Ethnographer Heith Copes With Research Subject

Photo courtesy of Jared Ragland

2 GETTING CLOSE TO DEVIANCE

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you will be able to:

1. Discuss the significance of research to sociology.

2. Appraise the value of official statistics and surveys.

3. Explain the challenges and practice of deviance ethnography.

4. Explain the importance of understanding broader social contexts when studying one particular social group or deviance category.

BLURRED BOUNDARIES I: GETTING CLOSE TO DEVIANCE

The television series *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* and its many spin-offs have captured the imagination of the American public. With suspenseful dramas of elite teams of forensic investigators who solve disturbing crimes, a big part of the shows' appeal lies in the ways they give the viewer a chance to get inside the crime itself, to get a glimpse of the criminal's thoughts and actions. With visions of *CSI* and shows like it fresh in their minds, some students arrive at college with plans of becoming crime scene investigators. Many talk about a desire to develop a special understanding of crime and criminals by studying forensic anthropology, chemistry, and psychology. Yet, without diminishing the knowledge and skills of forensic scientists, the case can be made that some sociologists investigating deviance get closer to the actual contexts of criminal acts than do most forensic researchers. Consider the three following cases.

To learn about white-collar crime from the inside, Eugene Soltes (2016) reached out to once-prominent executives who had been charged with business crimes. Most of the offenders he studied were convicted and in prisons where they could be located and interviewed. In one case, however, Soltes pursued a businessman who had fled the country to avoid prosecution. Soltes contacted the former executive through his attorney and travelled to Sweden to meet with him and discuss the fugitive's experiences committing fraud and fleeing prosecution. Through sustained ethnographic effort, Soltes was able to get many white-collar criminals to trust him enough to discuss not only their crimes, but even the impact of their misdeeds on their families. In fact, the rapport that some white-collar offenders came to feel with Soltes was exemplified in the case of the notorious white collar offender, Bernie Madoff (discussed in Chapter 6) who was serving a 150 prison year sentence for his crimes. When Madoff learned that one of his sons had died, he called Soltes and asked him to read his son's obituary to him. In that moment, Soltes wrote later (2019), he recognized how deeply he had developed personal connections with at least some of the white-collar criminals he was studying.

Sociologist Kelly Ray Knight (2015) spent four years doing ethnographic research with a very different population, San Francisco prostitutes who were struggling with addiction and pregnancy. She witnessed their troubled lives up close, as captured one morning with Ramona, a pregnant sex worker who Knight visited in a rent-by-the night hotel room. She recalls the morning visit:

> Ramona is naked from the waist down, with a short T-shirt on. Her legs are scarred, but I notice no bruises or blood. I walk two steps over to the faucet and turn off the running water in her sink. When I turn around to face her again, she falls into my arms. Exhausted howls and screams come out of her. Her body heaves and shakes as she sobs in my arms for a full minute. "It's OK," I keep repeating. "It's OK."
>
> "I'm tired. I can't keep going on like this," she wails. "I'm done."
>
> I notice syringes on the bed and a bunch of other paraphernalia strewn around. Condoms, gauze four-by-fours, medical tape, prenatal vitamins, an empty sandwich wrapper. She manages—barely—to get some underwear on and turn off the porn that is still playing on the suspended TV across from the bed. She isn't in labor, no stroke, no kidnapping.
>
> She is just really high. (3–4)

Finally, some deviance ethnographers decide to become full members of the groups they study. In her research on strip-club dancing, anthropologist Katherine Frank (2002) worked as a dancer at five different strip clubs over a 14-month period. Explaining the advantages of full member research in this setting, she writes that, "Working as a dancer gave me access to all of the club's spaces, allowed me to be involved in dressing room conversations, and required me to learn the tricks of the trade" (6). Frank returned to the practice of full member ethnography for her more recent book, *Plays Well with Others* (2017), exploring group sex culture and activities. She explains:

> I've gone to house parties, BDSM sex clubs, swingers' clubs, orgies hosted by movie stars and musicians, and lavish invitation only events where potential participants are screened by existing club members. I've been to parties where the rules of engagement became more nebulous with each line of cocaine disappearing from the nightstand. I've seen a lot of group sex. In fact, I've seen so much group sex that I can discuss the weather or the irritation of rush hour traffic as the action unfolds around me. (11–2)

The foregoing ethnographers put themselves close to the experiences of people engaging in behaviors that are widely considered deviant in the United States today. They do so because they believe that knowledge based on firsthand experience and understanding provides unique insight into human behavior. While not all sociologists studying deviance go into the field to look at deviance from the inside, those who do so draw on a rich tradition of deviance ethnography. But getting close to deviance can place researchers in uncharted territory, forcing them to improvise and make quick decisions in the field.

In this chapter, we will explore a range of methods and data that sociologists use to study deviance, with most of our attention focused on the research strategies and challenges of deviance ethnographers. Some of the examples of deviance ethnography may strike you as extreme—at times even foolhardy. At other times, the research may strike you as exciting and even courageous. Whatever the case, studying deviance offers powerful potential for adventures, surprise, and sheer emotional impact.

While sociological research can at times be thrilling and personally satisfying, the core purpose of research is intellectual. The deviance ethnographer is not there primarily for the adventure (however intriguing it might sometimes be), but to better understand the social world under investigation. Up close to deviance, the researcher must confront the blurred boundaries of deciding how close is close enough, and how close is "too close"—a question we will return to at the end of this chapter.

SOCIOLOGY AS A MODE OF INQUIRY

When people think of sociology, they tend to think of the topics of sociology courses (e.g., family, religion, social inequality) and the theories (e.g., functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interaction) that sociologists use to explain the dynamics of social life. Often we give short shrift to perhaps the deepest, most fundamental characteristic of sociology: its commitment to learning. At its heart, sociology is a mode of inquiry. It is based on the belief that we can improve our understanding of human behavior and social life if we take the time to systematically examine what people think and do. As a social science, sociology demands openness to learning from observation. This is why research is so important. The observations we collect in research can challenge our present ideas and call us to rethink how best to explain things.

As we noted briefly in the first chapter, many approaches to social life are oriented to sustaining previously held beliefs rather than modifying or changing them. Most of our daily life is spent taking things for granted. We take for granted that people (from the grocery store checkout clerk to our parents) are who they say they are and that they will act in ways that are consistent with their stereotypical identities. Yet the stereotypes that we take for granted can be misleading, and sometimes we are forced to reexamine our beliefs. In personal life, we may have a grandparent who begins to suffer from Alzheimer's and who seems no longer able to function in the role we have expected of them. Or a close friend may confide that she is pregnant as a result of an unplanned sexual encounter and is struggling with what to do next. Such personal experiences may force us to change our ideas and our beliefs. The grandparent who looked after us may now need to be looked after. And it isn't only "bad girls" who want to get abortions. In facing challenges to our beliefs, we expand our ways of understanding the world around us.

The most fundamental difference between everyday life and sociology is that sociology requires a commitment to consistently looking at the social world as a potential "learning experience." But sociological learning today does not occur in a historical vacuum. It grows in large part out of the learning experiences of scholars who have gone before us, mapping out ideas about the dynamics of social life that we continue to explore.

In this chapter, we examine the methods by which sociologists gather data about deviance. We will see that sociologists often seek data that allow them to gain a deeper understanding of two broad sets of questions. The first set of questions focuses on rates and causes of deviant behavior. That is, how many (and what proportion of) people engage in a certain kind of deviance, such as drug abuse or white-collar crime, and why do they do it? The second set of questions involves the meanings and processes through which deviant behavior is enacted. These questions focus more on social psychological aspects of deviance (e.g., What is the meaning of the behavior for the individual?) and the practical issues of how they go about doing it (e.g., How do a prostitute and a "john" find each other?).

