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Davis Wadley

*Ouachita Baptist University*, wad60677@obu.edu

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A Review of *Defining Deviancy Down* and  
How Trump Could Possibly Be Redefining Hate Crime

Davis Wadley

Crime and Deviance

Dr.Caddell

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this research paper is to summarize and critique Daniel Moynihan's essay entitled *Defining Deviancy Down*, and then to evaluate whether Donald Trump has helped normalize, increase, or change hate crime in America. This will be achieved by examining the Southern Poverty Law Center's report on hate crime data since the 2016 election. The hope is to find a connection between Moynihan's normalization redefinition and how Trump's nomination has affected Americans, specifically in the context of hate crime.

## **Introduction**

One of the major thinkers of Sociology is Emile Durkheim, who shaped and influenced this field in mighty ways that are still evidenced today. One way is his description of how Sociology views deviance. In his essay, *The Normality of Crime*, he argues that crime is normal. He argued "a society exempt from it is utterly impossible" (Durkheim, pg. 39), meaning that every society has a set of norms. Further, every society has punishments for not following these norms. Therefore, if crime did not exist, there would be no reinforcement of these norms, which would lead to anomie, or a state of normlessness. Thus, crime serves a function, and it is normal in every society because every society has it in order to exist.

No one really picked up and studied what Durkheim said about crime until Kai Erikson, who compared Durkheim's beliefs about Crime to the Colonial America Puritan society in the 17th century. One aspect he specifically put to the test was "Durkheim's notion that the number of deviant offenders a community can afford to recognize is likely to remain stable over time" (Moynahan, pg 17). Kai tested this hypothesis by studying three crime waves that occurred in

this Puritan society. He found that Durkheim's notion panned out. The number of convictions remained stable over over a 30-year period in this society, despite three major crime waves.

These two scholars intrigued Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan enough that he conducted some research of his own. This led to a critique of their work, which then led the birth of a new theory. Daniel's biggest issue with Durkheim's concept of deviance is that he did not leave open the idea that there could be too much crime (pg. 18-19). However, Erikson believed there could be, arguing that the amount of deviance a society "can afford to recognize is likely to remain stable over time" ( pg.19). Thus, what we can afford to recognize is going to remain stable over time rather than the deviant behavior itself.

This got the senator thinking and led him to see that Erikson's theory suggests there are instances in which a society ignores behavior that would usually be "controlled, or disapproved, or even punished" (pg.19). This idea led Moynihan to offer his own thesis on deviance, stating "Over the past generation, since the first time Erikson wrote, the amount of deviant behavior in American society has increased beyond the levels the community can 'afford to recognize' and that, accordingly, we have been re-defining deviancy so as to exempt much conduct previously stigmatized, and also quietly raising the 'normal' level in categories where behavior is now abnormal by any earlier standard." The senator's argument is basically that America has seen such an increase in certain deviant behaviors that in response, the society is redefining these behaviors as not deviant. This makes deviant behaviors normal, so that the level of deviance stays stable. In addition, to keep the level of deviance at a normal level, the behavior that is no longer deviant is replaced by behavior that was once seen as normal and now viewed as deviant.

## Summary

Not only does he offer this thesis, but Moynihan also describes three categories of how we redefine what is deviant, with examples for each one. The first type of redefinition is “Altruistic” (pg.19). The basic concept of the Altruistic redefinition is that there is a perception of increase in deviance, and people try to fix the behavior but fail in doing so. This is seen in the deinstitutionalization of the mental health facilities from the 1960’s-1980’s. Beginning in the 1960’s, Moynihan was active in the battle of mental health. In New York, the mental health institutions held over 94,000 New Yorkers (pg.20). In each year following, the number of inhabitants in these institutions grew. At the time of this increase, doctors in New York created a new tranquilizer, which proved successful in getting patients discharged. This was not yet implemented nationally, so the numbers continued to soar. The author notes that “Durkheim’s constant continued to be exceeded” (pg.20).

