# Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

## Vaughan, Diane: The Normalization of Deviance

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Sociologist Diane Vaughan has developed an empirically grounded theoretical argument that many unlawful or deviant organizational actions can best be understood as the result of a social process she calls *the normalization of deviance.* The normalization of deviance occurs when actors in an organizational setting, such as a corporation or a government agency, come to define their deviant acts as normal and acceptable because they fit with and conform to the cultural norms of the organization within which they work. Even though their actions may violate some outside legal or social standard and be labeled as criminal or deviant by people outside the organization, organizational offenders do not see these actions as wrong because they are conforming to the cultural mandates that exist within the workgroup culture and environment where they carry out their occupational roles.

Vaughan's concept of the normalization of deviance makes several important contributions to criminological theory. First, it offers a useful corrective to the tendency to see all crimes, including organizational crimes, as the result of individual rational choices; that is, calculated decisions where the costs and benefits of wrongdoing are weighed by the actors before acting. Second, it advances our sociological understanding of how organizational cultures narrow choices and shape social definitions of what is rational and acceptable at any given moment, and how these choices and definitions can lead to unlawful or deviant behavior on behalf of the organization.

# The *Challenger* Launch Decision and Theory Elaboration

Vaughan developed the concept of the normalization of deviance in her landmark study, *The Challenger Launch Decision: Risky Technology, Culture, and Deviance at NASA* in 1996. The Space Shuttle *Challenger* exploded on January 28, 1986, killing the seven astronauts on board. The immediate cause of the disaster was a technical failure: the failure of the rubber-like O-rings in the joints of the Solid Rocket Boosters to properly seal out hot propellant gases. The presidential commission created to investigate the explosion (known as the Rogers Commission) identified production pressures and

a flawed decision-making process at NASA and documented a history of problems with the O-rings. A number of narratives emerged that depicted the NASA managers responsible for the launch as *amoral calculators* who had engaged in a variety of safety rule violations (see Vaughan, 1998, p. 23). But Vaughan's exhaustive research contradicted the conventional explanation of calculated managerial wrongdoing. As she pointed out, "No fundamental decision was made at NASA to do evil; rather, a series of seemingly harmless decisions were made that incrementally moved the space agency toward a catastrophic outcome" (1996, p. 410). According to Vaughan, it was not deviance per se, but conformity that was responsible for the *Challenger* disaster.

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To understand Vaughan's analysis of the normalization of deviance at NASA, it is important to first spell out her theoretical strategy. Vaughan calls the overall strategy *theory elaboration*, by which she means "inductive strategies for more fully developing existing theories that explain particular research findings by merging different theoretical perspectives in a more general way" (2007, p. 3). Her particular strategy in this case is to combine different levels of analysis to elaborate theory. Sociologists generally tend to focus on two levels of analysis: macro and micro. The macro-level concerns large-scale social structures and institutions and the micro-level deals with human agency in the form of face-to-face interaction and the process of acting toward things based on social meanings created and modified through interpretive work. While there is theoretical consensus among sociologists about attempting to bridge the gap between structure and agency, Vaughan points out that "making the macro-micro connection is an unresolved empirical problem" (2007, p. 4).

Her position is that research on white-collar crime can make an important contribution to making this theory-elaborative connection across macro-and micro-levels of analysis by including a middle- or meso-level: formal and complex organizations. Criminologists who study white-collar crime often focus on organizations and occupations such as business corporations, industries, states, and government agencies. Vaughan believes that this research shows how structure and agency can be brought together to enhance our understanding of *situated action;* that is, behavior that takes place in socially organized settings. As she notes (2007, p. 4),

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> Organizational settings make visible the ways that macro-institutional forces outside of organizations and occupations are joined with micro-processes, thus affecting individual decisions and actions. Organizations provide a window into culture, showing how culture mediates between institutional forces, organizational goals and processes, and individual illegality so that deviance becomes normalized in organizational settings.

# The Normalization of Deviance at NASA

Vaughan's revisionist history and sociological explanation of the *Challenger* launch decision provides an important illustration of this theory-elaborative strategy. Her primarily archival and specialized interview data show that over time the work group culture at NASA, in the context of institutional pressures and aerospace industry norms, began to normalize signals of danger and technical deviations in its official risk assessments. Since the space shuttle was an experimental technology it was normal to have technical problems at the agency. Small changes that were slight deviations from the normal work process gradually became the norm and provided the basis for further deviations over time. According to Vaughan, there was an incremental descent into poor judgment at NASA. Routine judgments within the agency were made to move forward despite the technical problems that came to be defined as normal and acceptable. The result was the development of a cultural belief that it was safe to fly the shuttle, even though ultimately it was not and disaster ensued. This organizational worldview, the NASA managers' interpretation of technical information with regard to the risky technology of the shuttle, was shaped by larger social forces and environmental contingencies such as the production pressures the agency experienced. Thus, macro-, meso-, and micro-factors linked together in combination to produce the fatal outcome for the *Challenger.*

A growing body of research offers support for Vaughan's theoretical argument that, when corporate managers or government officials make decisions that appear to outsiders as clearly deviant, they are, in fact, often conforming to cultural mandates that have developed inside the organization. As she concludes, "Thus, in some social settings deviance becomes normal and acceptable; it is not a calculated decision where

the costs and benefits of doing wrong are weighed because the definitions of what is deviant and what is normative have been redefined within that setting" (2007, p. 11).

# Implications for Social Control

Vaughan's strategy of theoretical elaboration through the inclusion of the meso-level of analysis and her development of the concept of the normalization of deviance within organizational settings have important implications for the social control of white-collar, corporate, and state crimes. If sociologists and criminologists restrict **[p. 979 ↓ ]** their explanations of crime to only one level of analysis, they will produce only partial understandings of the phenomenon. A partial explanation of crime can only produce a partial strategy for crime prevention and control. A more complete explanation of criminal or deviant acts, one that combines the different levels of analysis, would provide a firmer basis on which to construct more appropriate and successful social control strategies.

Theories that portray white-collar offenders as amoral calculators or which focus only on individual failings in decision making often leave out the broader structural and cultural conditions that lead to the normalization of deviance. As with traditional forms of crime, this leads to the creation of control policies that target individual criminals, not the larger criminogenic social forces. Such policies will be as ineffective in dealing with white-collar crime as they have been with regard to street crime. As Vaughan has pointed out, the failure to address the cultural and structural conditions that led to the normalization of deviance at NASA and the *Challenger* explosion resulted in another space shuttle disaster 17 years later with the loss of the *Columbia* and her crew. The *Columbia* Accident Investigation Board discovered that NASA had once again normalized a technical anomaly with catastrophic consequences. If control policies are only directed at replacing or punishing individual corporate managers or state officials and do not address the larger structural, cultural, and organizational forces that shape decisions in the workplace, they will be ineffective. As Vaughan's analysis shows, only by addressing the macro-level influences, the meso-level forces and the micro-processes that shape the normalization of deviance can successful strategies be developed to prevent and control organizational crime and deviance.

Ronald C.Kramer

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*See also*

- Anomie and White-Collar Crime
- Integrated Theories of White-Collar Crime
- Michalowski, Raymond J., and Ronald C. Kramer: State-Corporate Crime
- Rational Choice and White-Collar Crime

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