In the following pages, we will examine several sociological methods for studying deviance. We begin with official statistics and researcher-designed surveys—primarily used to address questions regarding the rates and causes of crime and deviance. Then we look at deviance ethnography with its emphasis on data that can address more contextually oriented questions regarding cultural meanings and social processes. Each of the different methods and kinds of data discussed in this chapter can provide insights into the social organization of deviance, but it is critical that we come to grips with the limitations of the data as well. If the data do not measure or represent what we think they do, they will lead us to mistaken conclusions. With this fundamental issue in mind, we turn now to an examination of the kinds of data sociologists collect and analyze in order to understand the deviance process.

COUNTING DEVIANTS

Let's begin by considering one of the basic challenges of studying deviance. Many behaviors classified as deviant are statistically rare and geographically dispersed. Relatively few Americans, for instance, commit murder or robbery. Still, in the United States over all, it is

estimated that, in recent years, around 15,000 murders and 275,000 robberies have taken place annually (FBI 2019). It is hard to imagine that any sociologist would be able to personally collect enough data from across the country to examine these phenomena. Fortunately, several governmental agencies have embraced the task of collecting data on these and many other types of crime and deviant behavior. Sociologists studying deviance—especially criminal deviance—often turn to official statistics as a major source of data. However, while official statistics are an indispensible tool in analyzing some aspects and some kinds of deviance, we must be clear about what they are and what they are not.

The Value of Surveys and Official Statistics

There are a wide variety of national, state, and city agencies that collect data related to many kinds of deviance. Crime data, for instance, are gathered by city police officers and county sheriffs, by various state agencies from the highway patrol to the department of corrections, and at the national level by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other U.S. Department of Justice agencies. Similarly, many governmental agencies collect information about health-related deviance, including mental illness, alcoholism, and obesity. The term *official statistics* refers specifically to information that has been collected by government agencies or international public organizations (such as the World Health Organization). Such statistics may include data about behaviors (e.g., rates of smoking, criminal arrest rates) and attitudes and beliefs (e.g., about gay marriage or abortion). In addition to official agency statistics, many social scientists collect data on various kinds of crime and noncriminal deviance.

Official statistics and survey data collected by other social science researchers are particularly attractive to sociologists and criminologists because they provide information about large numbers of people. The *Uniform Crime Reports* (*UCR*) published by the Federal Bureau of Investigation are compilations of crime reports and arrests from law enforcement agencies across the country. Surveys and official statistics are often used to establish the **rates** of particular kinds of deviance, that is, what proportion of the population engages in or is victimized by specific kinds of deviant behavior. Looking at the rates of different kinds of deviance among different social groups or settings enables sociologists and criminologists to examine two other issues: correlation and causation. **Correlation** refers to a pattern of things that tend to be found together. For instance, violent crime is correlated with age, as far more violent crime occurs among teens and young adults than among those over 35 years old. **Causation** refers to a special kind of correlation in which one specifiable condition leads to another, as in the case of cigarette smoking being a major cause of lung cancer. As sociologists are quick to point out, just because two things are correlated does not mean that one caused the other. Lung cancer is correlated to gender; more men than women get it. Does that mean that being male causes lung cancer? Obviously not. Rather, males are more likely than females to smoke and it is smoking, not gender, that leads to the high rates of lung cancer among men. To make the argument that one thing caused another, you must be able to demonstrate not only that (1) the causal factor occurred first, but also that (2) no other factors intervened to influence or produce the behavior you are seeking to explain. The issue of causation is clouded by the fact that there are often multiple potential causes for the same outcome. While smoking is a major

cause of lung cancer, many people who smoke do not get lung cancer and many people who do get lung cancer never smoked. Similarly, the issue of what causes deviant behavior is very controversial.

Such controversy notwithstanding, most sociologists find it useful to get some sense of how common specific categories of deviance are, as well as the kinds of things that are frequently associated with those behaviors, conditions, or statuses. Official statistics and other large-scale surveys offer valuable resources for examining these issues. But these kinds of data can also mislead us unless we clearly understand how they are created and what their limitations are.

The Limitations of Official Statistics

Every year the FBI gathers data from local law enforcement agencies across the United States and compiles summaries of arrests and crimes in the *Uniform Crime Report*. The primary *UCR* statistics focus on violent and property crimes called index crimes. These are crimes that we are most aware of as serious crimes and that are most likely to be reported to the police, including murder, robbery, forcible rape, aggravated assault, burglary, and motor vehicle theft. The *UCR* statistics on index crimes represent an enormous effort to collect large-scale data, but even so, it is widely acknowledged that the reports are not a completely accurate tabulation of serious crime across the nation. For one thing, accurate nationwide data require that all policing agencies around the country provide accurate crime data to the FBI. Unfortunately, that is not the case. In the early 2020s, for instance, the FBI was in the process of transitioning from one reporting system, known as the Summary Reporting System (SRS), to a more detailed system called the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS). In the long term, the NIBRS will provide more detailed data on crime, but in the near term, many smaller policing agencies have not been able to convert their reporting to the NIBRS format, leading to gaps in *UCR* data (FBI 2019). While this problem will likely be solved over time, a more serious problem is that many crimes are never reported to the police at all.

How common is it for victims of crimes to not report them? Perhaps as many as half of all crimes never get reported to law enforcement agencies. In an attempt to get more accurate statistics on crime than those from law enforcement agencies, the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics conducts a **National Crime Victimization Survey** (usually referred to by the initialism NCVS) that is administered to approximately 43,000 households around the United States each year. This extensive survey explains different kinds of crimes and asks individuals if anyone in their home has been the victim of such a crime in the last 12 months. The reports of crime victimization in NCVS data reveal that many property crimes are never reported to law enforcement. According to the NCVS annual report for 2020, only about 40 percent of violent victimizations and 33 percent of property victimizations were reported to police in that year (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2021).
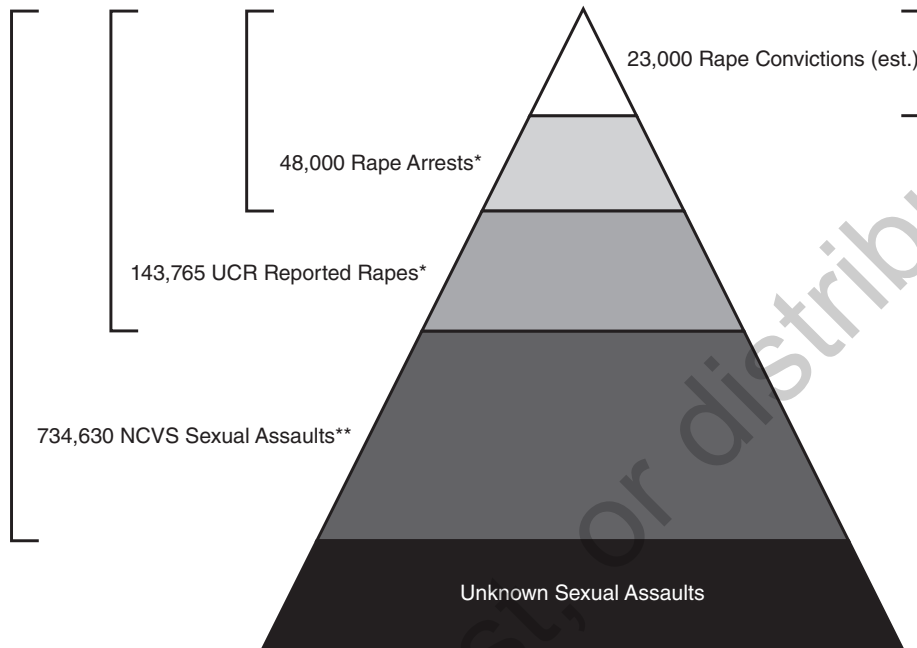
Counting Rape and Sexual Assault

Consider the crime of rape. Most of us believe we know what rape is and that we can recognize it when it occurred. We also agree that it is a serious crime and that those who commit it should

be prosecuted. In attempting to understand rape, we might well turn to official statistics for a sense of how often it occurs and what the social characteristics are of the perpetrators and the victims. But official statistics on rape are far from an accurate count of rape in American society, and an even less accurate picture of sexual assault more broadly. We can think of the relationship between rape and official statistics on rape and sexual assault more broadly in terms of a pyramid, as shown in the rape reporting graphic below. Since the National Incident-Based Reporting System is still in the process of being implemented and at present many jurisdictions are not yet reporting, we will use more inclusive FBI and Bureau of Justice Statistics data for 2018.

