DURKHEIM, TERRORISM AND POSITIVE DEVIANCE

Paul Kooistra, Furman University

Daniel M. Harrison, Lander University

INTRODUCTION

In the past several years, a series of sociological articles (cf. Dodge 1985; Heckert 1989; Goode 1991; Heckert and Heckert 2002, 2004; Irwin 2003; Hughes and Coakley 1991; Jones 1998; Spreitzer and Sonenshein 2004; Theberge 1997; Zeitin, et. al. 1990) have appeared making use of the term "positive deviance." A number of these articles as well as various conference presentations have discussed the merits and demerits of this term. In 1985 Sagarin urged that the term not be used, describing it as "oxymoron." In 1991 Goode also attacked the concept, arguing that it was not a viable concept. The usage of the term has not only continued, however; it has also expanded.

This paper further examines the concept of "positive deviance." First, we argue that while some of the conceptual features of positive deviance are attractive theoretically, we also think the term as it is typically used is rather vague and somewhat value-laden. It has been used in a number of different and inconsistent ways (cf. Goode, 1991). We propose that if the term be granted "intellectual approval," that it should be used only to describe a positive public reaction to rule breakers. It should not be used to describe atypical behavior that is highly regarded, overconformity to norms or to identify patterns of deviance that the researcher considers positive for society. Second, we provide a theoretical framework for the analysis of "positive" deviance using Durkheim's concept of altruistic suicide and apply it to different interpretations given to individuals who deliberately kill themselves and others as part of an organized effort to bring about religious and/or political change.

The person to whom the "fatherhood" of the concept of positive deviance has been attributed, David Dodge, published an article in 1985 in which he lamented the almost universal concern paid by social scientists to negative attributes and consequences of deviance. He proposed that scholars are overdue in acknowledging the empirical existence of what he termed "positive deviance." His basic argument was that there have always existed "those persons and acts that are evaluated as superior because they surpass conventional expectations" (Dodge 1985:18). Such figures include saints, heroic figures, geniuses, and other charismatic

individuals. The social reaction to these individuals, who vary from conformity or normality in socially positive ways, are in Dodge's view "positive deviants." Dodge claimed that such a conceptualization was both logical and useful, expanding the scope of deviance studies and redirecting attention from only studies of behavior that is socially judged as "offensive, disgusting, contemptible, annoying or threatening" (Dodge 1985:17). Furthermore, he suggested that recognition of this concept might already be found, however indirect, in the writings of past scholars (cf. Clinard 1974:15; Katz 1975:1384; Lemert 1951:23-4).

The uncovering of presumed past proponents was also made by Druann Heckert (1989), attributing it to such theorists as Sorokin (1950) and Lemert (1951). Heckert argued for the plausibility of positive deviance by showing how the social perception of French Impressionists changed over time from one of rejection to widespread acceptance and respect, what she considered a transformation from negative to positive deviance. In later works, Heckert (1997, 1998, 2004) argued that Robert Merton's typology of crime and anomie relates to the concept of positive deviance.

Nachman Ben-Yehuda (1990) also argued for the viability of the concept of positive deviance, building particularly on a functionalist perspective. Drawing up on the work of Coser (1962), Durkheim (1915), and Erikson (1966); Ben Yehuda suggested that positive deviance be considered not only behavior that is positively sanctioned but also include deviance that has positive functions for society.

A somewhat harsh critique against the concept of positive deviance was made by Edward Sagarin (1985), who argued that Dodge essentially was misinterpreting sociologists of the past whom he claimed had recognized the concept of positive deviance. Sagarin also cogently argued that the concept was illogical, of little utility, and violated the common understanding among scholars of deviance as to what deviance constituted. He concluded that the concept of positive deviance was an oxymoron. This perspective was furthered by Goode (1991), who argued that the concept has been used in a variety of ways that are not logically connected. Kooistra (1990) also noted that positive deviance was a value-laden term that was used in a variety of

inconsistent ways. He questioned the intellectual usefulness of the concept except in a very limited way: to use the term to describe rule breakers who elicited positive reactions to their deviance (what Heckert and Heckert (2004) later called "deviance admiration." He stressed that there was nothing particularly inherent in the act or the presumed value it held for society that made it positive. What was of interest was simply that some members of society interpreted the behavior in a positive way, while others presumably did not. Much of his argument was presented in Goode's (1991) paper arguing that positive deviance is not a particularly useful concept.

In some ways, the debate about the viability of "positive deviance" reflects a fundamental argument about the relationship between words and things that goes at least back to Plato (cf. Bierstedt 1974:156-87). One side of this argument posits that definitions reflect an underlying reality or essence. The job of the scholar is to capture as accurately as possible the essential nature of an idea through the word, or definitions, she applies to the concept. From this perspective, definitions can be right or wrong because they involve claims about truth. There is an implicit theory being stated in the choice of a definition—a proposition about the relationship between variables. In the philosophical literature, such a definition is a "real definition" and reflects an "essentialist" perspective (cf. Grana 2002:16).

