

Sociology 101

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Observation of a Deviant Subculture

All societies have norms and values, be they formal or informal, mores or folkways. Society also does its best to encourage or enforce what it views as appropriate behavior while discouraging or punishing those that exhibit negative behavior. At the same time however, where there is a “right” way to behave, there is also a wrong way. In the case of societal norms, the wrong way is considered *deviant*. Deviance is behavior that violates the standards of conduct or expectations of a society. Thusly, the subculture that does not conform to the norms or common values of a given society is a *deviant subculture*. Some of the common values held in the United States include striving to get a good education, working hard, and staying away from drugs. Our norms include things like show up at work on time or dressing appropriately for your job. Most people in our society do follow these guidelines. Yet some, as I have seen first hand, do not.

When choosing a location for my ethnography study, I tried to pick someplace where I could actually see some of the big sociological topics at work. As in Ain't No Makin' It, I chose to study a group of individuals, allowing them the freedom of anonymity and interviewing and observing them in a place they frequented. In the small town I grew up in, a pizza chain moved in around 5 years ago called “Cassano’s Pizza King.” While a reputable business at first, after multiple managers and employees cycling through it fell into a state of disarray. Located in the middle of a suburban, blue-

collar town, the deviant subculture that the workers exhibit is a stark contrast. After getting permission to carry out my study from the general store manager, who I will call Kevin, I examined the workers through observation, conversation and interview. My study took place during my trips home to Monroe over the past few weeks.

Working at Cassano's on the times I visited were a total of 6 workers. First was Kevin, the store manager, a 25-year-old graduate of Middletown, Ohio. Kevin was viewed by the others as "chill" because, according to them, he did not care what the workers did as long as he didn't get into any trouble and they did their jobs. Bob and Dave were the next two men I met, 24-year-old friends who have known each other since grade school. Bob is single, attends a community college in Dayton and is a delivery driver. Dave is dating another ^{one} of the workers, Samantha, who is 7 years his junior. He also has a child from a previous relationship. The two younger workers I encountered were Chuck and Josh. Josh is a stocky 22-year-old delivery driver who has worked there nearly since the store opened. Chuck is a 17-year-old high school dropout who works as a cook.

Drug use is something against the societal norms of the United States. Most look down upon the use of narcotics, seeing it as against modern moral values. Furthermore, drug use is something certainly never to be done at one's work place. However, every one of the employees I met at Cassano's does drugs at least on occasion. In the back of the store, out of the view of the service window to the dining room, there is a door leading to the back parking lot. This is where the employees gather in between orders and deliveries. The workers had put lawn chairs and buckets outside to sit on, and informed me that this is where they met to smoke pot.

Me: So, Kevin lets you guys sit out here in broad daylight and smoke pot?

Josh: The building blocks the view from the main road and he doesn't care as long as we don't get him in trouble.

Chuck: The drivers smoke while out on deliveries, while the screen's clear we can chill out here as long as somebody's inside to watch the oven.

Josh and Chuck are the only two workers I met that claimed they smoked pot at least once a day and were high at work most of the time. Dave, Bob and Kevin all claimed to be "social smokers." Bob also told me that the reason he doesn't smoke much anymore is because during high school he was suspended for selling marijuana. Harder drugs such as crystal meth and cocaine were less common, but some of the workers, such as Josh and Joe (who was never working while I was interviewing) did them frequently.

Aside from drugs, a common anti-normal characteristic of the workers was appearance and relationships. Most people in American society would not think of large, half-inch holes for earrings as normal. Dave is a good example of this sort of deviance. Dave's a shorter guy with the previously mentioned earrings, a dyed pitch-black mohawk and tattoos all over the place. He's also got his eyebrow and nose pierced. His appearance is surely unlike most other 24-year-old fathers. While not an extremely rare sight, Dave's appearance is still an example of the ways in which the workers ignore the social norms. Another way is through relationships. Again, I'll use Dave as the example here, although from what I understand, Joe is in the same situation. It's customary for people in the U.S. to date people of their same age. However, both Dave and Joe are dating girls 7 years younger. When asked, he said "Me and her don't see it as a problem. What's a couple of years matter?"

Aside from the drug use, another commonplace occurrence at Cassano's was

drinking, both coming to work drunk and drinking while on the job. Many of the previous employees had been fired for drinking. One employee, George, had called off sick from work and was later found by one of the other drivers at a nearby bar drinking. On one of the weekends, I went in on a Friday night and stayed until closing time at 1:00. At around 12:00 when the orders lessened, Kevin allowed the workers to drink inside the building, filling up the paper cups from the keg in the refrigerator. Chuck, who was again 17 and therefore underage, was allowed to drink freely as well. At one point, a delivery order came in. Josh, who had been drinking, got into his car and drove off to take the order.

