The Original Blue Man (and Woman) Group

Over six generations ago, Martin Fugate and his bride settled on the banks of eastern Kentucky’s Troublesome Creek. They had children, who had children, who had children. Most of them were healthy and lived well into old age. When Martin Fugate’s great-great-great-great-grandson was born, he was as healthy as a newborn could be. He did, however, have one curious trait: dark blue skin, the color of a ripe plum or dark denim blue jeans. The attending physicians were concerned. Did the child have a blood disorder? The child’s grandmother told them not to worry. Many of the Fugates had blue skin (Trost, 1982).

A young hematologist from the University of Kentucky was curious about the unusual skin color. With the help of a nurse and a blue couple, the physician eventually uncovered the reason for the blue tint. It was caused by a hereditary condition that allowed too much methemoglobin (a form of hemoglobin that is blue) to accumulate in the blood. The blue people, it seemed, lacked an enzyme that is necessary for the regulation of methemoglobin. Due either to a quirk of fate or an affair of the heart, Martin Fugate had married a woman who carried the same recessive gene for blueness that he did. Because members of the Fugate line were content to remain where they were born, people with the recessive gene that caused the blueness often married and had children with others who had the same hereditary trait. As a result, the number of blue people around eastern Kentucky’s Troublesome Creek increased.
The physician and the nurse had more than an academic interest in the blue skin color. As befitted their medical training, they were really hoping to find a “cure” for it. Once they knew the reason for the skin color, it was easy enough for them to find an “antidote.” Methylene blue is a chemical that changes the color of methemoglobin. When it was injected into the blue people, it had the desired effect: Their skin turned pink. However, because the effects of methylene blue are short-lived, the former blue people of Kentucky would have to take a pill every day for the transformation to last. (Physicians no longer see this blood condition very much because mountain people are more inclined than they once were to leave the mountains, so the gene pool is more diverse.) What could show the relative nature of deviance better than the fact that people can be stigmatized for characteristics over which they have little or no control? If being blue among a bunch of other blue people can be labeled as deviant and in need of correction, then anything can be.

**Being and Doing**

An individual’s identity contains two separable parts (Goffman, 1971). One part is social identity, which consists of general social statuses, such as gender, race, class, and nativity. The other part is personal identity, which is more idiosyncratic and requires familiarity with an individual for it to be known. It includes an individual’s name and appearance, as well as distinctive attributes, traits, or marks. These two identities, of course, complement one another, and social identity is always “fleshed out” by personal identity. Although being a “mother” is part of social identity, each mother has unique characteristics that make up her personal identity (e.g., this mom likes to mow the lawn and jog 5 miles a day). Some relationships are pegged or anchored, and interactants know one another personally and know that they are known in both their social and personal identities. Other relationships, however, are anonymous, and interactants know one another only in terms of social identity (p. 189). We each have access to many identities, both social and personal, that we can present to others (Shanahan, Bauldry, Roberts, Macmillan, & Russo, 2014).

An individual may do all he or she can to keep a deeply discrediting act or attribute hidden entirely or restricted to personal identity alone so that only a few others will be aware of it (Ridolfo & Ward, 2013). It may be a central part of one’s life to keep discrediting parts of personal identity from contaminating social identity (and vice versa) (Schroeder & Mowen, 2014). Social and personal identities are in many ways a negotiated reality, being
flexible, contingent, and relative to time and place (Burke & Stets, 2009; MacKinnon & Heise, 2010; Richardson, 2010; Thompson & Thompson, 2014). Some of what we are we embrace willingly and fully, while other parts we take on reluctantly, as something imposed on us against our wills. The human body is both a possession and a prison (Kosut & Moore, 2010; Lizardo & Collett, 2013).

Garot (2010) studied gang memberships of students in an alternative school (called Choices Alternative Academy) in an area characterized by some of the highest levels of crime and poverty in the western United States. These students had histories of violence, drug use, truancy, dropping out of school, and teen pregnancy. Garot’s subjects, who were mostly African Americans or Latinos, were rough and tough, the baddest of the bad. They knew how to take care of themselves, regularly using violence to do so (p. 15). Garot found, however, that gangs were not filled with ruthless killers, bent on carrying out whatever missions their leaders demanded of them. Gang members were individuals—more normal than not—who were trying to construct identities in social environments that they found irrelevant and alienating. Whatever gang members are, they are more than just members of gangs. They do what they can to make lives for themselves that matter out of inferior materials in alienating and dangerous environments (Venkatesh, 2008).

The experiences of people who are treated as deviant for what they are—their shame, guilt, rejection by others—may not be appreciably different from the experiences of people who are treated as deviant for what they do. Both human behaviors and human beings must be part of our understanding of deviance, because deviance is sometimes a matter of being rather than doing (Sagarin, 1975).

The belief that one is a certain thing, particularly when the concept of isness carries with it a sense of destiny . . . creates a feeling of immutability in that role. The language reinforces both the identity and the immutability, and the role occupant at that point finds it impossible to believe that he can be or is other than what he has defined himself as being. (Sagarin, 1975, p. 152)

Role engulfment can occur in which an individual feels trapped in some particular role and powerless to leave it (Schur, 1971). Others may think this person is only what he or she is believed to be (Hills, 1980). We sometimes do feel imprisoned by our bodies rather than liberated, and we are imbued with all kinds of meanings and understandings, coming from both the self and others (Etorre, 2010; Fiske, 2012; Moore & Kosut, 2010).
Deviance and Responsibility

Attaching Blame

The *fundamental attribution error* (FAE) is the mistake of attaching responsibility for some happening to an individual (or individuals) rather than to the social situation within which it occurs; it is the error of giving too much responsibility to individual disposition and not enough to environmental or contextual factors (Nisbett & Ross, 1991; O’Brien, 2006). In one experiment, observers were asked to view two teams of equally talented basketball players. One team was playing in a gymnasium that had plenty of light, and the second team was playing in a poorly lit gym (and doing far worse at making shots). The observers were asked to rate the players, and they decided that the players in the brighter gym were better (Gladwell, 2000). They confused context with character, deciding that it was players’ *character traits* that explained what happened rather than an obvious and important difference in environmental conditions.

Although we should never miss the role played by individual factors in what humans are, we must also be fully aware of the power of context. We will find, more often than not, that what we do and are, as well as how what we do and are is evaluated, reflects context more than anything else. We may be more fun at parties—and viewed that way by others—precisely because parties *are* fun. If we found ourselves in a bar fight, however, all this would change. We wouldn’t be fun people at all (nor would we be viewed that way by others).

The attribution of responsibility is strongly influenced by whether deviance is considered to be ascribed or achieved. *Ascribed deviance* exists if a rule breaker is defined as having a physical or visible impairment, and the individual can acquire that status regardless of his or her behavior or wishes. By contrast, *achieved deviance* involves some intentional or deliberate activity on the part of a rule breaker. Ascribed deviance would cover the situation of individuals who are rejected for physical disabilities, and achieved deviance would cover embezzlers or bank robbers. Unlike the ascribed, the achieved have had to acquire rule-breaking status, at least to some extent, on the strength of what they do (Mankoff, 1976, pp. 241–242).

If deviance is ascribed, it is more likely to be viewed as a misfortune—devalued perhaps, but not in the same category as achieved deviance. With achieved deviance, because something has indeed been done, negative reactions are more likely to be warranted and are easier to justify. It practically goes without saying that *behavior* that breaks rules or violates expectations will regularly be viewed as achieved, and *conditions or attributes* that break
rules or violate expectations are more likely to be viewed as ascribed. It is also possible for individuals to fall somewhere in between, displaying something that is perceived to be voluntary, but still what one is rather than what one does (Sagarin, 1975). An individual who is hard of hearing but who refuses to get a hearing aid falls in this category. Because the individual could hear better by purchasing a hearing aid but chooses not to get one, he or she is perceived to be “deaf by choice.” The deviance exists not because the individual is hard of hearing, but because he or she is defined by others as being able to do something to hear better but choosing not to. It is generally true, however, that “isness” is less blameworthy than “didness.”

