The Simpsons Help Us Understand Deviance and Social Control

Abstract:

Marge in Chains, an episode from the 4th season of the popular animated television show, The Simpsons, provides a wealth of opportunities for students to actively engage with concepts related to deviance and social control. Students first read about deviance and social control in any introductory textbook. I use Schaefer's Sociology in Modules. In class, we review these concepts using a PowerPoint presentation. Then I show this episode of Simpsons. It is not necessary, and may be distracting, to show the entire episode. I usually forward the DVD to the third track and begin there, as the deviance concepts start popping up in force after a minute or two. While they watch the video, students have a worksheet in front of them in which they answer both factual questions about the plot and about deviance concepts that are being depicted. Afterward, we discuss all the answers as a class to make sure that each student has a good artifact from the experience that they can use as they study for the deviance portion of the upcoming test. Student feedback from this learning experience has been singularly positive as a means for developing a real sense of what these concepts might "look like" in real life, albeit the real life of The Simpson family.

Usage Notes:
I use this activity in my Principles of Sociology course, but it could also be used in courses such as Deviance and Social Control, Criminological Theory, and other similar classes. It is important to confine viewing to the portion of this episode that involves deviance concepts. Thus, the first few minutes can safely be skipped, then watch the video until the conclusion of the episode. The only pitfall I have found is that it is important to advise students to focus on the deviance concepts, even though, admittedly, they may find other aspects of the video humorous and interesting as well. Students usually look relieved at the completion of this activity, as it really helps them to grasp how a number of important deviance concepts and processes actually work. Now they can visualize these things and remember them.

Learning Goals and Assessments:

**Goal**
Apply the concept of labeling (Becker) and primary/secondary deviance (Lemert) to events in this episode.

**Assessment**
Show of hands in the classroom and success on the deviance and social control portion of the test.

**Goal**
Apply the concepts of the degradation ceremony (Garfinkel) and reintegration ceremony to events in this episode.

**Assessment**
Show of hands in the classroom and success on the deviance and social control portion of the test.

**Goal**
Apply other concepts of deviance, including, effect of deviance on community (Durkheim), sanctions, self-fulfilling prophecy, differential association (Sutherland), and retrospective interpretation to events in this episode.

**Assessment**
Show of hands in the classroom and success on the deviance and social control portion of the test.

Resource Files:

- DevianceSocialControl.pptx
- MargeInChainsWorksheetMYCOPY-03-06-10.docx
Marge in Chains

1. (Labeling) What was the behavior that Marge engaged in?
   LEFT THE STORE WITH A BOTTLE OF BOURBON FOR WHICH SHE DID NOT PAY.

2. (Labeling) Who noticed it?
   APU, THE CASHIER AT THE CONVENIENCE STORE.

3. (Labeling) How was the behavior interpreted; what does the observer say she did?
   APU SAYS THAT SHE STOLE IT.

4. (Labeling) What was the sanction, or consequence? Was it negative or positive?
   30 DAYS IN PRISON

5. (Garfinkel) Was there a degradation ceremony? If so, what happened?
   YES. COURT TRIAL. SHE WAS FOUND GUILTY.

6. Was there a reintegration ceremony? If so, what happened?
   WELCOME BACK MARGE BANNER ON ROOF, WHOLE TOWN SHOWED UP, 3 CHEERS, ADJUSTED STATUE IN HER HONOR.

7. (Lemert) Did Marge engage in primary deviance?
   SHE MAY HAVE, IF SHE ACTUALLY DID STEAL THE BOTTLE OF BOURBON.

8. (Lemert) Did Marge engage in secondary deviance?
   NO. SHE DID NOT ENGAGE IN FURTHER ACTS OF DEVIANCE.

9. (Durkheim) How did Marge’s absence affect the community?
   RIOTING, LOOTING FIRES, KILLER BEES, POLICE DOGS, COULD NOT AFFORD LINCOLN STATUE

10. (Labeling) Did Marge accept the deviant label?
    NO, SHE DID NOT CHANGE HER BEHAVIOR TO FIT THE DEVIANT LABEL.
11. (Differential Association) Did Marge develop an excess of associations favorable to violation of law over those unfavorable to violation of law? How did her associations with Phillips and with Tattoo Annie and others affect her?

NO. SHE BEHAVES EXACTLY THE SAME AS BEFORE, EVEN AFTER ASSOCIATING WITH CRIMINALS.

12. What is the difference between these two statements?
   a. Police Chief – Marge Simpson was arrested for shoplifting?
   b. Mayor – Marge Simpson is a shoplifter?
   A. REFERS TO A FACT.
   B. REFERS TO HER IDENTITY AND IS A JUDGMENT OF HER CHARACTER.

13. (Retrospective Interpretation) What were some of the comments made by the minister, the doctor, and their wives about Marge and
   a. Her husband DOESN’T EARN VERY MUCH
   b. Family IS A MESS
   c. Cooking HAIR ON A MARSHMALLOWS SQUARE
   d. Physical appearance WEBBED TOES
   e. Alcohol use? DRINKY-DRINKY GESTURE
   f. Why do they follow her to the bathroom? DON’T TRUST HER NOT TO STEAL SOMETHING.

14. Do you think Marge stole the bourbon? Why or why not?

LINES UNDER EYES SUGGEST SHE WAS TIRED AND FORGOT SHE WAS CARRYING IT

15. According to labeling theory, does it matter whether she stole it or not? Explain.

NO. IT ONLY MATTERS THAT SHE WAS OBSERVED, LABELED, AND PUNISHED.

16. At one point, Bart is eating lunch with a friend on a bench outdoors. A well-known bully, Nelson, approaches and taunts Bart, calling Bart’s mother a jailbird. Bart counters by saying "So is yours!" Nelson replies, "Oh yeah! Let's play." One theory of deviance suggests that if Bart spends too much time with Nelson, he may learn techniques for committing crimes and/or may learn attitudes favorable to breaking the law. Which theory of deviance is this?

DIFFERENTIAL ASSOCIATION THEORY