

Deviance as a Situated Phenomenon

Variations in the Social Interpretation of Marijuana and Alcohol Use*

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Introduction

A relativistic orientation has become preeminent in recent theoretical work in the field of deviance (Douglas, 1971; Rubington and Weinberg, 1973; Davis, 1972; Matza, 1969; Schur, 1971). In contrast to earlier structural or normative theories of deviant behavior, relativistic theories do not treat deviance as an objectively given quality of certain acts or actors. Rather, deviance is viewed as analytically identifiable only *in relation to* interpretational and interactional processes through which acts and actors are *socially defined* as deviant. Erickson (1966:11), for example, states: "Deviance is not a property *inherent* in certain forms of behavior; it is a property *conferred upon* these forms by the audiences which directly or indirectly witness them" (emphasis in original). Assignment of this symbolic property to a certain act may depend as much or more on various characteristics of the actors, audiences, and situations involved than on the nature of the act itself. Thus, an actor's behavior is but one of a number of contingencies which must be considered in relativistic analyses of social definitions of deviance.

Unfortunately, this relativistic orientation has served more as a focal point for critique, debate, and speculation than as a heuristic stimulus for empirical research (see Gibbs, 1966; 1972; Schur, 1971:7-36; Davis, 1972). In particular, few studies have dealt with the relativistic argument that social interpretations of "deviant behavior" are

situationally problematic. Audience interpretations of a given act as deviant or nondeviant are taken to be highly dependent upon the social circumstances within which that act is embedded. The same act interpreted as deviant under one set of circumstances might be seen as quite acceptable under other circumstances. As an illustration of this argument, Douglas (1971:139) cites the following example adapted from Blum (1970):

... a woman observed on the streets of a city to be wailing might well be thought to be "mentally ill." Yet once we know that she has just been in an automobile accident in which a loved one has been killed, her behavior can be seen to be "normal grief" and not "mental illness." Only the situational context makes this clear to us.

Deviance theorists in the "ethnomethodological" tradition, such as Douglas, Blum, and McHugh (1970) have been especially insistent on treating deviance as a "situated" phenomenon. However, a concern with situational variations in interpretational processes is also evident in more conventional theories of societal reaction and labeling (Kitsuse, 1962; Rubington and Weinberg, 1973:1-10). Yet with the exception of several studies on police work (Piliavin and Briar, 1964; Bittner, 1967a, 1967b; Black and Reiss, 1970; Black, 1970), deviance research has overlooked this problem.

Previous theoretical discussions of situated interpretations of deviance have been rather abstract and have not provided systematic guidelines for research. This study will attempt to specify several situational factors which influence the interpretational process. The influences of these factors will be examined empirically, using survey data which compare interpretive reactions to marijuana use and alcohol use in various situations.

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Situational Variations in the Interpretational Process

One of the earliest and clearest statements of the relativistic orientation is Kitsuse's (1962) analysis of societal reactions to deviance. Deviance, for Kitsuse, must be defined and analyzed from the point of view of those who interpret and react to behavior as deviant. Accordingly, he conceptualizes "deviance" as a three-stage process "by which the members of a group, community, or society (1) interpret behavior as deviant, (2) define persons who so behave as a certain kind of deviant, and (3) accord them the treatment considered appropriate to such deviants" (Kitsuse, 1962:248). These stages represent empirically related, but analytically distinct sources of variation in social definitions of deviance. The initiating stage in Kitsuse's formulation—interpretations of behavior as deviant—is of primary interest here.¹ Although Kitsuse (1962:255) indicates that the "interpretational process may be activated by a wide range of situational behavior," he does not present a detailed analysis of these situational variations.

In a recent paper, Orcutt (1973) attempts to extend Kitsuse's work by relating it to laboratory studies of deviation in small groups. On the basis of a reanalysis of two small group studies, he identifies three situational conditions which appear to influence naïve group members' interpretations of "deviation" performed by experimental confederates during group discussions. Group members' attitudinal hostility toward a confederate tends to increase to the extent that the confederate's behavior is perceived (1) to interfere with central situational goals, (2) to be stable, i.e., unresponsive to social influence and situational change, and (3) to be motivated by pervasive personal dispositions of the confederate rather than by immediate social events in the situation. These three conditions refer to joint perceptual relationships between the confederate's actions and the situational context from which interpretations of deviant behavior are derived. Cumulative combinations of these perceptual conditions are used by group members as grounds for assigning "deviance" as a situated meaning to the confederate's actions. Consistent with Kitsuse's formulation, Orcutt argues that such interpretations subsequently provide members with

evidence for defining the confederate as deviant in character and with justification for reacting to him accordingly.

