

Preface

HALF A CENTURY AGO, during my first semester of graduate school, I enrolled in a course taught by Robert King Merton—then the most eminent sociologist in the world—entitled, as I recall, “Analysis of Social Structure.” The inaugural lecture was packed, as virtually all of his were, with fifty or sixty students in rapturous attendance. Merton began the course by explaining that in *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes argued that humans are naturally selfish, unruly, and individualistic and that if each one of us pursued what he or she coveted without respect for the rights of others, such behavior would engender a “war of all against all,” in which life would become “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Hobbes raised what eventually became the foundational question of sociology: “How is social order possible?” The answer the English philosopher offered was that societies demand that their members agree to an unspoken social contract: Abandon your natural, selfish desires, submit yourself to the rule of the sovereign, and what you receive in return is—life itself. Protection. Nourishment. Association. Connubiality. Intimacy. But, Merton added, when some of the society’s members stray too far from its rules—which we sociologists call norms—members of the society will formally or informally sanction them and oblige them to account for themselves. He encouraged us to answer Hobbes’s question in a more satisfying, persuasive, and analytically powerful manner: How is such a social contract carried out today?

The question Merton mooted in his inaugural lecture stewed in my brain for five decades, and this book is the product. I wonder if he would

have approved of my distillation of Hobbes's argument. (Merton died in 2003, at the age of ninety-two.) Perhaps not. Though he was a seductive encourager of student research, Robert K. Merton was an extremely exacting and demanding critic.

That some—or many—members of the society violate one or more of its norms, or those of its constituent collectivities, is hardly news. That people who do so blab at length about their transgressions, and on the scale that currently prevails, is a fairly recent development, although widely known. That violators who blab about normative violations do so in interesting and revealing (and not entirely predictable) ways is, in my estimation, an under-reflected-upon phenomenon. Yes, social psychologists and sociologists have extensively investigated apologies (Tavuchis, 1991; Lazare, 2004), excuses (Snyder, Higgins, and Stucky, 1983; Maruna and Copes, 2005), confessions (Brooks, 2000), and scandals (Adut, 2008; Kipnis, 2010)—not to mention any and all manner of cognate verbal processes. But, for the most part, their inquiries focus mainly on violators who have been found out and are forcibly and rudely called upon to explain themselves—human deer, as it were, caught in the headlight of exposure.

Instead, here, I explore transgressors' well-thought-out and carefully constructed accounts of normative violations and their mostly self-serving interpretations, directed at audiences who may (or may not) endorse such presentations. My informants, if they may be called that, describe their deviant behavior (whether initially known or unknown) in a crafted, stage-managed fashion. Laura Kipnis (2010, p. 21) refers to "the hollowness of redemption" of these trapped human deer who clumsily (in her cases, unsuccessfully) attempt to bamboozle a vindictive audience into refraining from tearing them apart. But the targets of scandal have stepped into a mess—of their own making—on which social headlights have suddenly and inadvertently focused. Instead, my cases are made up of transgressors of *someone's* norms who have gone on at length self-revealing—and, for the most part, exculpating—their selfsame putative violations. My authors have framed their discussions in ways that are very different from those of transgressors who are frozen in the act when the curtain is pulled back and the audience is aghast at or derisive about the discovery. In short, most of my authors have spent a substantial part of a lifetime reflecting on their putative transgressions and have crafted a mostly positive spin on what these acts mean, attempting some measure of vindication and redemption. Indeed, some do not even regard what they have done as wrong, do not even feel that they belong in the company of other miscreants, though they feel that explaining themselves is nonetheless necessary—and they are usually sincere in their belief in the truth of what they are saying and often prove persuasive in their rationales. As receivers, connoisseurs, and

appreciators of such accounts, we should take such narratives seriously. In short, I do not believe that these authors' redemptive accounts are "hollow" at all, and they clearly reveal how a major feature of our society works. But it is they, the authors, who recognize discrepancies between their self-image and their described actions, and it is they, the authors, who have constructed a reconciliation that smooths over this seeming contradiction by means of a verbal construct.

