

Changing Concepts of Deviance

DOUGLAS D. BOND

*Department of Psychiatry, Case Western Reserve University
Cleveland, Ohio 44106*

As I look at the list of distinguished Stoneburner Lecturers, I see I am honored by being the first psychiatrist. This is a tribute to the Department of Psychiatry.

In thinking about this paper, I at first considered giving a kind of history of psychiatry. What seemed to me more interesting, however, was an examination of our whole perspective on deviance, in general, and what we call "illness"—an example of a certain kind of deviance, or, perhaps more accurately, a certain way of looking at deviance.

Concepts of Physical Health

It is clear that if one talks about deviant behavior, one must have some concept of a norm from which to deviate, and yet normality is a tricky concept for which we have either slippery or banal definitions. We have practical definitions, so that if someone says he feels fine and he looks all right to us, we say he's normal. Such definitions have very little theoretical value, however. Certainly our definition of normal has changed as our knowledge about the workings of the body has increased. We now signify changes in cells as being abnormal or deviant, when only a very few years ago one would never think of even examining them. To define health one must think of certain balances that maintain the safety of the organism, protect its life, and maintain the possibility for the fullest use of its various

functional capacities. In this framework, all illness tends to hamper or threaten the organism's existence or functional capacity. Health, or the normal, has never been of much interest to physicians. The absence of disease has always seemed dull. The physician who has just examined a patient in which there are no "positive" findings will say the patient has "nothing." Even the word positive is peculiar here, but so accustomed are we to the search for disease, that to change it to "negative" would be a wrench.

This disease orientation of the physician has had great advantages. The imbalance brought by disease to the functioning of the organism has been used to study the balance of health. Where would medicine or, indeed, biology be had we surveyed the size of livers, for example, and concluded that since some people have big livers, some have small, and some are in the middle, this is the natural distribution? The concept of natural distribution has carried with it the tacit set of acceptance or of inevitability. The concept of pathology—of disease, of something being wrong and needing to be changed—has been basic to medicine, to research and to treatment. This whole disease orientation is now under attack. The physician is condemned for his narrowness, and many people want something more—something in the area of increasing potential and happiness. In biology we have certainly moved beyond the need for an illness, which one can view

as an experiment of nature, to point the way for the investigator.

The direct approach in the biochemical and biophysical mechanisms in the organism is at hand, and direct intrusion into the mechanism will prove infinitely fruitful. But before we leave the subject of disease orientation, I would like to point out that Pauling's Nobel Prize in medicine was awarded because of interest in two diseases—sickle cell anemia, a common illness, and paroxysmal nocturnal hemoglobinuria, a most uncommon one—but studies of these two illnesses led to the most fundamental discoveries on the shape and structure of the hemoglobin molecule. The single helical formation inspired the double helical formulation for genetic material and brought a second Nobel Prize.

This direct approach to the study of disease will result in a future generation of physicians having a different and more modern outlook. We have certainly crossed a barrier when we now do research on the aging process and can get grants to study it—hopefully, to cure it. What brave new world do we enter here? Will it be normal some day to be only a certain age, a certain height or a certain color? Will the increase in control that scientific knowledge gives tend to standardize us, to narrow the spectrum of what we now think of as normal? Can we stand these decisions? What constant controversy could maintain when the possibility of control is further realized? Man was spared decision and controversy when superstition reigned and it was the gods or nature who determined practically the whole environment as well as the character of man himself. What arguments one could have with one's wife, parents and in-laws over the ultimate size, color, sex and I.Q. of a blessed event!

The maintenance of life and functional capacity demands an adaptation to the environment, because no living thing is self-sufficient. It always takes from and

gives to the environment. In physical terms the lack of adaptation leads to death. Let us look at the mental and the social aspects.