On the other side of the debate is the view that words or definitions are *not* truth claims, but simply "names" we choose to describe phenomenon. This is a "nominal definition," and it reflects a "conventionalist" approach. A definition, from this view, is not right or wrong. It should be judged primarily according to a number of other factors. First, as Sagarin (1985) points out, there should be a logical consistency to the way in which it groups or classifies. Second, a definition should attempt to avoid words or phrases that are value-laden, have negative or positive connotations. This point is particularly important because value-laden terms implicitly transform definitions into propositions or theories. Third, and perhaps of greater importance than logical consistency or linguistic neutrality, is whether the concept in question is

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useful. That is, does it lead to more avenues of inquiry, discussions among scholars, presentations, publications, and positive tenure decisions?

How, then, does the concept of positive deviance hold up to these criteria? First, we would argue that it in at least some uses, as proposed by Dodge, the concept of positive deviance lacks a logical consistency.   Goode (1991) argues that there are nine analytically distinct ways in which the term has been used. In subsequent years the term has been used in even more ways, as we will discuss below. We argue that the term, as it has been used in the social science literature, has generally been used in one of three major ways. First, positive deviance is behavior or characteristics that deviate from the "average" or "typical" in an *inherently* positive way. Second, positive deviance is *overconformity* to social norms that results in harmful consequences to the individual (as judged by the author and/or some unspecified audience). Third, positive deviance is rule breaking that is *beneficial* for society. We find problems with each of these approaches and will discuss them later.

A second set of issues is the use of the qualifier "positive." To call a form of behavior positive is to say that it is good and valued behavior. It also implies that what we might have considered "ordinary" deviance must now be considered "negative deviance," suggesting that it is in some way bad and undesirable. It is quite true, as Dodge (1985) and others (e.g. Goffman 1980; Liazos, 1972) have noted, that the vast majority of work in the field of deviance has examined behavior that is socially judged (at least by the powerful) to be disgusting, annoying, dangerous and perhaps immoral.

But it is possible to examine behavior that is *socially defined and reacted to* as negative without implying that such behavior is *inherently* negative. Labeling, conflict, and constructionist approaches currently popular in the field of deviance have been able to examine behavior judged deviant without necessarily suggesting that deviants are in any way morally flawed individuals. Attaching the label "negative deviant" to drug users, unwed mothers, AIDS victims, practicing homosexuals, the homeless, rap musicians or others who are current research topics presents significant theoretical conundrums.

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Our argument is that "positive deviance," as the term is frequently used, is not so much a definition as it is a theoretical proposition about a relationship between variables. What is being proposed, however, is not clear. In some cases, the term appears to be a "real definition" presumably claiming that positive deviance is *inherently* good for society (in terms of its consequences or as a model of exemplary behavior) or *inherently* harmful for individuals and society (as an example of over conformity) as others use it. In other cases, positive deviance appears to be a nominal definition that fails to specify for whom the deviant behavior is judged to be positive deviance and assumes that there is a consensus as to the nature of the behavior. The key issue here then is whether that proposition, often implied, is testable and holds up to empirical evaluation.

Positive Deviance: Behavior Favorably Deviates From Average/Typical

Dodge (1985:20) argues that "social behavior may range from the highly unacceptable to the highly acceptable" and thus implies criteria of "exceptionality" and "directionality." Therefore, individuals who are "different" in a positive sense, being extraordinarily beautiful, brave, or in some way exemplifying rare but desired behavior, might be considered positive deviants. This follows Wilkins' (1964) argument that behavior occurs in a bell-curve pattern, with most behavior—acceptable or normal—being in the center. Examples of positive and negative deviances are statistical outliers found at the tail ends of the bell curve. Jones (1998:180) takes this approach, arguing that "deviance only refers to that which is not normal….and that a norm violation may be positive as well." Here then, deviance is viewed as any variation or departure from the "average."

This statistical approach to understanding deviance presents a number of problems. First, deviance becomes something that is inherent in a behavior or situation by virtue of its variance from a hypothetical mean, rather something that emerges from an act of interpretation in a social context. While such an approach *may* lead to empirical verification, it is a conceptualization of deviance that varies significantly from how sociologists and deviance scholars usually understand the term.

Second, there are problems with measuring positive deviance as a variation from typical or normative behavior. To begin, the population that is being used to determine "normal" behavior is unspecified. Is it the US population? The world population? College students? Street gangs? Furthermore, this approach implies that a consensus exists within the unidentified population regarding normative behaviors or characteristics. It may be conceptually interesting to point out that the very rich and very poor have a number of similarities that are not usually shared with the middle class--for instance social isolation-- but should we then conclude that the incredibly rich are positive deviants and the dirt poor are negative deviants? And only the middle class are "normal?" The attitudes that exist in sociological literature toward the rich and the poor —consider Spencer compared to Marx--do not show a consensus. It would be safe to assume that no such consensus exists in society.

Third, the concept of positive deviance does not easily handle the distinction between *formal and informal norms*. There are many situations where the "typical" behavior is not the same as that called for by formal norms. Consider traffic laws and speed limits. The formal norm is the actual posted speed limit. Yet very few drivers actually heed the norm, in part because the actual application of the law by control agents differs from that posted. Drivers are allowed five to ten more miles per hour than posted. Is a driver who drives too fast a positive deviant and one who drives too slow a negative one? Or are drivers who actually obey speed limits positive deviants?