Orcutt's (1973) analysis of situational contingencies in the interpretational process is limited by its reliance on indirect inference from previously published research. A more adequate analysis of these conditional factors would require that the situational context be systematically varied while holding the actor's behavior constant. The present study attempts such an analysis. Respondents in the investigation reported here were asked to interpret the acceptability or unacceptability of marijuana use or alcohol use in various hypothetical situations. Situational circumstances were systematically varied according to three conditions suggested by Orcutt's reanalysis of small group studies.

The first of these conditions relates to *situational goals* and varies according to whether drug use occurs in a *task* situation or in a *socio-emotional* situation. The use of either marijuana or alcohol should generally be perceived as consistent with the goals of a socioemotional situation, such as a party, but as a potential source of interference with goal-attainment in a task situation. Therefore, the acts of marijuana use or alcohol use will tend to be interpreted as deviant when situated in a task setting.

The situational *stability* of marijuana or alcohol use is also varied. In some of the items presented to respondents, drug-using behavior was described as *intra-situational*, i.e., a single, situationally circumscribed occurrence. Other items described marijuana or alcohol use as *inter-situational*, i.e., the act of drug use was presented as a stable pattern of repeated occurrences across several situations. Attribution theorists (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967) argue that the certainty with which inferences or interpretations can be made regarding an act will be an increasing function of the consistency of the act's occurrence across situations. When drug use is perceived as a stable *inter-situational* pattern, it will be more likely to be interpreted as deviant. Some support for this hypothesis is supplied by Johnston's (1973:74) recent study of attitudes toward drug use.

The third and final situational variation considered in this study relates to *motivations* attributed

to the marijuana or alcohol user. A central issue for attribution theories in social psychology (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967), as well as for relativistic theories of deviance (McHugh, 1970), is whether situational circumstances or personal motives of the actor are perceived to be responsible for the occurrence of an act. Situational causes are frequently viewed as legitimate "excuses" for a deviant act (Scott and Lyman, 1963). An attempt is made to tap this aspect of situational interpretations in the present study by varying drug-using situations according to a distinction between *social* and *personal* motivations for use. Social motivations were depicted in situations which reflect mutual social participation in marijuana or alcohol use. Personal motivations were implied where drug use is presented as an individualistic attempt to cope with the situation. Interpretations of deviance should be more likely under the latter condition.

In addition to its focus on these three situational variations, the present study also attempts to take into consideration recent criticism advanced by Lemert (1972) of relativistic theories of deviance. Lemert cautions against the tendency of some theorists to overemphasize subjective social definitions and to ignore the objective nature of the deviant act itself. He argues that "[t]he extreme relativism in some statements of labeling theory leaves the unfortunate impression that almost any meaning can be assigned to human attributes and actions" (1972:22). Deviance research should attend both to objective factors and to subjective factors and "it has to be heeded continually that deviance outcomes flow from interaction between the two sets of factors . . ." (1972:21).

In order to deal empirically with Lemert's arguments, the research reported here incorporates comparisons between two objectively different acts, marijuana use and alcohol use. Half of the respondents in this study were presented with situational variations in marijuana use, while the other half were asked to interpret alcohol use in the same situations. These two acts are similar enough to permit standardization of situational variations, but sufficiently different to permit comparative assessment of unique effects of an act upon respondents' interpretations. For example, is marijuana use *generally* interpreted as more deviant

than alcohol use, irrespective of situational contexts? Also, does the nature of these acts "interact," in Lemert's words, with certain situational features to produce unique interpretations of deviance? This analysis will focus on these substantive questions as well as on the relativistic problem of situated deviance.

Methodology

Items describing situational variations in recreational drug use were included on questionnaires administered to a purposive sample of University of Minnesota undergraduates during the Winter Quarter of 1972. The questionnaires were distributed and completed during regular meetings of eight large classes in four undergraduate divisions.² Two forms of the questionnaire—a Marijuana Form and an Alcohol Form—were distributed alternately to students in adjoining seats. Approximately half of the items on the two forms were identical. The other half of the items dealt specifically with one drug or the other. The Marijuana Form was completed by 460 undergraduates and the Alcohol Form was completed by 465. These two sub-samples did not differ significantly in sociodemographic characteristics or in levels of recreational drug use.

