorporating positive deviance could spark innovation in the field of deviance and result in a paradigmatic shift in thinking about deviance.

The underlying assumptions used to formulate the concept of positive deviance was contentious and the source of several counterpoints that ensued in the same journal [*Deviant Behavior*] in response to Dodge's original proposition and Ben Yehuda's subsequent endorsement. The proposal for including positive deviance in sociology was not well received among sociologists and dismissed by two important scholars (Sagarin 1985; Goode 1991) as an implausible derivation of the concept and ultimately a contradiction. Sagarin (1985) argued that the notion of a good form of deviance complicates and obfuscates the cultural acceptance of deviance as a bad behavior. The central contention in Sagarin's argument held that in defining deviance from a social reaction position, it must always include negative actions. Sagarin asserted that the entire concept of positive deviance was a contradiction in terms and ultimately an oxymoron. Goode (1991) arrived at a similar conclusion, explaining that the notion of positive deviants should not be accepted by sociologists, as they lack the stigma normally associated with deviant behavior.

In the 25 years since Dodge's original proposition, and the debates that ensued, there was never a ''paradigmatic shift'' in thinking among scholars of deviant behavior. This may be due, in part, to the paucity of research in this area coupled with the lack of a clear conceptualization of exactly what good or positive deviance should represent. Alex Heckert and Druann

Heckert (2002) have addressed the problem in an attempt to refashion the deviance archetype in proposing a new typology of deviance based on integrating reactivist and normative understandings of deviance. Their typology allows for both negative and positive deviance based on normative approaches to deviance, but also adds a reactive dimension based on how the collectivity responds. Overly conformist behaviors can generate a negative social response, such as in the case of ''rate-busters'' or people who exceed work quotas. Likewise, deviant behaviors may receive admiration, such as the case of mythical figures such as Robin Hood, a social actor we would call a deviant hero.

Heckert and Heckert's useful typology gives much needed attention to the one-sidedness of negative portrayals of deviance, but still does not demonstrate how deviance may lead to positive social change. Limitations in the concept of positive deviance has confined the handful of studies embracing the positive aspect of deviance to things that may generate an initial social response or are clearly a violation of norms, but that are not necessarily a behavior that puts the actor at risk in a heroic way. Examples of studies using positive deviance have examined corporate responsibility (Spreitzer and Sonenshein 2004), bodybuilding and athletes (Scarpitti and McFarlane 1975, Ewald and Jiobu 1985), artists (Heckert 1989), and movie stars (Lemert 1951). Such deviant actions may be positive but they do not affect social injustice while subjecting the actor to institutions of formal social control.

The antithesis of bad or villainous conformity could be best conceptualized as heroic deviance; it is also a remedy for unjust normative contexts. The concept of positive deviance is a useful landmark for this idea, but it should be expanded to capture the actions of heroic individuals who selflessly break laws to change unjust conditions. While an important and valuable contribution, the current literature on positive deviance does not fully encapsulate the sociological dynamics underpinning deviance that is altruistic and aimed at changing oppressive social contexts. Not only has this debate on positive deviance been far from concluded, but also our concept of the deviant hero as one who challenges unjust or oppressive norms, has not been given full consideration in the course of the discussion. The deviant hero has a distinct societal role, one that is qualitatively different from the positive deviant in that the deviant hero is one who actively challenges and seeks to change oppressive rules and unjust laws, at personal risk, to overturn unjust social norms. Additionally, we have found that the forerunners of the argument for and against the case of positive deviance have not adequately combed the classical theoretical perspectives that are predecessors to most contemporary theorizations of deviance and crime. We have found that classical sociological theory, including the contributions of lesser-recognized scholars, aids in our reconsideration of the deviant.

## CRIME, AGITATION, AND CREATIVE MALADJUSTMENT: THE CLASSICAL ROOTS OF DEVIANT HEROISM

While the debates around the concept of positive deviance apparently ended twenty years ago without resolution, we wish to take the discussion further, and in a different direction. The concept of positive deviance represents an important first step in the consideration of the deviant hero, but it is an incomplete appraisal of how altruistic motivations may encounter systems of social control. Despite few contemporary studies probing the positive or heroic aspects of deviance, our premise is hardly a new one to sociology or the larger public discourse. For

example, West (2002) found references to the possibility of positive deviance the classical works of Weber, Simmel, and Durkheim. Along these same lines, we look to the classical traditions to explore the more heroic dimensions of positive deviance.

