



HUMAN NATURE  
AND  
COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOR

*PAPERS IN HONOR OF HERBERT BLUMER*

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## "NOTHING UNUSUAL IS HAPPENING"

The societal reaction theory of deviance, disputing earlier approaches which assumed deviance to be an intrinsic quality of behavior, stresses the interaction between actor and audience. A deviant label, is the product of an exchange between an actor and someone who charges the actor with rule violations, perhaps with ratification by third parties. How is social reality constructed by the participants so that an event comes to constitute a rule violation?<sup>1</sup>

Participants in any encounter take stances on the expectedness of the events; these stances are referred to in this paper as

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, Inc., 1963); and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966).

"nothing unusual is happening" and "something unusual is happening." These orientations are expressed through a person's demeanor and do not necessarily reflect his private assessment of the situation. A member of the audience who undertakes labeling first must establish that "something unusual is happening" in order to define an event as a rule violation.<sup>2</sup> This stance sets the appropriate tone, just as the participants might effuse gaiety or being emotionally touched to carry off other events. In the framework of "something unusual," the labeler must establish the following propositions: (1) "You have committed an act of such-and-such a nature"; (2) "We recognize a prohibition on acts of this kind"; (3) "Therefore, you have committed a prohibited act." The validity of the labeler's premises may be challenged in terms of the kind of act that took place, the actor's responsibility for it, the existence of the rule, or the applicability of the rule. However, it may be more effective to prevent the establishment of the prerequisite "something unusual" framework.

•-'•• This paper will consider the "nothing unusual is happening" stance as it affects the labeling of deviance. The central hypothesis is that social interaction has intrinsic properties that routinely bias negotiations toward the "nothing unusual" stance; this bias inhibits the application of deviant labels. The paper will suggest circumstances under which the "nothing unusual" stance is assumed and examine in detail two examples of negotiation. Finally, it will explore the structure of interaction affecting the outcome of such negotiations.

### The "Nothing Unusual" Stance

In many situations persons assume a stance routinely. But at times it is not clear which stance to assume, or persons may not agree on how to proceed. There are two sets of circumstances relevant to labeling in which the stance is negotiated. First, persons may confront events which are particularly suitable for labeling within an acknowledged framework of rules. Second, persons may negotiate to transform an encounter from one normative framework to another.

Persons acknowledging a framework of rules must decide whether or not each particular event constitutes a violation. Although any event may be interpreted as a violation, for some events the interpretive work and winning of acceptance for the definition are easier. For such labeling-prone events the "nothing unusual" stance is particularly important. For example, a man feigning accident but deliberately caressing the body of a strange woman in a crowd trades on the woman's embarrassment, should she publicly

<sup>2</sup> Harold Garfinkel, "Conditions of Successful Degradation Ceremonies," *American Journal of Sociology*, LXI (1956), 420-24.

invoke a "something unusual" stance. Rather than call attention to the situation at such a high price, the woman may cooperate by pretending she thinks the touching is merely an accident unavoidable in such a tightly packed crowd. The more a person can influence the evolving definition of what is happening, the more he can work the system by undertaking action he thinks would be appropriately defined as deviant and deliberately creating an alternate definition.

When others believe that the actor did not intend to break a rule, they may be especially ready to ignore potential violations. In any situation where a person reveals information about himself which challenges the image he is projecting, loses his self-control, or violates body decorum, others may tactfully act as if nothing unusual were happening.<sup>3</sup> In another example, dying patients typically are treated as though they had as assured a future as anyone else; Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss speak of "situation as normal" interaction tactics in this connection.<sup>4</sup>

Surprisingly, persons also may react to bizarre behavior, such as delusional statements, with similar tact. The writer repeatedly observed staff members respond blandly to temporarily disoriented, senile, and brain-damaged patients on a medical-surgical ward of a general hospital and later gossip about the patients' "weird" behavior. The staff sustained an ordinary demeanor when a patient in a leg cast and traction claimed to have walked around the ward; when a 90 year old patient refused x-rays because her children were too young to have the money to pay; when a senile woman asked a young nurse, "Was the meat done when you looked at it?"; and when an elderly man after a stroke said he was a boy scout and made a tent of his bed sheet. On an obstetrics ward of another hospital, nurses advised the writer not to contradict a patient who claimed John the Baptist as the father of her baby. In everyday life as well people are inclined to acquiesce to statements which sound incredible or paranoid. Cautious because of uncertainty about what the behavior means, persons avoid a fuss by continuing their "nothing unusual" stance even in response to bizarre gestures.