At the apex of the pyramid, we have the cases of rape that result in convictions. While it is possible that some convicted rapists are innocent—as we see in some notable cases of men who have been released from prison after DNA evidence exonerated them of the crimes—most who are convicted have likely engaged in sexual assault that we would consider rape. But there are far more rape arrests than there are convictions for the crime. Only about one-third of rape arrests end in convictions. And even when we look at rape arrests rates, we are still toward the tip of the pyramid that would include all cases of the crime. Out of every 10 rapes that are reported to law enforcement officials, an average of about one-third lead to arrest. That means that two-thirds of reported rapes are never "cleared" by the criminal justice system. If we were to rely simply on the FBI's *Uniform Crime Reports*, that would be where our count of rapes ended. The data would provide us with a picture of how many people have reported being raped and we would have a profile of perpetrators who have been arrested and convicted of rape.

But what is left out of these data? First and most obviously missing are the cases of women and girls who have been raped but have not reported it. Why might someone not report being raped? Some of these cases involve women who are too embarrassed to report their rapes or who are afraid of how they will be treated by the criminal justice system. Following the trauma of being raped, many women withdraw into themselves and keep their experiences secret, or reveal them only to a few close family members or friends. Yet other women and girls do not report rape because of their relationships with those who have raped them, such as family members and close friends. In order to learn more about crimes that have not been reported, the U.S. Department of Justice conducts the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) to gather information from households about crime victimization, including crimes that did not get reported to law enforcement officials. In 2018, the NCVS number of reported sexual assaults according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2020) was five times the number of rapes reported in the *Uniform Crime Reports*, adding another large tier to the total in Figure 2.1.

Even yet, we have not included all incidents of rape in our society. What cases of rape might we still have failed to capture? What about women and girls who either don't know or are unsure of whether they have been raped? If a female is under the influence of drugs or alcohol, she may lack clear recall and be confused about whether or not she willingly engaged in sex. Or what about a prostitute who is a victim of sexual attack? Can drunk women and prostitutes be raped? While most of us would agree that they can be victims of rape, we also understand why they would be unlikely to go to the police or even report their experiences to survey researchers.

FIGURE 2.1 ■ Rape and Sexual Assault Reporting Pyramid

23,000 Rape Convictions (est.)

48,000 Rape Arrests*

143,765 UCR Reported Rapes*

734,630 NCVS Sexual Assaults**

Unknown Sexual Assaults

Source: *FBI. 2019.

**Bureau of Justice Statistics. 2020.

Finally, we need to consider how our beliefs regarding what rape is will make certain kinds of aggressive sexual acts visible as crime to us, while obscuring our view of other possibilities. For example, can a married woman be raped by her husband? *Marital rape* is a relatively new addition to the definition of rape in the United States, with the state of South Dakota being the first to make it a crime—in 1975. Or what about the rape of males? As you might have noticed, this discussion of rape has focused on sexual assault against women. That has not been accidental. In many venues, including *UCR* data, sexual assault against a male has not been included in rape until relatively recently (Stemple and Meyer 2014).

As the rape reporting pyramid shows, the counting of rape is a difficult challenge with multiple layers. But the points that we need to grasp now are (1) official statistics capture only a segment of the actual cases and (2) to understand official statistics, we must know how they have been created, and especially the criteria and procedures for counting an individual or event as a case. Statistics on crime and deviance do not represent pure counts of objective instances of deviance. Humans construct them through their thoughts and actions. Crime and deviance statistics are compiled by specific organizations, and those statistics must be understood in terms of the deviant-processing activities of those organizations.

PUSHING YOUR BOUNDARIES: UNREPORTED CRIME INTERVIEWS

Official statistics capture only the officially identified cases of criminal behavior. In response to this problem, the NCVS seeks to gather information on unreported crime. The survey finds that most victims of crimes do not report them. But why? What are the reasons that people give for not reporting crimes?

In this project, you are asked to conduct short interviews with two of your friends who have been victims of crimes that they have not reported. In your search to find two friends who have been victims of unreported crimes, keep track of how many people you had to ask before you found two who met this criterion. Begin your interview by telling them that you would like them to answer a few questions about their experience and that you will be taking notes, but that you will not include their name in anything you write. Then, ask them the following questions:

● Tell me about the crime (or crimes) that you were a victim of, but did not report. What was the crime? Describe what happened.

● Tell me about how you handled the incident. Can you explain to me why you didn't report it to the police?

● When you look back at what happened to you, do you wish that you would have reported the crime to the police? Tell me why you feel that way.

After the interviews, write up summaries of what the interviewees told you. Did they report similar or different types of crimes? How about their explanation for why they didn't go to the police? Finally, consider what you think you would have done in similar circumstances? Do you think you would have reported the crime or not?

Official Statistics as Organizational Processes

When we look at official and other agency statistics as organizational processes that define some kinds of acts as deviant and developing routines for identifying and handling people who become labeled as deviants, we see things in a new light. Instead of reifying official statistics (looking at them as objective reality), we can focus our attention on better understanding what they capture—and what they miss. In later chapters on specific categories of deviance, we will take a closer look at how statistics and rates for each category are created. For now, we will emphasize just two basic points.

First, the amount of human behavior we count as deviant depends on how we define things. Second, how we react to things also depends on how we define them. All too often these issues are missed. Newspaper reports with such dramatic titles as "Downtown Prostitution Doubles in Last Six Months" or "Teenage Meth Use on the Rise" are often based on increased arrest rates that reflect greater police attention to the activity rather than an actual increase in the activity itself. Similarly, in the early 1990s, the rate of diagnosis of attention deficit disorder (ADD) rose exponentially in the United States. But that increase was not a result of a sudden dramatic rise in the number of children suffering from the disorder. Rather, the rise was connected to the marketing of medications to treat the disorder and to the enactment of the

Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act, a law that provided new educational resources for children diagnosed with ADD. The new resources for children identified as suffering from ADD played an influential role in the number of physicians diagnosing the illness and the number of parents willing to accept the diagnosis and treatments.

Nor do decreases in official rates necessarily mean that the number of people engaging in a behavior is declining. As sociologists Harold Garfinkel and Egon Bittner (1967) noted many years ago, there are often "good reasons for bad organizational records." Social service and criminal justice agencies that deal with many forms of deviance face constant pressures to maintain or increase their resources on the one hand, and to avoid trouble on the other. The agency routines and records reflect these interests. The court system provides an excellent example. While the courts are officially in place to prosecute crime, the actual processing of criminal cases may depend on the interests and resources of prosecutors, the costs associated with cases, and how busy the courts are at a particular point in time. Criminal prosecutors usually have considerable discretionary power in deciding how to proceed with a given case. Depending on how heavy their caseloads are at a given point in time, prosecutors may decide to take a case to trial, or they may choose an alternative course of action. They may decide that even though the case has some merits, it lacks sufficient evidence to take to court. Or the prosecutor may agree to reduce the criminal charges as part of a plea bargain—say, lowering felony charges of burglary to misdemeanor charges of breaking and entering. While the defendant's behavior has not changed, the definition and consequences of it change dramatically under these different scenarios.