The work of Durkheim presents a classic illustration of the deviant hero. Durkheim argued that crime serves a useful social function in terms of defining what a society's values are and reinforcing social solidarity. In his work, *Rules of the Sociological Method* (1895) Durkheim reasoned that crime can be a source of progressive social change, facilitating the redefinitions of norms and values of an entire society in a beneficial way. As an example, he uses the trial and execution of ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates:

> According to Athenian law, Socrates was a criminal . . . however, his crime, namely, the independence of his thought, rendered a service not only to humanity but to his country. It served to prepare a new morality and faith which the Athenians needed, since the traditions by which they had lived until then were no longer in harmony with the current conditions of life . . .. At the time . . . the violation was a crime . . . and yet this crime was useful as a prelude to reforms which daily became more necessary. (1895:93)

Durkheim's assertion, using the example of Socrates, provides cause to reconceptualize the role of the criminal (deviant) in society. For Durkheim and functionalist theory, deviance is thought to provide some kind of useful and positive function to society as a whole. Within this theoretical framework, the positive function of crime (or deviance) is to bring about some kind of much needed social change. Socrates was deemed a criminal in his day; however, his crime served to redefine justice and pave the way for much needed legal and ethical reforms. History now regards Socrates as a hero for democracy and academic freedom. Durkheim's insight reminds us that sometimes criminals can serve as moral prophets serving a greater good for society as a whole.

Other classical theorists also make mention of the validity of heroic deviance. For example, long excluded founding sociologist, W.E.B Du Bois (1907), in an essay entitled ''The Value of Agitation'' states: ''agitation is often unpleasant. It means that while you are going on peaceably and joyfully on your way some half-mad persons insists upon saying things you do not like to hear'' (85). The agitator sees that ''this is a world where things are not right.'' Du Bois calls the agitator a ''herald.'' The agitator ''is the man who says to the world: 'There are evils which you do not know, but which I know and you must listen to them''' (85). Du Bois reminds us that agitators (the deviant hero) may be stigmatized and point to conflict, but they are a heroic necessity to pointing out and challenging injustice.

Another foundational sociologist was Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Gilman also offers some relevant words regarding the importance of deviance that brings about needed social change. In her classic work of social theory, *Women and Economics* (1898), she writes:

> In the course of social evolution there are developed individuals so constituted as not to fit existing conditions, but to be organically adapted to more advanced conditions. These advanced individuals respond in sharp and painful consciousness to existing conditions, and cry out against them according to their lights. The history of religion, of political and social reform, is full of familiar instances of this. The heretic, the reformer, the agitator, these feel what their compeers do not, and naturally say what they do not. The mass of the people are invariably displeased by the outcry of these uneasy spirits. In simple primitive periods they were promptly put to death . . . but this remarkable sociological law was manifested: that the strength of a current social force is increased by the sacrifice of

individuals who are will to die in the effort to promote it. . . . Our great anti-slavery agitation, the heroic efforts of women's rights supporters, are fresh and recent proofs of these plain facts. (41)

Gilman's point, that when it come to social progression, ''advanced individuals'' defy unjust systems of norms such as slavery and the oppressive systems of patriarchy, to champion a more human system of norms and human progress. These ''advanced individuals,'' like Du Bois' ''agitator'' subject themselves to risk in challenging systems of oppression.

Other sociologists have also mentioned the topic of deviant heroism, although they are not often considered within scholarly discussions of crime and deviance. For instance, Martin Luther King Jr.[1] in his 1963 book *The Strength to Love,* speaks of the ''disciplined nonconformist,'' arguing that the hope of the world rests with the disciplined nonconformist, asserting that ''the trailblazers in human, academic, scientific, and religious freedom have always been non-conformists'' (26). He tells people to look to the deviant as a model for one who challenges entrenched systems of injustice: ''The saving of our world . . . will come, not through the complacent adjustment of the conforming majority, but through the creative maladjustment of a nonconforming minority'' (27).

Declaring that ''In any cause that concerns the progress of mankind, put your faith in the non-conformists!'' (27). In his famous ''Letter from a Birmingham Jail'' (1964) King hails the brave individuals of history who have risked everything to progress society while denouncing the con-formist white moderate who is more ''devoted to order than justice'' (73). Of course, Dr. King was a perfect example of such an individual who represents the deviant hero. King's heroic actions were absolutely deviant in his day and he was criminalized, jailed, and eventually assassinated.

