One crisp fall Sunday afternoon, we stepped into the sanctuary of a small Baptist church in Kansas to attend worship. Given the prevalence of Protestantism in the Midwestern United States, this in and of itself was not particularly noteworthy. Likewise, the service was unremarkable, at first. We sang a hymn. An elder led the congregation in prayer. But then the grizzled, fiery pastor started preaching. His message was anything but ordinary.1

The sermon covered a host of topics: sin, hell, the American military, the Supreme Court case Lawrence v. Texas, “Antichrist Obama,” “hordes of Sodomites,” “Satanic miracles,” and, for good measure, a Komodo dragon.2 All those who were not members of the group—including us—were labeled “fag enablers.” The preacher chided that we and everyone else not in the group, were “DRUNK on the bitter wine made from the grapes of gall from the vine of Sodom, which grows only on the fields of Gomorrah.” The sermon ostensibly centered upon responding to a dubious text titled “The Homosexual Manifesto.” Copies were distributed to all congregants. The heading read: “Reprinted from the Congressional Record.” The actual original source of the text was explicitly labeled as satire, but in the pastor’s jeremiad that morning, the story of the manifesto was presented as a deadly serious conspiracy of the highest order, one in which “both houses of Congress are filled to the brim with Sodomites.”3 Further, the preacher intoned, just “as leaven secretly, quietly, mysteriously, works its way throughout every particle of the bread dough, making it rise, we are told that the sinister forces of evil work, permeating society until the whole is fatally and irreversibly corrupt.”

The man beseeching his followers to wage an apocalyptic battle against homosexuality and mainstream culture on that afternoon was none other than the infamous

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Introduction

Insiders, Outsiders, Hiders, and Drifters
(and now deceased) Fred W. Phelps Sr. The place we were attending services was the notorious church he founded and led: Westboro Baptist Church (WBC) in Topeka, Kansas. The themes from Phelps’s sermon that day were in no way an aberration from a typical Sunday there. A content analysis of more than one hundred sermons across multiple years from the group’s worship services showed that homophobia, religious evil (apocalypse, Satan, hell, demons, etc.), contemporary politics, and the wrath of God were the most common themes covered, typically in conjunction. As patriarch of the WBC, Phelps led his band of true believers to protest the perceived sexual sinfulness of America in ways that shocked and outraged the public. Their general strategy was to carry extremely offensive signs around in public places. Young children in the group often participated in these protests.

WBC first gained wider media attention when its members protested the funeral of Matthew Shepard, who was murdered in a hate crime, with signs declaring Shepard was in hell because “God hates fags.” Although these shocking antics drew some scorn, it was not until WBC started to protest outside the funerals of American service members killed in combat that they became truly infamous. During one such protest at the funeral of Marine Matthew Snyder, WBC held up signs reading, “Semper fi fags” and “Thank God for dead soldiers,” among other
things. This action resulted in a Supreme Court case about free speech and the right to protest, which WBC argued on their own behalf and won. WBC threatened to protest the funerals of five Amish girls who were murdered after being taken hostage in their one-room schoolhouse. The group only relented from the planned protest in exchange for air time on a national radio show so they could spread their message to the public.

And what is their central message? “So, earth-dweller, our message to you is this: You’ve sinned away your last day of grace; there is no remedy for this country and this world; God is your enemy; and America is doomed. . . . We warned you to obey, so your blood is not on our hands, but is on yours. Your duty stands constant—OBEY. You won’t fulfill it, and very shortly Christ is coming through the clouds to punish the disobedient, and to destroy this earth with a fervent heat.” To put it succinctly: God hates you. You are going to hell.

Feel like converting yet? Neither did we. But as researchers who study both deviance and religion for a living, we were intrigued. What could possess people to do and say such things? Beyond the appalling lack of concern for others’ feelings and privacy, there are puzzling paradoxes at the heart of WBC’s identity and activism. Why preach to (at, really) people you don’t think can be converted? Why protest ceaselessly if you do not believe any changes to governmental policy or practice will follow? And why try so hard to offend people, showing no regard for norms of tact and decency, while also meticulously avoiding the violation of legal boundaries regarding protest?

We will return to each these questions at the end of our study. But the answer, in short, lies in the group’s sense of deviant identity and their related strategies of messaging about that identity to the outside world. This is a book about both. It also is about how identities rooted in social conformity conflict with identities rooted in actions or attributes labeled as socially deviant. More directly, we outline some of the basic processes of deviance management—meaning the strategies and messaging that communities and individuals use in response to being labeled deviant. We then test these hypotheses across a range of substantive examples—specifically, sex, drugs, and Bigfoot—but deviant religion, too. We use a variety of social scientific methods to look at different dimensions of deviance management, including qualitative research using ethnography, interviews, and content analysis, as well as quantitative research analyzing patterns in primary data and secondary survey and policy data. Qualitative methods allow us to look for thematic patterns in narratives, social movements, and identities focused on deviance management. Quantitative methods allow us to see if there are distinctive patterns of deviance management, how these patterns are related to subcultural conflict, whether different styles of deviance management are related to social activism, and under what conditions changes in public policy toward normalization occur.
The Processes of Deviance Management

Our focus on the processes of deviance management is guided by five observations about people who are labeled, or potentially labeled, as socially deviant.

