Generally considered a marginal concept within the field of deviance, positive deviance has been slowly gaining traction in other fields. It is a concept that has been used in nutritional studies (Zeitlin, 1991; Zeitlin, Ghassemi & Mansour, 1990), organizational and leadership research (Cameron, Dutton & Quinn, 2003; Wright, 2003), public health (Babaloa, Awasum & Quenum-Renaud, 2002), and child development research (Robinson & Fields, 1983; Werner & Smith, 1989; Garmezy, 1991; Howard & Dryden, 1999). Even though positive deviance has been successfully incorporated into these disciplines, it is slow to catch on in the field of deviance. This is not to say that the concept is absent from the discussion. In fact Becker (1978) utilized the concept while examining geniuses, and Huryn (1986) provided evidence for its use while studying gifted children. Other scholars such as Heckert (1989) with artists, Irwin (2003) with elite tattoo artists, Brezina and Piquero (2004) with crime abstainers, and Shoenberger, Heckert, and Heckert (2012, 2015) with high achievers have all found the concept of positive deviance to be a viable one. Slowly, the concept is making its way through the discussion of deviance as scholars discover its potential to the discipline. The following is a discussion of the concept of positive deviance (definitions), the typology of deviance, applications of the concept, and critiques.

The Basics: Normative and Reactivist Deviance Definitions

Traditionally, deviance is understood in two variations: normative and reactivist. Heckert and Heckert (2002) define normative definitions as an objectivist approach that “emphasize[s] the violation or lack of conformity to normative expectations” (452). If an individual breaks a social norm of a group, the individual has taken part in a deviant act and is now considered a norm violator.

The second traditional definition of deviance is the reactivist or subjectivist definition, which “emphasize[s] the role of the social audience in determining deviance” (Heckert & Heckert, 2002, p. 452). Within this, deviant acts are those acts that receive negative reactions and are labeled deviant by a social group. Becker (1978) argued that “deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an ‘offender’” (453). Goode (1991) adds that, within the reactivist definition of deviance, there needs to be a social audience to view the deviant act in order to appropriately react to the violation and to properly place a negative sanction.

There are two forms of reactivist definitions: the hard/strict definition and the soft/moderate definition (Goode, 1991). The hard/strict definition follows the literal interpretation of the reactivist
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definition, in which there needs to be a social audience to condemn or punish the actor (Goode, 1991). The soft/moderate definition is not as literal as the hard/strict definition. Within this form, there does not need to be a concrete punishment that occurs simultaneously with the violation of the norm. There can be a perceived or potential punishment that is dealt to an incident that was “displayed, witnessed, or told about” (Goode, 1991).

Positive Deviance

An addition to the traditional way of conceptualizing deviance is the concept of positive deviance. The definition Heckert and Heckert (2004a) utilize for positive deviance is “behaviors or conditions that overconform to normative expectations that are also positively evaluated” (78). Up until recent research that discusses the topic of positive deviance, the concept has been discussed without specifically referring to the term within both reactivist and normative viewpoints (Heckert & Heckert, 2002). Heckert and Heckert (2004a) state that the idea of positive deviance has been utilized in both normative and reactivist approaches. In the normative approach, “positive deviance refers to the behaviors or conditions that surpass or overconform to the normative expectations” (Heckert & Heckert, 2004a, p. 78). In the reactivist perspective, positive deviance can be seen as a behavior that invokes a positive reaction (Heckert & Heckert, 2004a).

Since the recent introduction of positive deviance, some argue that earlier theorists such as Durkheim and Lemert discussed this concept in their own terms. West (2003) argues that Durkheim, Simmel, and Weber all discussed the concept of positive deviance; however, the term “positive deviance” was never explicitly used. For example, West (2003) stated that Durkheim’s later work discussed the idea of the duality of social forms. For Durkheim, religious forces can come in two types that sweep across the spectrum of deviance, and even though these forces can be purely evil or extremely holy, these forces are similar in certain ways (West, 2003). The concept that differentiates between the two forces is the way these forces provoke reactions that differ based on the particular force (West, 2003).