Me (to Kevin): Aren't you afraid he'll get pulled over?

Kevin: Nah, the cops usually don't pull over a delivery driver, they know they're in a hurry.

Me: What about Chuck? He's under age.

Kevin: He's not gonna tell anybody.

There seemed to be a completely different set of rules in this place. Drugs, even hard ones like cocaine, were no shock and done in the store during business hours. Drinking was commonplace, done nearly every weekend, according to Bob. Drinking and drug use at work are clearly not normal behavior. The workers at Cassano's did indeed seem to make up a subculture of their own. Their work attire varied from day to day, Kevin was not strict on this either. Unlike most food businesses one encounters, the workers were not required to wear certain clothes except for a Cassano's hat. Tardiness was frequent, some workers coming in an hour late or more without calling.

In Ain't No Makin' It, the boys who made up the Hallway Hangers were all from

poor families living in the projects. Stratification played a big role in the decisions they made. However, I found that most of the workers at Cassano's came from blue-collar or higher families. Chuck's parents drove a BMW and lived in a large house in an upscale neighborhood. Bob's parents paid for his schooling and lived in the suburbs. It seems that coming from more upper-middle class families did not affect their decisions toward drugs and alcohol. In other words, their deviance with regard to the norms of drug use and drinking were not related to their family status.

Education is a large part of American ideals. We are all expected to do our best and try to go to college. Education is important to most individuals in society. However, the workers at Cassano's do not take it so seriously. Chuck, as stated previously, dropped out when he was 16 years old. According to him, his brother received a 34 on his ACT test and currently attends college at Miami Oxford in Oxford, Ohio. It is surprising that in an identical environment, one child can achieve so much and the other so little – one succeed with respect to societal norms and the other becoming a deviant. When asked why he dropped out, Chuck explained. "My parents' expectations were too high. They pushed me too hard and I hate being pushed. Eventually I just quit." The values of his parents and their will for him to succeed did not have the desired effect. Besides Chuck, all of the workers I talked to had finished high school. Bob was the only one pursuing any sort of college education, which, judging by their family backgrounds, is uncommon. Perhaps like the Hallway Hangers the overall disregard for conventional success (at least at this stage in their lives) leads to their cohesion in the deviant subculture.

If you were to ask the average American living in the suburbs what he or she thought was normal behavior, they might say "going to school," "saying 'no' to drugs and

alcohol,” or “getting a job.” These are some of the most common and fundamental values we hold in our society. Work hard, get an education, stay away from drugs and you will succeed. However, as seen through observation, the workers at Cassano’s Pizza King disregard these norms, forming their own deviant subculture where drug use and drinking on the job are commonplace occurrences. The workers there have a very distorted view of what a job should be. I believe that my observations may help to determine what causes this lack of norm following in suburban areas. Social deviation and the subcultures therein are an important part of understanding the different groups that coexist in our society. From the gangs of New York to the pizza delivery boys of Cassano’s Pizza in Monroe, Ohio, deviance such as drug use is prevalent. To better understand these subcultures, we must investigate and observe their members, much as I have done over these past few weeks. Perhaps if we were to have a better grasp of where these subcultures tend to exist and how their members behave, we could work to form solutions to the problems of drinking and drug-use in our youth that a deviant subculture such as the one seen here exhibit.

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Today's society is consumed by fitness and health care. There are thousands of articles, television commercials, and websites about the latest miracle diet and work out technique. Gyms and work out facilities are popping up all over the place and personal trainers appear to be very busy with fitness crazed clients. The no-carb and high protein diets are only a few that seem to be taking over. Lately it seems as though society is more concerned about washboard abs and toned arms than actual physical, mental, and social well-being. With all of these things taken into consideration, what are the social norms of a healthy lifestyle?

The Ohio State University has recently invested a huge amount of money into building the most state of the art fitness center. The Recreational and Physical Activity Center (RPAC) certainly has a lot to offer. The newest cardio and weight machines, several basketball, volleyball, and racquetball courts along with a track could keep an OSU student very busy. The RPAC also includes a juice bar and a food court that offers healthy dining options. Since part of a healthy lifestyle would be working out, I decided to conduct my observation at the RPAC. Over the past few weeks I have spent several hours in the RPAC observing the norms and culture of the gym. My observation focused mainly on the work out facilities opposed to the juice bar and dining area. My observation also included an interview of a student actively using the RPAC facilities.