This book focuses on the process by which autobiographers and memoirists explain, justify, exculpate, excuse, and warrant their putatively untoward, transgressive, non-normative behavior. By "untoward," "transgressive," and "non-normative" behavior, I mean acts that are likely to attract condemnation among identifiable and relevant, actual or potential audiences, such as peers and associates, friends and acquaintances, and relatives—or enemies, rivals, and competitors—and editors, readers, the general public, and law enforcement officers. Sociologically, deviant/deviance is not an identifiable *thing* in the world, like an oak tree or an Apple computer; it is a *label* that designated collectivities apply to a person, a set of acts, or an expressed belief. It is important that I stress this point, since several critics of what I say here have already reacted to the term "deviant" or "deviance," taking the lay meaning as *my* meaning, or as some abstract, indwelling, essentialistic meaning—thereby committing the fallacy of reification. Such critics' imputation is very far from the truth. Sociologists teach courses entitled "Deviant Behavior"—with robust enrollments, I might add—and they teach from texts entitled *Deviant Behavior*, some of which sell well. Half a century or more ago, sociologists abandoned the archaic notion that the word or the concept "deviance" is pejorative, that it has anything to do with psychiatric pathology or immanent sin (Becker, 1963); unfortunately, however, much of the public and some misguided critics still cling to this antiquated, reified definition. We would love to abandon the term for a less clumsy one, but no one—not even those who have objected to such use—has suggested a viable alternative. "Unconventional," "regarded as transgressive to certain audiences," "non-normative within a specific context," and "supposedly untoward" are insipid, flabby, namby-pamby, milquetoast, and verbally contorted attempts. We are still waiting for that better term; in the meantime, we will have to continue to use the word "deviant" to describe that which is *situationally objectionable to specific audiences*. Proof of the pudding—a "definition in use."

The sociological definition of deviance is relativistic; it relies on how designated *audiences*, real or potential, react to behavior, beliefs, or characteristics. Certain observers react in such a way that it is clear they have decided that someone has violated their normative system so egregiously or chronically that the person *deserves* to be condemned or punished. This definition

says nothing about who *ought* or ought *not* to be so treated, but it does insist that such treatment in response to perceived violations against a normative system is a social fact. By their reactions to the behavior of our actors in question, designated audiences make announcements such as these: Jordan Bel-fort is not to be trusted with our money; Eddie Bunker deserves a prison sentence; Roman Polanski is not to be trusted with our daughters; Elia Kazan is a rat and should be avoided; Malcolm X is a troublemaker and a rabble-rouser; Melissa Febos should not be taken home to meet Mother; Norman Podhoretz is a right-wing nut case. The sociology of deviance does *not* valorize these judgments; it recognizes that some observers have made these judgments about our authors. And such judgments may have real consequences. Moreover, these author-actors, recognizing that some observers have condemned them or their actions, take such judgments into consideration. Consider these quotes from some notable memoirs: “The theory circulated that I had gone mad” (Norman Podhoretz); “I was notorious, an informant, a squealer, and a rat” (Elia Kazan); “If you behave like a man, you are doomed” (Jack Henry Abbott); “Why so much anger?” (Jim Bouton); “What else could I do?” (Edward Bunker); “I had crossed the fine line between decent folks and scum” (Roman Polanski). Their words constitute that *they* recognize that they have been tagged with the label “deviance”—that is, what *sociologists* mean by a “deviant”—and they encapsulate their defensive reaction to their own designation.