Finally, some—and perhaps many—behaviors are not easily fit into a bell curve and seem more *dichotomous or non-linear* in nature. Consider cases such as father-daughter incest or cannibalism in American society. Is it possible for positive deviance to even exist regarding these behaviors (cf. Hawkes 1975)?

As a summary criticism, we might also consider deviations from ideal body weight, as defined by the American Medical Association. While this definition of "ideal" might apply to healthcare professionals in the United States, such a consensus might not exist in other societies, where a little more body mass might be preferred! Or in the world of professional models, where

a little less weight might be desired. In our culture, would we consider anorexics and bulimics a form of negative deviance, and those who are morbidly obese positive deviants? Or are those who rigidly conform to this idealized body weight ("health Nazis") deviants since the "average" American is overweight? As can be seen from this discussion, issues over whether something is "positive" or not are in fact fairly complicated.

Positive Deviance as Overconformity

Another major approach to conceptualizing positive deviance is to see it as a form of overconformity and is found in the sociology of sports literature. Here positive deviance refers to athletes with presumably high pain thresh holds who "play with pain" to the point of damaging themselves (Hughes and Coakley 1991: Theberge 1997). It seems to us, however, that this behavior is not so much a form of deviance as it is an over conformity to the hyper masculine ideals found in competitive sports. Messner (2002:55-61) observes that athletes— particularly male athletes in competitive team sports—live in a world where there are cultural standards to endure pain:

> Boys learn that to show pain and vulnerability
>
> risks their being seen as "soft," and they know
>
> from the media, from coaches, and from their peers
>
> that this is a very bad thing. Instead, they learn
>
> that they can hope to gain access to high status, privilege, respect, and connection
>
> with others if
>
> they conform to what sociologist Don Sabo calls "the
>
> pain principle," a cultural ideal that demands
>
> suppression of self-empathy and a willingness to take
>
> pain and to take risks (Messner 2002:58).

Here the concept of positive deviance is invoked by the detached scholar to indicate behavior that is potentially harmful to the athlete and thus seemingly irrational, making it "deviant."

Positive deviance, then, is a form of overconformity that results in harmful consequences to someone who conforms to normative expectations and "does too much of a good thing." In a way, it becomes a term whereby the author can disguise one's own value judgments about behavior or characteristics through the use of a concept that sounds scientific and neutral. It is grounded in a long established and valued sociological "debunking" tradition that points out the harms–personal and social–that may result from blind conformity to social expectations (Berger 1963). Nonetheless, we do not see the concept used in this manner as having much wider applicability. Would it seem viable to consider genocide as an example of positive deviance in that it results from widespread societal conformity–at least tacitly–but leads to significant social harm, at least physical harm, to large numbers of people? Or would the concept only be reserved to describe situations where conformity to social norms leads to personal harm to the conformer, if such harm could be determined in any objective manner?[i]

Heckert and Heckert (2004:78) define positive deviance "as behaviors or conditions that over conform to normative expectations that are also positively evaluated." This approach differs from how the concept is used in the sociology of sports literature in that there is no implication that this overconformity is harmful. If anything, it is a desirable overconformity. Two forms of positive deviance are identified. The first is overconformity to innovation as exemplified by computer innovators without college degrees, certain corporate executives, or the French Impressionists. The second is overconformity to ritualism, as exemplified by zealous mediocre students who are praised as examples of hard work although their efforts result in little success. Positive evaluations of non conformists are called "deviance admiration" and include social bandits, employees of the month, lovable drunks, political or social revolutionaries who are recognized as heroes by some portion of the public.

This is an interesting and ambitious approach to expanding Merton's work on deviance and conformity. However, there are a number of problems with Heckert and Heckerts's (2004) interpretation of positive deviance. First is the question of how to determine overconformity and how much over conformity is needed for an individual to become recognized as a positive

deviant. How, for example, do we conceptualize the French Impressionists as positive deviance? The fact that initially this movement was not well regarded by the art community seems to indicate a lack of conformity with traditional artistic tastes rather than over conformity. That their artistic style later found favor with the some portion of the art community and influential sponsors is not easily conceptualized as over conformity, either. Ritualistic positive deviance, such as a hard working professional athlete who earns the plaudits of team mates and managers for his exemplary work ethic does not seem to be a very good example of overconformity, either. He or she is an overachiever but not necessarily an overconformist. If anything, these athletes exemplify behavior called for by formal norms—giving of 100 (or 110) percent at all times and who heed the athletic mantra of always "doing your best." Most athletes (or students) rarely conform to such normative expectations. Overachievers may clearly be viewed as positive, an example to be followed, but there is no deviance here except perhaps in an implicit statistical sense that their effort is not typical. And we have already identified problems with that approach to defining positive deviance.

Positive Deviance as Being Useful for Society

A third major conceptualization of positive deviance has been in terms of how deviance may be useful for society. Dodge (1985:31) suggests the concept be used is to show how positive deviance may be functional "for society and the group." But such a claim begs the question of just how one determines whether positive deviance, as Dodge uses the term, is useful. How would one begin to measure the usefulness to society of a behavior or a condition. Useful to whom?

