



## Creating the Sociological Imagination on the First Day of Class: The Social Construction of Deviance

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### Abstract:

The first day of class is crucial in setting the tone for the rest of the semester (Dorn 1987; Riffer 1983; Weimer 1989). This paper describes an exercise that we use on the first day of our courses in the sociology of deviance and in introductory sociology. Four objectives are sought in the initial meeting. The first two are the answers to two questions suggested by Dorn (1987): "What are we doing here together?" and "What is the sociological substance of the course?" In answer to the first question, students should know what they will be able to do by the end of the course. To this end, we give them an overview of things to come that will enable them to place course material in an appropriate context. To address Dorn's second question, we expose students to a major sociological concept, the social construction of reality. They experience firsthand the insights and the usefulness of the concept before they have had time to read and discuss any of the course material. The exercise uses lay language and experiences already familiar to students. The third objective is to show students the power of the sociological imagination in understanding their social world.

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## ***Creating the Sociological Imagination on the First Day of Class: The Social Construction of Deviance***

John R. Brouillette and Ronny E. Turner

The first day of class is crucial in setting the tone for the rest of the semester (Dorn 1987; Riffer 1983; Weimer 1989). This paper describes an exercise that we use on the first day of our courses in the sociology of deviance and in introductory sociology. Four objectives are sought in the initial meeting. The first two are the answers to two questions suggested by Dorn (1987): "What are we doing here together?" and "What is the sociological substance of the course?" In answer to the first question, students should know what they will be able to do by the end of the course. To this end, we give them an overview of things to come that will enable them to place course material in an appropriate context.

To address Dorn's second question, we expose students to a major sociological concept, the social construction of reality. They experience firsthand the insights and the usefulness of the concept before they have had time to read and discuss any of the course material. The exercise uses lay language and experiences already familiar to students.<sup>1</sup>

The third objective is to show students the power of the sociological imagination in understanding their social world. Sociology can provide them with a "way of seeing" rather than with a body of information to be memorized and regurgitated on examinations. Howery (1991), commenting on the appropriate focus of the introductory course, states, "The course should be less encyclopedic or fact and name oriented. Instead, faculty should identify the powerful ideas and concepts in sociology and empirical generalizations that explain society" (p.9). The professor attempts to demonstrate that the most valuable education is not the mastery of a body of facts, but "learning how to learn" (Kelly 1990, p.317). This approach helps students to learn skills that they can adapt and use in a variety of situations outside the classroom. Cross (1983) summarized this point well in the following statement:

There is an ancient proverb which says, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; give him a fishing rod and you feed him for the rest of his life." Our educational proverb might read, "Teach students subject matter, and you give them perishable information; teach them how to learn, and you give them knowledge and independence for the rest of their lives" (p.22).

This third objective is the most germane for this paper: students receive a very useful tool that they can use to interpret human behavior in other contexts.

The fourth objective of the first day is the most difficult: to change students from passive notetakers to active participants in their education. The exercise presented here has proved stimulating enough to rouse intellectually all but the most passive students, even in classes of 100 or more.

### **IS IT SPIT OR SALIVA?**

After briefly describing the procedures and the course content, the professor calls on one of the students to provide a small amount of saliva in a sterilized spoon that the professor has brought to class. With a small amount of embarrassment, she does so (after class she is rewarded with a free copy of a book related to the course content). Thanking her for the contribution that he now holds in the spoon, the professor gives a brief lecture on the benefits and functions of saliva for the human body. Among his remarks, he says:

Saliva continuously moistens the linings of the mouth, throat, and general bronchial area. Saliva aids in the prevention of infection in these areas. Some cold remedies, for example, so dry out the linings that the microscopic cracks in the linings often bleed and are very

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<sup>1</sup> Although both of us use the exercise in class, it was developed by Ronny Turner.

susceptible to infection. Also, the admonitions of parents to their children to eat slowly and chew well is not just to prevent choking on large pieces of food. The leisurely eating of food mixes saliva with the food, which shortly thereafter is blended with the gastric acids in the stomach. This compound now sets the stage for a catalytic combination of saliva, food, and gastric juices, which produces optimal digestion. The addition of an adequate amount of saliva allows the body to extract needed nutrients throughout the digestive tract. Finally, saliva offsets the possibility of too much acid in the stomach, and therefore lessens the possibility of heartburn or ulcers.