Not only are official statistics in significant part a result of organizational processes. They are also potentially subject to several different kinds of social biases. Crime and deviance processing organizations, like many other organizations, often treat people differently based on who they are. Self-report surveys that ask people to tell whether or not they have committed certain crimes or deviant behaviors consistently find more "deviants" than are reported in official crime statistics. Self-reports also show that for many types of crime the differences between lower-class and middle-class individuals, or members of different racial or ethnic groups, is far less than what arrest rates would suggest. In a classic study of juvenile delinquency, William Chambliss (1973) found that middle-class and lower-class male high school students reported engaging in roughly equivalent amounts of delinquent behavior. But lower-class boys were far more likely to be formally charged and punished. And numerous studies have shown that law enforcement personnel tend to watch and react more severely to African American males than to white males—leading to higher rates of arrest (Fagan et al. 2016). From a different angle, gender stereotypes can also play a significant role in the labeling of people as deviant. Women going to physicians to report physical symptoms suggesting heart problems are frequently sent away with prescriptions for antidepressants in the (often mistaken) medical opinion that their problem was psychological rather than physical (Paulsen 2020). Men reporting the same symptoms are far more commonly diagnosed as suffering from heart disease.

These kinds of issues force us to recognize that official statistics—or any statistics, for that matter—should not be taken simply at face value. We need to know how the statistics have been created in order to understand (a) what they are counting and (b) how well they can be compared to other statistics about the same topic or condition.

Summing Up the Numbers

We can wrap up our discussion of official statistics and surveys by emphasizing four points. First, counting crime and deviance is a daunting task, plagued with blind spots and inaccuracies. The relative rarity of many kinds of deviant behavior, the stigma and secrecy that often surround it, the biases that often come into play in identifying and processing deviants—all of these present roadblocks to getting a clear and accurate count of the number of people involved in various types of crime and deviance. Official statistics and surveys cannot provide a completely accurate snapshot of the numbers of deviants or their behaviors, but—and this is our second point—even flawed as they are, official statistics and surveys have valuable uses.

Official statistics often provide the only extensive counts of certain kinds of behaviors, especially crime. Even if the data don't capture every case, it is useful to know whether there were 20 or 200 reported murders last year in a given city. Large-scale statistics offer opportunities to make at least rough comparisons of rates of crime and deviance according to individual and geographical demographics and other variables. We can document different rates of violent crimes, such as murder and assault, in different age groups and according to community size. While it is important to avoid mistaking correlation with causation, the fact of correlation can sensitize us to look for the meaning of such relationships.

The third point is that official statistics are a good measure of the *official processing* of those who become labeled and treated as criminals or deviants. Official statistics do capture the way we treat certain categories of people identified with deviant behavior at a given point in time. Looking at changes in official statistics can sensitize us to how official definitions and treatments of deviants are transformed over time. Official data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics show a huge increase in the number of incarcerated criminals in America from 1980 to 2010. Statistics from the National Institute of Mental Health show a massive decrease in the number of hospitalized mentally ill persons from the 1960s to the 2020s. Does this mean that we have more criminals and fewer mentally ill people in the United States today? Not at all. But it does mean that we identify and treat people who are labeled as criminals or as mentally ill differently today than we did in the past.

Finally, while well-conducted surveys can help us improve the quality of our data, there are many issues that sociologists researching deviance cannot effectively use official statistics and surveys to study. Many deviant activities are hidden from officials and survey researchers going door-to-door or emailing people to ask them questions. Perhaps the most critical issues that deviance scholars must address is the meaning of activities that are labeled deviant for those on the inside—the so-called "deviants" themselves. If we take seriously Blumer's proposition (discussed in Chapter 1) that "people act toward things on the basis of the meaning that those things have for them," then before we do anything else, we need to investigate the meanings that individuals and groups construct. We must get close enough to deviance to understand it from the inside. When we try to do this we find that we must conduct research not just to know the answers to our questions, but to know what questions to ask in the first place. Only then will we see the view up close.

THE CHALLENGES OF DEVIANCE ETHNOGRAPHY

Sociologists who approach deviance from the symbolic interactionist perspective argue that in order to understand deviance we must investigate how the meanings of the behavior or condition are socially constructed. Nothing in and of itself is universally evil, bad, or wrong, they contend. Our notions of right and wrong are social constructs that we talk into being. In order to understand deviance from this point of view, we need to grasp the meanings that members of relevant groups have created for objects, relationships, and events in their social world. For answers to these kinds of questions, we must turn to what sociologists refer to as ethnographic research methods.

Ethnographic research involves spending time with people, observing their actions and talking with them. As Jack Douglas, a leading deviance scholar in the 1970s explained, "We know quite clearly that official information is not only an unreliable source for studying deviance but also that it is systematically biased in line with the needs and desires of officials and important segments of the public, so that it provides a systematically distorted picture of deviance" (1972:4). The only real alternative, Douglas argued, was to get close to the everyday lives of deviants so in order to understand their views of their experiences.

The ethnographic interest in *direct* observation and apprehension of the social world reflects a certain **epistemology**, or theory of knowledge. The central tenet of this theory is that face-to-face interaction is the fullest condition for achieving intimate familiarity with the actions and orientations of other human beings. Rather than trying to learn about crime and deviance from agency records, official statistics, and surveys, ethnographers believe they will learn far more by watching and talking to people as they go about their daily lives. Deviance ethnographers creatively confront the challenges of directly studying deviance. They do so primarily because they believe that there is no practical alternative. In the process, they often find that the hard work of deviance research is filled with its own unique rewards.

The Focus of Deviance Ethnography

The first thing that we need to clarify as we turn our attention to **deviance ethnography** is that it involves more than just studying particular groups of people who have been labeled deviant. Deviance ethnographers who work in the symbolic interactionist and social constructionist tradition of sociology are interested first and foremost with the creation of meaning and alignment of individual and group activities in social interaction.

The social constructionist approach to deviance takes a broad view of three different, but interrelated, aspects of the deviance process: rule-making, rule-breaking, and rule-enforcing. **Rule-making** involves those individuals, groups, and activities that focus on defining certain acts or conditions as deviant and on banning them from the society. The group Mothers Against Drunk Drivers is an excellent example, as are groups that seek to ban public smoking or pornography. **Rule-breaking** refers to the activities of individuals or groups who violate expectations and rules that rule-makers seek to impose. Finally, **rule-enforcing** includes the range of activities by such people as police officers, county prosecutors, and drug counselors to identify those

who are breaking rules and punish or treat them in ways designed to control their misbehavior. Of these three groups, it is the rule-breakers—those labeled as criminals and deviants—who have received the bulk of ethnographic research attention.

While some scholars have lamented the disproportionate attention that those who have been labeled as deviant receive in comparison to those who make the rules and those who enforce them, there are good reasons why deviance ethnographers have paid so much attention to them. First, those who are labeled as deviants and rule-breakers are the focus of the attention of the other players in the deviance drama. Rule-makers and rule-enforcers make claims about who the deviants are, why they engage in deviance, and what should be done about them. But the claims that rule-makers and rule-enforcers make about deviants tend to be made with little if any attempt to learn about deviants by talking directly to them or directly observing their activities. Deviance ethnographers serve a vital function in providing more accurate under-standings of these individuals and groups, since they are among the few people who endeavor to understand their experiences and points of view. Not surprisingly, the research of deviance ethnographers often challenges the popular images of deviants promoted by rule-makers and rule-enforcers. By virtue of their interest in learning and sharing the insider views of those they study, ethnographers provide opportunities for those who are labeled deviant to have their voices heard.