Other problems emerge when one begins to talk about the "positive functions" of deviance and invoke Durkheimian arguments about how deviance is necessary to establish moral boundaries. All deviance is positive deviance since any and all deviant behavior establishes moral boundaries. Consequently, the concept of positive deviance, from this perspective, is meaningless because it has no discriminatory value.

There are also problems in arguing (in a Coserian sense) deviance is positive in that it signifies that social change is needed. This type of argument is typically an "after the fact" one, where in retrospect the researcher concludes that it was really fortunate for society that certain individuals violated rules, were labeled as deviant by political authorities, but were able to overcome the dominant power structures by force of reason or by just plain force. Thus, it is judged good that George Washington was a traitor or Martin Luther King, Jr. fought for civil rights. In these cases, we think what the researcher is actually saying here is that it was good for his and the current dominant world view that these once-deviants broke rules and helped bring about a revolutionary or reformist change.

Yet in the case of Martin Luther King, Jr. (cf. Heckert 1998), for instance, there were and are still individuals who would disagree about the positive nature of his rule breaking and the "good" it has done for society.[ii] As much as one might applaud the goals of the civil rights movement, not to mention the sovereignty of the United States, imputing "good" or "bad" to the consequences of rule-breaking is troublesome because it is both a value judgement and a virtually untestable proposition. One might simply be content with documenting how perceptions of deviance and deviants vary and change over time.

Dodge (1985:31) does suggest that assignment of the deviant label is problematic in that what is considered deviant is relative and subject to change. He points to the "politics of deviance" and underscores the role that power plays in assigning or shedding deviant labels. This is the aspect of positive deviance that Heckert (1989) emphasizes. She considers positive deviance to be behavior "that people label in a superior sense (p. 134)." Yet her discussion and analysis suggest, however, that she is primarily concerned with individuals who are acknowledged rule-breakers and viewed negatively by significant portions of the population; but who are considered by some portion of the public, either at the time or at a later time, to be symbolic representatives of cherished social values or standards. Although we have reservations with Heckert's approach, we also think that this is the context in which the concept of positive deviance has some scientific value and might be of use to sociological researchers. In the

remainder of this essay, we flesh out the logic behind this approach by exploring,(to paraphrase a now old cliche) how one man's terrorist is another's "positive deviant." Furthermore, we believe that such a conceptualization of positive deviance is grounded in traditional deviance theory, avoids the value-laden qualifier of ''positive'' and offers constructive directions for empirical research.

Positive Deviance: A Theoretical Framework

One way to examine the interpretations of and reactions to rule breaking is to use an approach suggested by Spector and Kitsuse (1977) for the study of social problems. They propose that a social problem be looked upon as a "product of definitional processes in which people perceive, define, and assert conditions to be social problems." The focus of sociological research should be on how situations come to be perceived and defined as social problems, how members generate definitions and constructions of definitions (Becker 1963; Erickson 1962; Kitsuse 1962). In applying this approach to the analysis of deviance, theoretical concern shifts from trying to define a presumed objective phenomenon named positive deviance to examining the characteristics of a social group that interprets illegal behavior as positive, how it constructs and maintains that definition, how it is asserted to and imposed on others, and under what structural conditions a particular definition becomes accepted by others.

A useful framework for the analysis of positive (and negative) definitions of deviance is derived from the sociological analysis of literature (cf. Alexander 2003). As Robert Escarpit (1965:1-2) has noted: "Each and every literary fact presupposes a writer, a book, and a reader; or in more general terms, an author, a product, and a public." The relationships between these elements are complex, but it is important to consider each in order to gain a full understanding of the sociological significance of literary products. A similar perspective has been used in the study of revivals of plays (Griswold, 1983) popular cultural forms (Fine, 1977), social banditry (Kooistra 1989, 1990), and political crime (Kooistra 1985). We would propose that this framework is valuable for examining any "cultural product" (cf. Griswold, 1987), including interpretations of deviance.

Authoring definitions of positive deviance: issues of power

Such an approach offers a number of avenues for social research, and at the same time avoids some of the value-laden implications of the concept. For instance, one might examine the nature of those contesting different images of rule-breakers, perhaps using a resource mobilization perspective to show how *power* plays a critical dimension in making a particular image dominant. As Sir John Harrington noted about 300 years ago:

Treason never prospers, what's the reason?

If it prospers, none dare call it treason.

The dominant powers in society have a decided edge in determining what types of behavior and kinds of people are going to be widely recognized as deviant. The winner of a revolution may become a political saint and father of a country. A soldier who allies himself with the losing side and has the misfortune of being captured, such as Benedict Arnold, may be vilified for centuries. Or on another level, impoverished individuals running numbers in Harlem are deviants, while affluent citizens on Wall Street gamble on the stock market and are considered embodiments of the American dream. A corollary approach would be to consider the relational differences between those asserting definitions of deviance and those being so labeled (cf. Black 1989, 2004; Goodwin 2006).