Some individuals get labeled as deviant and negatively sanctioned because they are viewed by others as a bothersome annoyance. In Irwin’s (1985) words, they are rabble. If rabble keep to themselves and cause nobody any trouble, they are given little attention. However, if they take their annoying traits or conduct to places where they do not belong—or are defined as not belonging by influential or powerful individuals—police will usually be called to return them to places where rabble are more likely to be tolerated or to cart them off to jail (Fitzpatrick & Myrstol, 2011; Huey, 2012; Way & Patten, 2013). It is not their danger but their offensiveness to standards of decency and propriety that mobilizes the forces of social control against them. Dominant groups are most likely to act to control minority groups (i.e., race/ethnicity) when they are viewed as a threat (Chiricos, Stupi, Stults, & Gertz, 2014; Olzak & Shanahan, 2014).

When it comes to issues of deviance and responsibility, cause and blame are sometimes confused, but they are not the same (Felson, 1991). Cause is objective and verifiable, referring to observed patterns of association and ordering. If drinking ethyl alcohol causes poor driving ability, it is because the drinking precedes erratic driving and is responsible for it. Blame (or the assessment of responsibility) is a value-laden term, more of a moralistic judgment than a scientific determination based on logic and observation. If an individual had been in the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, and was killed in the terrorist attack on that day, one cause of his or her death would have been that the individual decided to enter the building. However, the individual should not be blamed for what happened. Goode (2011) clarifies matters when he notes that, “[i]f I take a plane to Los Angeles and the plane crashes and I die, my taking the plane is one cause of my death—but I should not be blamed for my death” (p. 130).

No perfect correlation exists between cause and blame, and blaming someone for some trespass is different from identifying its cause. Though we may agree, from our observation of changes in variables, about what causes what, attaching blame is a more contentious issue. Different groups can have
very different understandings about who is at fault and how much responsibility the individual should bear for the trespass (even while group members might agree on its cause).

**Discreditable and Discredited Deviants**

According to Schur (1971), deviance is a personally discreditable departure from a group’s or society’s normative expectations. Discreditable attitudes, behaviors, or conditions could lead to social censure and stigma if they ever reach the light of day, so they may be expressed or performed in private and in secretive ways (Goffman, 1963). An example of discreditable behavior is ritualized self-injury. In the sample of 25 self-injurers studied by Adler and Adler (2009), the majority (80%) engaged in their acts of self-mutilation while they were alone, and they most frequently cut themselves, although they also burned, branded, and shocked themselves. Because the injurers could control where, when, and how the pain occurred, it replaced—at least temporarily—all the other pain in their lives, actually giving them a measure of comfort and relief. Their pain was a “warrior mark,” less an unfortunate consequence of the experience than one of its central objectives (Atkinson & Young, 2008). Their ability to endure pain was, at least to the injurers, an indicator of strong character, courage, and integrity. The immersion of self-injurers in their own private world of injury and secrecy leads to greater and greater isolation from others and, if discovered, strong pressures for them to stop the injury, which leads ultimately to greater loneliness, which is the principal reason that they began to injure themselves in the first place (Adler & Adler, 2009).

Passing as something other than a deviant requires impression management and strategic interaction to control what others learn about the deviant (Furst & Evans, 2015; Goffman, 1959, 1969). It involves information control and the manipulation of others in the interest of presenting and sustaining a fabricated self (Brune & Wilson, 2013; Lasky, Jacques, & Fisher, 2015; Shippee, 2011). A qualitative study of 73 participants in the bondage/discipline/sadism/masochism (BDSM) subculture, by Stiles and Clark (2011), reports that these sexual deviants were inclined to conceal their deviance from others whenever they could. They hid information about their sexual interests and practices, as well as about their deviant identity, when interacting with people whom they deemed likely to be both offended and judgmental. The largest portion of the sample (38%) told nobody outside of the subculture, following a strict need-to-know decision rule (“absolute concealment”). The rest told only close friends or family members. Only a small percentage (1%) was completely open about their
sexual activities. Some of the sample (8%) had been forced out of the closet (“outed”) against their wishes. The principal reasons members of this sample opted for concealment were self-protection and to protect others from information that these sexual deviants thought might be upsetting or unpleasant for them.

Individuals who have been caught and labeled for their trespasses find themselves in a different situation from the discreditable. They are discredited deviants, and their main problem is managing tension during social contacts with individuals who do not share their condition (Goffman, 1963). Goffman relates the case of a 16-year-old female who wrote to “Miss Lonelyhearts,” asking for advice about a “problem.” The teenager told the columnist that she would like to go out on dates like everyone else, but males won’t take her out even though she is a good dancer, wears nice clothes, and has a nice figure. The reason males avoid her as a dating partner is because she was born without a nose, having a “big hole” in the middle of her face. Her main question for the columnist is whether she should take her own life. In situations as extreme as this one, the discrediting trait is very difficult, if not impossible, to manage successfully no matter how much an individual tries. Some people are quick to judge and quick to reject anyone who is perceived to be different from them, while others are much more accepting (Edgell & Tranby, 2010). Hostile reactions may keep an already marginalized population from trying to integrate into mainstream society (Brayne, 2014).

A study by Rassin (2011) of individuals with HIV in the largest AIDS clinic in Israel shows that the division between the discredited and the discreditable falls apart in the real world. Because the demands of passing are so intense for individuals who must do it on a continual basis, both tension control and information control are required. Part of the reason that these HIV sufferers decided to keep their condition a secret is that the initial reaction of family members who had been told of the diagnosis was prejudicial, discriminatory, and hurtful. Even those HIV sufferers who had received a favorable response had reasons to hide their disease from most others. They feared that their families might become the target of hostility or persecution. Most of them hid their disease because it made it possible for them to continue to lead a normal life for as long as possible.

Maggard and Boylstein’s (2014) study of a small number of individuals \((n = 8)\) who participated in the marijuana trade as users, sellers, and indoor growers in central Florida, over a period of about 15 years, shows some of the complexities involved in identity construction and maintenance. One core objective of the participants in this deviant subculture was to be able to successfully maintain secrecy about the nature and extent of their
involvement in the marijuana trade. They wore a great many “masks” in their relationships with others (p. 600), but the deviant identity that they most wanted to keep hidden from outsiders was that of grower. This study showed how significant marijuana is to members of this subculture. It brought personal identity, while solidifying and reaffirming social bonds among members of the group.

Responsibility and Moral Careers

McHugh (1970) identified two decision rules that observers use to attach moral responsibility or blame to individuals for their untoward attitudes, behaviors, or conditions. The first decision rule, called conventionality, refers to whether observers believe that the attitude, behavior, or condition “could have been otherwise.” If, in their opinion, it could have been, then it is a good candidate for consideration as something deviant instead of something accidental, coerced, or miraculous. It is the perceived inevitability of nonconventional events that makes the difference. Slipping on ice and falling, getting hurt in the process, is a different event from the standpoint of conventionality than is using your body in a game of football to block an opponent. The extent of the injuries may be identical, but slipping is an accident—nonconventional—while body blocking in an athletic contest is something that is conventional (i.e., the athlete elected to do it to help win the game). McHugh’s second decision rule is theoreticity. It concerns whether the untoward attitude, behavior, or condition is viewed as having been intentional, unfolding according to some plan or purpose (making it “theoretic” instead of “practical” action). Individuals who deviate in a conventional and theoretic way are held responsible (i.e., blamed) for disrupting the social order. They are expected to show that they understand the wrongfulness of their trespass. They are also expected to repair the damage they’ve done to the flow of social interaction and the moral understandings on which it is based.

These two rules are neat and tidy—sort of—but the real world is far more complicated. The boys still won’t ask the teenager with no nose out on dates, and she anguishes over her physical condition so much that she contemplates suicide. She can take some small comfort in knowing that had she intentionally removed her own nose (when she did not have to), her situation would have been even worse. She herself would have been held entirely responsible for her plight. We can see that even in the absence of the assessment that an individual is responsible for his or her condition, it is still possible for a great deal of stigma and unhappiness to result from being different from everyone else.
We must include in our understanding of deviance a category called involuntary deviants. These are individuals who are not held responsible for either their devalued traits or the social reactions based upon them (Montanino & Sagarin, 1977). They are still devalued and stigmatized, however, for conditions they are viewed as having had no responsibility in creating (Butera & Levine, 2009). In fact, people with disabilities are the target of both hate and violence because of their disabilities, and disablism—prejudice against people with disabilities—is a far-too-frequent fact of life for these involuntary deviants (Davis, 2014; Sherry, 2010; Wappett & Arndt, 2013). They may be defined as disabled people instead of being viewed as people with disabilities (Cahill & Eggleston, 2005; Campbell, 2009).

