

## **Differentials in Deviance: Race, Class, Gender and Age**

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*“The story of deviance and social control is a battle story...Deviant never exist except in relation to those who attempt to control them. Deviants exist in opposition to those whom they threaten and those who have enough power control against such threats”*  
(Pfohl 1994:3)

Social structure is central to the sociological endeavor; indeed, the analysis of structured inequality is the essence of the “sociological imagination” (Mills 1959). Race, class, gender and age -those cornerstones of stratification - shape access to social opportunity, demarcate social inequality, inform identity, and provide common ground for social movements and resistance. So too they shape our understanding of deviance. Race, class, gender and age create the contours of that battle story of deviant response and societal reaction.

Despite their centrality to sociology, the treatment of these statuses in the literature on deviance has been varied, and occasionally confounding. Race, class, gender and age have been simultaneously at the margins and the center of the sociology of deviance. At times, they have been the unspoken, unexamined subtext of analyses of particular deviant behaviors, lurking unnamed and unattended. Conversely, race, class, gender and age have also been the central focus of scholarship on deviance, the very variables held as crucial to an understanding of both behaviors and labeling. Race, class, gender and age have been addressed singularly as separate influences with class and age have been the primary focal points. Still others have called for their examination as intersecting variables whose relationship to deviance must be understood as

part of an interlocking system of oppression, an approach resulting in amongst the most profound research. Finally race, class, gender and age are alternately seen as direct contributors to deviant behavior, as stigmatized statuses that are targets for deviant labeling, and as sources of power to exert that very same social control.

This latter point is perhaps the most fruitful framework for a discussion of the role of race, class, gender and age in the deviance literature. The sociology of deviance has attempted to variously explain both the deviant and the ensuing societal reaction. In both the classic and contemporary literature, these variables have largely been examined through one lens or the other, that is, as either differential shapers of deviant behavior or as precursors to differential social control.

### **Race, Class, Gender and Age: Differentials in Deviant Behavior**

*“When alienation becomes so entrenched, an oppositional culture can develop and flourish. This culture, especially among the young can gain strength and legitimacy by opposing dominant society and its’ agents.”(Andersen 1999: 216)*

From the outset, race, class gender and age have been cited as variables that contribute to deviant behavior. The prevailing question of the field early on was “*Why* are people deviant?” One set of answers involved a look at the structural conditions that impelled deviance, that is, a look at race, class, gender and age as primary factors. The initial interpretation of the role of these variables was decidedly deterministic, and partly limited by a reliance on official statistics that over-represented the poor, the young, people of color and men. This flaw was further compounded by an acceptance of official statistics on crime, arrest and mental illness as comprehensive accounts that captured the universe all deviants in their measures.

The “deviants’ who were the subjects of study through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were poor, they were young “delinquents, they were racial/ethnic minorities and they were often male. The

deviance they were engaged in was street crime, mental illness, drug addiction, alcoholism, and gang membership. Discussion of female deviance was largely ignored or limited to issues of sexual activity or sexually stereotyped mental disorders and was later explained by the influence of either men or feminism. Of course, these “deviants” could largely be found in inner city urban areas and so attributes of those areas and their inhabitants became the locus of explanations for deviance. The question - “*Why* are people deviant?” became – “*Why* are the poor, people of color, urban youth and women deviant?”

Two early explanations emerged to explain the role of race, class, gender and age in deviant behavior– cultural deviance and strain theories. Both held social class as central variable in shaping either values or access to opportunities. According to cultural deviance, structural position and location produced subcultural interactions that gave rise to deviant values (Cohen 1955). Strain theory argued that these variables, particularly class, lead to blocked opportunities in achieving the shared “American Dream” which then fostered deviant alternatives for economic success (Cloward and Ohlin 1960). Later, a third approach, differential association, offered additional insight into *how* deviance was learned in interaction with others (Sutherland and Cressey 1960). These theories persist to date in less deterministic versions, and related research has offered insight into the complex relationships between these statuses and deviant behavior.

Race, class gender and age are statuses that do shape access to the opportunity structure, and may give rise to values that legitimate deviance. Certain types of deviant activities do require knowledge, skills, rationales, and avenues for engagement. Class continues to be the primary consideration, and to the extent that it interacts with race, gender and age, these variables are often implied if not explicitly addressed. Until recently, the focus has been on poverty as a

contributor to deviance, and yes, some types of deviance are more available to the poor, often not by choice but by access to institutional means. Poverty may increase the inclination of people to commit economic crimes such as theft, burglary, armed robbery, and street-level drug dealing and prostitution (Merton 1997). Other deviance requires positions of wealth, power, and prestige, a point finally elucidated in the literature with the acknowledgment of “white-collar” crime and later “elite deviance” (Simon 2003; Sutherland 1983). The decision to illegally dump toxic waste, pollute, expose employees to hazardous work conditions, embezzle, engage in insider trading on Wall Street, or participate in elaborate cybercrimes necessarily is dependent on socioeconomic status and occupational/organizational position. It is the middle-class or the rich – in other words, mostly white, male and middle-aged - who can commit these “crimes of the suite”, often while rationalizing their activity with an array of techniques of neutralization (Simon 2003; Coleman 1998)

Age is also a variable that continues to be linked with deviant behavior in this literature. Scholars and the public remain fascinated with the propensity of youth to become deviants. A plethora of literature addresses informal, medical and formal deviance: youth subcultures of style, teen suicide, youth crime and violence ranging from gangs to school-shootings, teen drug use and sexual activity, and dire predictions of a generation of “super-predators” (Wilson 1995; Males 1996; Hancock 2001).