This book pulls together the research from deviance ethnographers who have studied all three groups: rule-makers, rule-breakers, and rule-enforcers. It is impossible to understand the deviance process without looking at each of these kinds of groups and activities and the inter-connections among them. But, in keeping with the work of deviance ethnographers themselves, we will draw especially deeply upon ethnographic work that has looked at the social worlds and experiences of those who become labeled as deviants.

Gaining Access

The first task in conducting deviance ethnography is gaining access, which involves locating where the people and activities you want to study are and then negotiating with formal and informal gatekeepers who influence access to the setting or groups. Both present their own chal-lenges. Think for a minute about trying to locate members of a particular group of deviants or rule-breakers. Some are obvious because we cross their paths in the course of our daily lives. We may see a group of homeless people regularly hanging out in the park, or a group of antiabortion protesters picketing the local Planned Parenthood clinic. We may have driven past (perhaps even stopped at) adult bookstores and strip clubs, and we are likely to have seen (from inside or out) the police headquarters and city jail. In short, we know where to find some of the subjects and settings relevant to deviance ethnography.

But many of the activities and groups we might want to study are concealed from public view and more difficult to find. Those who are at risk of being labeled as deviant or criminal often have spots that are hidden from the public eye where they congregate and interact. At times, their settings may be camouflaged. What appears to be a pizza parlor or video arcade may in fact be a front for selling drugs. In other cases, back alleys and hidden alcoves of public

settings may be appropriated for the purposes of deviant transactions, sometimes strewn with tell-tale signs like hypodermic needles, condoms, or empty bottles.

When we are interested in studying particularly sophisticated and privileged groups, whether they are rule-breakers or rule-enforcers, we often find that they are especially secretive and protected from our view. White collar crime is conducted largely behind the corporate doors of banks and businesses—places much harder to penetrate than low-level drug dealing out of an abandoned building. And secretive law enforcement agencies set up clandestine operations in places like Guantanamo, or even on ships at sea, where they can escape public scrutiny.

Finally, what about the internet? Today a huge amount of social interaction occurs on the web. X/Twitter, YouTube, and Meta/Facebook are just a few of the best-known sites, used by millions of people on a daily basis. Not surprisingly, as the technologies and popularity of the internet have grown, it has become a major nexus for deviance-related communication and interaction. In terms of deviance, the internet is perhaps most recognized as a venue for pornography. But what about other types of deviance or deviance related activities? Many organizations, from small businesses to large law enforcement agencies, have websites devoted to providing deviance-related information. And in recent years, online support sites have proliferated for groups associated with various types of deviance, from psychedelic mushroom enthusiasts (Walker-Journey 2020) to eating disorder "pro-ana" (anorexic) and "pro-mia" (bulimia) websites (Gailey 2009). While some sites allow open access, others require membership in order to access some or all of the website's content. The rise of internet communication has led to the emergence of a new variation of ethnography, often referred to as **netnography** (Kozinets 2019), that is devoted to finding and studying online interaction and subcultures.

Like investigative reporters, deviance ethnographers must often nose around—on the streets or online—for contacts and clues to see what they can find. When ethnographers have found appropriate settings and groups, they have taken the first step in their research. The next step is to negotiate the approval from official and unofficial **gatekeepers**—those who may open or block opportunities to engage in research. For academic social scientists today, one important requirement is to submit one's research for approval by the university's **Institutional Review Board** (or IRB, as it is typically called). IRB committees are composed of faculty members and administrators responsible for reviewing research projects to certify that they meet standards for the ethical treatment of human subjects. In order to receive IRB approval, researchers must provide (1) an assessment of the potential risks and benefits associated with the research; (2) an explanation of **informed consent**, or how those they are studying will be informed of the research and asked to consent to be part of it; and (3) a statement of how the identities of research subjects and potentially sensitive information about them will be protected.

Often, there is a second set of gatekeepers in the setting itself. These gatekeepers may include officials, such as prison wardens, mental hospital directors, police chiefs, or even business owners without whose endorsement the researcher will be unable to get into a particular facility or meet with participants. Informal settings may have gatekeepers as well. Illegal operations such as crack houses or brothels often require some kind of special endorsement in order to get in—especially if one is interested in conducting interviews rather than buying drugs or sex. Fieldworkers may also find it useful, even necessary, to build relationships with individuals

from the settings who are willing to serve as guides in the field, helping researchers find their way and make contacts once they are allowed in.

Getting People to Open Up

While getting into a setting is crucial, the researcher must also find ways to get participants to open up to them. People engaged in stigmatized and potentially illegal activities have plenty of reasons to be wary of strangers. They may fear being looked down on or not being understood. They may not want their secrets revealed to the public, and they may worry about being turned over to authorities. On the other hand, law enforcement officers may be cautious about opening up to researchers, fearing that their investigative tactics might be revealed or that their ethics might be challenged. Given how many reasons there are to keep quiet, the most pertinent questions are these: What possible reason would someone have to let researchers learn about their lives? What do they stand to gain?

We can begin with what they seldom do it for: money. While there are occasional cases where deviance researchers pay their informants, it is an uncommon practice (Copes, Brown, and Tewksbury 2011). Typically, deviance ethnographers work with very tight budgets, often funding their research out of their own pockets. When they do have money to pay their informants, it is seldom more than a token amount, such as the $30 gift cards Heith Copes and his coresearchers (2022) gave those who consented to interviews in their study of methamphetamine users in Alabama. When Richard Wright and his colleagues interviewed active burglars at the scenes of recent crimes, they offered each burglar $50. While none of the men refused the money, it was not the cash that motivated most of them to share their stories. Indeed, just to prove that he did not need the money, one of the burglars pulled out his wallet at the interview and showed the researchers that it was stuffed with thousands of dollars. So, what motivated the burglars to consent to be interviewed? Perhaps the most common reason, Wright and his coresearchers argue, was that it gave the offenders a chance to share their stories. "The secrecy inherent in criminal work," they write, "means that offenders have few opportunities to discuss their activities with anyone besides associates—which many of them find frustrating. As one informant put it, 'What's the point of scoring if nobody knows about it?'" (Wright et al. 1992:154).

Just as this burglar was attracted to the opportunity to share his exploits, others often appreciate attention—so long as they feel safe in sharing their stories. Members of stigmatized groups that are marginalized and ignored, such as the homeless, may be especially pleased when researchers take an interest in them. Even respected professionals, such as law enforcement officers or rehabilitation counselors, often appreciate a chance to share their expertise and knowledge. Frequently, those who share their lives and stories with ethnographers do so in part out of a desire to correct what they feel are mistaken impressions that other people have about them. As one undercover narcotics agent bluntly told ethnographer Bruce Jacobs, "Maybe I can clear you up some" (1992:202). Similarly, one of the homeless women who Elliot Liebow (1993) spent time with during his research voiced her hope that he would, "Tell them who I am"—a request that he took to heart so seriously that he made it the title of his book on homeless women.

Finally, given the amount of time that ethnographers spend sharing the daily activities of those they study, they may become friends with their informants. And just as with other friends,

they may become sources of material and social support. In her research with pregnant addicted sex workers mentioned earlier, Kelly Ray Knight found herself offering to buy meals and provide small "loans" that were unlikely to be repaid. As needed, she writes, "I was an outreach worker, confidante, friend, chauffer, and sometimes 'doctor'" (2015:25). In situations such as this, rapport, good will, and openness develop in the course of daily life together.