This increasing amount caused a disturbance within America and led Congress and the President to form committees to assess the situation and determine what should be done. The congressional committee found that the tranquilizer should be used and that deinstitutionalization should begin. However, the presidential committee determined that more mental institutions should be built. In fact, this executive committee proposed that one mental health institution should be built for every 100,000 people (pg. 20). The presidential committee’s findings prevailed and were signed into effect in 1963. In spite of the new law, deinstitutionalization occurred. According to Moynihan, “In 1955 there were 93,314 adult residents of mental institutions maintained by New York State. As of August 1992, there were 11,363” (pg.20). Thus, the law was not enforced, and many mentally ill patients were set free. Moynihan believes

this occurred because of a belief within that “bet on improving the national mental health by improving the quality of general community life by expert knowledge, not merely by effective treatment” (pg.20). This belief stuck and helped lead to deinstitutionalization. Additionally, people began to believe that mental institutions were not good methods of social control; those who believed this began their own redefinition, which led them wanting to see mental patients “labeled” instead of drugged (pg. 21). Eventually, these beliefs won out, and more mentally ill were released back into society. According to Moynihan and his sources, many slept outside. According to Fred Sigel, “the poor and insane were freed from the fetters of middle class mores.” Moynihan points out that they were free to sleep outside, so their label changed from mentally ill to unable to afford housing (pg. 21).

Thus, the effect of the closing of many mental health institutions was an increased numbers of homeless. In the end, this policy of deinstitutionalization failed to help the situation for the mentally ill. As the senator put it, “Altruistic mode of redefinition is just that. There is no reason to believe there was any real increase in mental illness at the time deinstitutionalization began. Yet there was such a perception, and this enabled good people to try and do good, however unavailing in the end” (pg 21. ). Basically, deinstitutionalization began prior to any evidence to support an increase in the number of insane individuals, eventually resulting in an increase in homelessness. Thus, the Altruistic redefinition caused people to perceive an increase in mentally ill, which led society to attempt to fix the issue. However, in “fixing” this issue, they relabeled mentally ill as not able to afford housing, which compelled people to view the situation fixed. Thus, what society considered mentally ill deviance reverted back at a normal level

because of denationalization. However, in reality the deviance had not been fixed at all, only the perception of fixed.

The second category of redefining deviance is known as the opportunistic mode. According to Senator Moynihan, this attempt reveals only a nominal attempt to do good, as he believes that the true desire is to do well (p. 21). Unfortunately, there is a potential kink that occurs in this desire, the problem that “a growth in deviancy makes possible a transfer of resources, including prestige, to those who control the deviant population. This control would be jeopardized if any serious effort were made to reduce the deviancy in question” (pg.21). Basically, those in control of a deviant behavior could possibly want to keep it under their control and lose focus of actually fixing the issue. To maintain control of the deviance, those in leadership redefine the behavior as normal, so as to cause people to perceive that they are performing their jobs well.

The author demonstrates this concept through the single parent issue in America, a major issue facing our country. Countless children are being raised by a single parent. According to Moynihan’s source of the *New York Times*, “Thirty years ago, 1 in every 40 white families were born to an unmarried mother; today it is 1 in 5, according to federal data. Among blacks, 2 of 3 children are born to an unmarried mother; 30 years ago the figure was 1 in 5.” This dramatic increase in both families with unmarried parents and single parents is causing huge issues. More and more families are becoming dependent on welfare in order to adequately care for their children. The situation is also causing detrimental psychological damage to the kids (pg. 22, 23). And what has been the response? According to the senator, “ There is little evidence that these facts are regarded as a calamity in municipal government. To the contrary, there is general

acceptance of the situation as normal” (pg.22 ). Basically, there is a problem, and the American people and government have done nothing about it.

According to Moynihan, the groups in charge of the single parenthood deviance did not want to lose control of it, so they redefined the behavior as normal, thus causing others to view it as under control. These groups accomplished this by changing the focus. They claimed single parenthood is becoming the norm and that it will help kids out (pg.23). However, the idea that more single parent families would make things better for kids simply turned out to be untrue (pg.23). By changing the focus of the issue, those in leadership led society to believe the deviance at hand is within a normal level, even though the data and science refuted what those spoke groups were saying.

The government response to this issue was that while the increase in single-parent homes is occurring, they attested there were more children who lived with one parent in Colonial America (pg.25). Thus, in comparison, they claimed things are okay or normal. Therefore, the government and interest groups successfully used the opportunistic mode of redefinition in the issue of single parenthood in America and redefined the issue as normal. Thus, what society could afford to recognize as deviant was put back at a normal level, but in reality the deviance at hand was only worsening.

The final category of redefinition is the normalizing mode. Moynihan recognizes this category as the most applicable to Erickson’s thesis “that the number of deviants a society can afford to recognize is likely to remain stable over time” (pg.26). The senator predicted there would be an increase in crime because of the ever increasing number of broken families in America (pg.26). He believes his prediction is correct. Moynihan believes crime has increased,



but this increase in deviant behavior has been what he calls “curiously passive,” because no one is really doing anything about it (p. 26). Political leaders crime enforcement leaders talk about crime as a problem, but this worry has not brought about any change.