Respondents' interpretations of situational variations were measured by a series of eight items, listed in Table 1. These items were randomly mixed with four filler items. Respondents who completed the Marijuana Form were asked to rate situated descriptions of marijuana use, while respondents who completed the Alcohol Form were asked to rate alcohol use. Ratings were recorded in a five-point Likert response format ranging from "quite acceptable" to "quite unacceptable" with "indifferent" as the mid-point.³ The eight critical items presented all possible factorial combinations of the three situational variations, i.e., situational goal (Socioemotional/Task), stability of use (Intra-situational/ Inter-situational) and user motivation (Social motivation/ Personal motivation). Therefore, including the marijuana-alcohol comparison across independent sub-samples, these items were designed as a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial, with repeated measures on three factors.

TABLE 1 Percentages Accepting of or Indifferent to Marijuana Use and Alcohol Use by Situational Item Variations

<i>Situational Items</i>	<i>Conditional Variations*</i>			<i>Accepting or Indifferent</i>		<i>Significance of Difference (by Chi-Square)</i>
	<i>Situational Goal</i>	<i>Stability of Use</i>	<i>User Motivation</i>	<i>Mari.</i>	<i>Alco.</i>	
1—A college student smokes marijuana (drinks alcohol) at a small party with his friends who are also using marijuana (alcohol).	Socio-emotional	Intra-situation	Social motivation	82.8%	97.0%	p < .001
2—A college student working as a salesman smokes marijuana (drinks alcohol) with one of his clients who has offered it to him.	TASK	Intra-situation	Social motivation	39.0%	81.0%	p < .001
3—A college student smokes marijuana (drinks alcohol) two or three times a week when he gets together with friends in the evening.	Socio-emotional	INTER-SITUATION	Social motivation	70.9%	79.0%	p < .01
4—During a boring party, a college student withdraws to a quiet corner to get high on marijuana (alcohol) to help him feel better.	Socio-emotional	Intra-situation	PERSONAL MOTIVATION	41.7%	34.9%	p < .05
5—A college student uses marijuana (alcohol) to ease his anxieties about meeting others before going to any kind of a party.	Socio-emotional	INTER-SITUATION	PERSONAL MOTIVATION	39.6%	48.5%	p < .01
6—A college student working in an office regularly smokes marijuana (drinks alcohol) with his co-workers during their lunch break.	TASK	INTER-SITUATION	Social motivation	29.6%	31.5%	N.S.
7—On a particularly trying day at his part-time job, a college student smokes marijuana (drinks alcohol) during his lunch break to help him face the rest of his work.	TASK	Intra-situation	PERSONAL MOTIVATION	26.5%	20.9%	N.S.
8—Every day before going to his job, a college student smokes marijuana (drinks alcohol) to help him cope with his work situation.	TASK	INTER-SITUATION	PERSONAL MOTIVATION	9.3%	4.9%	p < .025

*Conditions expected to increase "deviant" interpretations shown in capital letters.

Results

Table 1 lists the situational items and the conditional variations that each presented. This table also presents the percentages of respondents who either rated an item as quite acceptable, acceptable, or indifferent. These categories seem reasonable as an operationalization of *non-deviant* interpretations of situated instances of recreational drug use. Percentages are given separately for interpretations of marijuana use ($N = 460$) and alcohol use ($N = 465$). Finally, the significance level of differences between drug percentages is given for each item.

Cumulative Effects of Situational Variations

The items in Table 1 have been ranked in four groups. The item presenting no "deviant" situational conditions is listed first (Item 1), the three items with one "deviant" condition next (Items 2-4), followed by items presenting two "deviant" conditions (Items 5-7) and the item with three "deviant" conditions (Item 8). A general indication of the cumulative influence of the situational conditions can be gained by reading percentages down this table within drugs.