Concepts of Mental and Emotional Health

If we have difficulty in dealing with or developing the concept of physical health, we have even greater difficulty with the concepts of mental and emotional health. We can see many of the same dilemmas in definition, and we see even hazier borders. But if we go about our definitions in the same way, we may get somewhere. To be normal mentally for one's age, there are certain prerequisites. One must have some understanding of the world outside; this we call reality. It is immediately clear that reality varies with the culture and with the understanding of it, but, nonetheless, one cannot be normal or be able to adapt without a grasp on it. Once one has some grasp of reality, some kind of adaptation is absolutely necessary in order to be self-sufficient. We can see that the most difficult part of our environment to adapt to is other men. We can see that there are certain requirements in the environment for the adaptation to be normal. Adaptation to an environment like a concentration camp or a prison, for example, might be heroic for a spell, but quite abnormal if preferred. In other words, the environment must provide the opportunity for the full use of one's mental capacities and the satisfaction of one's emotional drives, or such an environment will prove as restrictive to the mental sphere as the desert to a water bird.

If one were to caricature the psychiatrist's, psychologist's, social worker's or physician's role in past years, one might say that it was to get those who were out of step with the society back into step with it, to help them adapt to it. This is not the same as conforming to it. Now the young and the disenchanting are

saying, "Examine your environment; you will find *it* sick—not the people who refuse or cannot adapt to it. Replace your efforts to adjust the individual to this sick society with social action that will modify the society so that it better fits the individual's requirements." There is nothing new in this idea except that, because of modern science and medicine, this problem enters the health field in a philosophical way. Every great political and religious movement had some environmental change in mind. The various communist revolutions all have had at their core a desire to change the human environment in order to enhance the hope of individual realization and opportunity. The tremendous revolution in labor practices of the last 35 years has changed the lives of millions for the better.

In the interface of the society and the mental functioning of the individual, there is a new and confusing twist in our scientific attitude of inquiry into the cause of things and the relationship between forces. We have undermined an older moral view. This conflict gives many of us great concern and is at the heart of much of our turbulence. Not long ago, the idea of free will and individual moral responsibility was widely accepted and, indeed, still underlies most of our legal foundations and social processes. It is based on church law, from which civil law was derived, and is basically an attitude that a great many people still hold. The idea is simple, namely, that an individual knows right from wrong and is responsible for his actions. It was and is a simplistic view. There were no exceptions to this rule at first. Then only those persons who were most deviant were excepted—deviant in the way that they did not see reality the way others did. Until recently this view of human behavior was, in general, satisfactory. Now there is an explosion of discontent and disorder in this area. Under the impact of

psychoanalysis, modern psychology and sociology, the idea of individual responsibility has decreased, and a kind of determinism has taken hold. It is interesting that the assassination of Robert Kennedy, for instance, was met with sadness, but no great public outcry for revenge. As Sirhan Sirhan's own personal history unfolded, one envisioned a miserable little boy, a brutal father and great adversity, and one compounded these into some kind of a partial explanation that did not whet the appetite for revenge, but simply revealed another tragedy.

Similarly, alcoholism has graduated from being a moral defect to being an illness. An illness in this instance is a deviance one cannot help. Not long ago an unmarried girl having her second abortion was considered a psychopath (i.e., a bad girl); now she is more likely to be looked upon as having suffered two traumatic events. In all these instances it is clear that one is moving away from moral judgments toward explanations for behavior that put the individual more in the position of victim than of perpetrator.

The opposition to this modern trend has its rational base in the fear that the lack of individual accountability for one's action will degrade individuals and society as a whole. There are always cases that cause public ire, e.g., when there is no question about the act, but the defendant is judged not guilty because of insanity. In these instances the law, as I see it, turns a partial explanation for a bit of behavior into an excuse. The law says, in effect, that this man's or woman's deviance is so great that he or she can no longer be held morally accountable for any action. As modern knowledge about formation of man increases, we see greater complexity—particularly in the interplay between the environment and the growing mind of the developing individual. It is exactly analogous to the tremendous in-

crease of the biological complexities that biochemical advances have brought in the knowledge of the body. Just as they have made a quick definition of health impossible, so has the knowledge of the developing mind and the complexities in the determination of behavior made a quick and simplistic differentiation of normal impossible. To ask one of us if someone at a given moment in the past knew right from wrong and was able to adhere to the right sounds simple, but to answer the question in an honest and intelligent way is almost always impossible. Our minds are too complex and too inconsistent.