How has this happened? According to Moynihan, we have become “normalized” (pg.26) to the amount of murders and robberies occurring in our country. Basically, we have been desensitized to it. Crime occurs so regularly that we now picture it as mundane. He argues his point by comparing the reaction to the Saint Valentine's Day Massacre to reactions to crimes currently occurring in America. In 1929, four gangsters killed seven gangsters. According to Moynihan, this villainous crime “shocked the nation” (pg.26), so much so that this crime “merits not one but two entries in the *World Book Encyclopedia*” (pg.26). Moynihan suggests that the outrage over this crime helped lead to the end of prohibition, which in turn stopped much of the gangster violence. Thus, in the 1920's, society was not willing to put up with those sorts of behavior, and their response helped reduce it. The reaction to this deviance was to fix it.

Moynihan attests that this outrage over crime no longer exists. He quotes James Q. Wilson, who suggests the Saint Valentine's Day Massacre happens every weekend in Los Angeles (pg.27), yet there is no outrage over these murders. He then quotes multiple excerpts from the *New York Times* about horrific murders, yet there is no response from society against these villainous actions. After numerous atrocities, society has redefined these acts as normal, to hide itself from the fact that this is an issue. In context of violent crime, American society maintains a level of what they can afford to recognize as deviance by redefining heinous actions as normal so that the deviance level does not go above the line of normality. Yet, in reality, the violent acts continue to occur and increase, despite the society's lack of response.

## **Critique**

The biggest issue in Moynihan's paper is his thesis that claims society lowers the bar on certain issues and raises the bar on other issues to keep the level of deviance at the level they can afford to recognize, but he fails to provide an example of an instance where this raising has occurred. He gave three very insightful examples where American society has redefined behavior in order to now perceive deviance as normal. However, he never describes an example when this country raised the bar on an action that was once seen as normal but now deviant. Moynihan alludes to the transition of behavior being redefined from normal to deviant in reference to the Republican party and their defending of "old standards" (pg.19 ). However, he never returns to this concept. This omission did not degrade this tremendous essay in the least, but it would have substantiated his thesis to see this idea explained further.

## **Moynihan's Thesis Applied Today**

Upon researching *Defining Deviancy Down*, I found an article comparing the senator's composition to Donald Trump and what he has done to America. The author of the piece, Jonathan Capehart, argues that Trump was not only "defining deviancy down" in politics, but also ruining America"(Capehart, pg. 1). It was an interesting read, and led me to ponder the effect of Donald Trump and his campaign and election has had on America. In my subsequent research of events since the 2016 election, I came across a report by the Southern Poverty Law Center about the hate crimes since Trump's election. After reading this document, I was left with

questions. Did Donald Trump in fact define deviancy down in America? Did he help define it down? In reference to hate crimes, did Donald have any affect on them?

The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) is a non-profit organization whose goal is “dedicated to fighting hate and bigotry, and to seeking justice for the most vulnerable members of society.” Their report entitled “Ten Days After. Harassment and and Intimidation In The Aftermath of The Election” is a summary and examination of a self-report campaign run by this organization. The SPLC ran a campaign to gather reports of hate crime and harassment incidents since the election. They allowed only real world accounts to be recorded, and anything determined to be a hoax by the police was not counted in the report (SPLC pg. 5). At the ten day mark, there were “867 hate incidents” (pg.5). The number alone is fairly astonishing, but after reading descriptions of things said and done to human beings, it had me reeling. The categories of hate crime were “Anti-Immigrant, Anti-Black, Anti-Muslim, Anti-LGBT, Anti-Woman, Anti-Semitism, White Nationalism, and Anti-Trump.” These reports included elementary school children chanting “build a wall,” to kids telling Hispanic and Black classmates that Trump was going to deport them, to a historically Black church being burned down and revealing a wall spray-painted “Vote Trump” (pg. 4).

The first thought that crossed my mind after reading this report was whether these types of hate always occur, or are we simply more aware of it because of Trump’s nomination? No report like this has been completed after an election, so there is no data to compare. However, the Bureau of Justice Statistics gathered data on the number of hate crimes in 2012, revealing 293,800 (BJS), an incredibly high number. Further, these are only those incidents reported.