## SUPPORT IN OTHER THEORETICAL TRADITIONS

Besides the classical traditions we have mentioned, more contemporary theories used in the soci-ology of deviant behavior may be updated to apply the concept of the deviant hero. For instance, to begin at a very rudimentary level, statistical definitions of deviance readily operationalize both positive and negative deviance. Quantitative and statistical definitions of deviance, outliers more than two standard deviations beyond the mean, generally assume a two-tailed bell curve with those who fall above the mean and those who fall below. This crude definition has long con-sidered deviance as being located on either ends of a bell curve as outliers. For example, Wilkens (1964) explains that the majority of human behavior exists within the bell while, what he terms both saintly and sinful behavior exists at opposing ends of the curve. For Wilkens, deviant beha-vior is simply behavior that is not considered normal. In the grade distributions of one of our intro courses, the two ends of the curve represent outliers along with ''anomalies'' who managed to horribly fail (negative deviance) or manage to trudge through the alienation of a large and impersonal class to achieve perfection (positive deviance). Such a conception of deviance may include failing class, murder, theft, and pedophilia, but it may also include perfect test scores, saintly behavior, and random acts of kindness. While a high test score is probably not

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[1]Although Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is best known for his work in civil rights and secondly as a minister, his first training was as a sociologist, earning a degree in sociology from Morehouse College in 1948.

heroic in most contexts, simple acts of kindness may well be considered so in a world filled with dehumanizing norms of getting ahead at the expense of others.

Merton's famous adaptive typology, while originally developed and employed to explain street crime, can readily be incorporated to fit the deviant hero into his typology (1968). For Merton, deviance was a function of the acceptance of the established goals of a society and the legitimate means to attain them. If both are accepted, they are conformists. Innovators reject the accepted means but keep the goal. Ritualists embrace the means but reject the goal. Meanwhile, retreatists accept neither. Rebels reject the means and the goals and replace them with something else. In this scheme, the deviant hero is the rebel who challenges unjust goals and the accepted means of achieving them. In the case of Martin Luther King Jr., he challenged the goal of a racially segregated society by using unorthodox means to achieve them, providing a classic case of a rebel in Merton's typology.

Labeling theorists have asserted that deviant acts are labeled such, precisely because they are deemed negative or bad (Sagarin, 1985). Heckert (1989) has demonstrated just the opposite in applying labeling theory to the concept, demonstrating that since labels can vary over time and space, positive deviance can be labeled negative in different social and historical contexts. Heckert demonstrates this by using the example of French Impressionists, once labeled negative deviance, only to be later elevated to a positive type of denotative nonconformity in art. These creative acts of nonconformity led to evolving new standards in art.

Many of the other theoretical traditions used to explore deviant behavior are also well suited for the study of heroic deviance. Conflict theories, which present a critique of powerful relationships, may be utilized to examine how the status quo social order functions to produce an environment where deviant heroism may challenge norms resulting in inequalities and conflicts of interest. Conflict theories can be further extended to demonstrate how the deviance of social actors, acting on behalf of marginalized groups, have protested rules imposed on them by an oppressor. Interactionist approaches, such as the theory of differential association, may consider the process of how deviant heroes may learn their ideas and techniques of opposition. In all, theoretical approaches to understanding deviance, applied in a critical manner, may be utilized to understand and explain deviant heroism.

## NEW DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Based on other literatures, especially classical sociological theory, we have formulated a definition of deviant heroism as one who altruistically violates unjust or oppressive rules in an effort to act as an agent for social change. The concept of the deviant hero illuminates a variety of areas that can be explored in light of the classical articulations concerning heroic deviance. Aspects of norm violation that better the human condition or increase justice ought to be more thoroughly recognized and explored in sociological studies. Many topics of inquiry are already related to mainstay topics in both the field of deviance and criminology. For example, many classic cases in criminological research contain descriptions of heroes and villains whereby deviance may be cast in a positive light. Whether it be in Sutherland's *White Collar Criminal* (1949), Becker's *Outsiders* (1963) or Anderson's *Streetwise* (1992), each alludes to unjust normative environments where a deviant hero could have existed, fulfilling a desperately needed social role. Other literatures on social movements and change may also consider the role of the deviant hero throughout history and in modern society.