Dilemma of Conceptualizing Deviance

It seems to me that we have a major dilemma here but one which can be solved if we approach it properly. We should divide the concepts of explanation and excuse. For instance, there may be many reasons which determine, or at least partially determine, a man's act when the act is detrimental to society and, therefore, should be deterred. I know a woman who shot an eight-year-old neighbor through the head, buried the gun in some hamburger meat in the freezer, dumped the body in a field, and then went shopping. A large number of people asked me, "Is there anything wrong with Mrs. C.?" The only answer I could give was "How normal can you get? Any suburban housewife ought to shoot the neighbor's child." The act itself, in a case like this or Speck's, speaks more loudly for senseless deviant behavior than anything else one could find out about it. The verdict of not guilty because of insanity in Mrs. C's case does not sit well with any of us. In her instance, guilty because of insanity would make more sense. The depth of penetration of moral concepts into our legal system is clear here, because the law literally maintains

that if one had no moral responsibility for the act by reason of derangement, one in effect did not commit the act.

I talk here of an extreme of deviant behavior, which showed its abnormality by being determined not by an external provocation from reality but by distorted inner drives unmodified by a grasp on reality. It may be true that environmental pressures in the distant past were influential in distorting these drives, but, if so, they were important in the developmental process. Let us turn to deviants who are more obviously influenced by the society around them.

Societal Attitudes Toward Deviance

How a society handles and even identifies deviants is an important hallmark of that society. We probably delude ourselves into thinking that times are different in the very ways in which they are not. For instance, student protests and riots, rather than being an innovation of the 20th century, are as old as universities. Student demands for authority started, in a way, at least as early as the Middle Ages when students were the authority. Both in Spain and Italy universities grew out of bands of students hiring men to teach them and firing them when they were displeased. Riots of students in England and Paris progressed to pitched battles in which multiple deaths occurred on each side. In this century, with the great growth in knowledge that has occurred, particularly in the sciences, and the tremendous increase in the number of people and the demand to attend universities, we have had to evolve a more complex structure. This structure is now seriously threatened by student criticism and questioning, actively supported by many faculty—most of them young.

Although many of these criticisms are rational and just, because our structures, like all structures,

have become encrusted, there is great danger that the impatience and sharpness of the demands may make much good disappear. In the excitement of this mounting battle, extraneous motives are included: the working out, or at least the expression of personal hatreds toward an authority that arise out of attitudes toward one's parents; the simple excitement of battle; the support of some cause, no matter what, that gives the shy and the lonely an excuse for companionship. Again one sees the tendency to move responsibility for failure one step away from oneself. It is becoming increasingly popular to say that it is not the student that fails, but the school. The man does not fail; the society fails. In *Time* magazine, an English psychiatrist is quoted as saying that mental patients are not sick; society is sick. It is a reversal of what we had taken as obvious before. We are now almost saying that it is up to the school to see to it that a student is happy and successful and up to society to insure success. The conservatives among us have a point. Is it not degrading to remove all sense of personal responsibility? Does it not remove a valuable pride if one has to say the school or society did it—not I? But the conservatives have gone too far in the past. Starvation is no incentive; hunger may be. The interweaving complexities of our society no longer leave any one of us "free" in the old sense. Prejudice against a man's skin, nationality, or religion still takes a horrible toll, and this must be fought. Societal changes that move toward fairness are the good things that our protesters are protesting for. The deviant serves us well here. The man or woman, girl or boy, who defies convention, who moves out of the establishment to look at it with personal courage and clarity saves us from the perpetration of the wrongs that have gone before. But the older ones of us, who, I suppose, are members of the establishment, wish that the

young reformers would realize that once some of us were young reformers, that we are not personally responsible for the world as it is. We inherited a good part of it, and we have been tolerant enough to let them have their strident say. I hope they realize also that the deviant's tragedy is his success, because with success, which entails a following, he no longer is deviant.