This recognition is not simply cognitive; it is emotional as well. Bill Clinton’s sense of entrapment at the charge that he had engaged in sex with Monica Lewinsky must have amounted to the feeling of holy terror—that his presidency was at an end; that history would judge him a foul, depraved, out-of-control profligate; that his wife might leave him and his daughter would not respect him. He was desperate to do something—tell a feeble lie, make up a distinction that would delay his impeachment, do *anything* to avoid being kicked out of the White House. “I did not have sexual relations with that woman” was the verbal neutralization, and *My Life* (2004) was the memoir that enshrined that emotion. Feeling that he is “doomed,” Abbott not only knows he must react to avoid said doom—he *feels* a sense of terror, knows in his bones that he must act a certain way, but he cannot think his way out of the Minotaur’s Maze in which he is trapped. James Frey, a *novel* manuscript in hand, is given a book contract for a *memoir* that would make him rich and famous. What to do? *What the hell!* he tells himself, with a dry throat and trembling hands. *I’ll fake it—I’ll call it a memoir and see how far I can take this ride.* Polanski’s awareness that friends and acquaintances, moviegoers, supporters and enemies alike felt he was *pond scum*, set off tremors of fear throughout his psyche, backed him into an emotional corner, forced him to

devise legal, logistical, and verbal schemes to escape this collective judgment. Saturated with hormones, the mind does not always come up with sound solutions, but they are nearly always interesting to the student of human behavior.

Kipnis describes the “ongoing battle between the anarchy of desire and the sledgehammer of social propriety” (2010, pp. 19–20)—a graphic and apposite phrase. Rules are ubiquitous, their violations are ubiquitous, and society’s punishments—though contingent—are likewise ubiquitous. Deviance is the unruly side of social life, and its social control is the subject matter of Hobbes’s formulation—which becomes necessary when the social contract breaks down—and the attempt at exculpation following a violation is its inevitable love child. As sociologists and anthropologists have learned, societies can thrive on fairly high levels of normative violation, provided certain conditions prevail, and perhaps one of those conditions is how transgressors frame their acts to audiences.

Authors keep audiences or significant others in mind when narrating their life stories; they anticipate criticism from these relevant audiences as they unfold the details of their lives. To fashion an acceptable persona, as characters or actors in their own life drama, memoir writers couch the details of their transgressions in more or less acceptable (or less unacceptable) fashion and typically receive responses that are more positive than they would without such verbalizations. These verbalizations often come naturally to authors, so we need not impute or attribute, as Kipnis seems to, sly or cynical manipulation at work here. I walk away from my memoir authors’ self-exculpations with exactly the opposite feeling from Kipnis’s. I sense that most of these authors have gotten themselves into all-too-human jams or have interacted with dubious companions, and I *empathize* with their feelings about the experience of being reproached. I feel that *I* could have engaged in many—though not all—of the condemned activities in which they participated. I try to avoid the term “rationalizations” when referring to deviance neutralization inasmuch as this is a loaded, pejorative term that implies that such accounts are “hollow,” illegitimate, cynical, crass manipulations of the sympathy of the intended audience. Yes, what persons who use such verbal strategies as are often *labeled* “rationalizations” engage in is rhetoric, though I assume some measure of heartfelt emotion in such strategies—for the most part, their users *really do* believe that the acts they exculpate are not as bad as their detractors say they are. Yes, such articulations are verbal “strategies,” devices,” “contrivances,” and “techniques,” which terms sound as if their authors use them to induce audiences to react in a certain way to them, their books, and the acts they describe. And yes, actor-authors often exaggerate or sweep damning details of their lives under the proverbial rug. All of this is true, as it is

common to all social interaction, but this in no way detracts from the sincerity of these authors. I argue that the narrators typically project anticipated negative reactions *by* their audiences *to* the revelations of untoward behavior and find it necessary to explain and contextualize said actions in certain ways—hence, these contrivances. These are not simple lies to get away with something; they are efforts to ingratiate themselves with audiences.

In addition, different memoir authors address, seek out, or have attracted particular audiences or circles of readers. Hence, in any array of writers, the vocabulary each author uses to frame, explain, or contextualize the acts and their meaning will differ, one from another; moreover, the type of behavior in which each engages will occasion each one to construct a distinctive house of stigma verbalizations. Here, I address the processes by which some memoir authors seek to win over generic audiences; others court more specialized or *subcultural* readers, social circles, or collectivities; and still others woo those that are both generic and specialized.

