

Oct 2005

The Nature of Deviance and Criminality

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During the Katrina phenomena, some behaviors were exhibited that caught the attention of the world. These behaviors were of such deviance and criminality that most decent people could not and still cannot comprehend. At a time when the state of Louisiana and the city of New Orleans were being deluged, certain citizens felt the need to murder, maim, and rape the weak, powerless, infirmed, and the weary. Even those who volunteered to help the desperate, were assaulted. When the Red Cross and the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) were dispensing debit cards and cash to the victims of the hurricane, criminals were injecting themselves into the lines of the needy to get their share of the money. Sexual predators are now hunting for prey in and out of shelters, and the children are the ones who are prone to victimization. Very interesting is the fact that the criminals were assaulting and maltreating their own people. What could have driven “civilized” people to prey on their own kind, from their own communities, and their own neighborhoods? Why did they choose that moment to strike? Were they simply lying dormant until the right moment to activate? Was it a psychological triggering? Or, were they merely deviants and criminals who did what they do best?

Most people hold a stereotypical notion of what deviance is and who the criminal is, - what may be referred to as the “nuts and sluts” stereotype (Gouldner, 1968; Liazos, 1972). This is the view that the study of criminality and deviance focuses on: the seamy, sensationalistic, disreputable behavior enacted by marginal, powerless, usually lower-class individuals. This stereotype is partly right and partly wrong. A great deal of criminality conforms to the “nuts and sluts” stereotype, especially that which is most vigorously condemned; that which is most likely to get someone in trouble. On the other hand, the “nuts and sluts” stereotype also leaves a great deal of criminality out of the picture altogether. *Criminality and deviance can be any behavior or quality that generates condemnation; it occurs just about anywhere and is enacted or possessed by just about anyone.*

Ben-Yehuda (1985) showed that criminality and deviance occurs in science, an eminently respected institution. Scientists sometimes plagiarize papers, fabricate data from nonexistent or uncooperative experiments, or propound theories their colleagues regard as *crackpot*. Criminality and deviance routinely takes place in the used car industry, where odometers are set back to show less mileage, taxes are avoided, and bribes are paid to the appropriate parties. Criminality and deviance takes place in the bosom of the family, where violence is common, including wife battering, the rape of wives by husbands, and incest forcibly inflicted by older male relatives on younger females. Professors engage in deviant behavior, for instance, by sexually harassing their students

and students can, of course, engage in deviance, by cheating on exams, among other things.

Corporate executives engage in white-collar crimes. Pharmacists fill out fraudulent prescriptions, workers steal materials from the work site, automobile mechanics charge for work they did not do, physicians perform unnecessary surgery, bill for nonexistent operations, or wildly overcharge on Medicare and medical bills. Criminality and deviance is everywhere. They are ubiquitous. They penetrate every corner of society. They are engaged in by the rich and the poor alike, respectable and disreputable. They take place in locations that are not ordinarily thought of as breeding sites for unconventionality. Criminality and deviance are universal fixtures of every sphere, locus, arena, and crevice of social life.

Every place people interact with one another or, indeed, enact behavior alone, the potential exists for someone to engage in disreputable, blameworthy behavior. Contrary to the stereotype, criminality and deviance is not confined to “nuts and sluts,” nor do criminologists and sociologists confine themselves exclusively to the study of “nuts and sluts.” The central issue in positivistic criminology is *etiology*, or the cause or causes of criminal behavior; “*Why do they do it?*” is its central theme. Why did they behave that way in New Orleans? They did because they are *vile* people.