So far negotiations about interpretations of particular events have been discussed. Negotiations about the system of interpretation itself, however, have more radical import. When persons are invited to change their normative framework, interpretations of numerous events may be affected over a long period of time.

The most common circumstance in which a person is invited to change his normative framework occurs during socialization into an unfamiliar

<sup>3</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1957).

<sup>4</sup> Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, "Awareness Contexts and Social Interaction," *American Sociological Review*, XXIX (1964), 672.

subculture. As persons move into new settings, they meet unanticipated experiences which initially they may regard as undesirable. Novices learn that the experiences are both customary and desirable in the new situation. Members of the subculture exhort, perhaps implicitly: "Now you see what we actually do here; I urge you to go along even though you weren't prepared to go along with such matters when you entered the situation." The "nothing unusual" stance is often a claim of expertise: "We know more about what usually happens in this situation than you do because we have been here time and time again when you have not."

A good illustration is Howard Becker's article on how experienced drug users present a "nothing unusual" definition to comrades undergoing drug-induced experiences which the latter are tempted to interpret as insanity.<sup>5</sup> In settings where homosexuals are dancing, flirting, and caressing, participants and heterosexual observers act as if nothing remarkable were occurring. Visitors at nudist camps remark that it seems just like an ordinary resort and that everyone seems to feel natural about not wearing clothes in public.<sup>6</sup> Members of occult groups, when expounding beliefs about magic, reincarnation, communication with other planets, and other matters outrageous to current scientific opinion, speak with the same casualness they use for generally accepted topics.<sup>7</sup>

Consider the prevailing demeanor in night clubs and topless bars. Risque entertainment derives its impact from trifling with customary taboos, particularly about exposure of the body. Yet, while surrounded by nudity, participants strive to suggest a situation that is no different than it would be were all fully clothed. In bars where pickups occur, the participants' "situation as normal" style implies that they would be amazed to learn that the modes of introduction they were practicing would not be acceptable to Emily Post.

But it is not only in worlds generally regarded as offbeat that newcomers meet a "nothing unusual" stance. Observers in any setting, such as the medical world, find the same thing. A patient may look upon his medical condition and the technical procedures it elicits as highly unusual events, while the staff is reassuringly nonchalant. In a gynecological examination, for example, the staff members do not acknowledge as applicable the taboo exhibited in most other situations about private parts of the body; they act

<sup>5</sup> Howard S. Becker, "History, Culture and Subjective Experience: An Exploration of the Social Bases of Drug-Induced Experiences," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, VIII (1967), 163-76.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Weinberg, "Becoming a Nudist," in *Deviance: The Interactionist Perspective*, eds. Earl Rubington and Martin Weinberg (New York: The Macmillan Company, Publishers, 1968), pp. 240-51.

<sup>7</sup> Leon Festinger, Henry Riechen, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1964).

as though the procedure were as matter-of-course as an examination of the ear.<sup>8</sup>

Because people so frequently meet a "nothing unusual" stance from others they accept as legitimate socializing agents, they are prepared by analogy to accede to the stance under less legitimate circumstances. The "nothing unusual" stance is a claim about the standpoint of a subculture. Persons may insinuate that the suggestions they make to others are normal in a subculture when in fact this is not the case. This may happen when persons are recruited for situations they are hesitant to enter; it also may happen when two or more persons evolve private understandings. For example, the visibly handicapped, learning to manage the uneasiness of others' responses to them, attempt to negotiate a stance of "nothing unusual is happening."<sup>9</sup> Persons may approach each other in ways which may not fit the elaborate set of conventions surrounding introductions and the initiation of encounters. Prostitutes and clients, disattending the commercial aspect of their transaction, may attribute their encounter to friendship.