I am not saying that the only motive that drives people to write memoirs, especially “deviance” memoirs, is to square accounts with their past and neutralize the stigma that readers might attach to them and their transgressive acts—but it is a major, and a powerful, motivating factor. More important is the fact that the manner in which authors narrate their transgressions, or supposed transgressions, *functions* as a mode of neutralization, regardless of why people write or utter the narrations. Readers can more readily appreciate why someone may have engaged in behavior that they regard as untoward if the author supplies an account for it, and they will condemn him or her less and like the book they are reading more. The more readers know about the specifics of the acts in question, *as they are interpreted by the author*, the more empathetic they feel about the enactment of the behavior and the actor and the less judgmental they are about both. I argue that what sociologists refer to as “deviance neutralization” should be hugely expanded to include factors that make for emotional identification with the actor and causal and descriptive accounts given by the actor for why the behavior was enacted and what it was like. These may be literary or storytelling devices—but they *serve* to mitigate condemnation of the narrator/actor.

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SHORT OF READING every memoir and autobiography ever published, how does the conscientious researcher find a few dozen interesting but more or less representative pebbles strewn along this seemingly endless stretch of beach? Diane Bjorklund, a sociologist, examined over a hundred autobiographies published during the past two centuries so that she could lay bare society’s efforts to define the self (1998). In conducting her research, she system-

atically selected a random sample of volumes from a well-defined and clearly laid-out universe of books. Contrarily, I have not followed a systematic selection process, short of choosing from among those that fall into the “deviance” genre, sociologically speaking. Frankly, my selection was somewhat haphazard. I have stuck with American memoirs, and I have chosen the fairly well-known over the obscure and the fairly recent over older samples; the median date of publication for the volumes I examine is 2000. I have included one non-book example (a magazine article [Van Doren, 2008])—in fact, a book-length memoir in process) because it is so delectable that I felt compelled to sample the tasty feast it offers. In any case, memoir aficionados will no doubt feel that their favorite and, on my part, neglected paragons deserve attention, but with so many to choose from, this consequence is inevitable. These restrictions limit the variability of cultural convention in shaping deviance neutralization. For instance, I do not treat historical time as a factor because my time frame is so narrow, though the impact of how history plays a role in the shaping of both narrating and exculpating deviance would constitute a fruitful and enlightening line of inquiry.

A major feature of the narrative of a memoir is detail, and narrative entails *storytelling*. The same applies to deviance disavowal, which cannot be understood apart from the events of the lives that actors narrate. In the past, analysts of the exculpation of transgressive acts have ignored context, as if these verbalizations dropped down from the skies virtually intact. What their authors have avoided, some observers aver, is the *circumstances and sequence of behaviors* that led the self-absolver to downplay the seriousness or impropriety of the acts. In order to grasp how such verbal formulations come to be made, critics argue, we need to engage the unfolding of these events, as the actor interprets them, in all their fullness. This enterprise entails allowing actors to have their say in quite a bit of detail—hence my inclusion of much of the narrative of the stories they tell. Most of the authors whose memoirs I discuss are consummate storytellers, and following the tales they spin is worth the rides we take. But in addition to sharing with us their *narrative arc* (a beginning, middle, and end) our authors reveal a *process*—namely, how, when, and sometimes why they devised the mechanism of deviance neutralization. The story and its dynamic role in downplaying a social blemish are intertwined.

It seems intuitively obvious that social *context* shapes the content of deviance neutralizations. Norm violators “spin” their narratives and the justifications for their misdemeanors according to the setting in which they find themselves. Though not all the memoirs I look at here were published during the author’s lifetime, and not all were written solely by the subject, all are published memoirs. Hence, the influence of setting for the rendering of *oral*