Recent work has amore complex accounting of race and gender differentials in deviant behavior. General strain theory argues that race and gender discrimination are negative strains that may pressure youth into delinquency. Initial studies verify this; discrimination gives rise to a sense of injustice, which in turn is positively correlated with delinquency (Agnew 2001; Eitle 2002; Moon et al 2009) The most fruitful research clarifies how the intersection of race, class, gender

and age creates a complex impetus for deviance. Analysis of youth gangs, “cool pose” and “the code of street” (Shihadeh 2003; Majors and Bilson 1992; Anderson 1999; Stewart and Simons 2009) reveal how these variables combine to produce subcultural norms and collective responses that encourage violence, teen pregnancies, stringent norms of respect and a rejection of the mainstream values of work and conformity. Being young, poor and black in the context of institutionalized racism and isolated neighborhoods may contribute to the adoption of an alternative set of norms and standards for respect; this may, in turn, be correlated with involvement in gangs and/or violence.

The relationship between race, class, gender, age and deviance is a complicated one. The best thinking on how these variables contribute to deviance now indicates that it is insufficient to choose one of these variables alone as the primary focal point; they are inter-twined with both social structure and social identity. Further, race, class, gender and age cannot be isolated from consideration of the role of systems of oppression in fueling alienation and deviant response. That is, the experience of racism or sexism or classism or ageism may contribute to the rejection of dominant societal norms and subsequently be correlated with deviant behavior.

### **Race, Class, Gender and Age: Differentials in Labeling and Social Control**

*“All domination is, in the last instance, maintained through social control strategies”*  
(Bonilla-Silva 2001:25)

An alternative tradition in the sociology of deviance focuses on the relationship between deviant labeling and race, class, gender and age. The concern here is less with differentials in deviant behavior but rather with differentials in social control. This approach begins with the questions “Who is labeled deviant and who has the power to create and apply the labels?” Race, class, gender and age are key components of the answer; these statuses give rise to power or oppression

and are central to labeling and social control. It is this theoretical tradition that provided the most insight into the role that race, class gender and age play in the definition and control of deviance.

This analysis has its roots in the early works of both Marx and Durkheim as well as the later perspectives of Critical/Conflict theory, labeling, and functional-labeling theory. The initial work relied heavily on the examination of social class/class interests in shaping the law and its' enforcement against the poor and created the framework for further examination of inequality, power and labeling (Black 1989; Quinney 1970; Lauderdale 2003), Goffman's classic *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) expanded the discussion to race, and gender and age were included in analyses soon after. These foundational perspectives lay the groundwork for understanding race, class, gender and age as stigmatized statuses that are subject to social control by those with the power to create and apply deviant labels.

To the extent that the privileged and empowered "norm" is white, male, financially well off, heterosexual and adult, then systems of social control maintain their interests, while people of color, women, the poor, GLBT persons, and the young become "the Other", the "abnormal", the "deviant". (Goffman 1963; Bonilla-Silva 2001). These stigmatized "Others" have been subject to labeling and social control based on the intersection of race, class, gender and age. And, while there are "deviants" of all classes, all races, all genders and ages, the ways they are controlled reflect their relative social status. A substantial literature on stigma and related stereotypes explores how these statuses alone or in combination give rise to informal, medical and legal social control; the homeless, female athletes, AIDS patients, style subcultures, and the young, black male all have been examined through the lens of stigma (Gans 1995; Lynweiler and Gay 2000; Perry 2001; Weitz 2002; Zellner 1995).

The informal stigmas of race, class gender and age often provide the foundation for escalations in social control. Much current literature focuses attention on the systems of social control and how they operate to create and enforce rules that direct attention to select “deviants” relative to race, class, gender and age. Increasingly, media is cited as a force in shaping public perceptions of deviance. Corporate crime and governmental deviance is minimized, re-framed or ignored, while “street crime” and various epidemics of deviance rule the air waves. Media perpetuates stereotypes and fuels “moral panics” and the “culture of fear” (Fyrmer 2009; Glassner 1999; McCorkle and Miethe 1998)

Media stereotypes relative to race, class, gender and age become precursors to social policies that escalate social control, leading to medicalization of the “redeemable” white middle and upper classes and criminalization for the poor and communities of color (Conrad and Schneider 1998; Heitzeg 2009). Media has furthered the medicalization of deviance; epidemics of Disorders of Infancy Childhood and Adolescence, Eating Disorders, self-mutilations, addictions, depression and suicide are a news cycle staple raising concerns especially for youthful and female deviance (Birkland and Lawrence 2009; Ferrell and Websdale 1999; Males 1996; Weitz 2003). Perhaps mostly significantly media endlessly regales the public with stories of crime -- drug epidemics, school-shooting sprees, gang proliferation, and exaggerated accounts of violent crime, most often with young men of color as the perpetrator. The research indicates that violent crime and youth crime is dramatically over-represented, crime coverage has increased in spite of falling crime rates, African Americans and Latinos are over-represented as offenders and under-represented as victims, and inter-racial crime, especially crimes involving white victims, is over-reported (Hancock 2001; Walker, Spohn, and Delone 2007).