With two interesting exceptions, decreasing acceptance of marijuana and alcohol use can be observed as a greater number of "deviant" conditions becomes implicated in the situational context. Interpretations of alcohol use show an especially dramatic cumulative change. Although 97 percent of the alcohol sub-sample accept drinking in the completely "non-deviant" situation (Item 1), only five percent accept alcohol use in the completely "deviant" situation (Item 8). Therefore, *depending on the situational context*, interpretations of alcohol use undergo a virtually complete reversal from nondeviant to deviant. Situational variations have a similar, but less pronounced cumulative effect on interpretations of marijuana use. Percentages of acceptance range from 83 percent to nine percent. These general cumulative trends clearly indicate that social interpretations of these acts are systematically responsive to variations in situational contexts.

One exception to the general cumulative trend involves marijuana use in a task situation which is

"non-deviant" in other respects (Item 2). Marijuana use in this situation is slightly less acceptable than is use in a situation where *both* stability and motivation are "deviant" (Item 5). This finding suggests that the respondents place special weight on situational goals when interpreting marijuana use as deviant. In fact, the four situations involving task goals are also the four situations where marijuana use is most likely to be interpreted as deviant.

The other exception to the general cumulative trend occurs when alcohol use is presented in the context of a personal motivation to "withdraw" from a boring party (Item 4). Curiously, alcohol use is rated as less acceptable in this particular situation than in another situation involving both inter-situational use and personal motivation (Item 5, "easing anxieties about meeting others before going to any party"). This theoretically troublesome result is undoubtedly due to the specific reference to "withdrawal" in the former item. Such a use of alcohol implies extreme detachment from the social situation, while "easing anxieties about meeting others" still implies an element of social motivation. Ironically, this subtle and unintended difference between the "personal motivations" described in these items highlights a particular sensitivity to motivational considerations in social interpretations of alcohol use. The implications of this sensitivity can be seen more clearly in comparisons across drugs.

Comparisons Between Marijuana Use and Alcohol Use

The data indicate that the act of marijuana use is not uniformly interpreted as more deviant than is the act of alcohol use, at least among college students. As shown in Table 1, alcohol use is significantly more acceptable than marijuana use in only four of eight situational contexts. Greater acceptance of alcohol use is limited mainly to relatively "non-deviant" contexts, where only one or no "deviant" situational conditions are involved.

Alcohol use is much more acceptable than marijuana use in the task situation where other conditions are "non-deviant" (Item 2, salesman "drinks" vs. "smokes" with a client). This finding reflects the functional importance and "normality" of alcohol use in situations involving business

transactions, a situated activity which has yet to be institutionalized for marijuana. Consistent with Lemert's argument, this is an instance where the objective nature of the act "interacts" with the situational context to produce a unique interpretation of deviance.

Differences between interpretations of marijuana use and alcohol use tend to diminish or reverse as soon as personal motivation is perceived to enter into the situated activity. In three out of four items involving personal motivations, the acceptability of marijuana use is greater than that of alcohol use. Table 1 clearly shows the precipitous decline in acceptance of alcohol that results when personal motivations become a factor in situational interpretations. These patterns relate to the earlier comment regarding the interpretive significance of the motivational circumstances of alcohol use. Compared to alcohol use, interpretations of marijuana use appear to be less contingent on situational variations in motivations attributed to the user.

Discussion

The situational variations examined in this analysis do produce substantial and predictable changes in respondents' interpretations of marijuana and alcohol use. Each of the three situational conditions has at least some effect on respondents' interpretations and the cumulative effects of these variations are dramatic. This is particularly so in the case of alcohol use, where interpretations vary from almost unanimous acceptance to unanimous nonacceptance. In short, what is non-deviant in some situations is deviant in others. These data generally lend empirical substance to relativistic discussions of deviance as a situated phenomenon.

However, Lemert's caution against "radical" relativism also finds justification in these data. Several findings indicate that the nature of the act itself has important influences on respondents' interpretations. In contrast to marijuana use, alcohol use tends to receive substantial disapproval only after personal motivations are situationally attributed to the act. Once alcohol use is perceived to be associated with personal motivations, interpretive differences between this act

and the act of marijuana use diminish considerably. On the other hand, marijuana use is clearly viewed as deviant in a typical task situation where alcohol use is overwhelmingly accepted by the respondents. An understanding of these results requires analysis of differences between the acts themselves.