Fieldwork Roles

Another common challenge of ethnographic research lies in finding or creating a social role that provides a reason (beyond just the research itself) for being in the setting. Social roles provide others with a sense of who we are and what they can expect from us. Establishing a social role or identity in interactions with those one is studying enables them to see the researcher as someone who is not a complete outsider—someone who can be trusted. Finding a viable fieldwork role is a key task of ethnographic research and a crucial test of one's ability to fit into the group or setting.

Sometimes deviance ethnographers try to bypass open fieldwork roles by pretending to be members of a group. The practice of **covert research**, or **disguised observation,** is controversial among sociologists and occurs far less often today than in the past. In a classic 1973 study of the experiences of mental hospital patients, David Rosenhan and his fellow researchers faked symptoms of mental illness and were admitted to mental hospitals. While they quit faking any signs of mental illness as soon as they were admitted, they found that the medical staff continued to view them as mentally ill (although other patients sometimes suspected they were faking). In defense of their disguised observation, deviance ethnographers—again, mostly in the past—have argued that it would have been impossible to gain access to the people and activities they observed if they had not hidden their research identities.

The use of covert research is far less common today in large part because Institutional Review Boards require that those being studied will be informed of, and consent to, being part of the research. Still, it is often the case that many people who are present in settings studied by deviance ethnographers are either not informed at all, or only minimally aware, that they are being observed. It is simply impractical and inappropriate, for instance, to try to announce one's self as a researcher to a large gathering or to everyone in a public setting. Covert research is more common among researchers who are accessing information and interaction online. In her extensive research on prostitution, Teela Sanders has not hidden her research role from the women she has met face-to-face. But on the Internet, she has acted differently. "Mostly," she writes, "I adopted the role of a lurker, covertly observing online interactions between buyers and sellers in chatrooms and bulletin boards" (2005:27). Since publicly accessible space on the internet is available to everyone, and since the true identities of those who interact online are often hidden, this kind of covert observation has not drawn the disapproval associated with covert face-to-face research.

Some deviance ethnographers have no reason to engage in covert research because they are or have been members of the groups they study. Katherine Frank, whose research in strip clubs and group sex parties was discussed at the start of this chapter, is one of many ethnographers who engage in what has been termed **autoethnography**, drawing on their own personal

experiences as they analyze the meanings and social processes associated with a particular kind of deviance. Many autoethnographers, like Frank, decide to become full members of deviant groups during the course of their research. But other autoethnographers become members of the groups before they decide to study them. Peter Hennen's (2008) interest in gay "bear" subculture grew out of his experience as a middle-age, large gay man looking for similar companions. Similarly, Alison Fixsen (2016, 2021a) has been motivated to study the experiences of people struggling to recover from psychiatric medication in large part because she has experienced such problems herself (as discussed in Chapter 12). The use of personal experience and autoethnography in social science research has sparked lively debate, even among ethnographers (e.g., Allen-Collinson 2013, Atkinson 2006), but the value of rigorous autoethnographic inquiry (e.g., Anderson 2006) to gain an insider's view of many deviance topics is undeniable.

Most deviance ethnographers, however, do not go into the field with personal experiences as members of the groups that they are studying. Nor do they go in as covert observers. Most often they find or create roles that combine their research interests with other activities and connections with the groups and settings they are studying. One common role is that of the **buddy researcher**, a blending of the roles of researcher and friend. The fieldworker makes it clear that they are keeping notes and writing up observations as a researcher, but much of their interaction with those they are studying is focused on everyday activities. In contrast to the informal buddy researcher role, many deviance ethnographers find it useful to adopt more specific roles. In her research with addicted pregnant sex-workers, Kelly Ray Knight (2015) volunteered with an outreach program run by a San Francisco health care clinic. Her outreach worker role provided Knight with an opportunity to spend time with the women she studied and to provide them with support that fostered their openness with her.

Getting Along in the Field

Deviance ethnographers feel a sense of accomplishment when they locate appropriate settings and find a role that will make their presence acceptable. But fieldwork is an ongoing process filled with continuing challenges. Once the researcher is in the setting, they must build relationships and trust with those from whom they seek to learn. Human relationships, including those in the field, are not static. They are created and recreated through social interaction over time, and marked by shifting patterns of intimacy, closeness, distance, and conflict. The relationships that deviance ethnographers develop with those they study are made more difficult than most relationships by the contexts of stigma, illegal behavior, and distrust in which they are embedded. These researchers must find ways not only to "get in," but also to "get along," to manage the daily challenges involved with interpersonal relations with those they are studying.

Waverly Duck's research in a largely African American community where drug dealing was a common occupation offers a good example. Duck, who is himself African American, was initially introduced to the neighborhood when he was recruited to serve on a legal defense team for a young man falsely accused of murder. He went on to build a trusted reputation in the neighborhood by doing volunteer work with children and families, adopting the self-presentation of a social service provider. Once he was accepted in this role, he was able to freely observe behavior

on the streets without raising concern. But Duck also paid close attention to showing respect for the local norms of social interaction. "In accord with the code of the street," he explains, "I never made direct eye contact with dealers even when they were being helpful, and on the few occasions when we did cross paths I spoke only if spoken to" (2015: 43).

Many social settings of interest to deviance ethnographers include several different kinds of people and activities. A strip club for instance includes dancers, their audience, bartenders and cocktail waitresses, bouncers, and possibly undercover vice officers. Even a fieldworker who has worked hard to explain their research interests to some key people in the setting will find it impossible and inappropriate to try to explain to everyone. Not surprisingly, misunderstandings can arise. as Teela Sanders' experienced one night while doing research at Foxy's, a prostitution sauna house. Sanders recalls:

> About 10 o'clock, one of Emma's regulars arrived. I could tell he was a regular by the casual nature of the greeting. The man came into the lounge and sat opposite me on the sofa and proceeded to talk about the weather. This all seemed normal until I noted that both Emma and Belinda had gone out of the room . . . After a long silence he confided that he always "tried out" the new girls, even though Emma was his regular, and if I was free, would I mind seeing him in the Jacuzzi room. (2005:2829)

Sanders goes on to explain that a few minutes later, as she sputtered awkward excuses, Emma came to rescue her and took the client to a room. What Sanders learned as an ethnographer from that experience is critical. People often make assumptions about who the researcher is and why they are there. Deviance ethnographers must recognize others often read things into their presence that they may not even be aware of, and managing field relationships requires handling such presumed identities and interests in a way that does not damage rapport.

Most of the time the presumptions made about the researcher involve attempts to make sense of why they are in the setting or interested in the activities. Typically, people are presumed to be personally involved in settings and activities that they are seen in. Deviance ethnographers must be sensitive to how they may be perceived and prepared for appropriate action. When they experience pressures to engage in activities that they prefer to avoid, they face the dilemma of how to avoid participation while at the same time not alienating those they are studying. Waverly Duck faced such a dilemma when he was approached by a neighborhood drug seller, Dave, who assumed that he was a potential customer. Duck declined to purchase drugs. "But," he recounts, "given my desire to gain Dave's trust and not to insult his occupation, I explained my close family members' drug history; my brother and my nephew were both in prison at that time, and I had no desire for any experience with cocaine" (2015:38).

