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Trends. The Political Psychology of Deviance Regulation

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Abstract: This Trends article discusses deviation regulation in social context, commenting on the idea that deviance is intrinsic to us all.

Public discourse on deviance regulation most likely centers on how to employ variants of discipline and punishment to manage populations of people whom one might want to extinguish but cannot. Following Foucault, one might wish to seize each member of a stigmatized population to be drawn and quartered. Or one might wish to internalize control within each member through the construction of a panopticon mode of the world.

The above suggests that deviance is to be expunged or at best tolerated by non-deviants or—again following Foucault—best savored covertly by deviants as opposed to overtly through non-deviant legitimization. Yet if a recent article in the Review of Psychology is to be believed, deviance regulation can be constructed as a behavioral decision theory that all people employ to maintain desirable identities. In essence, Blanton & Christie (2003) have posited that actions translate into meaningful identities to the extent that they cause a person to deviate from reference group norms. An implication of this is that the very construct, deviation, that so many people profess to disdain, if not abhor, in its exemplification may be at the core of the continuous identity construction and maintenance engaged by all people.

A critique of deviation regulation might suggest that reference group norms may themselves be construed ipsatively or normatively. In other words, deviation as inducer of new self-identity may be salient in regards to the many aspects constituting self-identity at any point in time and/or in regards to different people employed as references. But even the critique might well allow that deviation is something intrinsic to us all and even behind the seeming non-deviance of majority groups. Isn't this last an ironic observation in a world wherein deviants are subjected to the dictum and discourse of discipline and punish? (See Blanton, H., & Christie, C. (2003). Deviance regulation: A theory of action and identity. Review of General Psychology, 7, 115–149; Blanton, H., Stuart, A. E., & Vanden Eijnden, R. J. J. M. An introduction to deviance-regulation theory: The effect of behavioral norms on message framing. Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin, 27, 848-858; Foucault, M. (1977). Discipline & punish: The birth of the prison. (Trans.). A. Sheridan. Vintage; Heckert, A., & Heckert, D. M. (2002). A new typology of deviance: Integrating normative and reactivist definitions of deviance. Deviant Behavior, 23, 449-479.) (Keywords: Deviance)