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The Social Science Journal

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/soscij

THE 2015 WESTERN SOCIAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Crime as an identity[☆]



ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Beginning with a question about the motivation to study crime and based on the work of Edwin Sutherland and Howard Becker, I examine the implications of incorporating conceptions pertaining to personal identity and the self into the sociology of deviance and criminology. I illustrate the insights gained by reviewing findings from empirical research conducted on prison inmates in two countries, domestic violence perpetrators undergoing therapy and incarcerated gun violence offenders.

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1. Why identity

Every Western Social Science Association President who steps up to this podium arrived here following a particular trajectory and through a confluence of events and circumstances that determined his or her journey. My path here has been an unusual and varied one in that it involved three countries, eight educational institutions and five employers (including one state correctional system). Educationally, I am the product of basic schooling in Malaysia, undergraduate and Master's-level training in criminology from India, and doctoral education in sociology in the US. In the following discussion of crime as a form of identity, I may wish to convey and you may wish to believe, that it has little to do with questions of personal discovery and the search for an authentic self (Vannini and Franzese, 2008). You and I will be right at a formal level, but we know such questions always lurk in the academic topics we study and the research questions we choose to investigate, even though they may not rise to the level of what some have referred to derisively as a "me-search". As for the timeliness of this (self) examination, I note here

that a *New York Times Magazine* writer declared 2015 to be "The Year We Obsessed over Identity" (Morris, 2015). Allow me therefore to begin with two personal anecdotes.

When I was twelve, I accompanied my father to a small village near the rubber plantation at the edge of the Malaysian jungle where he was employed and my family lived. The village was the site for a periodic visit by a representative of the national Registration Department who received applications for Identity Cards (or "Kad Penge-nalan" in Malay) which were required of all residents of Malaysia. When the card arrived along with the requisite fingerprints and my photograph, I was sorely disappointed to note that it had a red border (or in the words of my classmates, it was a "Red IC"). This signified one who was a permanent resident and not a citizen of the country even though I was born in Malaysia. As a citizen, I would have received a "Blue IC" instead. It turned out that in the rush to get me home from the hospital where I was born, my parents had forgotten to register my birth with the proper authorities resulting in my non-citizen status twelve years later. At a very early age, I was introduced to the transitory and malleable nature of what passes for identity.

In the late-1970s, I was a Master's student at the University of Saugar in Central India and taking a class in criminological theory under the tutelage of our professor, S.C. Tewari. Given the Indian system of long essay examinations at the end of a program of study, one of our texts, Herman Mannheim's (1972) book, *Pioneers in Criminology*

[☆] This article is adapted from the Presidential Address delivered at the 57th Annual Conference of the Western Social Science Association in Portland, Oregon on April 10, 2015. A slightly modified version was presented at Tunku Abdul Rahman University in Kampar, Malaysia, on June 3, 2015.

was the subject of much trepidation and lively discussion among my cohort as we attempted to commit to memory the lives and contributions of the early theorists profiled in the book. The following passage from the Introduction caught my eye and stuck with me for many years:

“Might at least some of these (criminologists) have undergone childhood experiences of the unhappy nature commonly regarded as criminogenic and might they have taken to the study of crime because of an early acquired feeling of fellowship with the offender and sympathy for the outcast?” (Mannheim, 1972, p. XX).

What had been a personal decision made as an undergraduate a few years earlier to major in a relatively unusual subject (criminology) mostly out of curiosity and without much thought was now invested with seemingly deeper meaning and significance.

I first had occasion to consider the implications of criminological and criminal identity while working on a research project (the equivalent of an M.A. thesis in the U.S.) studying prison work programs at the Central Prison in Chennai (then known as Madras) under the guidance of my mentor, Professor M.Z. Khan. I spent long hours interviewing a total of 95 prisoners about their work training, skills and attitudes (see Unnithan, 1976, 1986) and conversations were not particularly focused on whether they thought of themselves or identified as criminals. However, one of the questions on the interview schedule did ask about the nature of the criminal activity that resulted in their being sentenced to prison. To my surprise, the vast majority of them denied any such behavior and, if challenged, provided various exculpatory “accounts” (Scott and Lyman, 1968) for their arrest and conviction. While not assuming that every one of them was guilty of every criminal charge leveled, it seemed remarkable to me that only a handful of them accepted that they were indeed convicted offenders, let alone self-identified as such. In fact, even among the small group that accepted responsibility for committing crimes, there appeared to be considerable resistance to saying that they were “actually” criminals. So, who were those individuals that Mannheim suggested criminologists identified with in fellowship and sympathy and how would we find them?

However, before you stop paying attention and conclude that this all about me and my reminiscences, it is important to introduce the professional and academic side of questions regarding identity and crime.

2. Identity and crime

As in many other instances in sociological criminology, this examination begins with the pioneering work of Edwin Sutherland, described as the “leading criminologist of his generation” (Martin, Mutchnick, and Austin, 1990, p. 139). While known primarily for his theory of differential association (Matsueda, 1988) and his formulation of the concept of white-collar crime, Sutherland’s reputation also rests on his description of a form of criminal behavior that he identifies as “professional.” In the book, *The Professional Thief: By a Professional Thief*, Sutherland provides commentary and

Table 1
Types of deviant behavior.

	Obedient behavior	Rule-breaking behavior
Perceived as deviant	Falsely accused	Pure deviant
Not perceived as deviant	Conforming	Secret deviant

From: Becker, H. S. (1963). *Outsiders. Studies in the sociology of deviance*. New York: The Free Press. Page 20.

analysis on a monograph by Chic Conwell, a pseudonymous con-man, based on the latter’s own experiences in and observations of the underworld of those who take to crime as an occupation (Conwell and Sutherland, 1937). Nowhere in the text, is the term “identity” used; however, several observations relevant to the concept show up. Here are a representative few:

“When thieves finish the day’s work, they generally congregate in hangouts. They are thieves together regardless of their rackets, with one common love—money—and one common enemy—the law.” (Conwell and Sutherland, 1937, p. 158).

“The thief is somewhat suspicious of all individuals in legitimate society. . . . He believes that whoever is not with him is against him. Any noncriminal individual not personally known to the thief is a possible danger, and as an individual, is somewhat disliked on that account.” (Conwell and Sutherland, 1937, p. 165).

“The thief does not try to justify his stealing in general, but if he did, he would refer to the fact that thieves are not the only dishonest people.” (Conwell and Sutherland, 1937, p. 178).

While much is made of Sutherland’s formal conclusions that the professional property criminals devote significant portions of their time and energy to crime and that they have a “craft” orientation to work (e.g., planning, skills) and are mostly migratory, lurking in the quotations above is the idea that they have internalized their status as a thieves. In other words, they have acquired and developed personal identities as criminals. So thoroughly is this status ingrained that they identify with similar others, are suspicious of dissimilar others, and feel no need for formal justification of their identity.

So, most people, even convicted, incarcerated offenders shy away from self-identifying as criminals, as I learned tangentially from my study of Chennai prisoners. But according to Sutherland, there existed a class of offenders who willingly assumed this identity, even if they did so surreptitiously. Who were these people? Considering crime as a form of social deviance and learning more about the work of Howard Becker after I moved to the U.S. in 1980 seemed to provide a possible conceptual framework to find the niche where the self-identified criminal might conceivably be placed (see Table 1).

In studying deviance and its ultimate exemplar, crime, it is impossible not to be seduced by the elegance of Howard Becker’s (1963) two-by-two table as shown above wherein he famously described the relationship (or lack thereof) between deviant behavior and the perception

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