

Which type of Bigfoot do you believe in?: Strategies for managing deviance

Review by Tom Clark

Bader, Christopher D., and Joseph O. Baker. *Deviance Management: Insiders, Outsiders, Hiders, and Drifters*. University of California Press, 2019, pp. 232 ISBN 9780520304499

Do you think that you could be considered deviant in some way? Perhaps you spend your weekends searching for ‘the Wood Ape,’ but are afraid of telling people at work? Or have you found yourself trying to convince your family that your habit for smoking cannabis isn’t as bad as they think it might be? Questions like these are at the heart of Christopher Bader and Joseph Baker’s new book – *Deviance Management* - that seeks to examine how people who find themselves labelled ‘deviant’ attempt to manage their identities.

Their overarching answer to this problem is underwritten by the basic premise that like all identities, deviant identities are inherently social. Indeed, actions or attributes that are labelled as deviant often come into conflict with other facets of our identities that are rooted in conformity - and depending on the context, there is variation in the relative salience of those deviant/conforming identities. To this end, Bader and Baker argue that there are some very particular strategies that individuals and communities use in response to being labelled as ‘deviant.’

As you might have guessed, these are summarized in the subtitle of the book: ‘insiders, outsiders, hiders, and drifters.’ The ‘outsider’ is, of course, the classic version of the deviant that was first explored in Howard Becker’s examination of marijuana users in the jazz clubs of Chicago. These

are the people who prefer to seek out deviant subcultures rather than be part of more mainstream ones. Outsiders are not interested in being seen to act in accordance to social convention and instead actively incorporate their deviant status into how they see themselves. ‘Insiders,’ on the other hand, are those who hold a strong commitment to a perceived deviant identity whilst simultaneously holding a strong attachment to a conventional lifestyle. As the authors highlight, as an active and visible member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormonism), this is exactly the position that Mitt Romney found himself in when he attempted to run for President in 2012: how could he become President when a significant number of the most ardent base of voters for the Republican Party found his religion heretical? The answer was to take an insider approach and try to convince conventional people that his religious conviction was not as strange as some might assume.

‘Hiders’ have a different problem. They attempt to keep their deviant status from public view and will typically avoid making strong connections with deviant subcultures because they fear that discovery will result in public shame. This often leads to them exaggerating their conventionality. Indeed, as is well discussed within the book, there are any number of public figures who have been vocal opponents of homosexuality, only to be later caught engaging in same-sex affairs.

The final management strategy is, perhaps, the most nuanced because ‘drifters’ don’t really appear to actively manage their deviant status at all. They typically have weak attachments to both conventional society and the subcultures that they might otherwise be placed within. They do not feel motivated to conform and have little regard of any costs or informal sanctions they might incur because of their actions. Whilst they might find themselves loosely connected to a particular deviant subculture, they are primarily led by impulse and opportunity. Stanley, the protagonist in Clifford Shaw’s *The Jackroller (1930)*, spent much of his life falling in and out of work *and* crime, not to mention family life *and* social isolation. His life-course was marked by aimless diversity rather than purposeful planning.

Bader and Baker’s framework is articulated and discussed in the first half of the book and they weave a number of insightful examples into the text to illuminate their ideal types. In this

respect, the strategies of deviance management they introduce are very useful because they help to further emphasise that not everyone approaches a deviant identity in the same way. Instead, a deviant status is negotiated by those individuals and communities who are so labelled - and context does clearly matter in respect to the substantive nature of the deviance and the particular response to it. But as intuitive as their framework might be, is there any empirical evidence for it?

Anyone who is familiar with their previous work – which includes *Paranormal America (2010)*, *America's Four Gods (2010)*, and *American Secularism (2015)* - will not be surprised to find a wealth of quantitative and qualitative material in support of their argument. The second half of the book is dedicated to making a detailed investigation of how their strategies might be realised within three subcultures that have, at one time or another, found themselves viewed as deviant. Drawing on a mix of empirical evidence taken from participant observation, survey data, and a mix of historical and cultural analysis, they variously examine 'Bigfoot' subcultures, LGBTQ communities, and, the Women's Organisation for National Prohibition Reform (WONPR). Parallels are also drawn between the final case and more contemporary movements toward the normalisation of cannabis in the USA, and there's even room for a visit to a small, but notorious, Baptist Church in Kansas.

Given that it draws upon ethnographic data, perhaps the most interesting of these cases to readers of this forum is the chapter on Bigfoot - or 'the Wood Ape' as it's known by some enthusiasts. According to Bader and Baker, there are two Bigfoot subcultures: naturalists and paranormalists. Those in 'the flesh and blood' camp see Bigfoot as an undiscovered higher order primate and, as such, direct their attention to catching and documenting the creature - often using scientific discourse to legitimate their activities. Alternatively, there are those that believe Bigfoot is actually an interdimensional being that has a supernatural capacity to move through time, space, and mind. Their attempts to look for the creature are not designed to catalogue and record its existence, but to commune with a deeply spiritual entity. Bigfoot naturalists typically attempt to disassociate themselves from the paranormalists, and the paranormalists, unsurprisingly enough, are horrified at the thought of trying to catch and kill such a liminal creature.

But here is where things get even more interesting. By taking a measurement of their investment in conventional and deviant identities, the authors are able to demonstrate that attendees at the 2009 Texas Bigfoot Research conference can be classified into distinct groups of drifters, hidiers, insiders and outsiders. More specifically, they offer some intriguing evidence to suggest that naturalists and paranormalists might also take different approaches to managing their deviant status. All those who selected a paranormal explanation for the Bigfoot phenomena also demonstrate strong traits associated with outsiders, and all those who were appeared to be insiders selected the naturalistic explanation. The relatively small sample and the naturalist orientation of the conference means that the results cannot be considered exhaustive or conclusive, but they are certainly suggestive that the framework can have a useful degree of predictive validity.

Indeed, on one hand, the book serves as valuable demonstration of how to build a theoretical framework from general observation, and then test it using a variety of empirical evidence. On the other, it provides a valuable direction for scholars looking to examine how people negotiate the intersections of deviant and conforming identities. In this respect, the inclusion of a closing chapter that firmly argues for a renewed interest in the sociology of deviance, and the necessity to use mixed methods in such an investigation, is a very welcome one. As their book makes clear, taking such an approach is necessary because hard-line hidiers and drifters are, by their very nature, not likely to show up in standard quantitative data. But as the book also repeatedly demonstrates, wide-ranging quantitative data can also be very usefully employed to reveal overarching patterns of deviance management across time and place. So, regardless of which type of Bigfoot you believe in, there's plenty of evidence on offer here to suggest that whilst all outsiders might be deviant, not all deviants are outsiders.

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