

Encyclopedia of Death and the Human Experience

Deviance, Dying As

Contributors: Andrew Sherwood
Editors: Clifton D. Bryant & Dennis L. Peck
Book Title: Encyclopedia of Death and the Human Experience
Chapter Title: "Deviance, Dying As"
Pub. Date: 2009
Access Date: October 03, 2013
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.
City: Thousand Oaks
Print ISBN: 9781412951784
Online ISBN: 9781412972031
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412972031.n117>
Print pages: 363-365

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412972031.n117>

The word *deviance* is derived from the Latin verb *deviare*, meaning “to deviate.” To deviate is to extend outside the parameters of normative expectation. Dying as deviance, then, is a death that occurs in other than an expected condition, manner, or situation. This entry explores this unique concept within the context of death and the human experience. Thus an analysis of deviance addresses several issues relating to who deviates; from what these individuals deviate; what death-related actions constitute deviation; and how society reacts to death perceived as a deviant act.

Because deviance is understood to be outside the realm of the expected, the concept of deviance is a distinctly human affair. Predicated on the expectation that certain behaviors and attitudes are to be followed, behavior that is contrary to expectation elicits a negative response. It is important to note, however, that what constitutes deviant behavior for some is not necessarily deviance for all. As the postmodernist world becomes more tolerant of diverse perspectives, the interpretation of the seriousness and importance of deviance may become more difficult and differentiation between difference and deviance more problematic. On the other hand, the impact of national strategies to address perceived terrorist threats may influence behaviors and attitudes in a direction of national solidarity and, consequently, toward a more universally standardized expectation of behavior. Not all deviance is considered to be serious, though some deviant acts are viewed as both deviant and wrong because they violate social norms agreed upon and upheld by virtually all societal members. Other deviant acts may be interpreted as wrong by some and not by others.

Deviant death presupposes a culturally specific set of beliefs, values, and norms that are, in some way, violated through the experience of death. Such experience includes those who die as well as individuals who, while in close proximity, may be a participant in lifesaving or death-inducing acts or be among those who observe the death.

Explanations of Dying as Deviance

A variety of sociopsychological explanations are useful for understanding and interpreting dying as deviance. Statistical deviance means that the form of deviance occurs infrequently. This could include desirable spontaneous remission from a terminal

or chronic disease or an undesirable diagnosis of a particularly rare disease. This framework is without a moral sense of deviance and simply serves as a measure of occurrence.

An absolutist concept of deviance presupposes that certain behaviors and/or attitudes are simply [p. 363 ↓] inherently and intrinsically wrong. This perspective assumes full societal agreement on what is, and is not, deviant. Laws are viewed by some as a codified response to certain kinds of serious deviance. Others argue that such laws are developed to protect the interests of the privileged and powerful.

The symbolic interactionist perspective holds that deviance is so defined through interpretation; that is, the *act* is perceived by others to be deviant. When an act has *meaning*, that meaning is socially constructed through different or conflicting interpretations of the same behavior. For the symbolic interactionist, the social world is filled with symbols that are meaningful, but these symbols are, to an extent, fluid in their use/application. For example, death of enemy targets caused by military personnel during active warfare is defined and interpreted as desirable, whereas death caused by military personnel during a barroom brawl is defined in a significantly different way. Thus dying is likely to be interpreted differently depending on the context in which dying occurs.

Death as Unnatural

The notion of dying as deviance does not stem from the event of death itself, as all living creatures naturally die. Dying as deviance could result from the perception that the death occurs at an unusual or unexpected time during the life course, either too early or too late. A good death implies a death after a long and fruitful life, wherein the deceased had contributed to the community, as well as having experienced life course events that embellished his or her personal sense of individuation. Death that violates the usual ordering of death—for example, a child's death preceding the parent's death—also can be viewed as deviant. And death by homicide may be a way for humans to address the incomprehensibility of death and enact qualities of the divine since life and death are understood as originating from, and provided through, the divine deity.