West (2003) also argued that while Simmel disagreed with Durkheim when it came to theorizing about how society works, Simmel’s work shows that he also believed in a symmetry in concepts that appear to be oppositionally different, such as pure and impure. For example, Simmel used the idea of the stranger but not in the typical sense of a stranger that wanders through a city (West, 2003). Instead, the “stranger” is an element of a group, and this element carries with it a set of opposites such as cooperation and conflict, which in turn create social reactions that are either positive or negative (West, 2003). For West (2003), the discussion of the stranger is a discussion of the duality of positive and negative deviance without clearly using the term “positive deviance.”

Dodge (1985) discussed that Clinard and Lemert both utilized the concept of positive deviance in their work as well. Clinard recognized that reactions to deviations from the accepted norm can vary in direction, and the reaction can be the basis of a positive or negative reward (Dodge, 1985). Further, Dodge (1985) stated that Lemert clearly deemed the examination of the exceptional athlete and extremely beautiful women as important to the realm of deviance, because these individuals break the traditional social norms of an athlete and what is considered to be a beautiful woman. Both receive various social reactions for their statuses.

Heckert and Heckert (2002) mention other sociologists who have discussed the topic of positive deviance without using the term. They (2002) stated that Wilkins argued that geniuses and reformers were also deviants. Deviance could be seen as a normal curve of conformity when dealing with statistical norms, where one end of the curve holds acts that are disapproved of and the other end yields acts that go well beyond socially approved, positive acts (Heckert & Heckert, 2002). Furthermore, Heckert and Heckert (2002) state that Sorokin studied altruism and contended that since there can be individuals who fall below the norm, there are individuals, such as good neighbors, who are above the norm.
Sorokin (1950) did argue that two specific types of deviants could be explained: the subnormal—those who underconform to the norm—and the supranormal—those who are innovators.

**Classificatory Model of Positive Deviance**

Heckert (1998) created a classificatory model of positive deviance to provide examples of the concept. Within the model, she includes altruism, charisma, innovation, supraconformity, and innate characteristics. Altruism includes individuals such as saints, self-sacrificing individuals, or someone who donates time and money to a good cause (Heckert, 1998). Charisma is a personal characteristic that separates an individual from others in society because the individual possesses exceptional qualities (Heckert, 1998). Innovation is the ability to be innovative and creative in a way that surpasses others in society, such as Freud and Darwin (Heckert, 1998). The fourth type is the supraconformist deviant. This individual is the overzealous weightlifter or straight-A student who is over conforming to the idealized goals in society, and although these characteristics are strived for, there are very few individuals who attain high levels of success with these goals (Heckert, 1998). The last example of positive deviant discussed is the individuals with innate characteristics that separate them from others in society. These individuals can include the most beautiful in society such as blonde-haired persons or rock musicians and athletes (Heckert, 1998).

**The Typology of Positive Deviance**

To advance the concept of positive deviance, Heckert and Heckert (2002) created a typology of deviance that incorporates negative deviance, positive deviance, deviance admiration, and rate busting (see Figure 3.1).

Within this typology, positive deviance is the overconformity to a social norm while being positively evaluated (Heckert & Heckert, 2004b). More specifically, positive deviance refers to “any type of behavior or condition that exceeds the normative standards or achieves an idealized standard and that evokes a collective response of a positive type” (Heckert & Heckert, 2002, p. 466). For an example, Heckert and Heckert (2002) discuss the behavior of Mother Theresa, who is positively praised for her overly conformist life and good deeds.

Negative deviance is an act that either underconforms or does not conform at all to a social norm. These actions are negatively evaluated or would receive negative reactions if a social audience witnessed the act (Heckert & Heckert, 2004b). Conceptually, negative deviance is the most familiar concept to the field of deviance studies. Therefore, it is the most studied concept from this typology. Heckert and Heckert (2002) provide the example of a serial killer. This behavior underconforms to society’s moral code, and those who are considered serial killers receive negative sanctions such as prison sentences for their actions.

![Figure 3.1: Positive deviance typology](image-url)

Reprinted with permission. (Heckert & Heckert, 2002)
One newly added concept to the deviance typology is rate busting, which refers to overconformity that is negatively sanctioned (Heckert & Heckert, 2002). Specifically, Heckert and Heckert (2002) state that rate busting refers to “behaviors and conditions that surpass or overconform to the norms and evoke a collective response of a negative type” (460). Individuals in this category can include “geeks” or “nerds” who not only exceed past society’s standards but reach or excel beyond the idealized (Heckert & Heckert, 2002). These individuals are subjected to the constructed stereotypes of the words by which they are labeled (Heckert & Heckert, 2002).