Deviance as a cultural product

Another direction is exploring the tactics used by groups who are manipulating moral meanings to the uncommitted and perhaps apathetic public. Of particular interest might be how the social identity of the offender is constructed, who is presumed to be the "victim" of deviance and how is that identity presented, and what motives are imputed to the deviant to account for his rule breaking. The actual behavior and motives of deviants may in some cases be the least important factor in shaping their public image. As Orrin Klapp (1962:13) has noted, people fashion heroes, or villains, or fools using a standard set of anecdotes, themes, or concepts. One interesting line of research is to uncover the basic structures or formulas used to credit or discredit the moral standing of alleged rule breakers. Many basic themes are parallel to the

techniques of neutralization that Sykes and Matza (1957:664-670) suggest make it possible for juvenile delinquents to justify and commit illegal acts. According to Sykes and Matza, delinquents are not necessarily committed to the norms and values of a deviant subculture. These lawbreakers reveal guilt at their misdeeds and often express respect and admiration for model citizens. In fact, these delinquents generally show a firm commitment to conventional norms. But the normative system of society is flexible, sometimes ambiguous and norms are qualified guides for conduct. Rules for proper moral behavior are variable and situational. Using "neutralization techniques," the delinquent is able to define the situation in such a manner that he excuses his violation of law. In similar fashion, the positive deviant is not a member of a deviant subculture. He is seen as an individual who respects the basic moral precepts of society. Using such techniques, one may neutralize the deviant identity of these lawbreakers and transform them into good men who represent morality and justice. Shared images of positive deviants evolve from what might be considered socially constructed rationalizations that excuse and justified the lawlessness of these criminals and thus permit people to glorify them. Sykes and Matza identified five neutralization techniques--denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, and appeal to higher loyalties. Many of these neutralizations may utilized to rationalize lawbreaking for any type of positive deviant (cf. Kooistra 1989).

The deviant and his public

And finally one might consider who perceives a deviant in a favorable or unfavorable light and the role of social structure in shaping "audiences" that might be receptive to particular images of rule-breakers. There are always deviants who are considered as heroes for one reason or another by various segments of the population. The ghetto pimp, armed robber or drug dealer, for example, may be a hero to some lower class youth because he exemplifies autonomy, toughness, or "street smarts" (Abrahams, 1970:61-86; Anderson, 1999; Levine, 1977:407-420; Miller, 1958; Pattilla-McCoy 1999). Computer "hackers" who have illegally gained access to and tinkered with the highly complex computer systems of large organizational structures may

be granted heroic stature by some (Hollinger, 1991). But in order to emerge from obscurity and become a national figure, large numbers of people must find some positive symbolic meaning in his criminality and identify with him rather than with his victim.

A Study in Positive Deviance: Durkheim and Altruistic Suicide

A recurring theme in the works of proponents of the concept of positive deviance is to justify its intellectual use by linking it to previous social theorists. We will follow their lead by invoking the work of Emile Durkheim.

In Durkheim's (1951) classic work Suicide, he notes that the taking of one's life has long been almost universally condemned and prohibited. The mere attempt was punishable by both religious and secular authorities. The individual in the modern world, with its emphasis on individual rights and freedoms, "has become tinged with religious value; man has become a god for men. Therefore any attempt against his life suggests sacrilege. Suicide is such an attempt" (p 334). Even assisting suicide is considered a crime, akin to being an accessory to murder. Suicide is widely considered a form of social deviance.

Yet Durkheim also observes that there is a form of suicide that "resembles in its most vivid manifestations some categories of action which we are used to honoring with our respect and even admiration" (Durkheim 1951: 239). He terms this "altruistic suicide;" it comes about when "social integration is too strong" and the sense of the individual identity is lost (p. 217). Durkheim, then, provides an intellectual opening for defining altruistic suicide as positive deviance, although we must be careful about how we are using the term.

Durkheim identifies three types of altruistic suicide: obligatory altruistic suicide, optional altruistic suicide, acute altruistic suicide. The first category, *obligatory altruistic suicide*, falls into one of three categories: those who are elderly or ill, women whose husbands have died, or

"followers or servants on the death of their chiefs" (p 219). Durkheim (1951:219) argues that "when a person kills himself, in all of these cases, it is not because he assumes the right to do so but, on the contrary, *because it is his duty*. If he fails in this obligation, he is dishonored and also punished, usually, by religious sanction." If such a person continues living he loses public respect and earns the stigma of being a deviant. Suicide in this context is not an over conformity to norms, just conformity to them.

The second category, *optional altruistic suicide*, occurs where an individual is not bound by custom to take his life but chooses to do so because a social prestige attaches to suicide. Durkheim (1951:222) argues that "these suicides are of the same nature of obligatory suicide. Though public opinion does not formally require them, it is certainly favorable to them." While the obligatory altruistic suicide results from an attempt to avoid social censure, the optional altruistic suicide stems from the attempt to gain social respect.

Finally, Durkheim proposes that the *acute altruistic suicide* is one where the individual strives to "strip himself of his personal being in order to be engulfed in something which he regards as his true essence" (p. 225). He is in pursuit of a goal, but one which is "outside this life, which henceforth seems merely an obstacle to him" (p.225). A vision of a glorious afterlife is seen as a reality that might come to pass through the hastening of death. The various forms of altruistic suicides "have for their root the same state of altruism which is equally the cause of what might be called "heroic suicide" (p. 240). It seems that altruistic suicide, then, a may be construed as a form of positive deviance.