Disagreements exist over whether something is conventional or theoretic, and who or what is to blame is a contentious issue (as noted previously). A child is asked by a father to carry a plate of cookies, but the child then drops it. The mother may think that her husband is at fault for expecting capabilities beyond most children; the father, however, may think the child is to blame for not paying sufficient attention to the task at hand to do it correctly. An important factor in how a deviant is judged and reacted to is whether he or she is trying to evade the norms secretly, making him or her a cynical deviant, or openly defying them, making him or her an enemy deviant (Gusfield, 1967). Other things being equal, cynical deviants, because they are not openly challenging the status quo and the moral order on which it is based, are generally easier to deal with and accept than are enemy deviants. Both the cynical and enemy deviants are different from a deviant like the cookie-dropper, who is neither intentionally resistant to, nor stubbornly defiant of, the normative system.

The Social Construction of Spoiled Identities

Appearance and the Sociocultural Matrix

Symmetry, Learning, and Relativity

Physical appearance is one of the more obvious and immediate cues that people bring to their encounters with others, a fundamental element in personal identity that impacts social identity. It is used as a signifier of other, more difficult-to-measure personal factors, and it plays an important role in patterns of social interaction and in the differential treatment that people receive. Physical attractiveness is a valued trait that is valuable for an individual who is defined as having it (Vecitis, 2011). The determination that someone is beautiful or ugly (or any gradation in between) involves selective
viewing, classification, and evaluation. Beauty, just like deviance, is in the eye of the beholder, and *attentional adhesion*—the difficulty of pulling one’s attention or gaze away from a particular individual—is a documented fact (Maner, Gailliot, Rouby, & Miller, 2007). Appearance norms exist in all cultures, and violations of these norms can lead to the assessment that something deviant—or at least devalued—has occurred (Schur, 1983).

Studies have been done in which images of composite faces are constructed on a computer from individual pictures of faces. The greater the number of pictures of faces that went into the construction of the composite photo, the more average or symmetrical the composite became. So, if eight separate photos were used to make the composite, the composite was more symmetrical, typical, or average than if four separate photos had been used to make it. The central finding was that the composite image constructed from 32 separate pictures of faces was ranked as more attractive than a composite made from 16, 8, or 4 separate pictures of faces (Buss, 1994). The equating of facial symmetry with beauty and asymmetry with ugliness is interesting but flawed. People use things in addition to the face to determine attractiveness (figure, health cues, character, personality, age), and we can certainly think of times when a symmetrical face would not be judged particularly attractive (think Darth Vader in *Star Wars*, or other such villains).

Most of us suspect that the world’s “most beautiful people” have gotten that way by being more than just average. Using symmetrical to mean “average” is not the same as using it to mean “ideal” or “flawless,” and perhaps these words are closer to what is meant by beautiful. When American men and women are given the task of constructing an ideal or perfect human face, they seem to agree. The ideal or perfect female face is a very youthful one with full lips and a narrow mouth. The perfect male face (based on the responses of American female undergraduates) has large eyes, a large chin, a small nose, and prominent cheekbones. It is an open, pleasant face with rugged features (Small, 1995).

None of these traits seems extraordinary, but maybe it is unusual to find so many diverse indicators of female attractiveness on the same female or of male attractiveness on the same male. What is true about sexual selection—a fact of which Darwin was fully aware—is that if females show a specific preference in selecting mates, then males with the desirable trait will be at a reproductive advantage. They will leave a greater number of offspring, and the frequency of that trait will increase in a population (Jones & Ratterman, 2009).

Are uniform and universal cues for beauty and ugliness to be found? Some traits—festerling sores, hacking coughs, incessant sneezes, unpleasant body odors—are probably widely defined as unattractive or ugly, and they
could easily repel potential mates in practically any situation. Other traits—youthfulness, vitality, sincerity, integrity, kindness, poise, intelligence, pleasantness—are likely to be viewed as attractive, and they may be used to classify people as beautiful. However, that is a far cry from the claim that objective and universal beauty cues exist that have been programmed into our biology and psychology to ensure reproductive success (Buss, 1994; Ridley, 1993). Just because people say that they find some particular qualities attractive in a mate does not necessarily mean that their fantasies are echoes of some genetic predisposition established long ago (Small, 1995).

How beautiful or ugly a partner looks to us depends on our needs, our interests, the nature of our relationship to him or her, and—importantly—our relationship to other “hims” or “hers.” We may have an ideal image of beauty in our minds, but it is usually broad and alterable. Though a partner’s age and health are supposed to be important indicators of beauty or handsomeness in long-term relationships oriented toward reproduction, it may be just those relationships in which they are the least important. People do not usually divorce or separate on the grounds that their partner is too old or too sick. In fact, growing old together may enhance the quality of the relationship for both partners. It is almost certain that if we looked, we could find both beautiful and ugly things in every person on earth, and a trait that looks ugly at one time may look beautiful at another (and vice versa).

Learning must certainly play a big role in what and whom people find attractive, and culture must have an impact on what a group defines as beautiful or ugly that parallels or surpasses any influence of biology. Women and men want mates who are enjoyable to be around, who will make them feel special and needed, and who are accommodating and sensitive enough to be responsive to their wants and needs. In the absence of these, a partner’s youth, health, fecundity, or high social status will matter very little. What initially draws us to a relationship (attentional adhesion) may be very different from what keeps it going for the long run. The evaluation of potential mates and actual partners is a flexible, ongoing enterprise.

Beauty Norms and Cultural Dynamics

All the different body forms, skin colors, nose shapes, ear designs, and facial configurations, along with all the deliberate modifications of the human form, make it hard to believe that any universal and uniform standard of beauty and ugliness could ever be found.

A cross-cultural survey of notions of beauty is sure to include such “oddities” as a preference for cross-eyes (Mayans), flattened heads (Kwakiutl), black
gums and tongue (Maasai), black teeth (Yapese), joined eyebrows (Syrians), absence of eyebrows and eyelashes (Mongo), enormously protruding navels (Ila), pendulous breasts (Ganda), gigantic buttocks (Hottentot), fat calves (Tiv), crippled feet (Chinese), and so on. (Gregersen, 1983, p. 81)

Certainly, it is not hard to find examples that challenge the claim that standards for beauty are universal and programmed into us at birth.

The erotic potential of female genitalia is found throughout the world, but the Tswana-Kgatla (Africa) put their own spin on it:

With the onset of puberty Kgatla girls start pulling their labia and sometimes will ask a girlfriend to help. If the labia do not get longer as quickly as desired, the girls resort to magic. They kill a bat and cut off its wings, which they then burn. The ashes are ground up and mixed with fat. Each girl makes little cuts around her labia and smears the bat-ash ointment into the cuts. (Gregersen, 1983, p. 92)

This little bit of magic is designed to get the labia to grow quickly to the size of bat wings.

Teeth are an important part of one's appearance, and having a “nice” smile is usually considered an asset. The existence of “best smile” contests suggests that judges know a great smile when they see one (or believe that they do). Yet, what qualifies as a “great smile” varies across the globe. Teeth have been permanently colored, knocked out, dug out, filed down, decorated, drilled, and chipped in order to heighten their attractiveness (Gregersen, 1983). U.S. models and actresses (and others, thanks to the influence of television advertising) spend considerable time and money on the whitening of their teeth. The Nilotes of East Africa would find these efforts at whitening incomprehensible. Beauty for them involves knocking out the lower front teeth (up to six), usually at the start of adolescence (p. 97).

Standards for the “proper” girth and weight for individuals to meet are variable things, too. In places where food and a full stomach are both luxuries, corpulence is coveted, and thinness is taken as a sign of poverty or sickness, not self-control and good form (Brownmiller, 1984).