It is important to note that within the deviance typology, an individual may receive simultaneous reactions that could constitute the behavior as more than just rate busting. The response that A+ students get from their peers might be negative (rate busting), while at the same time they are positively evaluated by teachers and parents (positive deviance; Heckert & Heckert, 2002). They are either shunned by their peers or called names, while their parents may reward them or they may receive awards and honors in school, which is positive feedback for their work. Another example is attractive individuals. Heckert (2003) argues that blonde women who are considered to be extremely attractive also are negatively evaluated. They are called names and placed into a stereotype of being the “dumb blonde” while maintaining and breaking the social norm of what is beautiful. Both academic students (Heckert & Heckert, 2002) and blonde women (Heckert, 2003) are subjected to the idea that they lack certain social skills or capabilities.

The fourth concept that Heckert and Heckert add to the typology is deviance admiration. This deviance “focuses on underconformity or nonconformity that is favorably assessed” (Heckert & Heckert, 2004b, p. 212). More specifically, deviance admiration refers to “behavior or conditions that the majority of a given group regards as unacceptable, yet evokes a collective response of a positive type within that group” (Heckert & Heckert, 2002, p. 212). One of the main theorists regarding deviance admiration is Kooistra. Kooistra (1989) argued that in certain economic and social situations, there can and will be criminals that will be given hero status, such as Robin Hood—stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. Kooistra (1989) argued that the audience that saw men like Butch Cassidy, Billy the Kid, Al Capone, and Jesse James committing crime viewed the criminals as giving the banks and trains what these institutions deserved because these were seen as corrupt institutions. Thus, the deviant upholds what is just and fair by breaking the law at the same time. In the eyes of everyday citizens during those times, these criminals were heroes; however, deviance admiration allowed for the individual to participate in a rebellious act while at the same time understanding the extent of what the crime entails (Kooistra, 1989). Important to also note, deviance admiration can be simultaneously viewed by another audience member (e.g., the police) as negative deviance.

**Applications of Positive Deviance Within the Literature**

**Middle-Class Norms and Positive Deviance**

Heckert and Heckert (2004b) integrated their typology with 10 key middle-class norms introduced by Tittle and Paternoster (2000), which are loyalty, privacy, prudence, conventionality, responsibility, participation, moderation, honesty, peacefulness, and courtesy. An example of the expansion of the list of norms is privacy. An example of negative deviance would be intrusion such as theft or rape (Tittle & Paternoster, 2000). Rate busting for privacy would be seclusion, such as a hermit, a loner, or the Amish, who are negatively stigmatized for their behavior or religious beliefs (Heckert & Heckert, 2004b). An example of deviance admiration for privacy could be investigative journalism, since the social audience reading the work of the journalist appreciates and enjoys the divulging of private information even though it is wrong to invade someone’s privacy (Heckert & Heckert, 2004b). Lastly, an example of privacy for positive deviance is circumspection such as the CIA or FBI agents, because
these individuals honor their code of secrecy to their agency and are positively evaluated for such abilities of confidentiality (Heckert & Heckert, 2004b).

**Anomie and Positive Deviance**

Heckert and Heckert (2004a) state that Merton did mention that there is the possibility of the occurrence of positive innovations under anomie; however, he did not examine the social reactions and the presence of overconformity. To fill in this gap left by Merton, Heckert and Heckert (2004a) expanded Merton’s anomie typology to include the social reactions to positive behavior and then added overconformity to the typology of anomie. Merton (1938) in his classic re-conception of anomie contended that there is a division between the culturally prescribed goals and the means of obtaining those goals. Deviance occurs when there is an emphasis on the goals without the same strong emphasis on the means of creating other avenues to obtain the social goals (Merton, 1938). Merton introduced four adaptations to achieving the prescribed goals of society that are unattainable because of blocked opportunities: innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion. Conformity is a fifth adaptation; however, within conformity, the individual follows the appropriate means to achieve the appropriate goals.

