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Revisiting Deviance and its Relevance: A Conceptual History and Some Recent Applications in Discussions of Violence and Institutional Social Control

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**Violent Acts and Violentization: Assessing, Applying, and Developing
Lonnie Athens' Theories**

Edited by Lonnie Athens and Jeffery T. Ulmer
New York: JAI, 2003
\$94.95 (cloth)

Deviance: The Career of a Concept

By Joel Best
Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2004
\$38.95 (paper)

**Social Control at Opportunity Boys' Home:
How Staff Control Juvenile Inmates**

By Paul-Jahi Christopher Price
New York: University Press of America, 2005
\$32.00 (paper)

For anyone teaching a course on deviance or deviant behavior, one of the biggest challenges is to present the concept of deviance with all of the historical and theoretical complexity that it demands from the critical educator: enter Joel Best's *Deviance: The Career of a Concept*. In this concise, relatively accessible work, Best traces the development of deviance as a concept from its birth across disciplines (sociological studies of anomie, psychological studies of pathological behaviors, original studies of crime, and the like) to its peak of sociological application in the 1960s (namely, labeling theory and its critiques), and its steady decline since the late 1970s in sociological research. Rather than accept postmodern claims of the "death" of deviance as a useful sociological concept (2004:xi), Best attempts to map where

Symbolic Interaction, Vol. 30, Issue 3, pp. 427–433, ISSN 0195-6086, electronic ISSN 1533-8665. © 2007 by the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, at <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/si.2007.30.3.427.



deviance has gone over the past twenty years and where it might be going as a primary, secondary, and implicit concept in social science.

From an organizational standpoint, Best succeeds where many authors fail in that he clearly sets the parameters and limited goals of his work—to provide a useful, to-the-point history of the concept of deviance—and does so with as little distraction as possible. He consciously replaces lofty theoretical discussion and inflated literature reviews with clear summaries, useful illustrations (in table form), and references to exemplary or central works of and for what he defines as the identifiable periods and relevant critiques of the sociological study of deviance.

From a substantive standpoint, Best gives primacy to the development of labeling theory and builds his conceptual history around its rise and relative decline from popularity in sociological work. Though this is clearly a subjective choice, it may be justified in that Best uses labeling theory as a sort of vantage point to discuss several theoretical tensions that have and continue to challenge those researching deviance and its related fields. Most importantly, he highlights the fundamental tension between asking “what makes people deviant?” and more constructivist positions that focus on how people or behaviors come to be *labeled* as deviant. Best also illuminates how these processes of social construction and their implications become institutionalized and how people negotiate or resist deviant labels and resultant social sanctions (Becker 1963; Goffman 1961, 1963). Though central, labeling theory is not presented here uncritically or even as a clearly defined body of theory. In fact, he suggests that labeling theory is a loosely organized body of research that shares three basic characteristics: (1) the use of qualitative method, (2) the use of inductive research, (3) a general tendency to “question authority” (Best 2004:20). In addition, Best summarizes and applies general critiques of labeling theory leveled by “mainstream [functionalist and neofunctionalist] sociology,” feminist theory, and movements defined by “identity politics” to show some of the major problems with and departures from labeling theory over the past several decades. Specifically, chapter 4 (titled “Labeling’s Legacy”) highlights some descendants of labeling theory and how the qualitative study of deviance has and might incorporate other theoretical strands and past critiques. Finally, Best closes the book in chapter 5 with a discussion of how the concept of deviance has more recently taken a back seat to less conceptually ambiguous studies of crime and criminology.

One of the clear strengths of *Deviance* is the author’s obvious grasp on the historical development of deviance literature in relation to historical context(s) in U.S. society. One of the more interesting sections of the book (chapter 2) discusses the role of antiauthoritarian movements of the 1960s in relation to the emergence of labeling theory and its appeal to sociologists of that generation. Ironically, many critiques of labeling theory and the broader study of deviance also materialized within this same sociohistorical context (critical approaches inspired by, for example, the Frankfurt school and feminist theory). Best provides the reader his well-informed perspective on this period of deviance research and the social context that shaped how sociologists began to think and rethink the concept of deviance in relation to

the social and cultural upheaval of the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s and early 1970s.

To my disappointment, however, Best is considerably less thorough in describing the social context of the more recent shift of focus away from deviance per se, toward studies of crime, criminology, and criminal justice. He mentions that “criminology’s rise [since 1975] reflected the growing presence of criminal justice on university campuses” (Best 2004:71) and that academic organizations and federal programs were growing in size and number, providing a variety of resources for those studying criminology and criminal justice. However, unlike his discussion of labeling theory, the author presents this change in the absence of power and politics.