1. **Being Labeled Deviant Creates Role Conflict**

People’s daily lives are partially defined by shifting between different roles. The role of employee carries different expectations regarding behavior and use of time; what is valued or disvalued; how to achieve “success”; and sometimes even appearance, dress, and language than does the role of parent. Individuals act differently in church than they do at home, change conversational tones and choices of words when addressing close friends versus strangers, and studiously avoid discussing controversial topics in the workplace, even after attending a fiery political rally the night before. Stated simply, people tend to present themselves in the manner they believe best suits the current situation and leaves the most positive impression with their fellow interactants, within the parameters of a given situation.9

Problems arise when two or more roles carry “incompatible expectations for the behavior of a person,” a situation known as role conflict.10 An example is the competing demands placed upon women working outside the home, particularly those with spouses and children. Cultural expectations about what it means to be a successful wife and mother often are in direct conflict with those placed upon women by the workplace.11 Devoting enough time to work to be considered a valuable employee takes time away from housework, child care, and other “second shift” duties.12 Reducing time spent at work to meet the demands of family may lead coworkers to conclude that a woman is not serious enough about her career.13

Similarly, those labeled deviant face competing demands.14 Satanists have to interact with non-Satanists, whether it be on the bus, around the family dinner table, or at the supermarket checkout. The Amish need to sell their products to the English in order to survive. Furries have parents, and white supremacists have jobs. With rare exceptions, such as hermits or entirely self-sufficient, underground communities, deviant identities are lived in continued interaction with conventional society. How individuals manage their conventionality influences how they interact with a deviant subculture—a synergistic relationship.15 Since deviance refers to behavior that “violates a social norm or rule,” and it is impossible to conform to every social rule at all times, it is simply not feasible for someone to be a perfect deviant (or a perfect conformist).16 Therein lie role conflicts. Publicly and vocally committing to deviance risks conventional relationships, opportunities, and options. Likewise, taking full advantage of conventional opportunities or experiencing major conventional turning points such as marriage or having children may limit opportunities to fully engage with a deviant subculture.17
Clearly people labeled deviant will differ in the extent to which they experience role conflict. For those more committed to deviance than conventionality, subcultural concerns will take precedence, and vice versa. To predict responses to role conflicts between deviance and conformity, as well as who will experience such conflicts more or less acutely, we must understand the relative salience of both conventional and deviant identities.

2. Deviants Vary in the Relative Salience of Deviant and Conforming Identities

Role conflict can cause stress and exhaustion, career burnout, depression, and poor health. Yet not all role conflicts lead to such outcomes. The work of sociologist Sheldon Stryker proves insightful regarding the circumstances under which conflicting role demands are likely to cause negative consequences. The multiplicity of roles that individuals must perform throughout their lives form larger identities. Enacting the identity of physician can involve performing a number of different roles, including medical researcher, surgeon, patient confidant, coworker, and boss. Should that physician also carry the identity of mother, then she also will have to play the roles of child confidant, disciplinarian, comforter, caregiver, and moral compass. The degree to which statuses are embraced or resisted varies, and the veracity with which they are emphasized or imposed by others varies by cultural and temporal context.

Roles accompanying specific status positions considered important by both an individual and others she interacts with can be understood as social identities. But people simultaneously hold multiple status identities, which must be amalgamated into a broader sense of "self." When identities come into conflict, such as when a physician must choose between finishing a research project or attending her child's school event, individuals are forced to choose between them. As Stryker argues, primacy will be given to the identity with greater salience: "[T]he higher the salience of an identity relative to other identities incorporated into the self, the greater the probability of behavioral choices in accord with the expectations attached to that identity."

We can measure the salience of a conforming identity by drawing on criminologist Travis Hirschi's social control theory. Hirschi operationalized the strength of an individual's ties to conformity, or social bond, as consisting of several elements, including attachment, commitment, and belief. Attachment refers to the extent to which an individual has valued relationships that could be damaged by engaging in deviance. Commitment refers to prior investments an individual has made in conventional society or expectations of future rewards from sustained conventionality. For example, those committed to advancement within a conventional career have much to lose by engaging in deviant behavior. Finally, belief refers to having moral beliefs that align with conventionality. Simply put, we
would expect conformist identity to be highly salient when conventional attachments, commitments, and beliefs are strong.