After this discourse in praise of saliva, the professor offers the student who initially provided the valued body fluid the opportunity to put the spoon back in her mouth and swallow it. Without fail, the student declines. After the instructor states that he can't understand why anyone would reject such a valuable substance in an age of recycling, he offers the spoon with its contents to another class member. With students gagging throughout the auditorium, this offer is declined. The instructor states that this reaction is inconsistent with student behavior: after all, students sometimes share a can of soda pop, which of course also involves sharing saliva. He goes on to say:

Not only that, but some students engage in a formerly criminal action, French kissing, which most couples consider intimate, loving, and appropriate. Actually, two people place their lips together, intermingle their tongues, and exchange or mix their saliva. Is this deviant? Certainly not! It's sexy...cool...and a "turn on."

Well, if you believe that's cool, picture this. A couple are parked at the top of Lookout Mountain, passionately embracing each other. The woman pulls a spoon from her purse, which she uses to scrape some saliva from her mouth. To soothe her lover's raging hormones and to show her love for him, she offers him the spoon. Do you think it will turn him on to a point of no return? Probably not, unless he's into that kind of thing. Most likely the man would consider this a gross, disgusting offer and terminate the date much earlier than planned.

In subsequent discussion, the class agrees that the spoon offer is a deviant act.

Still holding the spoonful of valuable mouth fluid, the professor inquires, "Why doesn't anybody want the saliva?" The students give various answers, such as "The spoon's content is spit, not saliva." "No one wants spit." "Spit is disgusting." "You spit at someone you intensely dislike." With no takers, the instructor flicks the spoon's contents on the floor.

Now, it's definitely spit, if not before. Moisture in the mouth is saliva; former saliva now outside the mouth is spit. What is the difference between spit and saliva? Is there a chemical difference between the two?

At this point the professor proposes a hypothetical experiment in which samples of saliva would be taken from 25 students' mouths and placed in test vials. The same students then are asked to spit on their desks. The instructor carefully collects the spit and places each specimen in a clean vial. He says he will take 50 unlabeled vials to the chemistry department to determine which of the 50 vials hold saliva and which ones contain spit. Then he asks the class members to hypothesize what the chemistry department will find. Of course all the students respond laughingly, "There's no difference between the 'spit' and the 'saliva' samples." The professor retorts, "If there's no difference, why won't you drink the saliva off the spoon?" The room becomes quiet; the students are not sure how to answer. Here lies the opportunity to introduce them to the concept of the social construction of reality.

There is a difference between spit and saliva. But no chemist will ever find it because the difference is not chemical. It's social. If people believe that spit and saliva are different, they are different. You had better know the difference or suffer the consequences. Spit is saliva in the wrong place or under the wrong circumstances. Nothing inherent in the mouth moisture

itself necessitates a particular distinction between spit and saliva; no inherent change occurs. The difference is socially constructed. We social beings have drawn lines around behavior to demarcate deviant from normal, acceptable behavior.

In making these observations, the professor sets the stage for a later revelation that "deviance is social spit, behavioral spit."

Two other examples are introduced at this point: What is the difference between holy water taken from a local Roman Catholic church and tap water from a nearby restroom? Or what is the difference between wine and kosher wine? The difference is determined not by undertaking chemical analysis, but rather by studying Roman Catholic theology and Jewish dietary law respectively. The difference does not lie in the water or wine, but in the way people choose to define it. That is to say, people do not *discover* whether or not swallowing moisture from a person's mouth is deviant; they *determine* whether or not it is.

### IS SPITTING ALWAYS DEVIANT?

The professor continues to demonstrate the power of the sociological imagination to the class, again using terminology and examples with which students are already familiar. He explains that even spit and spitting are defined differently, depending on who is doing it and on the social context within which it is done.

Mothers often take moisture from their mouths to wipe their child's dirty face. Jesus and other religious leaders reportedly utilized their "sputum" to cure blindness. Deified saliva has been worshipped as capable of producing all sorts of miracles, whereas spitting in someone's face is usually the ultimate insult. Or spitting might be undertaken to prevent a superstitious affliction from occurring—i.e., spitting after stepping on a sidewalk crack.

A social act as mundane as spitting can reveal much about social prescriptions and proscriptions. For example, it is far more acceptable for males to spit than for females. Male athletes spit constantly during contests. The famous baseball player Reggie Jackson was observed spitting an average of 19 times per at bat during a World Series. Male marathon runners in the 1984 Summer Olympic Games spit incessantly even though bystanders provided water for their dry mouths. The runners would often splatter spectators along the roadside when they spit. No one thought their behavior was deviant.