We suggest a method to consider the actions of heroic deviance that relies on a qualitative approach promulgated by C. Wright Mills in the *Sociological Imagination* (1959). In this work, Mills called for sociology to be involved at the intersection of ''biography and history'' with his famous postulate of ''how personal troubles relate to public issues.'' A deviant hero represents an individual biography that is shaped by and enmeshed in a specific historical epoch. This method may consider how individual biographies, shaped and influenced by history, have struggled against unjust laws and social conditions. History considers the social context of norm violation while biography is mindful of how individuals' heroic norm violations affect positive social change. Consider the proposition of existentialist philosopher, Martin Buber (1962), as he considers the ramifications of Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*, a quotation from which formed the introductory rubric at the head of this article:

> Thoreau did not put forth a general proposition as such; he described and established his attitude in a specific historical-biographic situation. He addressed his reader within the very sphere of this situation common to both of them in such a way that the reader not only discovered why Thoreau acted as he did at that time but also that the reader—assuming him of course to be honest and dispassionate— would have to act in just such a way whenever the proper occasion arose, provided he was seriously engaged in fulfilling his existence as a human person. . . . The question here is not just about one of the numerous individual cases in the struggle between a truth powerless to act and a power that has become the enemy of truth. It is really a question of the concrete demonstration of the point at which this struggle at any moment becomes man's duty as man. (19)

Buber reminds us that disobedience, although advocated by Thoreau in a specific context, is something that may arise at any moment in a historical epoch. Humans are free to push back against the ''enemy of truth'' and realize their own existence as free willed individuals. The disobedience advocated by Thoreau may change by context and historical situation, but the consideration of biography and history remains a simple way to examine the change provoked by deviant heroes exercising their moral duty to violate unjust laws.

Perhaps the most heroic of all deviants are those who risk their lives to challenge unjust norms. Sociology has much to gain by incorporating deviant heroes' actions alongside the historical context their actions took place in. Many scientists, thinkers, civil rights leaders, and activists exist who may be profiled as deviant heroes. Biographies of individual harbingers of social, political, and economic justice demonstrate that crime and deviant behaviors can be just and morally good actions. Several of these figures, such as Martin Luther King, Socrates, and Thoreau have been considered in the formulation of the central thesis of this article. Their biographies show that they existed in a historical context and normative environment where their actions were deemed deviant and criminal.

## CONCLUSION

This article has examined the dilemma of how sociologists and criminologists should contemplate the question of heroic deviance or crimes that break unjust rules. We have considered an operational definition of deviant heroes as people who in their own social context, violated or fought against evil or unjust laws and norms. Although not often mentioned in contemporary discussions of crime and deviance, we have found support for including the deviant hero in

scholarly accounts of deviance dating back to the early founders of the discipline, such as Durkheim, Du Bois, and Gilman. Theoretically, the deviant hero could be incorporated into several traditions that are used to explain or understand deviant behavior. We have shown how this might be possible by citing the biographies of individuals who have made history by challenging unjust norms or laws of their historical epoch.

This article is written in praise of and in tribute to the ethical ''criminal,'' a unique kind of deviant, a rare individual who risks everything and actually makes a difference, changing the very social structure under which we live. The sociology of crime and deviance has much to gain by recognizing the theoretical view that crime can represent a social good, a heroic good. We have revisited some of the classical works and shown that there is support for this in the early development of the discipline. Returning to these works yields a large depth of insight and understanding not only to the consideration of deviant behavior, but also to the process of social change and justice. There is also much to gain by incorporating a multidisciplinary perspective on our understanding of deviance and crime, particularly from the arts and humanities.

Finally, we would like to close with the thought that anybody can practice deviant heroism to some degree. Gandhi practiced deviant heroism to challenge the most powerful empire in the world and Martin Luther King's ''crimes'' challenged the evil system of racism and segregation. Not everybody can sacrifice as much as these deviant heroes did, effectively changing the course of history. Yet, if more people were to embrace the principles of deviant heroism on an individual level, it could slightly alter their own normative environments. Perhaps a person may not be threatened with jail or assassination, but they may be threatened with the powerful informal forms of social control such as ostracism, ridicule, or social isolation. We are talking about the times when hurtful comments are made about other people, where racist or homophobic conversations take place or when a person is being bullied. Conformity in these contexts would mean going along with and accepting racist or hurtful practices, and deviance would mean openly challenging them and defending those who cannot defend themselves. It could be in this situation that someone might lose friends or cause an uncomfortable moment, such a person may risk being chided or mocked, but it represents a small form of heroic deviance that helps make the world a better place.