For instance, is it coincidence that the trend toward criminology and criminal justice (and away from more critical theories of deviance that *questioned* the very label of “criminal,” let alone the institutions and actors involved in sanctioning rule-breakers) occurred during the birth of the modern prison industrial complex? Joseph Davey’s work (1995, 1998) suggests that this same period (1975–present) hosted major policy shifts toward social control through the police state, marked by highly punitive “tough on crime” policies and the “war on drugs.” As a result, we have witnessed massive growth in prison populations and racial and class disparities of incarceration. Of course, such a shift also involves building the material (police, prisons, correctional officers, and bureaucratic growth) and ideological (think tanks, academic departments to train criminal justice personnel and research the “effectiveness,” however defined, of criminal justice policies and practices and media campaigns) mechanisms necessary to build and maintain a police state and booming prison industry. Similar to Becker’s (1963) discussion of “moral entrepreneurs,” Davey (1998) illustrates many of the political motivations behind the creation and implementation of “tough on crime” policies and the social construction of, for example, the African American, male, poor, street criminal or drug dealer in mass media portrayals of crime (see also Rome 2004). Further, it is disappointing that Best does not entertain the very plausible connection between the shift toward criminal justice and post-9/11 domestic and foreign policy (such as the Patriot Act[s]), political discourse, and academic climate in the contemporary United States. In other words, what larger *importance* can we place, as sociologists and citizens, on this shift in research and resource?¹ Best (2004:87) ends his book by suggesting, with some legitimacy I think, that “ideas are always the products of their times.” Yet, he does not apply this rationale at the conclusion of his book where it might have been interesting, useful, and important for the *social implications* of the study of deviance, criminology, and criminal justice.

In a similar vein of critique, I found myself questioning many of the fundamental assumptions and the general applicability of Lonnie Athens’s theory of violence and “violentization”—the process through which people are socialized to be “marginally” violent, “violent,” or “ultra-violent.” Athens and Jeffery T. Ulmer’s *Violent Acts and Violentization* includes the contribution of several authors who apply or expand

upon Athens's theory of violentization to explain particular contexts where violence may be central or to expand upon our approach to understanding violent behavior, yet all work from the same fundamental assumptions and questions that shape Athens's theory. The volume works around a primary research question: why do some people and communities become "seriously violent," while many others do not? Athens sees violent behavior, violent people, and violent communities as resulting from complex socialization processes that include the interaction between people vying for domination in particular community contexts. For example, people who have been exposed (indirectly or directly) to "brutalization" and have internalized violent means of achieving dominance or "getting ahead" with some success are likely to become violent people. In addition, Athens (2003) explains how, for example, in "malignant" communities "ultra-violent" individuals tend to dominate less or "marginally" violent individuals because of a lack of institutionalized nonviolent mechanisms for solving conflict and establishing dominant and submissive roles.

Clearly, this is a sweeping generalization of Athens's work and the work of others in the volume for sake of efficiency and clarity. In fact, Athens and others in the volume develop enough typologies and micro concepts for describing these complex processes to make the reader's head spin. Though many of these concepts may prove useful, the weaknesses of Athens's theory lie in the fundamental assumptions. First, "violence" is never actually defined. Clearly, Athens is concerned with physical violence on a micro level between individuals in civilian communities—but this clarification seriously limits the theoretical scope of the work and needs to be spelled out. Second, Athens uncritically and manifestly accepts the idea that all social life is a "rat race" based ultimately on the attempt to establish dominance over others. I find this to be an erroneous suggestion that rings similar to the common argument that, for example, competition is part of "human nature," thus a competitive society (e.g., capitalism) is unavoidable, and so on. At any rate, such an assertion about human nature or societies (universally) deserves considerable support, but that is not offered in this volume. Third, Athens does not account for what many critical sociologists call "institutional violence." This poses a variety of problems for Athens's approach—and is connected to the failure to define violence in the first place. For example, are police "ultra-violent" individuals? What about soldiers? Are the U.S. Capitol (Congress) and the White House (Bush administration) "malignant" communities? After all, they have organized, institutionalized, and exacted far more physically violent assaults on nonviolent populations than any gang or group of street thugs in human history. Fourth, the assumption that there are "civil" (relatively nonviolent) and "malignant" (violent) communities seems to oversimplify the much more complicated connection between communities. For instance, to what extent does the "civil" nature of seemingly peaceful suburban communities depend on the violent repression and destabilization of the potentially violent ("malignant") inner-city ghettos? In sum, though I agree with Athens (2003:37) that we must "promote programs" that diminish violence in communities where it has become problematic,

I am less sure that his theory (and further applications of it) provide the theoretical blueprint for solving these social problems.

Where the work of Best and Athens and Ulmer furthers our understanding of violent and deviant behavior, Paul-Jahi Christopher Price draws our attention to the opposing yet interconnected process of social control. As someone who has been researching and working with institutionalized youth, I was very excited to read Price's work on social control in group home settings. Though I do not feel that the body of literature on this topic is as limited as the author claims (see, for example, Armaline 2005; Kivett and Warren 2002), I do agree that more research on the institutionalization of youth and how these institutions "work" needs to be done to understand the current direction and affects of juvenile justice and policies designed for child "protection." Price is also correct in suggesting that the group home is an often overlooked (by researchers) quasi-total institutional setting for youth under temporary or permanent state custody. However, reading Price's work was a bitter-sweet experience.