However, Durkheim (1951:240) rejects any conceptualization of suicide that is grounded in subjective mental states such as motive, stressing that "every sort of suicide is then merely the exaggerated or deflected form of a virtue." A suicide resulting from a lack of social bonds with

others –the depressed widow—is no more or less virtuous than suicides by Christian martyrs, soldiers falling upon grenades to save their comrades, or Jesus himself, whose self induced death resulted from the absolute denial of the self. Where altruistic suicides reflect a noble indifference to the loss of one's own life, its egoistic counterpart reflects a praiseworthy respect for the suffering of others. All types of suicide, to Durkheim, are simply reflections of the social patterns and tensions found in a society. The various forms of suicide are defined by the social expectations surrounding them and the reactions they elicit.

Recent historical events, particularly the emergence of a form of altruistic suicide that involves killing oneself as well as the killing of bystanders---sometimes military targets and sometimes civilians—has made Durkheim's concept once again relevant. Pape (2005:171-98), using Durkheim's typology of suicide, concludes that many acts of "suicide terrorism" are forms of altruistic suicide. This variant of suicide also exemplifies some of the problems associated with the concept of positive deviance. On one level, it provides an interesting example of whether positive deviance is a definition or a proposition—the difference between real and nominal definitions. At another level, it exemplifies the confusion that exists about how the concept is to be used.

A battle over definitions

The first issue we confront when pondering this new form of terrorism is what to call it because it goes by several names, and each definition leads us into different intellectual and historical terrains. The four concepts typically employed are: heroic martyrs, suicide martyrs, suicide bombers, and homicide bombers.

The first of these—*heroic martyrs*— (or *ishtishahdi*,meaning "self chosen martyrdom) has been used to resolve a moral dilemma associated with bombings where the bomber

deliberately kills himself (or herself) in the attempt to kill others. Suicide is forbidden by most

interpretations of Islamic law, as is the harming of innocent bystanders. Consequently, for some

it becomes critical to define the acts as not a form of suicide. In an interview with leading Hamas

founder Abdul Aziz Rantisi, Juergensmeyer (2003:73-4) was informed that heroic martyrs were

not suicide bombers, since suicide bomber "implied an impulsive act by a deranged individual.

The missions undertaken by the young men in the Hamas cadres, [Rantisi] said, were ones that

they deliberately and carefully chose as part of their religious obligation." Juergensmeyer was

informed that "all Muslims seek to be martyrs." These select men were simply given permission

to express their religiosity in that particular way. Ellis Shuman (2001: 2) quotes another Islamic

cleric as stating: "They are not suicide operations. They are heroic martyrdom operations, and

the heroes that carry them out … are driven by an overwhelming desire to cast terror and fear

into the hearts of the oppressors." Another cleric qualifies this argument, noting "if a person

blows himself up, as in operations that Palestinian youths carry out against those they are

fighting, then he is a martyr. But if he explodes himself among babies or women or old people

who are not fighting the war, then he is not considered a martyr." In this manner, it becomes easy

to explain away a suicide and murder of others as a heroic and justifiable act. It becomes what

Durkheim would term acute altruistic suicide. The complete denial of the self through such as

selfless act allows for a rationalization of the act as not suicide since it does not involve, in a

symbolic sense at least, the killing of one's self (cf. Dyson 2006).

The second of these appellations—*suicide martyrs*—also allows the conceptualization of

suicide as socially acceptable. It links us to a view of this form of self-murder that we can trace

back to the early Christian church. Here we find numerous examples of individuals who, under

Roman rule, refused to disavow their Christian beliefs and worship Roman gods. In some cases,

these early Christian martyrs took provocative steps to ensure their execution and faced death with eager anticipation (de Ste Croix 1999). These individuals chose death over life for religious reasons. We can even find evidence of this perspective in an American context in the presumed actions of a number of American political saints. Nathan Hale, proclaims: "I regret that I have but one life to give for my country." Patrick Henry says: "Give me liberty or give me death." The culture of martyrdom is even expressed on New Hampshire license plates, where residents of that state drive about with the message: "Live Free or Die." Here we find death being embraced for a political cause.

It is important to note that contemporary (suicide) martyrs live in a culture of martyrdom. The killing of oneself for religious and political reasons is socially recognized as an honorable and glorious act. Such martyrs are extolled for their virtuous lives; their lives are often reconstructed to become one filled with religious devotion and moral purity so that they may be placed among the pantheon of past Islamic saints. Photographs of martyrs are passed around much like baseball cards in American society, with biographies of the martyr printed on the back. Tales of their self sacrifice and the carnage it produces are told throughout the community, and the families of such martyrs are often viewed with great honor. Parents even dress their infants in "suicide bomber" outfits (Oliver and Steinberg 2004). Pape (2005:138) notes:

> During the 1980s and even up through the present
>
> day, large segments of the Shia community in Lebanon
>
> engage in highly visible rituals and ceremonies that
>
> commemorate "martyrs" who have committed acts of suicide
>
> terrorism against American, Israeli, and other
>
> international targets. Major city streets are named in

> honor of these fallen heroes, their pictures are widely
>
> used as positive symbols in political discourse, and
>
> large public rallies are commonly associated with yearly
>
> public holidays and other special events are held in
>
> their honor.