Hirschi envisioned the elements of the social bond as measures of conformity, but they are equally useful measures of the salience of any identity, if we remove direct references to conventionality. A deviant is likely to have some valued relationships with conventional people and valued relationships with people in a deviant subculture. While opportunities for advancement and high-status positions in deviant subcultures are often less stable and transposable than those in conventional systems, deviants also will vary in their status within subcultural communities and the desire to maintain that status. Deviant subcultures necessarily involve nonnormative beliefs about life or society that members subscribe to in varying degrees. Deviant identity salience, therefore, will depend upon the strength of deviant attachments, commitments, and beliefs.

By conceptualizing the salience of conforming and deviant identities in relation to each other, we can build a framework for understanding how and when individuals will give deviant identities primacy and what strategies of action they are likely to use for managing the role conflicts inherent in deviant statuses.

3. The Relative Salience of Deviant and Conforming Identities

Dichotomizing the salience of conventional and deviant identities into “high” and “low” produces four different, broad strategies individuals may use to manage deviance/conformity role conflicts. As outlined in figure 0.1, we call these ideal types “Insiders,” “Outsiders,” “Hiders,” and “Drifters.” For the sake of simplicity, we often speak of these categories as types of people, but in actuality they are behavioral strategies, and individuals may use a combination of strategies to manage stigma across different situations. This follows Erving Goffman’s theorizing about stigma: “[S]tigma involves not so much a set of concrete individuals who can be separated into two piles, the stigmatized and the normal, as a pervasive two-role social process in which every individual participates in both roles, at least in some connections and in some phases of life. The normal and the stigmatized are not persons but rather perspectives.” Likewise, Insiders, Outsiders, Hiders, and Drifters are not specific people, but deviance management strategies.

Identity theory predicts that people will act in accordance with their most salient identity whenever conflict occurs, which is of greatest relevance to those we label “Outsiders” and “Hiders.” Outsiders have strong and highly salient deviant identity and weaker and less salient conforming identity. Outsiders are the focus of much of the research and theory in the study of deviance. When challenged by conformity, Outsiders prefer deviance to disavowal or compromise and will likely see their deviance as superior to so-called normalcy. In contrast, Hiders hold strong and highly salient conforming identities and weak and less salient deviant
identities. In other words, Hiders engage in some form of deviant behavior or interact with a deviant subculture while simultaneously facing high personal costs for discovery. Here the strategy of deviance management is one of information control rather than openly combatting stigma.

It also is possible for people to have conventional identities of lower salience (little interest in conventional occupations, educational attainment and few conventional attachments) and simultaneously feel little affinity with a particular deviant subculture with which they occasionally interact. We label such individuals Drifters. Drifters are more likely to move in, out, and between conventional and deviant identities, and also in and out of multiple deviant subcultures over time.

Of great interest to our study are Insiders, who simultaneously hold highly salient deviant and conforming identities. Insiders will find themselves in situations that can provoke considerable stress and potentially threaten both their deviant and conforming identities if not managed successfully. The flip side of this “double consciousness” is that Insiders are integral players in attempts to normalize deviance.

4. Different Deviance Management Strategies Produce Varying Pressures to Normalize Deviance

There have been many attempts to explain the dramatic softening of attitudes toward same-sex relationships that has occurred in the past few decades. Some argue that prejudice toward minority groups is reduced by interpersonal contact between majority and minority groups—the “contact hypothesis.” In theory,
meeting members of a deviant category humanizes them, leading to greater understanding and sympathy. A number of studies have found that personal contact with sexual minorities decreases negative attitudes and homophobia. Others speculate that a societal trend toward valuing individualism (independence of thought) over collectivism (obedience, favoring the group) can lead to “fewer restrictions on sexual behavior,” and/or that increasing levels of education among the general public lead to greater tolerance.

Such attempts to explain changing attitudes toward sexuality implicitly assume that the shift occurred because society changed; conventional American culture (anthropomorphized) became more open-minded, and gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals reaped the benefits. Minimized in these discussions is the key role that those labeled deviant themselves play in engendering such change by how they choose to message about themselves and the strategies of action they pursue. After all, contact with gay people might increase negative attitudes if that contact reaffirms preexisting biases or stereotypes. But, “If the stereotypes are false, if homosexuals as a group behave in general like others (aside from their sexual orientation), then contact with them can prove the stereotypes wrong and reduce prejudice.”

Normalization is a process of negotiation between representatives of conventional “society” and “deviants.” To change minds, deviants must be willing to present themselves in a manner that is palatable to the general public—in a way that changes minds and shatters preconceptions or, at the very least, encourages some form of identification with those labeled as deviants. This suggests a cyclical process whereby deviants seek affirmation and attempt to message about themselves in a more palatable manner. In response to this messaging, members of conventional society may soften their attitudes, encouraging further changes in messaging from the deviant subculture.