In order to minimize problems associated with such situations, ethnographers may plan in advance for confronting them. Female ethnographers—even unattached ones—may wear wedding rings as visible announcements that they are not romantically available, or to show as their reason for turning down a request for a date. Deviance ethnographers also frequently rely on evasive finessing, or finding ways to avoid doing things without looking like they are completely unwilling to participate. Drug researcher Terry Williams found that cocaine users themselves sometimes turned down an offer to use some by explaining, "My nose is coked out," an account that he found useful at times for explaining why he wasn't snorting coke with his

informants (Williams et al. 1992). As Williams's example demonstrates, finessing strategies tend to be spontaneous and highly contextualized, depending on a deviance ethnographer's grasp of local culture.

Collecting Data

In addition to talking and interacting with people associated with various aspects of the deviance enterprise being studied, deviance ethnographers must also record their observations and interviews in order to analyze and draw conclusions from them later. This means that when deviance ethnographers engage in participant observation, they participate with a different mindset than do others in the setting. While others are focused almost exclusively on the immediate tasks at hand (e.g., buying drugs, selling sex, making—or avoiding—arrests), the deviance ethnographer must also attend to issues of how to record what they are witnessing.

Ethnographers in general, and deviance ethnographers in particular, often find it difficult, if not impossible to take notes openly while participating in relevant activities. In order to avoid disrupting interactions, ethnographers frequently make jotted notes in the field and write up more detailed fieldnotes later. Even when they write short jotted notes to themselves in the field, ethnographers often take pains to do so in ways that don't draw attention to their writing. One common strategy is to withdraw to the privacy of a bathroom to hurriedly jot down key words and phrases that will spur their memories later—thus giving rise to the joke that ethnographers suffer from a professional tendency toward weak bladders.

Even when they openly conduct interviews, ethnographers must adapt to the unique circumstances of the people and settings they are studying. For some ethnographers that means negotiating access to correctional facilities. Neal Shover's 1996 research on persistent thieves and studies of illicit drug users conducted by criminologists like Heith Copes (2008) and Kristin Carbone-Lopez (2012), for instance, have been based on prison inmate interviews. Other deviance ethnographers interview research subjects as they go about their daily lives. Teela Sanders (2005) meshed interviews with the daily routines of sex workers she studied. For example, Sanders spent several days interviewing a sex worker named Beryl as she styled her hair and decided on what to wear in the late morning after she had prepared her children for school.

Similarly, in her research on drug-using street prostitutes in Brooklyn, Lisa Maher (1997) had to adapt her interviews to short time frames since many heroin users nodded out at repeated intervals or became fidgety and unable to focus due to withdrawal symptoms. In situations where interviews are conducted in odd moments and places, it may be practically impossible to record the conversation.

As these examples illustrate, deviance ethnography requires the researcher to juggle several activities at once and to improvise according to the dictates of the situation. Whether engaged in participant observation or interviewing, the researcher must be ready to roll with the punches and adapt to the situation. For those involved in participant observation, in particular, it can be a challenge to avoid being so caught up in the action that there is little time or energy left to record it. Unlike other participants in the setting, the fieldworker does not walk away from the activity or event once it is over. Instead, they must replay the interactions and conversations they have just witnessed and write out detailed descriptions of the day's (or night's) activities.

No matter how rich and interesting the researchers' experiences in the setting are, they are only useful for sociological analysis if they are written out in enough detail that the ethnographer can revisit the events later in order to gain new insights and ideas into the people and activities they are investigating.

Narrative Analysis

Those who are labeled as deviants are only one, however important, group in the deviance process. Deviance researchers must situate deviants' activities within the broader society in which they are labeled as bad, sick, or morally inferior. Some deviance ethnographers study deviance claims-makers, or individuals and groups who seek to define a kind of behavior or status as deviant. Others focus their research on rule-creators such as legislative officials, or rule-enforcers such as police and prison staff. Typically, such ethnographers find themselves using similar methods and facing many of the same challenges as those who study "deviants" themselves.

As deviance researchers collect and analyze data, they may also engage in various types of narrative or content analysis to examine the stories told about deviants—and by deviants themselves. Narrative analysis includes a range of analytic strategies as well as a variety of possible kinds of narrative or discourse. Deviance scholars turn to narrative analysis to understand the ways in which deviance categories are constructed and change over time. As Donileen Loseke (2021) observes, stories exist at every level of social life. At the broadest level, they are reflected in popular culture portrayals, including those of deviants, in public discourse and the media. At an institutional level, narratives are embedded in laws and social policies, presenting images of deviants and ways to manage or control them. Deviance processing organizations, such as law enforcement agencies and therapeutic treatment programs, have manuals and guides describing the "presenting problems" and appropriate responses to deviants under their jurisdiction. Finally, deviants themselves invoke narratives to characterize who they are and how they are treated.

Social constructionist scholars analyze the narratives used to create and define deviants and how to treat them. Many researchers seek to identify key themes and metaphors used in deviance claims-making. So, for instance, Craig Reinarman (2009) has examined the typical ways in which drug scares are constructed in the media and Abigail Saguy (2013) has analyzed how major newspapers and magazines have portrayed obesity and eating disorders. Other researchers have focused on the narratives used by ascribed "deviants" themselves, as in Niki Fritz and Bryant Paul's analysis (2017) of the sexual scenarios in different types of online pornography and Alison Fixsen and Damian Ridge's (2017) study of key themes in stories of psychiatric medication withdrawal posted on Internet support sites. Valuable findings and insights provided by narrative analysis are drawn upon in chapters throughout this book.

Understanding Social Worlds Different From Our Own

Deviance ethnography requires a special attitude toward new and potentially unsettling situations and people. Both intellectually and emotionally, deviance ethnographers must work to keep themselves open to seeing the world through the eyes of those they study. While they do not necessarily need to agree with the meanings that guide others' actions, they have to be able to

understand from inside the perspective of those they study. And they must do so not only with an open mind, but with an open heart—a willingness to see the humanity in us all. This can be particularly difficult when you are studying groups whose activities and ideas strike you as strange or even repugnant. But unless deviance ethnographers are genuinely open to learning from others about their experiences, they will fail to achieve their most fundamental research goals.

Of course, ethnographic research on deviance varies widely in terms of the groups and activities that are studied. Often deviance ethnographers study groups that they are particularly sympathetic to or find especially interesting. In these situations, the researcher is already receptive to the insiders' perspective. But many other groups studied by researchers evince less positive initial reactions, and deviance ethnographers must fight against the urge to hold themselves at arm's length and failing to look at their world from their point of view. This was certainly the case for Douglas Pryor in his research for *Unspeakable Acts*, a study of men who had sexually abused children. The very idea of men sexually abusing children stirs intense feelings of anger and disgust. As a father of two young daughters, Pryor experienced these feeling himself during the course of his research. But despite his emotional reaction, Pryor recognized the value of learning from abusers, in their experiences and their words, how involvement in sexual offending unfolded. "However repulsed one might feel about the issue," he writes, "such feelings do not diminish the importance of trying to understand how and why sexual situations between adults and children occur" (1996:2). Deviance ethnographers do not need to approve of the behaviors or agree with the beliefs of those they study. Their goal is to understand the meanings that guide their informants' actions.

Photo-Elicitation Interviewing

One valuable technique some ethnographers use to better understand the social worlds and experiences of those they study is called **photo-elicitation interviewing** where researchers ask participants to share their responses and insights to photographs that the researchers or participants themselves have taken. As Heith Copes and his colleagues explain, photo-elicitation interviews can facilitate rapport between researchers and respondents, which is especially helpful when working with stigmatized deviant populations because it gives them an chace to 'show and tell' ethnographers about their lives (Copes et al. 2018). When done well, this research technique produces emotionally powerful and substantively rich interviews for analysis, as we will see in Chapter 10 where we look at Copes and his colleagues research on the experiences of methamphetamine users in rural Alabama. The following researcher profile introduces Copes as an influential deviance ethnographer.

