

WHEN THE NORMAL CANNOT BE TOLERATED

Deciding which deviant behaviors should be encouraged

by ERIC SCHANSBERG



As a Christian, an economist and a public policy analyst, this was an important book for me to read and review. In a word, this slender volume ably describes how

categories of deviant behavior have changed in recent decades.

Hendershott opens by describing "the death of deviance" within the sociology profession. The topic had been one of their most important fields into the 1960s and a popular staple in undergraduate curricula

— as a set of provocative topics ranging from addition to serial murder. But under post-modern influences, sociologists began to argue that deviance was defined by

society's dominant groups, largely for the purpose of censuring other groups. Ironically, in essence, the *malignantia* was

claiming to use their power to free previously ostracized people.

In any case, today, powerful interest groups are clearly playing a dominant role in defining deviances away — or into

existence. The implications of this change have ranged from the ascendance of "political correctness" to the reformulation of

cultural norms. As a result, the modern understanding of deviance often parallels the contemporary use of the term "tolerance" — *i.e.*, in large part, those who hold

to traditional norms are believed to be deviant and, ironically, their views are no longer tolerated. For example, homosexuality was almost un-

able.

Second, to what extent was the post-Saddam looting in Iraq due to the impact of Islam, poverty, Saddam's dictatorship or the absence of law enforcement? To make a more specific application: how much looting would there be in the average American city if there were no police avail-

able?

First, why did individuals behave morally in the 1950s? To what extent was their behavior driven by Christianity or other

internal beliefs about morality rather than a desire to avoid the costs of social stigma?

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but other factors are also important. Take

two examples

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After her introduction, Hendershott turns to a variety of contemporary applications. Her first topic is the role of medicine in defining deviance — in particular, by promoting disease over decision. And beyond reducing personal culpability, what was previously considered "sin" is now often viewed as benign. In a word, many formerly deviant behaviors are now considered neutral and if the behavior is still considered unfortunate, it is also viewed as largely out of the person's control (She spends most of this chapter talking about various addictions, but one can also easily see this within the debate about homosexuality) Is it "biochemical determinism" or "free will" with some inherent tendencies to behave in a certain manner? The former has always seemed a strange position for one to advocate. Where is the dignity, self-efficacy and empowerment of having absolute control — or at least, in making that claim? In the Christian tradition, blame-shifting goes back as far as Adam and Eve in the garden (Genesis 3:8-13). But it always seems like a high price to pay for pity and an excuse. In any case, the evidence that people do change belies the claim of the determinists. Hendershott continues by talking about the "normalization" and de-institutionalization of the mentally ill. She notes that, by definition of mental illness, the definition was prone to expand as a result, we find assault redefined as "rage," temporary insanity copped as a plea, and ADHD and Ritalin taking the place of character flaws in children and parents. Today, more than six million children are defined as mentally ill, with parents now even requesting the diagnosis. Noting that doctors wrote nearly 100 million prescriptions for anti-depressants in 2001, she concludes soberly that "the practice of medicalizing deviance has encouraged the dangerous fantasy that life's every passing imperfection can be clinically diagnosed, and alleviated, if not eliminated, by pharmacological intervention through push-button remedies."

Hendershott also discusses sexual abuse by Catholic priests — and how it relates to pedophilia, homosexuality, celibacy and the sometimes contradictory agendas of the tolerance-mongers. The media have been reluctant to identify most of these incidents with homosexuality, instead focusing on pedophilia and trying to connect the abuse to celibacy. Of course, celibacy (for priests and other singles) is now largely viewed as deviant, having been replaced by a social norm of promiscuity. At the same time, some within psychiatry have been seeking to normalize pedophilia. One of the strengths of Hendershott's work is her use of contemporary cultural and political examples to illustrate her points. She points to the influence of "One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest" in de-stigmatizing mental illness. She critiques "A Beautiful Mind," but she would have been better served in complementing it, at least in contrast to "As Good as It Gets." While the love and long-suffering of John Nash's wife are essential to his recovery, at least love and tolerance, they are not portrayed as sufficient. Nash also emphasizes the importance of his "diet of the mind" — abstaining from certain destructive thoughts. In addition, Hendershott points to the late Senator Patrick Moynihan's warning about "defining deviancy down" in the early 1990s as the catalyst for the popular reconsideration of deviancy as a doctrine — focusing on illigitimate births, welfare dependency and sexual promiscuity. She argues that the election of Rudolph Giuliani in New York City signaled a recovery in traditional understandings of deviance. And she also discusses the role of 9/11 in redefining and solidifying traditional moral judgments. Finally, all of this begs some separate but related questions. In which "deviant" behaviors should we allow people the freedom to engage? To the extent we allow such freedoms, how does society continue to indicate that the behavior is, in fact, deviant? Cultural change largely determines legal change. Drunk driving, cigarettes, sexual harassment and date rape have all been stigmatized in recent years — and within more traditional moralities, this is a good thing. In the movies of the 1930s, drunkenness, adultery and wife-beating were all glorified — but over time, the culture has stigmatized them all. Although law may serve some role, the long and slow but ultimately more successful approach is to emphasize cultural change — one life, one family, one community at a time.



"Who cares if John Ashcroft's religion prohibits him from dancing? Who wants to see John Ashcroft dancing anyway?" (Comedian Dennis Miller)