*Moreover, much of the interaction of "John" (client) with girl (prostitute) is specifically oriented toward the reduction of the stigma attached to both roles, each pretending that the other is fulfilling a role more obscure than that which is apparent.*<sup>10</sup>

Yet participants in these settings remain aware of the outsider's perspective. Thus: "Nudists envision themselves as being labeled deviant by members of the clothed society."<sup>11</sup> "Fringe (occult) group members are usually keenly aware of the fact that the larger culture disagrees with their view of the world. . . ."<sup>12</sup> It is difficult to forget the outsider's perspective when one must continually engage in practices which implicitly acknowledge it. For example, nudist camps discourage the presence of single men, require civil inattention to nude bodies, prohibit bodily contact, and regulate photography.<sup>13</sup>

Underlying the overt "nothing unusual" stance may be simultaneous cues acknowledging "something unusual." Participants may devote elaborate attention to enforcing a "nothing unusual" definition, thus intensifying their interactive alertness, guardedness, and calculation. The behavior being

<sup>8</sup> Joan Emerson, "Social Functions of Humor in a Hospital Setting" (Doctoral dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 1963), chap. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Fred Davis, "Deviance Disavowal: The Management of Strained Interaction by the Visibly Handicapped," *Social Problems*, IX (1961), 120-32.

<sup>10</sup> James Bryan, "Occupational Ideologies and Individual Attitudes of Call Girls," in Rubington and Weinberg, *op. cit.*, p. 294.

<sup>11</sup> Weinberg, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

<sup>12</sup> J. L. Simmons, "Maintaining Deviant Beliefs," in Rubington and Weinberg, *op. cit.*, p. 284.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Weinberg, "Sexual Modesty and the Nudist Camp," in Rubington and Weinberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 275-77.

defined as "nothing unusual" may become the intensive focus of attention, as when a person breaks down in tears in a setting (such as a psychotherapeutic one) which claims to tolerate such behavior. Even a verbal acknowledgment of "something unusual" may occur, often accompanied by a negation. For example, a man picking up a woman in a coffee house may remark, "I wouldn't be doing this except that I've been drinking all afternoon." Or before and after the event the participants may take a "something unusual" stance, as in the strained kidding which may accompany the decision to visit a topless bar and the even more forced jollity or the awkward silence on exit.

All parties may find it convenient to adopt a "nothing unusual" stance, and yet the alternate definition presses for some kind of recognition. At other times it may be possible to convince someone to accept a "nothing unusual" stance only if it is qualified by "something unusual" cues. Such cues may serve as a bargaining concession by those adamant about constructing a "nothing unusual" stance.

### The Process of Negotiation

Examining the process of negotiating a "nothing unusual" stance may provide insight into how definitions of reality are constructed and sustained in social interaction. In most settings novices quietly cooperate with seasoned participants in sustaining a "nothing unusual" stance. In the instance described below, however, the novice declined to cooperate. As a result, the process of negotiation about the framework for the interaction is more explicit than in most encounters.

#### *Incident I. Gynecological Examination*

The writer observed a highly atypical examination on the gynecological ward of a general hospital.<sup>14</sup> A twenty-six year old unmarried woman balks at one of her first pelvic examinations; rarely do patients complain about unpleasant features of the hospital to this degree. This particular encounter may be viewed as a continual negotiation about whether to take a "nothing unusual" or "something unusual" stance. The parties come to no resolution during the procedure, although shortly afterward the patient indicates to the nurse a partial capitulation.

The patient's demeanor disconcerts the staff, especially the doctor (actually a fourth year medical student), so that the staff members proceed through the episode in a guarded fashion, especially alerted to social as opposed to technical aspects, handling the patient with kid gloves, and cooperating more closely with each other. Thus, while the staff members overtly

<sup>14</sup> For the complete field account of this incident see Emerson, *loc. cit.*

assert "a nothing unusual" stance, their guardedness conveys an underlying countertheme of "something unusual." Actually, the nurse partially acknowledges a "something unusual" stance at one point when the patient demonstrates pain. This acknowledgment serves as a bargaining offer to the patient: "Okay, we'll go along with you at this point, if you'll go along with us the rest of the time." The patient refuses this offer, for otherwise she implicitly would be agreeing that the unusual element was the pain rather than the invasion of privacy in a gynecological examination.

Six excerpts from the writer's field notes on this examination will now be analyzed.