In Mexico, for example, people are significantly less concerned than U.S. citizens about their own weight and are more accepting of overweight people. In Niger, being overweight—ideally with rolls of fat, stretch marks, and a large behind—is considered an essential part of female beauty. Women who aren’t sufficiently round are considered unfit for marriage. In Mauritania, girls as young as 5 and as old as 19 are sometimes forced by their parents to drink five gallons of fat-rich camel’s milk each day so they become fat. Among the
Calabari people of southeastern Nigeria, soon-to-be brides are sent to farms where caretakers feed them huge amounts of food to fatten them up for the wedding day. (Newman, 2008, p. 161)

The existence of cross-cultural differences in appearance norms for body size ratifies the truth of novelist Erica Jong’s (1990) Proverb Number One for Free Women: “You’re not too fat; you’re just in the wrong country” (p. 296). If she’s right, it means that finding that one’s body proportions are not only accepted, but even admired, has more to do with where an individual is than with the size of an individual’s stomach. Corpulence was not always considered an indication of either physical disease (e.g., glandular malfunction) or weak character in the United States, and it still is not in many places in the world even today (Ruane & Cerulo, 2015; Saguy, 2013).

Body Blame

Most adult women in the Western world have at some time in their lives been displeased to a greater or lesser extent with the shape and weight of their bodies, and they have tried to alter them in one way or another by reducing their food intake (Grogan, 2009). Studies in the United States, Australia, and Great Britain, using figural rating scales (a series of silhouette of a body, going from very thin to very fat), indicate that respondents were inclined to find as most attractive a body shape that was thinner than their own. Slenderness and confidence are positively linked for most women, and most of them can more easily identify something wrong with their bodies than right with them. Glass, Hass, and Reither (2010) report from their research done in Wisconsin that heavy females in their sample were less inclined than lighter females to pursue post-secondary schooling, even though they were just as academically capable. Part of the reason they avoided advanced education was low self-esteem, depression, and a fear of failing. Obese women do face significant and enduring discrimination and disadvantage in their jobs because of their body size (Mason, 2012). A study of 57 college women in a large, public university in the western United States shows that some of them are so dedicated to staying thin that they are willing to resort to heavy and potentially dangerous drug use to help do it (Vecitis, 2011). They overidentify with a specific and highly inflexible set of cultural understandings about physical attractiveness, and they do all they can to control information to hide from practically everyone just how desperately they try to stay thin.

Individuals who view obesity as deviant are the ones who are most likely to define it as a result of individual laziness and weak will, a failure by
overweight people to exercise often enough or to exert sufficient personal control over their eating habits (Guthman, 2011). These negative evaluators view obesity as a blemish of character, as well as of body, instead of the operation of impersonal forces over which an individual has little or no control (Goode, 2002, 2015). They view it as something that could and should be changed. The obese body is more than a lump of flesh and bone; it is a moral area and a contested terrain that is viewed in different ways by different audiences or groups, some accepting of it and some not (Badger, 2010; English, 1993; Gruys, 2012; Kwan, 2009).

The U.S. media usually offers a biased and distorted view of eating problems and of what should be done to manage them (Boero, 2012). Obesity is usually portrayed as an individual problem with roots in fundamentally bad choices. Social factors (e.g., class, race, gender, ethnicity, opportunity, accessibility, affordability), despite their clear role in how, what, and how much we eat, are given scant attention (Roberts & Edwards, 2010). Obesity is more often found among the poor and ethnic minorities, and rates are highest in countries with small or poorly developed (i.e., stingy or miserly) welfare systems. A principal reason is that overeating and binge drinking of fattening beverages are reactions to the stress and depression that result from economic insecurity and uncertainty (Ford, Schroeder, & Dotson, 2014; Offer, Pechey, & Ulijaszek, 2012).

Blame and responsibility are attached differently to the too-thin and the too-fat. Overeaters or binge eaters are looked on as weak and lazy; anorexics and bulimics are looked on as victims of social or biological forces beyond their control. Thin bodies, though extreme, are still viewed as associated with responsibility and self-denial, albeit of a perverse form, while fat bodies are viewed as the epitome of gluttony and irresponsibility (Saguy, 2013; Saguy & Gruys, 2010). In the public realm, fat bodies are viewed as something that must be changed in order to make other bodily functions and individual accomplishments possible (Saguy, Gruys, & Gong, 2010). The fat body is the contaminated body, crying out in a multitude of ways to be saved from itself (Kent, 2010; Sender, 2012). Atkinson’s (2011) study of how male athletes (marathon runners, wrestlers, swimmers, tennis players) stay thin reported that dangerous eating practices were justified by these men as both normal and desirable. They viewed their emaciation as a sign of self-reliance and emotional maturity, which meant that they experienced low levels of stigma and guilt over their risky behaviors.

Physical appearance cues influence how individuals are treated (McClintock, 2014). For males, being tall helps increase their earnings throughout their careers, and tall men are more desired as dating partners than are short men. Individuals with above-average appearances earn much
more in their jobs during their lifetimes than do people with below-average looks (Hamermesh, 2013). Although both males and females may dislike getting old, more females than males report that they do not want to look old. A double standard exists that works to the advantage of older men, who can still be viewed as “distinguished,” even well into old age, in a way that few women can achieve (Jaeger, 2011). Most women surveyed—heterosexual ones, at any rate—profess that an important factor that makes them think they look old is that they no longer receive approving looks from men (Slevin, 2010).

Attitudes toward cosmetic surgery are changing worldwide so that now the new shame may be to not have work done, especially where it is available and affordable (Stein, 2015). Cosmetic surgery is usually done to enhance an individual’s erotic potential or sexiness (e.g., breast augmentation surgery or penile enlargement), to create a “normal” appearance (e.g., nose reconstruction), or to create or maintain a “youthful” appearance (e.g., face-lifts or hair transplants). Clearly, a great deal of overlap exists, and it is not easy to know if a given procedure was done to sexualize, to correct a perceived defect, or to rejuvenate an aging body. (Did she get the breast lift to appear more attractive, to look younger, or to undo what was done to her mammary glands because of childbirth and breast-feeding?) More and more males are feeling the same pressure that females have felt to surgically correct the parts of their bodies that they find displeasing. The number one surgical procedure in the United States for men is a nose job; breast augmentation is the top cosmetic surgery for females (Stein, 2015).

Though many competing views, both cultural and personal, coexist about the benefits and desirability of altering a body in the interest of vanity rather than health, cosmetic surgery is no longer viewed as something that is received only by the marginal and maladjusted (Pitts-Taylor, 2007). Prominent boosters and cheerleaders for reconstructive surgery help to advance its public acceptance when they extol its benefits (as when a transgender woman, such as Caitlyn Jenner, whose birth name was Bruce Jenner, reports that she has been empowered due to her facial feminization surgery that she claims makes her feel better about herself and more easily accepted as who she really is).

It is a long way from laboratory studies of symmetry and attentional adhesion to the real world of finding and uniting with a desired partner. A few things—a very few things—might be universally viewed as beautiful or ugly. However, what appears to be more important is the total package a person brings to a relationship—or the other’s perception of that package. Having a beautiful face—or any other specific trait—is not that important, at least not for long, or at least not in long-term relationships. Many
things—opportunity, accessibility, availability, personal objectives, individual motives, physical qualities, personality characteristics, social attributes (e.g., status)—are assessed by people as they form relationships. Humans find a wide range of things attractive, some of which reflect cultural meanings and others reflect more idiosyncratic preferences. No matter whom we are with or what we find attractive, most of us realize that if we’d come to a different fork in the road and taken a different path, our partners would have been different from who they now are.

**Status and Stigma**

Each individual is a cluster of different attributes and appearance cues (in both social and personal identities), and each person displays a large number of different behaviors during the course of his or her life. We must wonder, therefore, why certain designations or characterizations are used more often than others to describe us, and why some of them stick to us more readily in describing what we are and what we do. E. C. Hughes (1945) coined the term *master status* to describe a status that evolves into the dominant way an individual is interpreted and categorized by others. A person’s sex is usually a master status, as are skin color and occupation. These are major identity pegs, and they play a role in most human relationships. The status of deviant, Becker (1963) informs us, is also a master status. It can predominate over many other statuses that an individual occupies and can become a controlling one in his or her relationships to others (Pager, 2007). A strong possibility exists that as a deviant identity becomes a master status, the level of social censure will increase and the individual will experience stigma (Goffman, 1963).