On the other hand, when Joan Benoit ran and won the gold medal in the women's marathon, she did not spit even once. When she and other female runners accepted water from bystanders, they would inevitably swallow it.

Not only the "who" determines whether or not spitting is deviant, but also the "where" or "when" it occurs. A dentist asks you to spit into the swirling alabaster sink after cleaning your teeth. That is not deviant. It is deviant, however, to spit in the kitchen sink. The appropriate behavior in the United States is to inconspicuously clear your throat and either discretely swallow the contents or direct them into a cloth handkerchief. Still, even this behavior, which is completely appropriate in the U.S., would be considered crude and disgusting in Japan. Deviance then depends not only on who is engaging in the behavior, but where and when it is done.

In summary, societies make distinctions between what is normal and abnormal, appropriate and deviant behavior. There is a difference between spit and saliva—not a chemical difference, but one that requires a sociological view finder. The distinction is social. Deviance is "behavioral spit."

We must approach the study of deviant or any other human behavior with the sociological imagination so aptly described by C. Wright Mills (1959). There are relative cultural, societal, historical, chronological, and situational factors that have to be examined before human behavior can be understood, whether it be spit, wine, delinquency, crime, or schizophrenia. These distinctions and the processes whereby they were

negotiated are social constructions of reality. To paraphrase the cartoon character, Pogo, "We have seen the reality, and it's us"—the reality referees.

#### THE IMPACT OF THE EXERCISE

We have used the spit and saliva exercise for about 15 years in courses on the sociology of deviance and in introductory sociology. On written examinations, students exposed to this demonstration have shown a greater ability to apply the concept of the social construction of reality to a variety of situations than students who were not exposed to the exercise.

Also, students remember the first day of class years after graduation. Furthermore unlike students who remember our stories and jokes but can't remember their relevance to the course, students who have taken one of our courses seem to be left with an indelible stamp enabling them to use the sociological imagination. Students who have written letters or who have returned to campus long after graduating have reported how useful they found their ability to use the concept of social construction of reality outside the classroom. In other words, they learned a versatile skill rather than acquiring an encyclopedia of facts that became outdated very quickly.

The class composition has been very heterogeneous as to sex, race, ethnicity, and age, but virtually all of the thousands of students exposed to the exercise have enjoyed it thoroughly. No one has complained that it was either inappropriate or distasteful.

Although this exercise was conducted by male instructors, the professor's sex should have no bearing on its success. Although norms often prohibit women from spitting, a female instructor should be just as successful as a male in illustrating the process involved in the social construction of reality.

#### DISCUSSION

The first day of class may be the most important one because students begin to define the situation at that moment. The tone for the entire semester can be set on the first day. Students will never be more receptive to knowing what the class and the instructor are like than at the beginning of class.

The key to the success of the exercise presented here is that the students *experience* the sociological imagination in an intimate manner rather than *being told about* the content of the course. They are able to do this without knowing many sociological concepts or terms.

We chose a single concept, the social construction of reality, because it is very central in sociology, especially in the study of deviance. The use of the spit and saliva illustration elicits both high interest and intellectual and psychological involvement among students.

Many other examples might be equally as successful, however, in helping students to understand how deviants in diverse times, places, and circumstances have become labeled as such. For example, formerly acceptable and legitimated child-rearing practices, such as swaddling in the eighteenth century, now would be labeled child abuse. Wrapping infants tightly in yards of cloth and hanging them on pegs on the wall to prevent them from being harmed would be viewed as legal justification for social services to remove them from the household (deMause 1974).

Teachers also could modify the current exercise to fit other courses in sociology. For example, how do we human beings differentiate leisure from work, status from stigma, adequate statistical levels from inadequate, cause from effect, masculinity from femininity, "real" crime from "white collar" crime, discipline from child abuse, and "what is" from "what is not" a social problem? The list could go on indefinitely.

Finally, this exercise is not limited to sociology classes. A botany professor on campus adopted the idea in one of his classes in plant pathology. He asked students, "What is the difference between a good plant and a weed? Are weeds inherently bad?" After considerable discussion, he stated, "Weeds are good plants in the wrong

place." His students learned that even in the natural sciences, human beings often construct what is and what is not real.

The initial class meeting described in this paper has been very fruitful. It excites students to learn more. It provides them with a new, exhilarating view of their social world, namely the sociological imagination. And it begins in the first 50 minutes of class.

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