Political discourse defines these suicide bombings as "martyrdom and legitimate self defense" rather than murder or suicide (cf. The Economist 2006:10). Surveys also show much public support for Hamas suicide bombings in the West Bank and Gaza, sometimes as high as 70 percent (Jenkins 2003:1-2; Pape 2005:191). Similar popular support is found for the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka and Al-Qaeda throughout Saudi Arabia.

The suicide martyr, from this perspective is both a selfless hero and a victim, or at least a symbolic representation of a victimized people. As the prominent Hamas spokesperson Rantisi put it "We are the victims in this struggle, not the cause of it" (in Juergensmeyer 2003:75). Many supporters of Hamas have or know first hand of those who have had families evicted from family farms by the Israelis and family members killed unjustly (Oliver and Steinberg 2004).

Conversely, the "victims" of suicide bombings are transformed into representatives of Satan, be they soldiers or civilians. The wickedness of the victims is reflected in both their political and moral failings, and such rationalizations are made easier by the relational distance between the suicide bomber and the target (cf Black 2004; Goodwin 2006). Justifications are conjured that allow for the dehumanization of the dead and wounded. In 1985 in an open letter the Hezbollah declared:

> America and its allies and the Zionist entity…have

Attacked our country, destroyed our villages, massacred   our

children, violated our sanctities, and installed

over our heads criminal henchmen… (in Pape 2005:190)

In this manner, victims become transformed into the moral offenders and the suicide martyr

becomes a representative and an avenger of an oppressed people. Even the murder of civilians—

of women and children—becomes rationalized. The Hamas and other organizations that used

suicide martyrs began targeting civilians presumably in response to Israeli attacks on Palestinian

citizens. Rantisi, in his discussion with Juergensmeyer (2003:74-5) claimed that the killing of

Israeli civilians was in fact a "defensive measure" designed to deter future Israeli murders of

Palestinian citizens and to teach a "moral lesson." It is clear, however, that "suicide martyrs"

and those who glorify them recognize that they are violating social norms. It is acknowledged

that such acts are illegal. From this perspective, one might identify these individuals as positive

deviants—rule breakers who are viewed favorably by a portion of the public.

Third, we sometimes find the term *suicide bomber* used. This leads us down a different

historical path.   An important aspect of early examples of suicide martyrs is that these deaths

involved only the individual-- early Christian martyrs did not attempt to kill others in the

process. More recent forms such as those found among the Tamil Tigers, Hamas following the

intifada, the hijackers of planes on September 11, and the contemporary Islamic forms involve

the deliberate killing of others along with the self. Consequently, there are many, even in

Islamic societies, who find nothing positive about suicide martyrs. They would exemplify, from

this perspective, simply another form of deviance.

However, in the Old Testament we do find the story of Sampson, who pulled down the

pillars of the Temple, killing both himself and those who were defiling a sacred place. In Islamic

tradition we find accounts of Moslem warriors who sacrificed their lives in struggles against military foes. More recently, during World War II, Japanese kamikaze pilots sacrificed their lives in the process of killing others. As one pilot put it in a letter to his family shortly before his final fatal flight: "Working as one heart, we will plunge into an enemy vessel. Although I did not do much with my life, I am content that I fulfilled my wish to live a pure life, leaving nothing ugly behind me" (quoted in Dyson 2006:8). Such an act of sacrifice for one's country was considered a great honor.

This terminology of *suicide bomber* in some ways strips the suicide of religious connotations. There is no explicit reference to martyrdom, although the act may be seen a morally justifiable political strategy, a form of asymmetrical warfare that those who have no chance of succeeding using traditional military tactics might use. A number of authors (Bloom 2005; Brym and Araj 2006; Pedahzur and Perliger 2006; Pape 2005; Robison, et. al. 2006) argue that often social and political motives rather than religious ones inspire suicide bombers. In a number of countries—Sri Lanka, Chechen, Turkey, and even Palestine—women have joined the ranks of such terrorists, clearly a break with religious tradition. The goals of suicide bombers are mainly secular—to instill public fear and loss of faith in political leaders, attract media coverage, gain support and sympathy for their cause, and create hope and solidarity within the community that supports their social and political agendas. It is essentially a form of terrorism.

Finally, we find reference to such individuals as *homicide bombers*. Here we see them as essentially a class of mass murderers. Jenkins (2003:3) claims that some American media refuse to use the phrase *suicide bombers* since the term places emphasis on the self-sacrifice of the attacker: they prefer to speak instead of *homicide bombers*, stressing the criminal nature of the act. Motives are described as some combination of delusion, self-interest, or psychopathology

(cf. Atran 2003; Jenkins 2003:67-8; Perina 2002).   White (2003:299) argues that "professionals" recruit suicide bombers. Of the suicide bomber he notes: "Victims are usually young and poor" who are brainwashed into carrying out their atrocities. One former Kentucky principal whose school experienced a mass killing by a student concludes that school shooters and terrorists are alike in their psychological profile. "Terrorists feel like they're in a hopeless situation, so 'I might as well go out with a big splash and take a lot of my enemies with me.'" (Quoted in Toppo 2006). Khosrokhavar (2005:2) observes: "One myth dies hard. Martyrs are described as 'Allah's madmen'. They are described as being motivated by something approaching dementia." This interpretation of suicide bombing resembles what Durkheim (1951: 276) called fatalistic suicide, "that of persons with future pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline." The motives of these lawbreakers are sometimes reduced to a desire for seventy virgins in the afterlife and a glorious legacy in this world. They are celebrity seekers with inadequate personalities who feel they will only ever amount to any significance by killing themselves and others. There is nothing positive about their deviance from this perspective. *They* are the offenders—flawed individuals, and they murder innocent civilians or defenseless soldiers (cf. Hudson 1999).