At one time, the word *stigma* meant a distinguishing mark or brand cut into an individual’s flesh for the purpose of identifying him or her as a tainted or despised individual. Now, stigma means *any* attribute—a physical sign or character cue—that is accompanied by shame or disgrace. Too-tall Jones is identified by body, and Otis the town drunk is identified by character. Stigma can also have little directly to do with body or character: It can exist because a person is a member of a persecuted or despised group, what Goffman (1963) called *tribal stigma*. He reminds us that when speaking of stigma, what is really needed is a language of relationships rather than of attributes, because no attribute is automatically crediting or discrediting. Stigma always involves a relationship between an attribute and its perception and symbolization by others. “Normal” and “stigmatized” are not persons but perspectives on persons (p. 138).

A tattoo, for example, may be either a *stigma symbol* (i.e., discrediting) or a *prestige symbol* (i.e., status-enhancing), depending on who the tattooee
is, what the tattoo represents, where the tattoo is placed, and the nature of the relationship between the tattooee and his or her evaluating others. Tattoos have been used to identify social outcasts and to make it more difficult for them to blend in with others. In Japan in the sixth century, criminals were tattooed on the arms and face, and in the 1800s, convicts in correctional facilities in Massachusetts had “Mass S. P.” and the date of their release tattooed on their left arms (Sanders, 1996).

At some times and in some places, tattoos are viewed by some individuals as tarnished cultural products, an indication that the tattooed individual lacks enough maturity to be able to consider the consequences of his or her actions (J. Adams, 2012). Tattoos on teenagers are still stigmatizing, indicating to the general public that the bearer is unconventional in outlooks and interests. Adolescents with tattoos are reported to be more inclined toward deviance, less academically oriented than adolescents without tattoos, and less interested in attending college (Silver, Silver, Siennick, & Farkas, 2011).

Some individuals do not consider tattoos to be stigmatizing. In fact, they collect tattoos on their bodies, viewing these markings as a fundamental and attractive part of their personal and social identities. They use a tattoo to increase their feelings of self-worth and to transform their identities in the eyes of others (Goode & Vail, 2008; Sanders, 1996). In fact, for some people, tattoos are said to be like potato chips in that one is not nearly enough (Vail, 2008). Even genital piercings, once considered abnormal and degenerate, are a body adornment that is becoming more mainstream and conventional (Thomas, Crosby, & Milford, 2015).

How tattoos are viewed, especially by those individuals inclined to view them as disreputable, cannot be separated from the tattoo industry itself. Tattoo artists have not had the same level of success as practitioners in related industries (e.g., cosmetologists, barbers, beauticians, manicurists) in changing the public image that they are engaged in what E. C. Hughes (1951) called dirty work. This is work that is defined as unpleasant, with clients or customers who are defined as unsavory or immoral (J. Adams, 2012). In November 2012, Walter Smith, a self-described tattoo artist, was forbidden to share information about tattooing with students during “Career Day” at Clearwater Fundamental Middle School (Clearwater, FL). His daughter was a student at the school, and Smith had participated in years past. The reason for the ban cited by the school principal was parental complaints that Smith would be promoting an alternative lifestyle.

Stigma may be an outcome of having “bad” companions or associates (or those defined as bad), a stigma by association called courtesy stigma (Goffman, 1963). (A daughter who is embarrassed because her father is viewed as the town drunk is suffering from this kind of stigma.) A study of
stigma by association, experienced by Hollywood artists and performers during the “Red Scare” of the 1950s, illustrates how this can work. After the Second World War (circa 1945–1960), some powerful and influential people in Hollywood became convinced—or acted as if they were—that the film industry had been infiltrated by communists and communist sympathizers. Of the approximately 30,000 artists (31,781, to be exact) who worked in Hollywood during those years, 300 were officially blacklisted and kept from performing. Practically anyone who had any connections with them, no matter how slight, also became the target of persecution. They, too, found that they had trouble finding work. One contact with a tainted individual was usually enough to have adverse consequences for a performer’s career. Even contact with a blacklisted writer proved to be a liability (Pontikes, Negro, & Rao, 2010).

The “Red Scare” shows that some individuals are accused of doing things they haven’t or of being things they aren’t. They are, in other words, falsely accused (Becker, 1963, p. 20). Even in a court of law, some people are tried and convicted of crimes that they did not commit—known as a “bum rap”—even though a number of safeguards exist to make it unlikely that the innocent are wrongfully convicted (Barkan & Bryjak, 2014). False accusations are even more likely to occur outside a legal setting where few, if any, safeguards exist to ensure that individuals are not accused of doing things that they did not do (Becker, 1963; Menard & Pollock, 2014). A label, even if it is false, can still have major consequences for both the labelers and the falsely accused (Rocheleau & Chavez, 2015). False accusations of criminal conduct are more likely with individuals who have prior records, deviant friends, or poor educational performances, and with those who are male, nonwhite, and lower-class (Menard & Pollock, 2014). A false label may even become a self-fulfilling prophecy, creating deviance that would otherwise not occur.

The social construction of a spoiled identity usually includes retrospective interpretation (Kitsuse, 1962). In retrospective interpretation, an accused deviant’s biography is scrutinized, and prior experiences with the accused are played over in memory, searching for anything that might help to account for the individual’s current display of deviance. The rule breaker is recast in the eyes of others, and he or she is viewed in a new way (Schafer, Ferraro, & Mustillo, 2011; Schur, 1971). What was once viewed as normal in the identity of the individual comes to be viewed as a façade that was actually hiding a deeper, more sinister, more authentic constellation of traits and attributes (Garfinkel, 1956). Retrospective interpretation works to create order out of what seems to be disorder. It allows observers to understand better how a seemingly ordinary person could do or be something so unusual. This
individual is found to not be as ordinary as originally thought; despite surface appearances, he or she actually had been a deviant all along.

If something is found in the accused deviant’s personal history that can explain the deviance, even remotely, it becomes part of the reconstructed biographical record. We may discover, for example, that a mass murderer had an abusive childhood and liked guns, information that would never have come to light—or been given much significance—if the individual had not committed random acts of violence. The process of retrospective interpretation is selective, and factors that might refute, challenge, or complicate the biographical sketch may be ignored, dismissed, or downgraded. It is also possible for the biographical reconstruction to include fabrications or lies. For example, a deviant’s parents might be viewed as having been abusive when they really were not. All deviants may undergo processes of retrospective interpretation, especially when the need is great to explain or understand what seems to be inexplicable.

Deviants themselves may engage in an autobiographical retrospective interpretation as they search through their own life experiences to come to some understanding of why they can’t be like everybody else or even why others are so annoyed by them. A study of 10 street prostitutes, who were in rehabilitation for their heavy drug use while trying to disengage from sex work, shows how this works. They used their former drug addictions as a way to explain and therefore handle some of the stigma associated with prostitution. They retrospectively made sense of their own involvement in prostitution by tying their sex work and their drug abuse together, presenting them as remnants of a former life with its corresponding former self (McCray, Wesely, & Rasche, 2011). This retrospective interpretation allowed them to move from a deviant to a nondeviant identity more easily. They were, in the words of Gusfield (1967), repentant deviants.

Managing Stigma

Deviance Avowal

Individuals are objects of their own experience, holding opinions and making evaluations of their personal attributes and social identities. Just because other people may condemn an individual for some behavior or attribute does not mean that he or she must share their opinions (LeBel, 2012). Individuals may take pleasure and pride in what they are, precisely because other people do condemn it, or they may simply be indifferent to the reactions of others, marching to the beat of a different drummer (Steinmetz & Gerber, 2014). Stigma is based on negotiated understandings and situational factors, not universal and absolute decision rules (Haenfler, 2013).
People with devalued attributes can still maintain a positive self-image, not only by hiding or covering the troubling condition, but also by believing that their personal condition is actually a good and valued trait regardless of what others may think. They may view their condition as righteous, requiring neither apology nor regret. In some cases, stigmatized individuals find ways to exploit their conditions for positive gains (Herman & Miall, 2005). They will transform negative labels into positive ones through a process of reinterpretation so that a once-stigmatizing label no longer is (“I’m bald and beautiful”). Little evidence exists that people who are defined as deviant by others inevitably hold poor opinions of themselves (Darling, 2013).