Handling of Deviancy, the Hallmark of a Society

In the handling of deviants a society brands itself. A society that demands conformity stagnates at best. A society that allows destructive deviation destroys itself. A compromise between these two extremes is needed. There seems to be an inertial force in society that swings to excessive motion first one way then another, yet it is the middle ground we seek. At this time we are rather at a loss in our control mechanisms which we used to think so firm. To whom do we go to deal with the educational problems in our cities? For all kinds of services? Our demand for service has far out-reached our supply, and the demands of men seem to have an infinite capacity to grow. Our welfare and social systems are hopelessly inadequate. Our teacher supply in quantity and quality is hardly better. Our courts and the availability of legal services come nowhere near meeting the need. The distribution of medical care is hardly better. Even the distribution of food in this country of plenty leaves shocking pockets of starvation. These defects demand solution, but how?

The deviant fixes on the weak points in the establishment and forces attention on them—perhaps too shrilly—but he knows there is enormous inertia where change is involved and, accordingly, pushes hard—harder and far more impolitely than many of us wish. The danger he faces is that he must gauge the strength and speed of his

demand or he will create a counterforce against him. He already has the conscience of the establishment on his side; once pricked, this conscience can be a strong force, but no one likes looking at his own conscience for too long. I hope we all can manage this so that the reforms may come with deliberate speed with acceptance of the need to act yet without the violence born of frustration.

Tempers are becoming short on both sides. This is not a good sign. We must pay attention to our methods. They are a safeguard. The only difference between a democracy and a totalitarian government is the difference in the methods that are used. Freedom of speech has to do fundamentally with the freedom to express ideas. We should be careful that it does not too readily encompass sheer invective or character assassination. The use of force for either repression or revolution is a dangerous tool; force breeds counterforce, and that, in turn, breeds war. Revolutions have been wrought in the thinking of men without force. Jesus Christ, Ghandi and Martin Luther King accomplished such revolutions. Exercise of true force can bring revolution of another sort. Nazi Germany, Russia, China and Cuba—perhaps even our own country a long time ago—are examples of countries that have seen revolution through force. I doubt that we want that type of solution to our problems. The conditions which existed in Germany and Russia, and possibly China, are not similar to the conditions which confront us now. If we are going to progress, we must realize that all change is not progress; that men still have the capacity for evil or destruction; and that adherence to the method of debate and compromise, heated but softened by reason, is still the steady road to improvement. It is enormously important that motion be evident in the right direction for, as President Kennedy said in his inaugural address,

"Those who oppose peaceful revolution make violent revolution inevitable!"

Summary

I have tried to speak of deviance in a very broad context but have, perhaps, done so confusingly. I was anxious to stress that it is a concept not only deserving broad treatment, but also requiring re-evaluation of our stereotyped ideas. I have tried to make three points: 1) Our concepts of health and disease are changing as we move toward a detailed interest in the biological process and the mechanisms that control it. We see that our older classifications are too rigid and too simple. We are caught up in the intricacies of cause and effect and are losing interest in the description—almost moral judgment—of health and disease with illness connoting bad and health good. Furthermore, the increasing control over our lives will provide us with more and more complex decisions. 2) This same kind of cause and effect thinking has penetrated to the mental and emotional sphere—due in the beginning to psychoanalytic findings. Here we have an even more revolutionary problem. Due to the original moral base of our law and the assumption of individual free will and moral responsibility as well as the discovery of a host of genetic and environmental factors in the development of the individual and his behavior, we have fallen into the trap of regarding explanations of behavior as an excuse for it. These concepts must be separated, because society must deter certain actions, regardless of their origin or the degree of our understanding. 3) Deviance, biologically, has been a window through which we have learned much about the more hidden balances of homeostasis. Because deviance is an exaggeration of the usual, its study has brought a greater understanding of the workings of biological organisms and

their adaptation to the environment. Through this study we have learned many of the requirements for prolonging life and identified the agents threatening it.

Deviance in the mental and behavioral sphere has likewise been a window, because it, too, is an exaggeration of the usual. It has led us to a better understanding of the human mind. In society it has led us to the greatest reforms for the preservation of the "body politic," but has also led us to the brink of the greatest disasters. Disaster in the body politic equals "illness" in the biological body; both are life threatening. The hallmark of a society and the judgment of a physician are measured in the same way—by the detection of those forces that threaten and those that enhance the life of the organism. As far as society is concerned, I have little to offer but homily virtues: reduction of prejudice, adherence to free debate, determination to be fair, and everlasting humility with regard to the human condition.