A large body of work documents the relationship between race, class, gender and age and formal social control by the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems. Topics of study include: racial profiling, increased police attention to youth gangs, the War on Drugs, the proliferation of zero tolerance policies in schools and the shift towards punitive policies in juvenile justice, the school to prison pipeline, the rise of mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex, the death penalty, and the proliferation of “collateral consequences” for many felony convictions such as voter disenfranchisement, denial of Federal welfare, medical, housing or educational benefits, accelerated time-lines for loss of parental rights, and exclusion from any number of employment opportunities ( Brewer and Heitzeg 2008; Heitzeg 2009; Mauer and Chesney-Lind 2002; Sheldon, Tracy and Brown, 2001; Zatz and Krejicker 2003). It is clear from the research that these variables are indeed better predictors of arrest, criminal processing, sentencing, incarceration and execution than actual participation in criminal behavior may be.

Again, the best analyses examine the intersection of race, class, gender and age and their relationship to social control. A brief glimpse into criminal justice statistics immediately reveals these intersections. Despite no real statistical differences in rates of offending, the poor, the under-educated, the young and people of color are over-represented in at every phase of the criminal and juvenile justice systems from arrest to death row. While 1 in 35 adults is under correctional supervision and 1 in every 100 adults is in prison, 1 in every 36 Latino adults , one in every 15 black men, 1 in every 100 black women, and 1 in 9 black men ages 20 to 34 are incarcerated (Pew 2008). The number of women incarcerated has increased tenfold during the past two decades, and they are overwhelmingly women of color (BJS 2007). The race and class disparities are even greater for youth. Black youth are two times more likely than white youth to be arrested, to be referred to juvenile court, to be adjudicated as delinquent or referred to the



adult justice system, and they are three times more likely than white youth to be sentenced to out-of-home residential placement. And while boys are five times as likely to be incarcerated as girls, girls are at increasing risk (Walker, Spohn and Delone 2007). Race, class, gender and age collide and combine to create these extreme disparities of formal social control.

Race, class, gender and age then are major factors in the social control of deviance. These variables and their intersection are powerful indicators of both stigma and subsequent social control. While race, class gender and age may play a role in creating opportunities for deviant behavior, their real significance is in shaping the differential direction of power and social control. The intersection of these statuses shapes access to both the power to label and the powerlessness of being subjected to social control.

### **Future Directions**

*“The sociology of deviance must speak of oppression, conflict, persecution, and suffering. It must examine the conditions of inequality, powerlessness, institutional violence... which lie at the base of our society”* (Liazos 1972: 120)

At various points in its history, the sociology of deviance has been called into question for failure to address the structural impact of race, class, gender and age (Liazos 1972; Sumner 1994).

Certainly the critics have been, at least partly, answered. Recent scholarship in the field has contributed to an understanding of how these positions in the social structure intersect to create both differential opportunities to engage in deviant behavior and differential chances for stigma, deviant labeling, and social control. The most compelling research examines race, class, gender and age, not in isolation, but in combination - illustrating how these statuses interact to create a complex process of deviance and social control.

Some of the early critiques remain unanswered. The sociology of deviance should further explore the interplay between “deviants” and social control, the deviance of elites and institutions, and the extent to which power/privilege shape the definition and control of deviance. The field could also more completely outline the interconnections between race, class, gender and age as sources of identity and resistance, and subsequent societal efforts at escalating social control. Although current research is pointed towards this direction, the sociology of deviance has yet to fully interrogate how systemic racism, classism, sexism and ageism may both create and encourage deviance, or indeed how these systems may represent a meta – level of deviance unto themselves.

The sociology of deviance may be informed here by the scholarship that examines the impact of racism and sexism on deviant behavior and by the literature that exposes the propensity of systems of social control to target deviants – not by behavior – but by race, class, gender and age. Research in other areas of sociology – inequality, race/ethnicity, gender and social movements – may additionally augment this line of inquiry, as might critical legal studies, critical race and feminist theory, and interdisciplinary studies of race/ethnicity, women/gender and youth. These fields have done much to uncover the social processes and consequences of “othering” and the roots of systems of inequality.

Yes race, class gender and age are central to the sociological endeavor, and they must remain so to the sociology of deviance. Their intersection forms the “matrix of domination” that is at the very root of deviation, definition, and control (Andersen and Hill-Collins 2007). The most pressing questions of 21<sup>st</sup> century research in the field may well center on the role of race, class gender and age in demarcating those battle lines of deviance and social control.

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