A once-stigmatizing trait also may be redefined by others as something positive (or vice versa). Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, the famous character from the Christmas song, shows how this can happen. His nose, once a source of embarrassment and shame (a stigma symbol), which kept the animal from joining in any reindeer games, became a prestige symbol because it came to be evaluated so positively by Santa Claus, majordomo of the North Pole. Women with naturally curly hair may be displeased with what sits atop their heads until style standards change and straight hair is no longer all the rage. During the Victorian era in both England and the United States, respectable women of means all carried parasols when they were outside in order to avoid any tanning of their skin. The bearer of untanned skin was viewed as attractive, because her ivory exterior showed that she did not have to toil in the fields to earn her daily bread. The meaning of suntan changed, however, and tan skin is now likely to be viewed as more attractive than is untanned skin. An important reason for the reversal is that fewer of us labor in the fields, finding our work activity indoors rather than outdoors (Gregersen, 1983). This means that having a tan, especially a full-body tan, indicates that the bearer has both the time and resources to be able to attain one in recreational pursuits; it is no longer necessarily a by-product of a life of toil on the land.

Whether negative reactions from others lead to reduced feelings of self-worth depends a lot on the type of deviance, how committed the individual is to the deviance, how involved the individual is with conventional society, the nature of the relationship between the accusers and the accused, and whether the condition is shared with others. Certain kinds of deviance are actually status enhancing, and deviants readily avow their deviance (Turner, 1972). Deviance avowal exists when people want to occupy a deviant status and actively pursue it if they can. This reminds us that deviance can be functional, even righteous, for individuals. In fact, nondeviants may fake or exaggerate unrespectability (Ball, 1970). Even extreme acts of deviance (e.g., murder, robbery, or drug dealing) can be consciously chosen in order to give an individual a sense of purpose, belonging, and respect (Lindegaard & Jacques, 2014).
Kitsuse (1980) proposed the term tertiary deviation to cover all those situations in which deviants embrace a deviant status but reject the negative identity and stigma associated with it. This transforms a deviant identity into something that is both positive and desirable. He referred to individuals who do this successfully as the “new deviants”:

Fat people, little people, ugly people, old people, and a growing number of others—who have called into question the very concept of “deviant,” not by denying what they are, but by affirming and claiming it as a valued identity deserving of the rights accorded any member of society. (p. 8)

One thing that tertiary deviants may do is to join with other devalued or deviant people to collectively fight against or resist the societal exclusion, segregation, prejudice, and discrimination to which they are subject. One positive result of such a banding together is the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), a United Nations treaty that was adopted in 2006. Its principal objective is to remove any barriers that may exist for individuals with disabilities in the areas of education, health care, and civic involvement (Sabatello & Schulze, 2014).

At one time, people with certain types of spoiled identity—they used to be called “freaks”—could find a place in the world of popular entertainment and amusement. Siamese twins, bearded ladies, tattooed men, giants, dwarfs, armless men, the obese, the extremely thin—you name them, they were there. Though some of them were exploited, most of them were performers and entertainers who were applauded for having turned a potential liability into a profitable and valuable identity peg. According to Bogdan (1988), these human exhibits had no objection to being put on display; in fact, most of them enjoyed the attention. They were comfortable with what they were, and though they were called freaks, they did not believe they were freakish. Their approach to life and their view of their disabilities was different from that of Joseph Carey Merrick (1862–1890), nicknamed “the Elephant Man,” whose story was movingly depicted in a Broadway play and a film. He believed he needed to hide his physical deformities under a mask whenever he could.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the display of human oddities for amusement had fallen into disrepute in the United States. Part of the reason was the growing fear that these individuals might reproduce and transmit their physical traits to future generations. The major factor, however, was that after physicians organized into the American Medical Association (in 1847), they worked to establish their claim that they had
special expertise and knowledge in regard to understanding and treating all human deviation. Human oddities, like those displayed in the freak shows, came to be medicalized as abnormal but curable rather than as exotic exhibits for the amusement of paying customers (Bogdan, 1988). How disabilities and people who have them ought to be viewed and understood is a constantly changing social terrain with many competing images: people who are strange, exotic, eccentric, pitiful, pathetic, sick, odd, freakish, helpless, dangerous, normal, admired, or beloved (Bogdan, 2012). The population of “people with disabilities” is a heterogeneous one (Darling, 2013).

Some attributes of individuals, though potentially discrediting, are tolerated or even accepted because they are assessed in light of other attributes of these same individuals. A different cluster of attributes would have produced very different reactions from others. Consider the following letter to “Dear Abby” from a “Happy Wife”:

Dear Abby:

When our daughter was a baby, I found her pacifier in our bed. I thought it had dropped out of her mouth while she was in our bed, but later I found the pacifier in the drawer of our nightstand table, and I couldn’t for the life of me figure out how it got there.

Then one morning I woke up early and saw my husband sound asleep with the pacifier in his mouth! We had a good laugh over it, and that evening when I fixed the baby’s bottle I jokingly asked him if he wanted a bottle too. He said yes, so I fixed him one.

He loved it, so I kept fixing him a bottle right along with the baby’s. I took the baby off the bottle when she was fourteen months old, but my husband still has one every night, and he is thirty-seven. Please don’t use our names as my husband is well known here. He works on the space program. Thank you. (Van Buren, 1981, p. 175)

How can the husband not be deviant? The wife is embarrassed to have their name printed, and both she and her husband seem to realize that most other fathers are not nursing on their babies’ pacifiers or drinking from their babies’ bottles. Yet how can he be deviant? Both the wife and husband laugh over the husband’s acts, and the wife really seems to experience very little consternation over her spouse’s fondness for infant paraphernalia. Other characteristics in his cluster of traits (employee on the space program, good provider, good sense of humor) seem to be sufficient for his wife to be accepting of his less commendable traits.
Deviance and Respectability

People differ on what they accept or reject in others and on what they consider respectable. In November 1996, a 13-year-old female student named Karla Chapman did what she had done many times before. She went to class at Runyon Elementary School in Pike County, Kentucky. This day, however, she was declared to be a distraction by Rosa Wolfe, the principal. Three times the principal had warned her, and three times Karla Chapman had defied the principal’s authority. The problem? Karla Chapman wore black lipstick. At another time or place, with different people, this probably would have been no big deal. However, at this time and place, with these people, it developed into a very big deal indeed.

Karla found that her choice of lipstick color (which she insisted was her business, not the school’s), coupled with her refusal to wipe the stuff off as ordered, got her suspended for 3 days. On the day that her suspension ended, Karla got ready for school, donned a different-colored lipstick, and arrived at the elementary school ready for classes to start. However, she was once again reprimanded and prohibited from entering the school, because her new choice of lipstick color—dark purple—was still unacceptable to school personnel. Because the principal would brook no opposition, Karla was put in a difficult situation. If she did not return to school, she would be considered a truant—which at Karla’s age qualified her as a delinquent—but if she did return to school, she could not wear lipstick that was considered distracting by the principal (Mueller, 1996).

It is difficult for an outsider to this incident to understand what it is about black lipstick that makes it so distracting and what exactly made Karla Chapman such a problem to the principal. Certainly, nothing unique to black lipstick makes it more upsetting than any other color of lipstick. Even red lipstick could be distracting on a 13-year-old (depending, of course, on how it was applied). One wonders if the problem was not so much the black lips as the fact that a teenager would refuse to comply with orders by the principal to wipe the stuff off (and thereby challenge the authority of those who have the power to decide what qualifies as a respectable appearance).

If Karla Chapman had been born with black lips, it is the principal who would have found herself in a difficult situation in trying to expel her. Though Karla still would have been sporting a “distracting” color, the attribute would be viewed as something over which Chapman had little or no control. The power and authority of school administrators would not have been challenged directly by a young person’s deliberate act of insubordination, and they could have afforded to be more gracious and understanding.
than they were in this particular instance. Clearly, stigma is one possible outcome of the negotiations between people about the propriety of conditions that some of them find disturbing and unnecessary.

Deviants can encounter two different types of potentially supporting or confirming others. Goffman (1963) refers to one group as the own—individuals who also have the deviant’s devalued trait. Although these individuals are more likely than others to be accepting of people like themselves, this is not guaranteed. Bullies don’t like other bullies very much, and hyperactive people are not automatically more accepting of people like themselves. The stigmatized may, in fact, stigmatize others. The other group is the wise. These are individuals who do not themselves possess the devalued trait but who are familiar enough with the plight of deviants to be both understanding and accepting of them. We seem to be attracted to people who are like us and repelled by (or at least not attracted to) people who are dissimilar to us (Skvoretz, 2013).