The RPAC is a large facility so my observation focused on only one main area. I focused on the 'Upper Gym' located at the top of the steps. In general the RPAC is a very

open space. The walls that enclose the different courts are glass so both the participants using the courts and the passerby can see what is going on. The 'Upper Gym', which includes treadmills, ellipticals and bikes, overlooks the juice bar and dining area. The majority of the RPAC is windows. Almost all of the walls are glass. The inside structure is made of brown cement blocks. But for the most part the RPAC is a very open space. In the 'Upper Gym' several televisions line the walls, although they are all tuned to the same station, mtvU. The demographic that uses the facility is very diverse. The ratio of men to women is about the same. Also, there was no more of one race than the other. While working out, most wore comfortable, loose fitting clothes and tennis shoes. The typical outfit consisted of a tee-shirt and gym shorts or sweat pants. Almost all of the girls wore their hair off their face in a ponytail. The average work out time was about thirty to forty-five minutes. A general trend was the use of an ipod. Others read a magazine or book. In general, everyone used some sort of entertainment while exercising. On every machine there is a towel and bottle of spray. Almost every person wiped off the machine after their workout with these items. I only saw two people who did not wipe off their machines. In general, there is not much interaction between the people in the 'Upper Gym'. The only interaction came from people who seemed as though they knew each other. These people usually chose machines next to each other and generally did the same workout routine. I interviewed an OSU freshman named [REDACTED] *do not use identifying information* about her thoughts on a healthy lifestyle. When asked if she considered herself living a healthy lifestyle she replied, "Yes, I think I do live a healthy lifestyle. I try to work out and eat right. I also only drink on occasion." Sam works out six times a week for about an hour each time and her workouts generally consist of cardio and weight training. When asked why she works

out she replied, "I am trying to avoid the 'freshman fifteen'. I just feel better about myself after I work out." When I asked Sam if there was anything else she does that would be considered within a healthy lifestyle, she told me she rarely takes the bus because she would rather walk. She also said she prefers the stairs opposed to the elevator.

I think there are several sociological reasons that can help explain these observations. One of these sociological reasons would be that the people that regularly go to the gym could be considered their own subculture. A subculture is defined as 'a segment of society that shares a distinctive pattern of mores, folkways and values that differ from the pattern of the larger society.' Even though wiping down a machine after using it is a general folkway of the gym, one will not be sanctioned if this act is not performed. Another folkway of the gym would be the general norm of wearing tee-shirts and sweats to exercise in. Although one would not get sanctioned for wearing high-heels or dress pants while working out, they might be looked at awkwardly or be treated differently. This subculture also has conceptions of what is considered good and proper versus bad and improper. These values of the gym serve as criteria for evaluating the actions of others. These values could explain why there is little to no interaction between the people working out. It could be considered improper to interrupt someone during their run.

I believe the media plays a large role in the desire to live a healthy lifestyle. The media is obsessed with Hollywood and its young starlets. Almost all of the headlines have to do with weight. The media often portrays a healthy weight as too big or unattractive. This obsession with weight and appearance is easily transmitted to the general public. Many people would love to have the body of a celebrity but most of the

time the thought of that is quite unrealistic. This media portrayal of body image could have something to do with [REDACTED] desire to not gain the 'freshman fifteen'. Perhaps she feels she would be deemed unattractive if she gained a few pounds around her waistline. I think this mentality is largely due to the media and its emphasis on appearance and body image.

I also believe there is some sort of labeling approach that plays a role in the desire to live a healthy lifestyle. Labels that are associated with health and fitness often reshape how others treat us and how we see ourselves. It is very easy to label someone unfit or out-of-shape. At the same time it is easy to look at a thin person and immediately decide they are in shape and healthy. Often times these labels are wrong. Just because a person has a small waistline does not necessarily mean they are living a healthy lifestyle. At the same time, a person with a bigger body type could be living a very healthy lifestyle. When one is constantly labeled unfit or out of shape, it could skew a persons thought on themselves. Our society attaches negative stereotypes to labels that suggest less-than-perfect physical and mental health. I think this contributes to why the health industry has gotten such attention lately. More and more people are joining gyms or hiring personal trainers in an attempt to avoid these labels and consequences. I think this idea could be an underlying reason for why so many students actually use the RPAC. Instead of sincerely wanting to be healthy, I feel most are trying to avoid the label of 'unfit' or 'out-of-shape.'

It is very clear that our society has a fixation with health and fitness. This can be observed through the hundreds of books and articles on the best way to tone up or shave a few inches off ones waistline. It is almost impossible to go an entire day without seeing someone or something that has to do with health and fitness. Through my observations at

the RPAC, it is quite clear that Ohio State is not an exception. The student population that regularly uses the RPAC facilities can defiantly be considered their own subculture.

Within this subculture, I believe that the media and the labeling approach play a part in why these students work out so often. I believe that while many students are trying to live up to the media's standards of what is attractive and acceptable, they are also trying to avoid stereotypes and consequences that go along with being labeled out-of-shape and unhealthy. In conclusion, by observing the norms and culture of the gym, several aspects of society and social norms became apparent.