RESEARCHER PROFILE: HEITH COPES

Heith Copes is a criminologist and deviance ethnographer at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. In research conducted with incarcerated offenders, Copes has interviewed auto thieves, identity thieves, bar fighters, meth cooks, and drug users. Much of his research

focuses on how offenders make decisions that prolong their criminal careers. Serving on the editorial boards of several crime and deviance journals, and as coeditor of the journal *Deviant Behavior*, has enabled him to be a major advocate for deviance ethnography. In the mid-2010s, Copes teamed up with several other researchers to study the experiences of methamphetamine users in North Alabama. As members of his ethnographic research team became embedded in the social world of meth users, they formed relationships with them and shared their daily lives, meeting their families and keeping in touch even when they were not in the field. The close connections Copes' team developed had a deep impact—and not just on the researchers' understanding of methamphetamine use. "When ethnographers get close to participants," Copes explains, "the stories of their hardships, struggles, and setbacks can have strong emotional consequences" for the ethnographers themselves (2019:222).

The toll that witnessing the troubled lives of methamphetamine cooks and users had on Copes became especially clear to him when he took the wife and son of a convicted meth cook to see the man while he was in prison. Recognizing Copes's nervousness during the visit, the man's son asked him why he seemed worried all the time. Copes was taken aback that his anxiety was so intense that even a child could sense it. Copes began to realize that witnessing the suffering of the people he was studying had taken a toll on him. He had lost nearly 25 pounds and was having difficulty sleeping.

When he discussed matters with his family and colleagues, some of them advised him to terminate the research. But he felt a sense of responsibility. "I knew I couldn't quit," he writes. "I didn't want to give up just because things got hard, but I couldn't be part of the suffering either. It wasn't fair to those around me" (226). Copes came to accept that what mattered to him was that he wanted to do the best he could to help them. For him that meant embracing more open feelings with his research subjects, and as he shared his feelings more openly with them, he felt a desire to be more open and engaged in his life beyond the research. He began to mentor and work with students more and reconnected with friends and family that he had lost touch with. "While these changes made me more vulnerable," he writes, "I realized that the anxiety was slowly going away. Exposure to the true hardships of these drug users' lives and the necessity of a mental shift led me to be more compassionate in general" (227).

Looking back on this research, Copes concludes, "While it is not possible to determine the long-term impact on our participants, I can say that I have come out a better person" (230).

GETTING THE BIG PICTURE: SOCIOHISTORICAL COMPARISON

Deviance ethnographers develop their understanding of different groups and aspects of the deviance process through up-close study. By virtue of the detailed attention they give to the settings and groups they study, few deviance ethnographies attempt to present a complete picture of the deviance process. Most ethnographies focus on one particular social group or deviance category, such as street prostitutes in a given city or recreational drug users on a specific college campus. Caught in the local details of a particular group or setting, it is easy to lose sight of the bigger picture: the actions and interactions of rule-makers, rule-breakers, and rule-enforcers that comprise the overarching context of a particular kind of deviance, in a particular local setting, at a specific point in time.

A crucial element of understanding any kind of deviance lies in awareness of the broader social context in which it occurs. In order to get the bigger picture, we must be able to grasp the perspectives of different groups and their interactions, both among themselves (e.g., interactions between law enforcement and those who break the law) and with other groups in the broader society. Further, in order to get a more balanced understanding, we need to have a sense of how similar categories of deviance have—or have not—been present in other cultures and other times. Therefore, we will not focus solely on deviants themselves at one particular point in time, but will also examine the constructions of different kinds deviance both cross-culturally and historically in the United States.

BLURRED BOUNDARIES II: HOW CLOSE IS TOO CLOSE?

In pursuing a deep understanding of the deviance process, ethnographers put their minds and bodies in closer proximity to deviance than is required of other kinds of research. Certainly, deviance ethnography can present ethical concerns that are seldom seen in other types of research. Consider the two activities described below. Imagine that you are a member of a university IRB faced with deciding if a study that allows the activity should be approved. Answer the questions at the bottom of this box about how you would evaluate the acceptability of these activities in deviance ethnography.

Covering for a deviant activity. When researching stigmatized deviant behavior, ethnographers may find themselves providing cover for those they observe. An example is provided by Jackie, one of the sex workers in Teela Sanders' (2005) research, who asked Sanders to meet a long-term boyfriend who knew nothing about how Jackie earned her money. Sanders was asked to play the role of "Tina," one of Jackie's office coworkers. In doing so, Sanders provided living proof of a cover story that protected Tina's intimate relationship from the harm of the sex worker stigma.

A more extreme case of covering for deviance comes from one of the most well-known and controversial deviance ethnographies ever conducted, Laud Humphreys's research for his book *Tearoom Trade* (1973), a study of impersonal male–male sex in public restrooms. In this research, Humphreys often played the role of what was called a "watch queen," a lookout to alert the men if someone unknown was about to walk in on them. Humphreys found this role enabled him to observe restroom encounters while not actually participating in the action. While no IRB would approve observing and covering for violent or otherwise harmful behavior, deceptive covering for victimless deviant behavior lies in a potential gray area of research ethics.

Using drugs or alcohol with those being studied. In their efforts to fit into a group or setting, deviance ethnographers find it helpful to participate in at least some of the members' social activities, at times including drinking and drug use. While Terry Williams and Waverly Duck (as discussed earlier) finessed their way out of buying or using drugs without alienating their research subjects, other deviance ethnographers have found sharing a beer or even smoking marijuana useful in getting close to those they study. Personally, the author of this textbook socialized over beer with homeless adults at dive bars and under bridges while researching homelessness in Austin, Texas (Snow and Anderson 1993). At a more extreme

level, criminologist Ken Tunnell shared alcohol and marijuana with some of his informants in an effort to build rapport and collect richer data. Recounting one such occasion, Tunnell has written, "I came away with some excellent data made possible by a connection established through methods other than those promulgated by hard science, objectivity, and researcher neutrality—a connection lubricated by weed and drink" (1998:207).

There are a number of arguments both for and against different levels of getting close to deviance. Where is it appropriate to draw the line? How close is close enough? How close is too close? These kinds of concerns will surface in the following chapters, forcing us to confront the fact that researching deviance, like deviance itself, involves blurred boundaries, judgment calls, and tough decisions. What criteria do you feel are most important for deciding what is acceptable versus unacceptable in research? Why? Given the criteria you identify, how would you evaluate the acceptability of the research activities described here? Explain how your criteria are relevant to these research examples.

SUMMARY

- Sociology is an empirical mode of inquiry focused on rigorous study of human behavior and social life.

- Official statistics are extremely important in the study of crime and deviance, especially for providing information about large numbers of people across the country.

- Official statistics are also limited in several ways.
  - They only capture cases that are reported.
  - They rely on current official definitions of deviance.
  - They reflect the priorities and structure of the agencies that collect the data.

- Deviance ethnographers study rule-makers, rule-breakers, and rule-enforcers to understand deviance from their specific points of view.

- Ethnographers must gain access to settings in which the different aspects of deviance are enacted and get those who are active in these settings to open up to them about their views and experiences.

In developing fieldwork roles that enable them to fit into deviance-related settings and develop rapport with those they study, ethnographers must make decisions about how close they can get to those they study without violating professional ethics and losing objectivity.

KEY TERMS

autoethnography

buddy researcher

causation

correlation

covert research

deviance ethnography

epistemology

gatekeepers

informed consent

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

National Crime Victimization Survey
   (NCVS)

netnography

photo-elicitation interviewing

rates (of deviant behavior)

rule-breaking

rule-enforcing

rule-making

*Uniform Crime Repor*ts (*UCR*)