*At 8:50 p.m. The doctor enters, says "hi" in a friendly, non-professional way.*

*Patient to doctor: "The blood is just gushing out of me."*

*Doctor, with surprise: "Gushing out?"*

*Shortly after this the doctor remarks to the nurse that the patient has her period.*

The doctor opens with a casual greeting which asserts a "nothing unusual" stance. The patient counters with a remark implying that her body is in a state nonroutine to the staff. At several other points the patient makes remarks ("Shouldn't I wash before he examines me? The doctor won't be able to examine me with such a heavy flow of blood"), which hint that, because the staff members are mistakenly denning her body state as routine, they are neglecting to take action which is essential if they are to cope with her medical condition. In response the doctor expresses surprise at a move contrary to his proposed definition, attempting to discount the patient's stance. Later the doctor discounts the patient's stance more forcefully by defining her body state as routine, as he also does elsewhere in the episode.

*Patient to doctor: "Do you go through this every day?"*

*Doctor: "What?"*

*Patient: "This examining."*

*Doctor: "Oh, yes."*

The patient suggests the possibility that gynecological examinations are nonroutine to the staff. The doctor, by failing to comprehend a move so contrary to his proposed definition, refuses to validate the patient's "something unusual" stance. When the patient supplies clarification, the doctor explicitly denies the patient's suggestion.

*Doctor: "I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to take a Pap smear. This is routine test we do in this clinic."*

*Patient: "Do you take anything out?"*

*The nurse explains.*

The doctor identifies the steps of the technical procedure beforehand, as he does at numerous other points, and directly states that the procedure is routine. The patient asks a worried question about the technical procedure, a question which implies, "Am I safe in your hands?" This move counters the "nothing unusual" stance. The nurse attempts to reinstate "nothing unusual" by a reassuring explanation.

*Doctor: "You have some pain already, huh?"*

*Patient: "It's just that I hate this."*

*Doctor: "Okay, try to spread your legs apart. Okay, I'm going to try to touch this and see where it is."*

The doctor establishes a framework for the patient to report neutrally about discomfort. The patient ignores the suggested framework and offers a negative comment on the event in strong, emotional language. (At several other points the patient does the same thing; earlier she has said to the nurse: "I hate this. I wish I could go home.") The doctor ignores the patient's move and attempts to reassert his definition by neutral technical instructions and explanations.

*Doctor: "Okay, this is the speculum and it's going to feel a little cold."*

*Patient: "Oh."*

*Doctor: "'Oh' what?"*

*Nurse to patient: "Okay, take a few deep breaths and try to concentrate on something else. I know it's hard; that's sort of a focal point."*

*Doctor: "Does that hurt very much?"*

*Patient: "Yes, very much."*

*Soon the patient remarks: "I won't be able to sit doivn for a week."*

*Nurse with an amused air: "You underestimate yourself."*

*Doctor, with an amused air: "How will you go home?"*

The doctor offers a brief explanation of the technical procedure in a casual style. The patient then demonstrates discomfort in a "something unusual" style. To negate this, the doctor claims that he fails to comprehend the patient's move. The nurse reinforces the doctor's stance by giving technical instructions, but her style and sympathetic remark constitute a compromise in the direction of "something unusual," a move that the patient has already rejected earlier. The doctor again establishes a framework for the patient to report neutrally about discomfort, and again the patient repudiates it, this time by an overt statement of pain in a "something unusual" style. Taking the offensive, the patient hints that the staff is mutilating her body. The staff attempts to discount the hint by couching the message, "You exaggerate," in a joking framework.

Doctor: "I'm going to do a rectal exam."  
 Patient: "No, no, no."  
 Doctor: "We have to do it; it's part of the examination."  
 Patient: "Why can't you give me a sedative first?"

The doctor announces the next step of the technical procedure. The patient protests this step in a highly emotional style. The doctor claims that both he and the patient are compelled by the standards of good medical practice: "I am merely an agent following the prescribed rules of the system," he suggests. He further emphasizes the routine nature of the procedure. The patient attempts to undermine the doctor's stance by suggesting directly how the technical procedure should be conducted. By asking that she be made insensitive to the experience via a drug, the patient implies that the staff is imposing unnecessary discomfort on her.

In each excerpt one sees a struggle over the stance to be taken. The patient insists that "something unusual is happening," and the staff tells her how routine it is. At one point the patient implies the event is unusual by asking, "Do a lot of women go through this?" Several times she challenges the staff definition by explicit references to topics taboo within the framework the staff is asserting. For example, she wonders if her body odor will repel others. The staff members attempt to establish the medical framework by discussing nonchalantly technical equipment among themselves, asking the patient technical questions in a casual style, and directly assuring the patient it will not be as bad as she anticipates.