Biological Death

Biological death, as the cessation of body organ function, may be framed as deviant if the person pronounced dead unexpectedly and inexplicably regains organ function. In rare cases individuals who have been pronounced biologically dead have spontaneously revived after periods exceeding 12 hours. Dying as deviance may be applied to those who are revived after clinical death has been pronounced. Many individuals who have regained biological functioning after having been pronounced clinically dead provide accounts with strikingly similar qualities. Some adherents of spiritualism and occultism present such accounts as supportive evidence of the certainty of an afterlife, whereas supporters of the scientific perspective dismiss such accounts through arguments that drugs, oxygen deprivation, limbic lobe syndrome, endorphins, and/or sensory deprivation may be physiological conditions influencing perception at death. The address of death in connection with the realm of the occult or supernatural may position the experience or idea of death as deviant, particularly in cultures operating under the paradigm of science.

As the living human being has a significant tendency to identify with the body, death as the demise of the corporal may be viewed as deviant, a departure from the normative realm of the living, physical body. This attitude is contrasted with the notion of the condition after death as the realm of the spiritual. So, too, death as a condition for entry into the “underworld” may be regarded as deviant, a rupture from the normative world of life.

Forms of Dying as Deviance

The form of death—for example, death through crime, death as sexually related, or death as self-deliverance or suicide—may be understood as deviant, as contrasted to natural death caused by old age. In fact, there exist a number of ways dying may be viewed as deviant.

Suicide

Émile Durkheim explained suicide through the analysis of social structure rather than as an exclusively personal act. He proposed four different types of suicide based on the degree of, and combination of, social regulation and social integration. Durkheim found that people who experienced extremely high or low levels of either social regulation or social integration, had a greater tendency to commit suicide. Altruistic suicide often involves [p. 364 ↓] highly integrated individuals whose lifestyle includes rigid proscriptions and restrictions, such as those expected of military personnel, for example, Japanese kamikaze pilots during World War II.

Japanese culture has long recognized an act of completed suicide as vindication from shame, disgrace, and dishonor. However, many other cultures regard suicide as *anti* social. To complete suicide is to reject participation in the social world. Such a rejection is a movement away from the world of sociability and therefore is viewed as deviant. Thus, suicide comes under the scrutiny of the law.

Many organized religions address the issue of suicide. Suicide may be understood as violating expectations of religious mores. The act of suicide always violates the expectations of religious-minded people. To override the will of a god, through willful acts of inducing one's own death, is seen as an offense. Some contemporary religions have guided congregations to engage in ideologies resulting in death. Marshall Applewhite, leader of Heaven's Gate religious cult group, encouraged more than 30 group members to complete suicide within the context of the group's religious ideology. Virtually all religions are concerned with transitions from life to death. The usual pairing of death and religion is not generally perceived as deviant. The encouragement of Heaven's Gate to self-deliverance is unusual within the context of religious direction in the contemporary West.

Finally, clinical psychology views self-harm as a pathological behavior through the assumption that the mentally healthy person does not engage in self-harm. It is the mental illness of the suicidal person that influences their actions.

Autoerotic Fatalities

Autoerotic fatalities are not categorized as suicide because criteria for suicide include the intention of death. Because autoerotic fatalities are sexualized activities wherein a potentially dangerous agent is used for heightening sexual arousal, accidentally killing the victim, the intentionality of death, as in suicide, is absent. Autoerotic asphyxia is a typical cause of death in the majority of autoerotic fatalities. Accounts of autoerotic fatalities evidence ritualistic qualities that often mirror address of the taboo within organized ritual. Many preliterate collectives demonstrate attitudes and responses to taboos through formal rituals. Rituals in such cultures, and even in Western culture, tend to be enacted at life continuum points representing significant changes or transitions from one social status to another.

Atypical autoerotic fatalities include causal factors such as aspiration of vomitus, electrocution, exposure, and Freon or nitrate inhalation. Autoerotic fatalities may be viewed as one of a variety of risk-taking behaviors. Whether or not risk taking is interpreted as deviant has to do with cultural attitudes toward particular behaviors that may be categorized as risk-taking behaviors.

Andrew Sherwood

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412972031.n117>

See also

Further Readings

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