Others claim that "suicide attackers are normally well-educated workers from both religious and secular backgrounds. Especially given their education, they resemble the kind of politically conscious individuals who might join a grass roots movement more than they do wayward adolescents or religious fanatics" (Pape 2005:216). Their social characteristics are much like the American youth who joined the SDS or other protest organizations, who also were socially constructed by political opposition as "freaks, fools, troublemakers or hustlers" (Turk

1982:114). Certainly there is no consensus as to the motives for their actions or their social characteristics.

Conclusion: What is positive deviance

The concept of positive deviance is too vague and value-laden, at least as Dodge (1985) proposes it and is commonly used. It should not be used to describe atypical behavior that is highly regarded or to identify rule breaking that the researcher considers positive for society. However, we argue that the concept may be of intellectual value if it is used to point out that deviance is the product of complex and dynamic processes of interaction, power, and legitimacy (Ben-Yehuda, 1990); and that the interpretation of rule-breaking may vary between groups and over time. *Positive deviance we would define as a favorable definition of rule breaking made by others.*

To illustrate this point we briefly examined the differing interpretations of deliberate bombings that result in the death of the bomber and others. Our study illustrates two important points relevant to the concept of positive deviance. First, the terms we use shape the perspective we have of the behavior. To append "martyr" as opposed to "bomber" leads us in different directions. To alter suicide to homicide adds yet another direction. We have no longer a simple definition, but an implicit theory about relationships between variables: the motives for behavior or the categories into which we wish to place an action. Similarly, by adding "positive" to deviance, we seem to be invariably drawn to an implicit theory about action rather than a simple definition.

Second, this modern form of altruistic suicide illustrates the conceptual issues surrounding the term *positive deviance.* First, there is no satisfactory way empirically to demonstrate that suicide or some types of suicides may be more or less beneficial or positive for

society. Furthermore, one cannot logically construe suicide, even altruistic suicide, as a positive deviation from typical behavior in any statistical sense. Finally, while it is possible to see especially altruistic suicide as the result of an over conformity to social norms that results in harm to the individual, it is a value judgment on the part of the scholar to call this positive deviance. While we might see the taking of one's life in the service of a higher cause as foolish and misdirected—like an obsessive compulsive hand washer or an athlete who plays with pain— certainly significant portions of the society where this behavior is manifested would not share that interpretation. Pape (2005) argues that almost all suicide terrorist attacks take place as part of a coherent campaign organized by large militant factions with significant public support, while other segments of the public and much of the world community vilifies these actions. There is no consensus here. What we are left with is little more than the recognition that *some* individuals in society would consider suicide, under certain circumstances, to be a positive or "heroic" act.

We acknowledge that there is nothing inherent in a suicide that makes it essentially positive in any sort of moral, practical or statistical sense. But we may consider it a form of positive deviance if our focus is on who defines it as such, how they construct that definition, and to whom is it asserted. Where the concept of positive deviance might be used in a consisted and fruitful way, then, would be to talk about who sees the behavior in a positive or favorable way, how they are able to construct that interpretation, and to whom it is asserted. Further, we can also see how meanings are contested.

In fact, this approach may be applied to an understanding of how social interpretations of deviance of any sort are fashioned, marketed, and accepted as true by segments of the public. Many conceptualizations of deviance seem little more than caricatures, dramatized myths that

justify ideological perspectives of powerful interests. There is much to be gained by examining

the processes by which definitions of deviance--positive and negative--are constructed, and

moral meanings manipulated.

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[i] Another form of positive deviance cited in the sociology of sports literature is the use of performance enhancing supplements. Here, also we encounter a number of problems. If the drugs or procedures are illegal, then it becomes problematic to define them as positive deviance resulting form over conformity. It is a failure to conform to laws or organizational guidelines that make the behavior deviant. We also encounter problems with determining exactly how to measure what is a performance enhancing drug or operationalizing harm. (Is caffeine a performance enhancing drug whose use constitutes positive deviance?) Finally, there may be disagreement over whether performance enhancing drugs or procedures like blood doping are deviant at all. Hill (2006) notes "At one time, using coaches was prohibited in Olympic sports. Systematic training was frowned upon. They were thought to be against the spirit of the games….Does banning such drugs make any more sense than the erstwhile ban on coaching?" Hill argues that many who study the health issues and ethical concerns raised by the use of performance enhancing drugs do not agree that such use is physically harmful or morally wrong.

[ii] It is clear, for instance, that J. Edgar Hoover was not especially fond of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights movement (Cf. Branch 2006).