

WHY AM I DEVIANT EPISODE 45: I PLAY WITH TOYS AT THE AGE OF 20

INTRODUCTION

Hello and welcome back to “Why am I Deviant?” Today we examine the case of Ritz Carr who still plays with her Littlest Pet Shop (LPS) toys. LPS are small, hand-sized bobblehead animal figures with vibrant colours and designs, aimed for the feminine youth of the late 1990’s to the early 2000’s. They come with accessories, food, houses, furniture, etc., not to mention the crafting community creating other things for them. “How big is your Littlest Pet Shop?” was the slogan, pushing girls across the world to collect as many as possible. In turn, this would build large collections that would require large storage containers and sometimes rooms; what would happen to these collections as girls aged?

We have all seen Toy Story. Andy gets older and the toys sit in a box, collecting dust (and in this case generating rust) over the years to be stumbled upon by their owners. Only then, are they re-sold, donated, thrown away, re-purposed, or stored longer. No matter the purpose, there is one purpose that is not commonly chosen due to current societal norms: playing with them once again, as an adult.

DIFFERENTIAL ASSOCIATION / SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY: “Didn’t you **learn to
stop playing with toys when you were a teen?”**

Low and behold, the toys that were a staple of Ritz's childhood now replace the college textbooks and notes on her formerly cluttered desk. However, the juxtaposition of the toys and college material makes Ritz wonder, why did she stop playing with her LPS in the first place? She *learnt* it was a child's-activity to play with toys and as an adult, she has "grown out" of playing with them. So, through these processes, Ritz was taught to conform with the social norm that she, as an adult, would be too old to play with toys because toys are made for kids (Clinard and Meier, 2011).

In "Alibis for Adult Play: A Goffmanian Account of Escaping Embarrassment in Adult Play" by Sebastian Deterding, the concept of acceptable societal adult conduct concerning "play" is brought into question: "The social meanings of play sit at odds with norms of responsible and productive adult conduct. To be "caught" playing as an adult therefore risks embarrassment." (Deterding, 2018). Embarrassment, here, is the informal social sanction. This social sanction is a response to a non-ideal behavior by society in efforts to control it (Clinard and Meier, 2011). While embarrassment is a response *to* the social sanction, it is an emotion feared in response to not conforming with the learnt roles of an adult. The fear of embarrassment is the sanction.

So, Ritz has learned that playing with toys as an adult is deviant. However, say she discovered that on YouTube, there are a handful of popular "LPS-Tubers" who are her age and older. They have large fanbases and have many likes and positive comments from fans. This would support the idea that adults *can* play with toys! Sure, there are a handful of negative comments, but some simple hedonistic calculus would show that, in this community, age does

not matter. Those who play with LPS as adults and are active in their communities *learned* that playing with LPS as adults was okay. This is an example of Sutherland's "Differential Association Theory", learning by our associations (Clinard and Meier, 2011).

LABEL THEORY: "You're an **adult, not a **child**!"**

In addition to learning that she is too old to play with toys because she is an *adult*, she has been subject to **label theory**. Label theory is also known as the interactionist perspective and focuses on the "consequences of deviants' interactions with conventional society, particularly with official agents of social control." (Clinard and Meier, 2011). Let's say Ritz decided to commit time to playing with her LPS during exams week, taking time away from studying. Upon receiving her final grades, she sees she failed two exams due to not adequately studying for them. Professor Mann calls her to meet him in his office to discuss this sudden slip in grades to which she confesses her newfound passion. He disappointedly remarks that she was **childish** and **irresponsible** for wasting valuable time playing with toys.

An official agent of social control, an educator, has labelled Ritz as childish and irresponsible due to the **consequences** of her playing with LPS and not studying for her exams. As a result, since she holds Professor Mann's judgement so highly, her next semester grades are worse, as she spends more time playing with her toys. Her military-focused parents have had no hesitation labelling her childish and irresponsible, reinforcing the labels from Professor Mann.

This goes to show that label theory carries different weights; some labels are heavier than others and the *labeler* matters.

Howard Becker, the sociologist who first theorized label theory, wrote that once the new label is attached, the labelled will “face new problems that are caused by other people’s reactions and their own internal reactions to negative stereotypes that are attached to the deviant label.” (Cortez, 2023). Ritz, as we know, is struggling in school because of not only how she has been perceived due to her playing with toys but has begun to believe those labels and sees herself as those labels, too.

SYKES AND MATZA’S TECHNIQUES OF NEUTRALIZATION: “Who cares what they think! **I’m not hurting anyone!”**

After realizing that she may not graduate with such terrible grades, Ritz has a change in path. “Why do I care so much about what others think?” Sure, she understands she must be more responsible with her time, but why keep dwelling on her labels? Does she not have the power to change, break that “self-fulfilling prophecy” (Clinard and Meier, 2011)? She can, with sociologists Gresham Sykes and David Matza’s techniques of neutralization.

Sykes and Matza’s techniques of neutralization are four techniques used by deviants to rationalize and neutralize their behaviors that society deems as deviant. For example, prostitution is usually a victimless crime; the second technique of neutralization being “denial of injury”

which is often used by prostitutes for the support of their “victimless crime”. In this case, Ritz chooses to use this technique of neutralization for her deviant behavior (Matza and Sykes, 1957). “I’m not hurting anyone by playing with my LPS! Why stop?” Her point is valid; why stop? As long as she can effectively manage her time and get her grades up, this technique is rational to her. And that’s exactly what she does, she effectively manages her time and becomes an indie LPS-tuber!

CONCLUSION

Today, playing with toys as an adult is the last deviant behavior in our minds. Who could care less? Still, there are plenty of adults that hide their passion for toys and play because they *know* that society frowns upon this behavior, an informal sanction. As adults, we have learned prescribed and proscribed norms that correlate to our role as adults in this society and that we ought not play with toys, only kids play with toys. But, for those adults who do not mind being seen as a deviant or do not see their behavior as deviant, will use the techniques of neutralization to rationalize their behaviors. So, while being 20 and playing with toys is deemed deviant, is she *really* hurting anyone?

PRESENTATION LINK: [A youtube video!](#)

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