Price conducts a three-and-a-half year participant observational study of the Opportunity Boys' Home, a group home for male adolescents in the juvenile justice system for minor or status offenses. In the spirit of symbolic interaction and Goffman-inspired studies of institutional settings, Price provides a thorough account of how staff at the Opportunity Boys' Home learn and employ social control tactics, and how internal rules and policies are negotiated by staff. To this extent, Price succeeds. He splits up his analysis into four basic themes: (1) how staff learn to be social control agents within the institution, (2) how "everyday control" is maintained by staff in the group home, (3) the peculiarity of the emergency ("panic button") in the institutional setting, (4) the significance of "resident leaving" (running away) or being transferred to juvenile hall. Price's discussion of "everyday control" would be interesting to those investigating how the behavioral status quo is commonly maintained in nonrestraining facilities for youth. Of particular importance is his discussion of "situational remedies" and "institutional responses" where we are reminded that rules and policies do not directly translate into behavior and action. Instead, staff members in the Opportunity Boys' Home develop common strategies for detouring rule breaking and providing the predictability and efficiency necessary for the institution to maintain a particular level of social control over residents. Specifically, Price compares how staff members employ "orders," "hands-on requests," and "requests" to maintain order and quell disturbances in conjunction with or in place of the more certain and punitive "institutional responses" (such as disciplinary logs or institutionalized consequences).

While I found the author's analysis of "everyday control" useful, and his discussion of (for example) institutionally labeled "emergencies" as a sign of his keen observational eye, there are several substantive and methodological problems with the study. I should preface my first criticism with what might be my own research bias—that I never accept the manifest purposes and functions of modern state institutional settings uncritically. That said, Price's uncritical acceptance of the Opportunity Boys' Home as a "treatment" facility is troubling. The author goes to great

lengths to explain how the group home should be seen as significantly different than more punitive settings, such as juvenile hall, in that the group home is centered on “treatment” rather than punishment. Though he is correct in suggesting that whether the setting is a lockdown or full-restraint facility is significant, Price provides no evidence to support the claim that the Opportunity Boys’ Home operates for the purposes of empowering or positively “treating” youth. In fact, Price repeatedly compares the social control tactics of staff and the disciplinary and surveillance mechanisms of this institution to those of police. Further, he repeatedly discusses how though residents may leave the facility voluntarily, they face state sanction for doing so (including transfer to juvenile detention).

The critique above may be due to differences in how Price and I might define treatment. He defines it as an environment where “infractions should be corrected by using behavior-altering sanctions” (Price 2005:3). Under this definition, nearly any correctional institution would be practicing “treatment” of detainees or clients. The author is uncritical of this concept (as defined) and how “treatment” is carried out in the Opportunity Boys’ Home. In the preface, Price (2005:viii) goes further to suggest that “this investigation demonstrates that juveniles are searching for someone to establish order, someone who is firm and in charge . . . Youth desire guidance, acceptance and approval from control officials.” This comment is one of many that demonstrate the author’s uncritical support of such a model for “treatment.” More important, it demonstrates one of many methodological problems with his research—he doesn’t include the narratives of detainees.

Within the same two pages, Price states that he is not interested in “resident perspectives on group homes” and that social control in the group home takes place as a process of “negotiated order.” Are residents not a part of this negotiated order? Price repeatedly uses his own experiences and the perspectives of staff to speak *for* juvenile residents (as demonstrated above). For another example of this, see the author’s discussion of “resident leaving” in chapters 6 and 7, where he uses the written and verbal accounts of staff to substitute for the perspectives of detainees.

As a second methodological problem, the author does not discuss the methodological implications of his own position in the group home. His three-and-a-half year study borders on an autoethnographic account of his *employment* at the group home as (especially later in his time there) a supervisory staff member. In his methods section (a six-page appendix) there is no discussion of (1) the effects of his relative position of power on interactions with residents and staff, (2) the data collection and interpretation biases associated with collecting data at one’s place of employment, and how these biases might be minimized or addressed, (3) the ethical and methodological issues involved in participant observational studies of institutionalized children. Clearly, a more thorough methodological approach is needed to accurately describe how social control in such a complicated, understudied institutional setting “works.”

In conclusion, Best’s *Deviance* is accessible and useful for an undergraduate or graduate audience. He has done an excellent job in creating a real pedagogical

tool that may be used to supplement lectures and discussion with the historical background and theoretical lineage of deviance research. I would also recommend this book as an excellent secondary reader to guide undergraduate and graduate papers or exams that require a grasp of the deviance cannon. Athens and Ulmer's *Violent Acts and Violentization* provides several micro concepts for describing and understanding interpersonal violence and socialization processes that contribute to individuals' tendency toward or away from violent behavior. Still, the reader should not accept claims to explaining the more general phenomena of violence or violent communities uncritically. Price's *Social Control at Opportunity Boys' Home* gives us a firsthand look into social control tactics used in quasi-total institutions from the perspective of social control agents, or staff. However, readers should be advised to keep in mind the methodological problems with the piece as they interpret Price's data and analyses.

NOTE

1. One might also ask (concerning method and the social construction of knowledge) about the correlations between a shift to criminological "science" as a dominant paradigm and the dominance of quantitative, "scientific" methods in the multidisciplinary study of crime and deviance (Young 1981).

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