Respondents may view marijuana use and alcohol use differently in terms of *typical* motivations for these acts. Respondents seem tacitly to assume that alcohol use is socially motivated, unless notified otherwise by situational circumstances. It is likely that a similar tacit assumption is not made with regard to marijuana use. Given the typical nature of marijuana use among American college students, the act itself might imply some degree of personal motivation in any situation. These observations are consistent with research and theory which documents the general motivational and functional importance of alcohol as a "social mixer" and the more personalized, experiential motivations associated with marijuana use (Orcutt, 1972; Cahalan et al., 1969; Goode, 1972).

These remarks suggest that respondents may use *either the situational context of the act or the act itself* as sources of evidence for motivational attributions. Even when marijuana is used in a situation that does not present explicit evidence of personal motivation, the act *per se* will still serve as an alternative source which carries this information. In the case of alcohol use, however, the situation must explicitly imply personal motivations, *since the act per se does not*.

This explanation helps to account for the responsiveness of interpretations of alcohol use to situational perceptions of personal motivation. The situation, and not the act, is the primary source of motivational evidence. Insight is also gained into the markedly discrepant interpretations of marijuana use and alcohol use in the "salesman-client" task situation. If alcohol use is assumed to be socially motivated, it can be accepted as an activity which facilitates interpersonal interaction and the attainment of task goals. On the other hand, if marijuana use is assumed to be personally motivated, it will tend to be viewed as a potential impediment to the attainment of task goals. Task activities require focused involvement in and

attention to the *interpersonal* situation. The act of marijuana use instead implies a motivation to focus inward on *interpersonal* experience. In the task situation, then, marijuana use will be perceived as motivationally inconsistent with task requirements and interpreted as deviant.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate the usefulness of relativistic conceptions of situated deviance. Situational circumstances appear to account for a considerable degree of the perceptual variance in respondents' interpretations of marijuana and alcohol use as deviant acts. At the same time, the findings caution against a radical relativism which would deny interpretive significance to the nature of the act itself.

Unfortunately, this study fails to come to grips with the interactional implications of relativistic theorizing, a weakness it shares with most of the research literature on deviance (Orcutt, 1973). The relationship between subjective interpretations of deviant acts and overt reactions to such acts by social audiences remains conceptually and empirically problematic. The kinds of situational conditions hypothetically varied in this survey investigation could conceivably be manipulated in experimental and quasi-experimental designs which focus on behavioral reactions to situated deviance.

Relativistic theories have raised new and important problems for the field of deviance. But it is time attention was shifted from the endless round of critique and debate of these ideas to the more crucial task of empirical evaluation.

Notes

1. Behavioral evidence is not a necessary condition for imputations of deviance to an actor (Katz, 1972). In most empirical instances, however, definitions of an actor as deviant and reactions to the actor's deviance are based on interpretations of behavior as deviant.

2. Probability sampling procedures were precluded by time and budgetary limitations, but an attempt was made to obtain a broad, if not precisely representative, cross-section of the undergraduate population. Classes were selected for the sample according to two main criteria: (1) enrollment exceeding 100 students and (2) required for departmental majors in four

diverse undergraduate colleges. Questionnaires were distributed to approximately equal numbers of students from classes in the Colleges of Liberal Arts (N = 304), Business Administration (N = 301), and Agriculture, Forestry and Home Economics (N = 322). A smaller number of students were in classes in the Institute of Technology (N = 85). Of the 1,012 questionnaires distributed, 92.3 percent were usable. Unusable questionnaires were mainly those filled out by graduate students and those that were incomplete. When compared with undergraduate enrollment parameters, the sample tends to overrepresent males (68.3 percent versus 58.4 percent) and to underrepresent freshmen (14.4 percent versus 23.1 percent).

3. The items were presented to respondents as follows:

What is appropriate in one situation may not be appropriate in another. Below are 12 descriptions of situations in which marijuana [alcohol] might be used. Rate the acceptability of marijuana [alcohol] use in each situation as you see it. Enter your ratings on the back page according to the following codes:

1 = I feel that marijuana [alcohol] use would be QUITE ACCEPTABLE under these circumstances.

2 = I feel that marijuana [alcohol] use would be SOMEWHAT ACCEPTABLE under these circumstances.

3 = I would feel INDIFFERENT regarding marijuana [alcohol] use under these circumstances.

4 = I feel that marijuana [alcohol] use would be SOMEWHAT UNACCEPTABLE under these circumstances.

5 = I feel that marijuana [alcohol] use would be QUITE UNACCEPTABLE under these circumstances.

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