Per an example, in their expansion of Merton’s theory, Heckert and Heckert (2004a) show that accepting the goals while rejecting the means could lead to negative innovation such as theft. This adaptation could also lead to deviance admiration innovation, which would include Robin Hood figures. An example of rate-busting innovation would be a computer innovator without a college degree such as Bill Gates, who may receive negative criticism for his positive behavior. Finally, positive deviance innovation could be a computer innovator without a college degree who receives a positive reaction for their behavior. Both negative innovation and rate-busting innovation would receive a negative social reaction, while deviance admiration innovation and positive innovation would receive positive reactions from social audiences (Heckert & Heckert, 2004a). As with the innovation example, Heckert and Heckert (2004a) continue their discussion of Merton’s typology by providing an expansion for the other adaptations to anomie.

**Tattoo Artists as Positive Deviants**

Building on the classificatory model of positive deviance, Irwin (2003) studied tattoo artists and collectors who receive both positive reactions (from peers) and negative reactions (from society) for collecting tattoos. Irwin (2003) argues that tattoo collectors and tattooists are overconformers and therefore positive deviants in two ways: a high culture icon or a popular celebrity. High culture is usually associated with elite classes, which coincides with operas, art, and music (Irwin, 2003). In high culture, those who are creating the art and those who are judging the art are associated with having exceptional character. This is not unlike the subculture of elite tattooing. Irwin (2003) contends that tattoo artists actually associate with this high culture by connecting with fine-art circles, are trained in the fine arts, and engage in intellectual conversations about what is considered good and bad tattoo art. She states, “Many believe that opening their work to peer review, and especially to the critique of those considered ‘masters’ will help them achieve their artistic goals” (2003, p. 43). In this regard, elite tattoo artists are highly respected and sought out by tattoo collectors and receive positive appraisal for their work—either directly or through others commenting on the tattoo on the collector. In doing so, the elite tattoo artist becomes a high culture icon of the tattooing world.

The second category Irwin (2003) adds to the conception of positive deviance is popular celebrity. Those who are celebrities resemble the notion that an individual can be popular no matter what his or her education or what social class he or she belongs to. Irwin (2003) contends that there is celebrity among tattoo artists, and some are recognized and receive much praise for their art. Collectors will travel all over to receive art from popular tattooists in Europe and Japan, and some tattooists are even...
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featured in magazines (Irwin, 2003). Again, making an artist famous can bring positive appraisal for a behavior that has typically been seen as negative by the majority of society.

**Techniques of Neutralization and Positive Deviance**

Shoenberger, Heckert and Heckert (2012) reconceptualized the techniques of neutralization theory, a theory traditionally associated with negative behavior, and applied it to rate-busting behavior. To do so, Shoenberger et al. (2012) examined high achieving college students who are both considered positive deviants and rate busters, as these students receive positive appraisal from teachers and parents but may also receive negative appraisal from peers. Many of the high-achieving students were hyper-committed to the standards of society, which places high value on doing well in school. Though the students of the study were very committed to doing well in school, Shoenberger et al. (2012, p.787) found that many students had to “create strategies for navigating and neutralizing the college youth subculture that deemphasizes high academic achievement.” These high-achieving students noted that at times, they would have to find ways to deemphasize their success or limit the amount of information that was released about how well they achieved in school. To do so, the students used all five techniques of neutralization to neutralize positive behavior, illustrating the intersection between traditional criminological theory and the concept of positive deviance.

**Stigma and Positive Deviance**

Studying positive deviance could allow for many avenues to open up in terms of understanding certain behaviors of individuals. It can also add to the question as to why some individuals commit crime while other individuals do not. What is it about these nondeviant individuals that keeps them from committing deviance and illegal acts? How are deviants and nondeviants the same? Positive deviance is important because it can aid in the understanding of how an action can be defined in one context as wrong and in another context as right. Ben-Yehuda (1990) stated that by researching both positive and negative deviance, researchers would gain a “powerful analytical view that enables [the researcher] to understand simultaneously not only deviance, but conformity as well” (225).