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APPENDIX A

Common Topics in Introduction to Sociology Textbooks Chapters on Deviance

| Text | Subjects/Topics |
| --- | --- |
| *Sociology*, Stark (2006) | robbery, burglary, homicide, mental illness, white-collar crime, drugs, etc. |
| *Sociology in Our Times*, Kendall (2007) | School shootings, indexed crimes, corporate crime, violence in the media, youth crime, etc. |
| *Society in Focus*, Thompson and Hickey (2005) | pornography, sex crimes, violent behavior, mental illness, topless dancers, violent and property crime, etc. |
| *Sociology*, Ward and Stone Stark (1996) | prostitution, suicide, violent and property crime, mental illness, alcohol abuse, etc. |
| *Sociology: The Essentials,* Andersen and Taylor (2006) | school violence, cannibalism, binge drinking, suicide, American violence, Mental illness, types of crime (from white-collar to property crime), Latino violence, etc. |
| *Introduction to Sociology*, Giddens and Duneier (2007) | violent and property crime, white-collar crime, drug trafficking, etc. |
| *In Conflict and Order,* Eitzen and Zinn (2009) | political crimes in the newly capitalist Russia; racism in the war on drugs; homosexuality; corporate crime; etc. |
| *Sociology*, Shepard (2010) | pot smoking, prostitution, homelessness, mental illness, white-collar crime, violent crime, etc. |
| *Living Sociology*, Renzetti and Curran (1999) | FBI Indexed crimes, violent crime, corporate crime, drug use, death penalty, etc. |
| *Sociology*, Scott and Schwartz (2005) | cannibalism, Jack Kevorkian, Ted Kaczynski, violent crime, white-collar crime, drugs, spousal abuse, cybercrime, etc. |
| *Sociology*, Thio (2010) | homicide, rape, drug use, binge drinking, pornography, corporate crime, mental illness, etc. |
| *Introduction to Sociology*, Tischler (2010) | nudists, athletes who rape, homicide, assault, serial/mass murderers, white collar crime, etc. |
| *Sociology,* Appelbaum and Chambliss (1995) | indexed crimes; white collar crime, gangs, etc. |
| *Sociology*, Macionis (1995) | Al Capone, homosexuality, white collar crime, date rape, hate crimes, criminal justice system, etc. |

APPENDIX B
Common Topics Covered in Popular in Deviance Textbooks

| Text | Subjects/Topics |
| --- | --- |
| *Constructions of Deviance*, Adler and Adler (2008) | rape, drug dealing and smuggling, cigarette smoking, homophobia, police lying, obesity, anorexia, cheating among college students, motorcycle gangs, sexual asphyxia, prostitution, etc. |
| *Deviance*, Rubington and Weinberg (2008) | the mentally retarded, battering of women, alcoholism, paranoia, sexual assault, nudists, gangs, cults, prostitution, drug addicts, stutterers, hermaphroditism, etc. |
| *Degrees of Deviance*, Henry and Eaton (1999) | extra-marital affairs, prostitution, stripping, cyberporn, stealing, steroid use, alcohol abuse, drug use, self-mutilation, hyperactivity, etc. |
| *Social Deviance*, Pontell (2010) | child abuse, ''nuts, sluts, and perverts,'' female crime, prostitution, battered women, drug use, homosexuality, rape, imprisonment, medical fraud, computer crime, etc. |
| *Deviant Behavior*, McCaghy et al. (2002) | homicide, interpersonal violence, rape, street crime, child abuse, spousal abuse, police corruption, white-collar crime, alcohol abuse, drug abuse, mental illness, prostitution, homosexuality, etc. |
| *Social Deviance and Crime*, Tittle and Paternoster (2000) | suicide, serial murder, drug abuse, street gangs, Oneida Perfectionism, gambling, etc. |
| *Deviance and Deviants*, Tewksbury and Gagne (1999) | drug use, pornography, prostitution, stuttering, obesity, homosexuality, domestic violence, rape, cockfighting, cheating among college students, skinheads, queer punks, gangs, etc. |
| *The Relativity of Deviance*, Curra (2010) | predatory violence, sexual violence, suicide, drug abuse, mental disorders, etc. |
| *Deviant Behavior*, Salinger (1998) | murder, computer hackers, credit card theft, divorce, polygamy, violence against women, drug addiction, sex industry, mental illness, etc. |