### ***Incident II. Attempted Holdup***

Sometimes persons need to establish a "something unusual" stance in order to bring off a performance. The audience's "nothing unusual" stance in the following newspaper account undermines the robbers' performance so much that it collapses.

#### THEIR STORY JUST DIDN'T HOLD UP

*Stockton—The worst possible fate befell two young masked robbers here last night. They tried to hold up a party of thirty-six prominent, middle-aged women, but couldn't get anybody to believe they were for real.*

*One of the women actually grabbed the gun held by one of the youths.*

*"Why," she said, "that's not wood or plastic. It must be metal."*

*"Lady" pleaded the man, "I've been trying to tell you, it IS real. This is a holdup."*

*"All, you're putting me on," she replied cheerfully.*

*The robbers' moment of frustration came about 9 p.m. at the home of Mrs. Florence Tout, wife of a prominent Stockton tax attorney, as she was entertaining at what is called a "hi-jinks" party.*

*Jokes and pranks filled the evening. Thus not one of the ladies turned a hair when the two men, clad in black, walked in.*

*"All right now, ladies, put your rings on the table," ordered the gunman.*

*"What for?" one of the guests demanded.*

*"This is a stickup. I'm SERIOUS!" he cried.*

*All the ladies laughed.*

*One of them playfully shoved one of the men. He shoved her back.*

*As the ringing laughter continued, the men looked at each other, shrugged, and left empty-handed.<sup>15</sup>*

In order to proceed, the robbers must crack the joking framework already established in the setting; if they had been willing to escalate, as by shooting someone, the outcome would have been different. Two sequences in this story will be analyzed.

In the first sequence, the lady who grabs the gun expresses surprise that the gun is metal. Defining the holdup as make-believe, the lady checks out a piece of evidence. In a make-believe holdup the guns are also make-believe, perhaps made of wood or plastic; in a real holdup the guns are real, made of metal. By expressing surprise at evidence contrary to her proposed definition, the lady attempts to negate the challenge to her proposal. The robber immediately issues another challenge by directly stating the contrary definition: "Lady, I've been trying to tell you, it IS real. This is a holdup." The lady tries to negate this attempt by claiming the other is not really committed to the definition he is asserting: "Ah, you're putting me on."

In the second sequence, the robber opens with, "All right now, ladies, put your rings on the table." Thus, he performs an act which would logically flow from the definition he is asserting. The response, "What for?" asks for a clarification of this act, suggesting that the act is meaningless because the proposed definition from which it is supposed to follow is not accepted. The robber provides clarification by a direct statement of his definition: "This is a stickup. I'm SERIOUS!" By laughing, the ladies propose a humorous framework for the robber's assertion and succeed in discounting the definition of the situation as a holdup.

The process of negotiating the stances of "something unusual" and "nothing unusual" consists of direct assertions and counterassertions, implications and counter-implications. It also involves the establishment of frameworks for the other's subsequent moves and techniques for discounting the

<sup>15</sup> *San Francisco Examiner*, April 4, 1968.

other's moves. Such techniques include incomprehension, surprise, humor, and accusing the other of a lack of investment in his own move. In the remainder of this discussion, conditions biasing the negotiations toward a "nothing unusual" stance will be explored.

### Negotiating Acceptance of a "Nothing Unusual" Stance

Whoever performs a "something unusual" stance has some advantage, because his dramatic intensity is difficult to ignore. But maintaining the stance of "nothing unusual" quickly becomes untenable unless all participants corroborate it. Despite this advantage for "something unusual," however, observation suggests that a "nothing unusual" stance more often prevails in a problematic situation. Why is this so?

The "nothing unusual" advocate capitalizes on the ambiguity of events. In the movies the music swells up to signal "something unusual," the weather may change dramatically, and the crowd starts moving toward the focus of attention. Should the audience miss these cues, they can hardly miss the camera zooming in upon the actors' reactions to the unexpected event. In real life people almost expect the concomitants found in the movies, and their absence creates uncertainty about the meaning of the situation.

In the face of uncertainty, the actor may take the easiest way out. "Nothing unusual" provides a definite prescription for behavior: just continue to act in a routine manner. Actors can avoid the effort of creating a unique response. A "something unusual" definition may call for unpleasant emotions which people prefer to avoid—embarrassment and indignation, for example. People are often nonplused by events which could be defined as unusual, and they are inexperienced in managing such events. So they may be willing to take cues from others.