accounts may have only oblique implications for accounts lodged in books; the dissimilarities of the two settings are so significant as to generate substantially different types of narrations. Even with that stricture, our accounts make up a mixed bag in terms of composition, execution, and production. As I said, only one (Charles Van Doren's) is a less-than-book-length confession, though the author says he is working on a full memoir (Anonymous, 2008, and personal communication). Four (the memoirs of Jim Bouton, Joe Bonanno, William Cope Moyers, and Malcolm X) were coauthored with or edited by a journalist or professional writer. For instance, Malcolm X's amanuensis, Alex Haley, toned down the radicalism and anti-Semitism of the subject's narrative (Biddle, 2011), as I discuss in Chapter 7. It is entirely possible that John Herman, Bonanno's editor, and Sergio Lalli, his collaborator, toned down Joe's elaboration of the heinousness of his own crimes. One (Abbott's memoir) is a gathered-together collection of articles first published in a literary magazine, and one (Kirk Read's) was originally self-published and then picked up by a major commercial house. The remainder were produced by means of the more conventional route, though some were put out by large, commercial houses (e.g., Susan Cheever's), while others were issued by smaller, more specialized publishers (e.g., Cathy Wilkerson's).

It seems almost superfluous to say that the relationship between the editor and the writer is crucial in shaping and producing the final manuscript. Though authors tend to be a feisty, independent-minded bunch, editors and publishers are acutely aware that publishing is a commercial enterprise, and any author who puts on a sour, cynical, or excessively reprehensible face on the page is likely to be told by the publishing "gatekeepers" that changes need to be made. Nonetheless, self-exculpation is the inevitable offspring of a confluence of multiple forces, and here I focus on the author as agent. A study of the role of editors and publishers in adapting the content and tone of deviance authors' memoirs would be worthwhile, and I invite the critical reader to conduct such a study; I would read it.

Hence, it is a virtual truism that what we say cannot be removed from time and place; circumstance must be factored into the equation. Making a certain statement is partly dependent on *the circumstances* under which we make it. What we say here would never be uttered there, and vice versa. A statement is not a simple reflection of who we are, brought out of us like a vial of blood; it is rendered by the narrator under stipulated circumstances. This generalization is self-evidently true and goes almost without saying. Gresham Sykes and David Matza's well-known discussions of deviance neutralization among juveniles (1957) make no mention of circumstance; their analysis is virtually *contextless*. We have no idea how these two sociologists reached the conclusions they drew; neither author refers to his own research and, though

they cite a few boilerplate slogans that anyone might make in neutralizing conventional norms, they quote no actual juvenile delinquents. Certainly *written* deviance disavowals are likely to be quite different from *oral* ones, if only because authors have more space, especially in the book-length memoir, to flesh out a verbal defense of their actions (Kahl, 1984). Lois Presser (2004, p. 82) insists that different social settings elicit very different narratives about the self—one does not *have* a life story, she argues; one *makes* one, within a particular context. True enough. Still, Mary Kahl and Lois Presser do not offer a systematic comparison among the apologies that different settings are likely to elicit. And it is difficult to imagine any sensible research program that would have drawn out of Presser's violent offenders a Little Boy Blue image—though she does admit that the accounts she generated are “tethered” to the brute facts of her respondents' lives. Other things being equal, virtually all life narrators manifest a systematic tendency to underplay or explain away the horrendous atrocities they have committed, but the issue of *how* and *where* they narrate their tales does *not* produce unlimited variation. We take it for granted that context counts (Presser, 2004; Agnew and Peters, 1986) and move on to more substantial matters.

Apologies are widely understood to represent an acknowledgment, by an actor, of having committed a transgression, along with an expression of regret at having done so. They are likely to work *to the extent that* the offender promises not to commit the same sin in the future, convinces audiences (especially the offended) that the apology is sincere, is observed as having suffered, and establishes a meaningful dialogue with the offended (Lazare, 2004). Apologies represent a particular subtype of deviance neutralization device; they are an attempt to wipe the slate clean and start again on the basis of a ritual of debasement of the offender. At the same time, because observers, especially victims, are on the lookout for an insincere or phony apology, their devisers are motivated to fashion convincing-sounding ones. But first they have to satisfy *themselves* that they are convincing, by making a sincere effort in this fashioning process to inhabit the skin of the other. But the point is that not all deviance neutralization devices are apologies, and not all persons who have offended others think that they have done anything wrong—nonetheless, they know that *others* about whom, presumably, they care in one way or another will object to what they did and said. Herein dwells the nub of the tale that unfolds in this book.