As discussed throughout this chapter, the social reactions to a behavior are very important in defining an act as deviant, but it is also important to note that social reactions also create stigma. One theory that highlights stigma is labeling theory (Akers & Sellers, 2004). Labeling theory posits that once an individual is labeled a criminal, deviant, or a drug addict—after or even before primary deviance takes place—the likelihood that this individual will commit another crime (secondary deviance) will increase because of the stigma of the label (Akers & Sellers, 2004). The deviant already feels that everyone sees him or her as the label so they might as well continue on the path of the behavior (Akers & Sellers, 2004). It is well known that a label holds consequences for convicted felons. Once an individual has served time for a crime, the stigma from being in prison or jail can keep him or her from getting a job, which can lead to more crime (Akers & Sellers, 2004). Ironically, the unintended results of labeling an individual and the prevention procedures to stop a person from committing a crime have an opposite effect and help create crime (Akers & Sellers, 2004).

Though traditionally connected to negative deviance, labeling and stigma have a place in the discussion of positive deviance. Irwin (2003) touches on this idea in her discussion of tattoo collectors. Negatively, people with tattoos are seen as “aggressive, outlaw characters,” and some may treat these tattooed individuals differently (Irwin, 2003, 31). To some tattoo collectors, having this negative label is a good thing. It sets them a part from normal society (Irwin, 2003). However, there is a subculture of tattoo collectors that is seen as positive deviants or elite collectors who are overconformers and become celebrities in the realm of tattooing (Irwin, 2003). Irwin (2003) states, “Elite members of the tattoo world are ensnared in celebrity and garner some of the praise, worship, and positive evaluation...
bestowed upon mega stars” (47). In this sense, they may revel in their new label and identity. This does not leave the collector without fear of negative treatment. Irwin (2003) notes that while the tattoo collectors felt safe among other tattooists, they would cover their body when entering mainstream society and would seek out places where they knew people were tattoo friendly (Irwin, 2003). In this sense, they were both positively and negatively labeled and had to deal with the stigma of those labels.

Heckert (1989) examined the French Impressionists and the social reactions these artists received. These artists were both hated and loved at different time points because of the boundaries they tested and broke within their art. Therefore, they were labeled both positively and negatively. They were negatively labeled by the art community, which did not accept this artwork. The art salons would not accept the art, which reduced the chances of success for these gifted artists (Heckert, 1989). Some critics and the community labeled these artists bad artists and insulted their work (Heckert, 1989). These labels and behaviors greatly hurt and diminished the value of their livelihood at the time they were producing their work. However, these deviants were soon turned into positive deviants and labeled geniuses of their time (Heckert, 1989). Though many did not receive the fruits of their labor, today, these paintings hold high esteem and sell for high prices.

Heckert (2003) also studied blonde women and found that these women were considered positive deviants because they overconform to the standard of beauty but also rate busters, as they would receive negative reactions from society because of their beauty. On one side, these women are the idealized picture of beauty and receive positive attention and positive treatment. On the other side, they are subject to ridicule and less respect because they are viewed as being dumb or sexually easy. Posner (1976) called the receiving of both positive and negative reactions from society a “mixed blessing.” These negative social reactions toward a positive attribute can lead to blonde women falling into the stereotype and fulfilling these preconceived characteristics of a blonde, or they may lead to some fighting against the label (Heckert, 2003).

Huryn (1986) studied giftedness and found that giftedness was negatively stereotyped, and this stereotype shaped the thoughts and social interactions of the gifted students. The students who were gifted would hide their talents from their peers while being open about their talents with their parents (Huryn, 1986). This finding is associated with Goffman’s work on identity and stigma. Huryn (1986) makes the connection with Goffman’s idea that individuals attempt to minimize their stigma by trying to hide their identity through attempts to control the release of their identity through information control. Shoenberger et al. (2012) found similar results while studying high-achieving students. These college students openly admitted to lying to their peers, hiding their grades, and acting different around their friends in order to reduce the negative repercussions they would face for their positive behavior.

Posner (1976) notes that this “mixed blessing” (141) can be just as problematic as being a negative deviant who is not gifted. Gifted individuals in our society do pay a price for their success and their achievements and are “subject to more rigidly proscribed behavioral patterns” (Posner, 1976, p. 141). Posner (1976) states that gifted persons in society may feel just as ashamed of their identities and labels as negatively stigmatized individuals do.