If one person firmly commits himself to a stand, others are likely to acquiesce. An effective strategy is to make a firm commitment to a "nothing unusual" stance immediately, without entering negotiations. An alternate strategy is to wait but decline the other's implicit "something unusual" offers, so the other concedes to "nothing unusual" to avoid a deadlock.

The ambiguity of events provides one condition favoring a "nothing unusual" stance. Conventions about maintaining social order provide another. Most social interaction is predicated on the desirability of avoiding a fuss. Many social practices rest on the assumption that it is wise to acquiesce to a person in his presence, regardless of one's private opinion. If a person has invested himself heavily in a certain definition of reality, others avoid challenging it. In particular, persons are reluctant to challenge another's claim about himself.

Since persons generally aim to maintain order in a particular situation, they invoke particular rules as relevant to the process of maintaining this situationally located order. Defining an event as a rule violation may shatter the view of reality that the participants have taken for granted. So, if invoking a particular rule would create disorder instead of maintaining order, it makes no sense to invoke the rule in that instance.

A third condition favoring a "nothing unusual" stance is the vulnerability of the would-be labeler to adverse consequences from his move. If the labeler's word must be weighed against the actor's, it may be difficult to convince third parties that a violation has occurred. In this as well as other cases, the would-be labeler's move opens him to counterdenunciation. Suppose, as in a *Candid Camera* sequence, a girl asks a man to help her carry a suitcase. The girl acts as if it were an ordinary suitcase, but actually it is filled with metal.<sup>16</sup> If the man remarks, "This suitcase is too heavy for anyone to carry," the girl might respond, "No, you must be a weak man because I have carried it myself for three blocks." Thus, a "something unusual" claim can be countered by, "No, it is you who cannot cope with this ordinary situation." Not only is a charge of inadequacy possible but, should someone persist in taking a "something unusual" stance, he could be labeled "emotionally disturbed" for displaying a demeanor too involved and for making the occasion into one more momentous than it really is.

Even if the labeler escapes counterdenunciation and succeeds in defining an event as a rule violation, this definition may reflect negatively on himself. Acknowledging the rule violation may involve a loss of face or self-derogation for the labeler. Any deviant act raises the question for observers: "Who am I that this should happen around me?" Many deviant acts are taken as an insult to others. To avoid the insult, what could be defined as a deviant act may be interpreted otherwise.

But under certain conditions others are less likely to assent to a "nothing unusual" stance. If a man comes home and discovers his wife in bed with another man, he is not inclined to accept their nonchalant invitation to join them in the living room for coffee. The following factors press for noncompliance: (1) the more persons are overwhelmed with emotion and cannot maintain the casual 'demeanor required; (2) the more complex the performance expected if they cooperate with the "nothing unusual" stance (civil inattention is more feasible than active participation); (3) the more certain they are of the definition of the situation that "something unusual is happening"; (4) the more committed they are to upholding rules which they think are being violated; (5) the more experienced they are

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Eugene Webb, Donald Campbell, Richard Schwartz, and Lee Sechrest, *Unobtrusive Measures: Nonreactive Research in the Social Sciences* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1966), p. 156.

at imposing the definition "something unusual is happening" in similar situations; (6) the less favorably disposed they are to the "nothing unusual" advocate; (7) the higher their status is compared with the "nothing unusual" advocate, the less they are accustomed to following his lead, and the less respect they have for his judgment; and (8) the less drastic the action required by the "something unusual" stance.

### The Deviant as a Monster

In the preceding section some factors inhibiting movement of the interaction in the direction of a "something unusual" stance and labeling were described. Labeling results from the application of a set of procedures for assessing situations and deciding how to proceed. From a closer examination of this set of procedures, an additional explanation for the structural inhibition against labeling emerges. The explanation is based on the inadequacy of certain commonsense conceptualizations to handle actual experience with potentially deviant behavior.

The set of procedures for assessing situations includes steps for recognizing divergent behavior. As a practical necessity any workable set of instructions singles out a few relevant features of a situation and ignores the rest. Forgetting that this selection has occurred, persons then come to think of the entire event as composed of the few features in focus. So the commonsense model has black and white categories for deviance. Both events and persons are viewed as either entirely deviant or entirely conforming.