Bogdan and Taylor (1989) studied individuals who were in a caring and accepting relationship with persons who had severe and debilitating mental retardations and physical disabilities. These individuals with disabilities sometimes drooled, soiled themselves, and could not talk or walk well. How was it possible for caretakers to be accepting and loving toward individuals who were so visibly impaired? First, the individual with a disability was granted the capacity for thinking and feeling, for being more aware and responsive than he or she might appear. Second, the individual with a disability was viewed as someone who had a unique personality, specific likes and dislikes, and a personal history—all of which underscored the person’s specialness or exceptionality. Third, the individual with a disability was defined as an active participant in social life. He or she was seen as fun, important, and someone with whom people without disabilities enjoyed interacting. Finally, a social place was reserved for the individual with a disability. He or she was defined as an important member of the family (or group), and he or she was included in its routines and rituals. The wise are able to avoid stigmatizing, stereotyping, and rejecting others, even those who have obvious and debilitating conditions, by seeing them as equals and as enjoyable instead of inferior and annoying. Though raising and caring for a child with a severe disability creates a great deal of stress for other members of the family and the entire family relationship (e.g., divorce rates are higher and financial strains are greater), the presence of a child who needs so much continuing care and support from others can also be a source of pleasure, purpose, and inspiration (Hogan, 2012).
Neutralization and Stigma Management

An individual may find it necessary to manage or lessen whatever stigma he or she is experiencing through the use of techniques of neutralization (Sykes & Matza, 1957). These techniques, regardless of their specific form, are verbalizations that make it possible for individuals to temporarily suspend forces of social control, making them inoperative or insignificant (though neutralization could persist indefinitely). This makes it possible for an individual to engage in deviance without experiencing serious damage to his or her self-concept and without feeling constrained by feelings of stigma or embarrassment. Sykes and Matza identified five techniques of neutralization:

1. Denial of responsibility: The deviant insists that whatever happens is not his or her fault.
2. Denial of injury: The deviant insists that what happened hurt nobody.
3. Denial of victim: The deviant insists the victim was actually the one responsible for the deviance that occurred.
4. Condemnation of the condemners: The deviant insists that those who are criticizing him or her have no legitimacy, and it is they who are the real deviants.
5. Appeal to higher loyalties: The deviant insists that what he or she did was actually for the good of the whole—the nation, the society, the community, the gang—to achieve some higher purpose.

Some deviants will deny responsibility, thereby neutralizing whatever tension they might otherwise experience; others will insist that nobody was hurt or that the victim deserved what he or she got; still others will condemn those who condemn them and portray those others as stupid, spiteful, or mean; and still others will manage tension by claiming that they march to the beat of a different drummer (i.e., appeal to higher loyalties).

Neutralization techniques can also serve as rationalizations. These come after some untoward act occurs, and they help a deviant handle whatever tension or stigma might come from the trespass (“They had it coming, so what’s the harm?”). The use of what Hitlin (2008) calls lawyer logic fulfills a rationalizing function (“I did it, but they can’t prove it.”). What kind of deviance occurs has a lot to do with the kind of neutralization techniques and rationalizations an individual is able to muster. Most deviants are aware that their trespasses are condemned by others and so engage in neutralizations of one form or another (Goode, 2013). A study of “sexting” at a small liberal arts college in the northeastern United States (with a student body of 535) shows that participants in the exchange of sexually explicit words or
photographs through cell phones or other electronic devices realize that sexting is deviant and that doing it could lead to unpleasant and unwanted consequences (Renfrow & Rollo, 2014). These sexters mustered all kinds of neutralizing and rationalizing strategies to minimize the risks of sexting, such as emphasizing its playfulness, exaggerating its normality (“everyone is doing it”), and stressing its benefits (e.g., as a way to strengthen a romantic relationship and to encourage more open communication).

When it comes to stigma, it may not be so much that the deviant did (or was) the wrong thing as that the deviant failed to present what he or she did in the most appropriate, socially acceptable way. Some people can get away with things that other people cannot, because they are skilled at managing impressions for the benefit of others. One thing that a deviant can do is to perform atonement. This means doing the “right” thing immediately after it was done “wrongly.” I once saw a tape of a weather report in which the reporter incorrectly informed her viewing audience that “from the north came cold mares’ asses,” while pointing to a map of the United States. She paused momentarily and then said it again, the right way: “From the north came cold air masses.” Her atonement helped lessen some of the discomfort that her initial misstatement could have caused, both for the audience and for her. Another thing that deviants can do is to use an apology (Goffman, 1971). An apology is functional, both for the recipients and for the individual offering it. It shows that the individual realizes the wrongfulness of the trespass, tacitly supporting the normative order and the values on which it is based, while indicating that the rule breaking will never happen again. When successful, an apology promises a new self in an old body, one that will be more diligent in honoring the social contract.

Accused deviants can account for their trespasses (Scott & Lyman, 1968). An account is a verbal statement that functions to relieve individuals of responsibility for what they have done. Two types of accounts exist, excuses and justifications:

An excuse is an admission that the act in question was bad, wrong, or inept, coupled with a denial of full responsibility. A justification is an admission of full responsibility for the act in question, coupled with a denial that it was wrongful. (Lyman & Scott, 1989, p. 136)

If a defendant in a court of law were to claim that he or she was insane at the time of the crime, this would be an excuse. The defendant is claiming that he or she did not know the difference between right and wrong and so should not be held responsible for what happened. If, however, a defendant were to claim that he or she broke into a stranger’s cabin to avoid an
impending blizzard, this is a justification (called *necessity* in a U.S. court of law). The accused is not claiming that something external (or internal) negated personal *responsibility* for the breaking and entering; the intruder knew fully and exactly what he or she was doing. However, in this situation, the possibility of greater harm (death by freezing) is being used to *justify* the illegal entry (i.e., breaking and entering) of someone else’s cabin. Humans, even when they are *outside* a courtroom, will use similar strategies to convince others (or try to) that they were not responsible for whatever happened or even that the deviance was actually necessary (i.e., justified) under the circumstances.

The existence of an exception to following rules that are still viewed as important and necessary is a regular part of human encounters. When excuses “work” (i.e., are accepted as reasonable claims), the individual who might have been held responsible for the deviance is let off the hook, because it is concluded that the reason for the trespass was some factor (external or internal) over which the rule breaker had no control. When justifications “work” (i.e., are accepted as reasonable claims), a rule breaker is forgiven for the trespass, because it is concluded that it was actually demanded by the situation, being therefore unavoidable and thus blameless (Yagil & Luria, 2014). We are prepared to exonerate some individuals for some rule breaking *if* they are able to account for these trespasses in acceptable ways. Individuals who refuse to offer accounts to others for their trespasses—or fail to apologize for them—face the prospect of not being reintegrated into the group (Young & Thompson, 2011).

One of the best things for a rule breaker is to be in a situation where nobody even knows that something untoward has happened, even those who have suffered some loss because of it. This is the case with *hidden* or *secret deviants*. They need not worry about dealing with injured parties who may demand restitution or even want the rule breaker punished for what was done to them. It is possible for some rule breakers to take advantage of others in one way or another, causing losses for them, but still keep them from realizing that they have been intentionally victimized. This may involve what Goffman (1952) called “cooling the mark out.”

The various methods of *cooling the mark out* all boil down to a nudging of a victim, injured party, or offended individual in the direction of believing that what happened to him or her was nobody’s fault. It was simply bad luck. Though Goffman’s (1952) principal objective was to show how victims are encouraged by coolers to adapt to failure and live with their losses in cases of criminal fraud (i.e., confidence games), his analysis has wider applications. “Persons who participate in what is recognized as a confidence game are found in only a few social settings, but persons who have to be

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cooled out are found in many” (pp. 452–453). Whenever a rule breaker is skillful enough to be able to cool the mark out successfully, or when the mark cools out on his or her own, no other strategies are necessary (such as apologizing, atoning, or accounting). One example is when an individual who has been cheated during a game of cards, losing both money and self-respect, comes to believe that the outcome was simply a matter of bad luck and thus was nobody’s fault.