According to the SPLC, the Bureau of Justice Statistics “estimates that two-thirds of hate crimes go unreported to the police” (SPLC pg. 5), so this number is potentially much higher.

Therefore, did Donald Trump’s nomination truly affect the amount of hate crime at all? With only 867 reported hate crimes to the SPLC since the election, the number pales compared to the level of 293,800 in one year. Let’s do a little math. Assume the number of hate crimes is 5,000 since Trump's election (10 days). 31 days divided by 10 days equals 3.1, representing the number of 10 day groupings in a month. Then, 3.1 times 5,000 equals 15,500, which gives us the number of hate crimes in one month. Finally, multiply that number by 12, a yearly total of months, and it equals 186,000 hate crimes in one year. This statistic supports that Donald Trump has not affected hate crime numbers, since at the current rate, there would be 107,000 hate crimes short of reaching the amount of these atrocities in 2012. Of course, if new data is released, I would like to check again.

So, what effect if any has Trump had on hate crime? SPLC believes the effect is that many hate crimes now are different after Donald Trump and his campaign than those committed previously. Many who reported these hate crimes said they had never been a victim of hate like this before, or that they experienced it in places that have never experienced it before. A Jewish woman in New York reported that a man yelled, “Nice nose,” and then added, “Make America great again” (pg 12). She responded, “I have grown up in New York for 25 years and have never been the victim of an anti-Semitic remark” (pg.12). Thus, different types of people are becoming victims of hate atrocities.

Also in this report was an account of a girl who revealed that she is gay four years before the election; she is now dropping out of high school because the hate she endured after the

election. She was threatened and called by schoolmates (pg.11). According to the parents of the girl “We never experienced anything like that. All of a sudden, the 9th (of November) hits, and she’s some kind of freak — she’s a target” (pg.11). Victims of certain hate crimes never experienced it at this level prior to the election.

Based on the SPLC’s data, it could be argued that this election has normalized hate crime for those who have never committed it before, or made it acceptable to commit these atrocities at a new level. One hypothesis is that Donald Trump has caused a redefining in many people to see hate crime as normal, therefore allowing people who have never committed these crimes to now commit them. The evidence to back this theory is that Donald ran a racist, sexist, and bigoted campaign. When he announced his run for presidency, Trump stated. “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending the best. They’re sending people that have lots of problems and they’re bringing those problems. They’re bringing drugs; they’re bringing crime. They’re rapists and some, I assume, are good people, but I speak to border guards, and they’re telling us what we’re getting” (Claire pg.1). He’s assuming Mexicans are indeed bad and bringing their problems, but assumingly some of them are fine. A clear slight to Mexicans. President-Elect Trump also said in 2005 in regards to women, “When you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything ...Grab them by the p\*\*\*y ... You can do anything” (Lusher pg.1), clearly the most sexist thing any presidential candidate has ever been caught saying publicly. Trump’s actions have obviously been racist and sexist.

It can be further argued that in these actions Trump has normalized this sort of behavior for people who once saw it as too deviant or taboo. Remember Moynihan’s redefinition category of normalization? In short, when the deviance goes beyond the level that society can afford to

recognize, they sometimes redefine the behavior as normal so as to keep the level of deviancy at a normal level. Trump has been very deviant considering his counterparts on the campaign. He said demeaning things toward a plethora of people. Could it be possible in the mass of this deviance that it has gone so far beyond the confines of what American society can afford to recognize, that in response many people have redefined this behavior as normal? I believe it could be possible because of the SPLC report. Recall numerous accounts experienced hate crime in places they had never experienced it before, becoming a first-time victim, and experiencing it a new level. Thus, Trump because of his remarks and behaviors in this election, possibly could have normalized hate crime for people who once thought of it as deviant. However, this is just a theory, and it does not prove causation.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, Moynihan built on the work of Durkheim and Erikson, which led to his essay, *Defining Deviancy Down*, in which he argues that in America the level of deviancy has surpassed what they can afford to recognize. In response, the society has redefined behaviors that were deviant as normal and also changed what was considered deviant to normal, so as to keep equilibrium. He goes on to argue that America has done this through three different modes of redefinition, including Altruism, Opportunistic, and Normalization. In a similar way, it could be argued that Donald Trump, through his racist and sexist behaviors, has normalized hate crime for those who once considered it deviant. Basically, it's okay to act this way. However, there is no complete evidence to this argument; it's only observation and theory.

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