A problematic act which persons might negotiate to define as deviant occurs in the context of numerous acts taken for granted as conforming.<sup>17</sup> In a bar pickup, for instance, the only questionable element may be the mode of introduction, while conduct within the exchange may be seen as entirely conforming to proper behavior for striking up an acquaintance with a stranger at a party. When one thinks about the situation in a commonsense perspective, one focuses on the offense and virtually ignores the norm-conforming context.

Because in the light of the commonsense perspective a person has been led to expect an offense to stand out markedly and overshadow any norm-conforming elements present, he is surprised at how comparatively dwarfed the possible violation is. Those pressing for a "nothing unusual" definition take advantage of this initial surprise and the moment of uncer-

<sup>17</sup> In discussing factors which impede the labeling process, Yarrow, *et al.*, make a similar point by calling the behavior of the candidate for the mental illness label a "fluctuating stimulus," at times symptomatic and at times ordinary. Marian Yarrow, Charlotte Schwartz, Harriet Murphy, and Leila Deasy, "The Psychological Meaning of Mental Illness in the Family," in Rubington and Weinberg, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

tainty it entails. Inasmuch as a person revises his expectation to take into account the norm-conforming context, he still might expect all facets of the exchange to be modified to correspond with the norm-violating note. Thus, in a bar pickup he might expect an exaggerated behavior between the couple, in which allusions to sex are blatant, the exchange has a wild, uncontrolled quality, and gestures of respect for the other person are suspended. When these expectations are contradicted by actual experience in a bar, a person's assessment procedures are thrown into confusion. Using ordinary procedures for assessing whether behavior is divergent, he is led to the conclusion the behavior is not divergent because it is obscured by norm-conforming elements.<sup>18</sup>

The commonsense perspective leads a person to expect that a deviant, at least in the setting where he engages in norm-violations, behaves in a way an ordinary person would not behave. Thus, victims do not suspect con men. "A deviant could not possibly be a person like you and me" is an underlying assumption. On the contrary, the deviant is a monster with whom we have nothing in common and who is so grotesque as to be incomprehensible to us.<sup>19</sup>

Suppose an actor has earned a reputation as an acceptable human being before he commits a labeling-prone act. Even without such a reputation, suppose he presents his act in a conforming context with "nothing unusual" cues. Such an event is experienced as not fitting the deviant-as-monster assumption. To reconcile the discrepancy, people can hold one of the following:

- (1) the actor is a monster;
- (2) the "deviant is a monster" assumption is not correct;
- (3) the actor is not deviant; or
- (4) the actor is deviant, but the case is an exception to the "deviant is a monster" assumption.

Alternatives 3 and 4 cause the least social disruption and therefore have the lowest cost. Thus, the person responding is inclined to choose 3 or 4. If he decides the actor is not deviant, then the actor escapes labeling entirely. If he decides the actor is deviant but not a monster, then the actor's total identity is not discredited.

<sup>18</sup> Jackson makes this point about labeling the alcoholic over a period of time: "The inaccuracies of the cultural stereotype of the alcoholic—particularly that he is in a constant state of inebriation—also contribute to the family's rejection of the idea of alcoholism, as the husband seems to demonstrate from time to time that he can control his drinking." Joan Jackson, "The Adjustment of the Family to the Crisis of Alcoholism," in Rubington and Weinberg, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> Garfinkel suggests this view is a necessary condition for a successful degradation ceremony: "Finally, the denounced person must be ritually separated from a place in the legitimate order, i.e., he must be denounced as standing at a place opposed to it. He must be placed 'outside,' he must be made 'strange.'" Garfinkel, *op. cit.*, p. 423.



To summarize, definitions of reality, such as "nothing unusual is happening" and "something unusual is happening," are negotiated. Ambiguity allows more scope for negotiations. Ambiguity is produced by over-simplified conceptual schemes contradicted by experience. The more difficult it is to use the prevailing conceptual scheme to make sense of experience, the more the social situation will be thrown into confusion and left to *ad hoc* negotiations. Negotiations provide the opportunity for persons to elude labeling when otherwise these persons might be sanctioned.

Black and white categories about deviance may at times serve to discourage behavior which risks labeling by exaggerating the horrors of crossing the line from good to bad. But when the categories are undermined, risky behavior may flourish. And the more simple any system of categories, the more likely it is to be undermined by the complexity of events.