But it is not a given that members of a deviant subculture will want to change their image. If the deviants in question refuse to soften their presentation and instead focus upon differences between themselves and conventional society, attitudes among the general public are unlikely to soften. Understanding the competing pressures of deviant and conforming identities allows us to predict how people are likely to frame and message about their deviance and, consequently, which types of deviants are most likely to promote and successfully achieve normalization. Chapter 3 focuses upon these messaging differences, deriving predictions based on the relative salience of deviant and conforming identities:

- Having weak salience of both deviant and conforming identities, Drifters are less likely to experience role conflict and also less likely to develop a strong message about deviance.
- Having a stronger and more salient conforming identity than deviant identity, Hiders are more likely to avoid publicizing their deviant activities and may actively deny participation in or affinity with deviance.
• Having a stronger and more salient deviant identity than conforming identity, *Outsiders* are more likely to promote messages of difference and superiority, as well as to actively discredit deviants who promote compromise or capitulation.

• Having to manage both a strong and salient deviant identity and a strong and salient conforming identity, *Insiders* are more likely to message about their deviance as less threatening and more normal than it has been labeled, and to highlight points of similarity between deviants and conventional society.

5. Differing Deviance Management Strategies
*Produce Subcultural Conflict*

Deviance theory and research typically focus upon the relationship between deviant subcultures and conventional society. However, it is important to also focus upon what happens within deviant subcultures. Throughout the book, we demonstrate how differences in the management of deviant identities can cause subcultural conflicts.

The most pronounced area of disagreement will be conflict between Outsiders and Insiders. These conflicts will arise from two very different needs. If a person holds a highly salient deviant identity *and* a highly salient conventional identity, she has much to lose from being stigmatized as deviant. Insiders must therefore perform the difficult balancing act of openly avowing their deviant identities while maintaining attachments to conventional others and preexisting commitments to a conventional lifestyle. Such concerns lead Insiders to develop narratives that present their deviance as less threatening than it has been portrayed and to magnify similarities between themselves and conventional others. Absent those concerns, or holding them to a lesser degree, Outsiders are comparatively free to enact unrepentant deviant identities in a wider variety of contexts. As we discuss at length in chapter 5, Outsiders may view Insiders as “sellouts”—people far more concerned with pleasing their conventional friends than being true to the deviant subculture. For Insiders, Outsiders are a potential source of embarrassment, threatening messages of similarity by performing deviant roles in outwardly defiant ways. As we discuss in chapter 4, it is not enough to simply know that a person is a Bigfoot believer to understand the performance of that identity, as Insiders tend to frame the search for Sasquatch as a scientific enterprise, while Outsiders view the pursuit of Bigfoot as a supernatural quest.

**SYNOPSIS**

This book presents a concise but novel framework that explains the paths of action most likely to be taken by individuals who are labeled deviant, as well as some of the consequences of these patterns for issues such as subcultural conflict, normalization movements and social policy reforms. Linking our five main points together
reveals a longitudinal story of deviance management. Individuals with particular attitudes, attributes or behaviors are labeled deviant by conventional others. These individuals must then decide how to respond to this stigmatization (or its potentiality). The relative likelihood of different responses will be strongly influenced by individuals’ levels of commitment to both conventionality and deviance. The resulting strategies vary in their level of engagement between conventionality and deviance, with Insiders’ normalization efforts having the highest level of engagement and negotiation. As reform movements negotiate conflict with conventional society, differences over how best to manage stigmatization—particularly with regard to normalization—also create internal subcultural conflicts.

By conceptualizing individuals’ and groups’ investment in social processes of both conformity and deviance, a clearer picture of the strategies of deviance management and subcultural dynamics emerges. Empirically, we can predict with relative accuracy which individuals and groups will be most likely to hide, limit commitments and drift, separate from conventional society, or make efforts to normalize what has been labeled deviant. We use a wide range of behaviors, groups, and movements as examples and sources of empirical data to test and refine these ideas. From marginal religious groups and paranormal subcultures to same-gender sexual relations and cannabis use, all are examined to see how people manage social stigma, who chooses different strategies for doing so, when individuals join reform-oriented social movements, under what conditions such movements succeed, and how and why these processes create subcultural conflict.

We begin by specifying a framework for understanding deviance management in chapters 1 through 3, then turn to empirical assessments of these ideas in chapters 4 through 6. We will also return to the Westboro Baptist Church to see how our conceptual framework can provide insight into the group’s behavior, as well as how the group’s unique characteristics illustrate some of the complexities involved in studying deviance management.