Criticisms of Positive Deviance

There are two sociological theorists who oppose the use of positive deviance: Erich Goode and Edward Sagarin. Sagarin (1985) argues that the concept of positive deviance is an oxymoron and deprives sociologists of the ability to discover why an individual would stray from the accepted norm. Sagarin takes the stance that positive deviance “obfuscate(s) rather than clarify, . . . collapse(s) into one group two ends of continua that have nothing in common except that they do not meet in the middle” (Sagarin, 1985, p. 169). The addition of positive deviance would dilute a well-accepted definition and would inappropriately broaden the field. To make clear about the definition of deviance, if one is researching the definition of deviance one key term should appearing: “negative.”
Sagarin (1985) further argues that the concept of deviance is a matter of grammatical clarification. He (1985) contends that there is confusion between deviation and deviate, in that the term “deviation” is misused when citing from older theorists on the topic (1985). This misrepresentation of the word “deviation” disproves, for Sagarin, that positive deviance theorists have justifiable logic for adding the concept of positive deviance to the field of deviance (Sagarin, 1985).

Goode (1991) argues that positive deviance is not a viable concept in the study of deviance. One of his main arguments is that the definition of positive deviance is not concise (Goode, 1991). He contends that there is little connection between negative and positive deviance, and if there are any similarities between the two, it is irrelevant to the discipline (Goode, 1991). Goode (1991) argues that Dodge’s definition of positive deviance, when used from a reactivist view, cannot make sense, since the reactivist prospective specifically uses stigma that is usually associated with the idea of negative reactions. If a negative reaction does not take place, in Goode’s eyes, then deviance has not occurred (Goode, 1991).

Ben-Yehuda (1990) made the argument that there is nothing specifically implied that the definition of deviance has to include the use of the term “negative.” He also argues that theorists of deviance cannot even agree on how to define deviance in general; and therefore, it makes no sense to attack the different definitions of positive deviance (Ben-Yehuda, 1990). Dodge (1985) states that it is logical to add positive deviance to the typology of deviance, since there has been no objection to the addition of new concepts such as sex variables and power in politics of deviance. Heckert and Heckert (2002) argue that if the definition would have to include negative reactions to a social act, then it would make sense to add rate busting, a form of positive deviance, into the definition of deviance, since rate-busting behavior elicits negative reactions from social audiences. Further, there is a problem with deviance definitions with stating that there needs to be a negative reaction to an act. The reason is that deviance admiration, another concept within the positive deviance typology, elicits positive reactions from a social audience even though the action is a violation of a social norm in the negative sense (Heckert & Heckert, 2002). Does that mean stealing from the rich and giving to the poor is not a deviant act?

Contradictory to his own claim, Sagarin (1985) argues that categories and concepts are “mental constructs: that is, they exist only in our own minds, and in a way we piece together the real world” (170). He further states that there are an “infinite and limitless number of ideas, thoughts, acts, reactions, interactions, relationships” (170) and continues to state that there is no right or wrong category or grouping. This thought process is perplexing because it is arguing that there is no right or wrong definition or way to categorize a concept. Arguing against the addition of positive deviance seems counterintuitive to Sagarin’s point.

Lastly, Sagarin introduces the formula as to how one should create a definition of a concept. Here, he adds that a category “should have internal logic of its own” (171) with a logical division of its own; it must be useful for those who created the definition; and there needs to be a community that agrees on the definition (1985). Sagarin (1985) argues that to include positive deviance in these three criteria would be “a step backwards in the sociological study of an important aspect of modern societies” (172). It could be argued, by using Sagarin’s own argument of how concepts are socially constructed by an individual, that positive deviance aids in all three of these criteria and, depending on which social scientist is asked, positive deviance is a viable concept within the realm of deviant studies. Adding positive deviance to deviance studies allows for a logical division of deviance in both a positive and negative direction, and those who introduced the concept find it very useful.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the concept of deviance is not well defined by current or even past theorists. There are traditional ways to define deviance, such as the normative and reactivist definitions; however, there
are also newer concepts within deviance that also need to be recognized, like positive deviance. There are some scholars that are pushing for the viability of this concept, mainly Heckert and Heckert, as well as Dodge and Ben-Yehuda. Although there has been some criticism toward the concept, positive deviance has been applied to Robert Merton’s anomie theory, Tittle and Paternoster’s middle-class norms, tattoo artists and collectors, and gifted and high-achieving students. These additions add a new flare to the field of deviance. Hopefully, others will continue to add and expand theoretically and empirically on the concept.

References
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