**Square Pegs and Round Holes: Eccentrics and Eccentricities**

Danielle Willis is a vampire, or so she claims. She sleeps by day; works by night (she’s a fiction writer); and drinks human blood, partly for nourishment and partly because it excites her. She paid her dentist to install a permanent set of porcelain fangs over her incisors. She does not change into a bat and then bite hapless victims on the neck, however. What she does is use a syringe to extract blood from a willing partner (whom she is confident has no blood-borne diseases) and then drink it, either right on the spot or at some later time. For Willis, the consumption of the bodily fluids of another is an expression of intimacy and trust. Hundreds of vampires like Willis live throughout the United States, and some of them believe (or at least hope) that drinking blood ensures their immortality (“Interview With a Vampirette,” 1997). Are these people real bats, just batty, or something else?

**Eccentrics** are quirky or even odd people who have thrown off the bonds of conformity and who pursue whatever wild hair intrigues them. Some eccentrics are successful people, and their eccentricities are just part of what they are. Other eccentrics have gained fame and fortune because of their eccentricities, which shape their lives and their identities (Nash, 1982). Still other eccentrics are abysmal failures at practically everything they do, partly because they are obsessed with their eccentricities. If an individual has the forbearance, ability, or good luck to triumph in some field, his or her eccentricity is likely to be overlooked or even admired. However, if an eccentric fails to gain prominence in some valued field of human endeavor, then his or her oddness is more likely to be disturbing to others, and he or she is more likely to be condemned or ridiculed (Wallace, 1957).

The label of eccentric—like all labels—is relative, and the ground rules for what makes one eccentric change all the time. Alexander Wortley had a deep suspicion of zippers in men’s trousers, so he removed them from any pair he purchased. The reason? He did not want a lightning conductor so close to such a sensitive body part (S. Adams & Riley, 1988). Wortley’s anxiety over genital shocks is not at all unreasonable; it is how he went about protecting
himself from electrocution that seems strange. The Reverend George H. Munday was a renowned Quaker preacher in nineteenth-century Philadelphia. Parishioners gathered by the hundreds to hear his sermons but mostly to observe his odd trait: He refused to wear a hat at a time when all male Quakers did (Sifakis, 1984). Joseph Palmer moved to the city of Fitchburg, Massachusetts, in 1830. Some of his new neighbors shunned him, and others threw rocks at him (and at his house). Businessmen refused to cater to him, and religious people prayed for his redemption. Women avoided and feared him, often crossing to the other side of the road when they saw him coming. What was Palmer’s problem? He was one of the first individuals in the United States to grow a long beard. This was so upsetting to others that one day, four men armed with scissors and a razor attacked him, threw him to the ground, and tried to shave him forcibly. Through all his trials and tribulations, he steadfastly kept his beard. His gravestone in Evergreen Cemetery in Leominster, Massachusetts, tells the story. It reads, “Persecuted for wearing the beard” (Sifakis, 1984, pp. 69–70).

Some eccentrics are what they are because accidents of birth made their pursuit of novelty more likely. Michel Lotito (1950–2007), also known as Monsieur Mangetout (“Mister Eat Everything”), a Frenchman from Grenoble, had an amazing ability: He could eat practically anything. When he was 16, he was drinking mint tea with friends at a French cafe, and the rim of the glass accidentally broke off in his mouth. Instead of spitting the piece out and complaining about the defective glass, he chewed the piece up and swallowed it. Because he experienced no adverse effects, he soon realized that he had a special talent (Flaherty, 1992). He went on to become a professional entertainer whose performance consisted of eating his way through things, such as television sets, aluminum skis, supermarket carts, bicycles (he liked the chain the best), razor blades, coins, glasses, bottles, bullets, and phonograph records. He even ate an entire airplane—a Cessna two-seater—piece by piece. Lotito would cut objects into bite-size pieces, lubricate his digestive tract liberally with mineral oil, and drink lots of water as he ate the debris. Surprisingly enough, though he could eat stuff that would kill an ordinary person, he had difficulty digesting bananas and eggs (S. Adams & Riley, 1988). Lotito was awarded a brass plaque by the Guinness Book of World Records to commemorate his eating eccentricities. He was so honored that he ate it (Flaherty, 1992).

Gourmandizing, which is excessive eating, was popular in the United States in the early 1900s as a form of freak entertainment. Now it is a competitive sport, and contests are regularly held with winners receiving prizes worth thousands of dollars. An International Federation of Competitive
Eating even exists to promote the sport. In 2014, a competitive eater named Molly Schuyler, 5-foot-7 and 125 pounds, broke a Texas restaurant’s record for eating steak. She ate almost 10 pounds of steak, along with side dishes of baked potato, salad, shrimp, and bread rolls, in just about 15 minutes. In February 2014, at a Philadelphia restaurant, the woman ate 363 chicken wings in 30 minutes.

Other eccentrics methodically plan ways to be different and systematically carry them out. One such person is Ashrita Furman (born Keith Furman), who as of this writing has the most records in the Guinness Book of World Records held by a single individual. He has traveled to about 30 different countries to try to break records. One of the ways he gets in the book is by inventing new things to do that will establish a record, such as the fastest mile by someone balancing a baseball bat or underwater pogo stick jumping. Sometimes, Furman does ordinary things in extraordinary ways or in unusual places. For example, in 1979, he set his first record by doing 27,000 jumping jacks, and in 1986, he did somersaults along the same 12-1/4 miles that was traveled by Paul Revere on his famous ride in Massachusetts in 1775.

Eccentrics occupy an indeterminate status. They are fascinating to others (and may even be a source of envy), while they are also upsetting to them. Eccentrics believe that they are right in what they do, and they are not usually unhappy with their unconventionality. They tend to do exactly as they please, and they are usually unconcerned with what is proper or what others want them to do.

Eccentrics are people who take boundless joy in life, immoderate men and women who refuse to violate their ideals. Their minds are always buzzing furiously with ideas... At the root of eccentricity is a healthy and determined irreverence. (Weeks & James, 1995, p. 254)

The eccentric’s unbridled freedom and independence of thought and action (or is it irresponsibility or some slavish obedience to the goal of being weird?) may rub others the wrong way. What gives eccentrics the right to do whatever they want when the rest of us cannot?

Eccentrics may actually be more alarming than some other kinds of deviants. To be sure, their eccentricities rarely break the law, but this does not mean that eccentrics are simply amusing oafs, providing some spice to life. Whereas most deviants know the difference between right and wrong and do not flaunt or challenge the rules openly, the eccentric seems to be out of touch with the ordinary concerns of ordinary folk. Not only is the
eccentric odd in the eyes of others, but he or she also goes to great lengths to be different and separate, defends his or her oddness as perfectly proper, is indifferent to the expectations and wishes of others, and appears unable or unwilling to understand why others would be upset by him or her. Whatever tensions that might exist between individual desires and the forces of social control have been resolved successfully by the eccentric in favor of his or her own interests (Suran, 1978). Eccentrics’ trespasses may be minor and relatively benign, but they do them with such gusto, irreverence, self-centeredness, assurance, and guiltlessness that their trespasses can take on an ominous and foreboding quality.

**Conclusions**

This chapter has shown that attributes (the principal element in “conditions” in the ABCs of deviance) are themselves a source of categorization and judgment. People are stigmatized for things over which they have little or no control. “Normal” and “stigmatized” are perspectives on persons, so we always will need a language of relationships to be able to discuss and understand any discrediting or discreditable attributes. An error occurs, called the fundamental attribution error, when observers attribute the cause for some happening to individual character instead of to the social context in which it occurs. Cause and blame are not identical, but decisions about blame and responsibility always have direct implications for who and what is deviant.

When the label of deviance is attached to some attitude, behavior, or condition, it usually involves some fundamental decisions about conventionality (Could it have been otherwise?) and theoreticity (Did the individual know what he or she was doing?). These decision rules help assess responsibility for some event, which leads quite easily into decisions about who or what is deviant. Such interpersonal processes are responsible for the social construction of spoiled identities and the stigma that comes from it. Deviance can easily evolve into a master status and be accompanied by a great deal of shame and embarrassment. Reputations can be tarnished or even irreparably damaged. Retrospective interpretation is a dynamic process in which a person’s social identity is reconstituted in the eyes of others. It is possible for accused deviants to impact what happens to them by using neutralizations, rationalizations, atonements, apologies, accounts, or cooling-out strategies. When any of these is successful, it is possible to have a great deal of deliberate rule breaking without anyone being held responsible for it.
References


The Relativity of Deviance


