

only recently begun to develop, several studies have examined the sociodemographic characteristics of atheists and the social correlates of atheism. It has been found, for instance, that in the United States, atheists are more likely to be male, young, educated, unmarried, and live in cities rather than rural areas. Likewise—though research is more mixed here—atheists are more likely to be liberal on social issues and support progressive causes or political parties. These correlations and findings, however, are based on limited survey data, and scholars in the area agree that more research is needed before making definitive claims about the characteristics of atheists and relationships of atheism with other social and psychological factors.

In addition to the quantitative assessment of the sociodemographics of atheists, some research has qualitatively explored the lives and experiences of atheists themselves. Examining atheist identities, the “atheist experience,” and the ways in which atheists negotiate their status with others, has been the focus of this research. As a result, several models of the development of atheist identities have been offered. These range from applying the perspective of an identity career model to the lives of atheists to proposing generic identity models of the process atheists undergo as they come to voluntarily adopt the label and “come out” as atheists. Researchers have examined the social–psychological factors involved in this interactive process, which includes discussion of the relevant social contexts that one comes to identify with atheism (e.g., peer and family networks; obtaining an education) and how and why atheists come to question and ultimately reject the normative idea of the existence of a God.

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See also Discrimination; Outsiders; Social Disapproval; Stigma and Stigma Management

Further Readings

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AUTHENTICITY

In information societies where representations of deviance are ubiquitous across a range of media—television, radio, Internet, games, and so on—deviance itself becomes a commodity to be consumed. This presents a problem for individuals and groups invested in the development of oppositional subcultural identities; their status as different from the mainstream becomes blurred, if not trivial. The authenticity concept frames the study of self, identity, and experience among such individuals and groups.

Authenticity has been characterized in various forms. In the social and medical sciences and the humanities, a more predominant form has been that of *personal* authenticity, emphasizing emotions and self-feelings, acting in accordance with one’s beliefs, and personal autonomy. A less used form in the social sciences has been *social* authenticity, which focuses on interpersonal processes of identification, the performance of self, and cultural normativity. The former is predicated on a rationalist philosophy of science; the latter is constructionist in orientation. A scholar’s preference for one or the other will shape how authenticity is conceived and, therefore, how it is employed in the processes of theorizing social deviance. Dictionary definitions exemplify a rationalist conception of authenticity and demonstrate the extent to which it is treated as something metaphysically real in everyday culture and discourse. Authenticity is often defined in terms of something being *factual* or *true* in substance, implying that authenticity is out there waiting to be uncovered. A second definition of authenticity has to do with the *genuineness* of the thing in question, as in whether a cultural object is real or a fake. Such definitions are manifest in psychoanalytic theories, where people are assumed to have essential selves or essential self-feelings that are “real” but may be unknown, buried, or otherwise in need of (re)discovery. Émile Durkheim’s truism that deviance and crime are functional aspects of all societies further connotes a rationalist approach to deviance inasmuch as deviant behavior is taken for granted as a natural aspect of social life. To the extent

that scholarship supports this perspective, individuals and/or behaviors that are defined as deviant become essentialized as a priori phenomena, and authenticity is rarely if ever called into question. People are naturally good or bad, and institutions are created to either fix those who are inherently good or control those who are inherently bad.

Symbolic interactionism, dramaturgy, and other constructionist perspectives offer analytic frameworks that bracket the assumed objectivity of authenticity and facilitate explicit focus on the situational and behavioral elements and processes through which deviance and authenticity are or are not achieved. Howard Becker's labeling theory turned the traditional conception of deviance on its head by exposing how marginal groups and their cultures were not naturally deviant but were, on the one hand, categorized as such by dominant social actors while, on the other hand, active in supporting distinctions between themselves and the mainstream. Constructionist perspectives explicitly reject the assumed objectivity of social processes such as deviance or authenticity and instead operate from the standpoint that human actions are responsible for creating cultures within which certain people, actions, or events are defined as authentically normal or abnormal, and/or right or wrong. The study of deviance or authenticity thus becomes the study of the social processes through which things are defined in certain ways. Just as deviance was reconfigured into labeling, authenticity may be better understood in terms of authentication. Rather than assume that some phenomenon or process is first "really" deviant and second unproblematic, the process of authenticating deviant identities or actions is explicitly called into question. Authenticity and authentication are especially important in highly commodified cultural milieus where everything, including deviant identities, is for sale and those who "are" deviant interact with others who "merely act" deviant.

There are increasing numbers of studies that support a constructionist view of deviance and authenticity, showing that members of marginalized and oppositional groups engage in a complex array of methods to negotiate authentic identities and actions. One significant pattern to have emerged is that, like constructionist scholars, subculturalists are quite aware of the socially constructed nature of deviance, especially when defending their own identities and behaviors vis-à-vis mainstream or dominant society. However, subculturalists regularly revert to a classic rationalist conceptualization of

self when comparing themselves with subcultural others, often arguing that others follow subcultural trends while maintaining that their own actions are driven by an authentic inner self. This makes sense given the social game that all people play, maintaining similarity to relevant others while not appearing clone-like in their behavioral choices. There are various discursive dimensions that frame authentication among self-identifying deviants. Psychologically, being true to oneself is a common theme among deviant groups but is ironically, as noted above, very much a reflection of dominant Western cultural ideals. Various deviant cultures may develop other discursive criteria, for example, in terms of race (e.g., hip-hop culture has historically been predicated on blackness), gender or sexuality (e.g., the riot grrrl subculture or the gay community), political economy (e.g., punk and its oppositional, working-class roots), social locational (e.g., being from the streets or the 'hood versus from an affluent background), or other social and cultural forms.

A constructionist perspective highlights that deviance can be acceptable in one situation but not in another; each situation contains its own relevant audiences and norms. Individuals who self-identify in nonnormative ways encounter situations in which their allegedly authentic identities must be covered, masked, or otherwise negotiated. This is particularly true in subcultures that orient to mainstream cultural goals but support illegitimate means of achieving them. In the case of street criminals for, example, portraying an authentic street identity can provide status and even protection when interacting with others within the same subculture. In dealings with the law, however, such a performance may result in being labeled a hard case, potentially incurable. Thus, the authenticity of the street identity must be negotiated situationally with the psychoanalytic belief in an authentic self that is redeemable. In both cases, however, deviant selves and actions are authenticated rather than existing as "naturally" real or fake.

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See also Argot; Subculture

Further Readings

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ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SOCIAL DEVIANCE

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