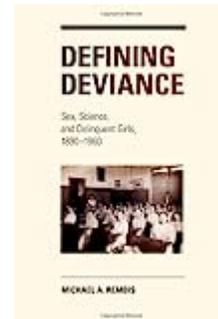


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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael A. Rembis. *Defining Deviance: Sex, Science, and Delinquent Girls, 1890-1960.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011. 248 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03606-4.



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Michael A. Rembis's *Defining Deviance: Sex, Science and Delinquent Girls 1890-1960* uses the Illinois state legal infrastructure to create a critical history of deviance discourse in the early nineteenth century. He blends case studies of inmates, usually young white women, along with statements and documents written by professionals in the field of deviance, namely doctors, lawyers, and scientists. Throughout the six chapters, he focuses on the State Training School for Girls in Geneva, Illinois, to illustrate changes in biopsychological constructions of deviance over the seventy years studied, while highlighting how the eugenics movement was used to construct the "abnormal" young woman.

The first chapter begins with Illinois' adoption of laws to commit the "feeble-minded" in order to uphold eugenic standards and to "breed better humans" (p. 14). In order to accomplish this, eugenicists used biology and medico-scientific discourse to change the function of institutions from "keepers of the 'insane'" to the "protectors of 'normality'" (p. 20). This led to many young people being diagnosed as "feeble-minded" for infractions such as "pauperism" or antisocial behavior. This diagnosis was particularly problematic due to the lack of consensus amongst professionals as to what constituted a "feeble-minded" individual.

During the time frame studied, many more young women than young men were diagnosed as "feeble-minded." Chapter 2 discusses the variety of sociocultural factors that contributed to young women being diagnosed as deviant or inferior. The "new girl problem" that arose with increased numbers of young women in the workforce led to greater access to amenities of youth culture, which led to an increase in systematic problems with law enforcement, including truancy and sexual assault. While young men were also involved in a growing youth culture, they were more likely to be released or absolved of any wrongdoing and were not diagnosed as deviant. The delinquents that were incarcerated were studied to verify eugenicists' claims regarding the mental and moral inferiority of the "feeble-minded." Eventually, the psychological tests that were used to determine if an inmate was "feeble-minded" were considered invalid.

The third chapter focuses more on the theorized relationship between moral behavior and intellectual capacity. Through United States Army testing, scientists found that the average American scored in the "high grade moron" category of feeble-mindedness, which led to the scientific community questioning the validity of IQ, IQ testing, and the supposed link to delinquency. Additionally, more social ecological theories of delinquency surfaced

during this period, which led to increased advocacy for community and vocational rehabilitation for delinquent “normal-minded” girls. While eugenic segregation was still seen as a cure for antisocial behavior, psychoanalytic theories created a distinction between “feeble-mindedness” and psychopathic behavior.

The use of psychological testing in the determination of impairment was problematic throughout the majority of Geneva’s history. Chapter 4 analyzes the use of both qualitative testing and qualitative interviewing of inmates to determine if a person lacking visible markers of “defectiveness” was in fact deserving of incarceration. Many times, the stress of testing impacted the behavior of the girls and was considered further proof that they were in need of incarceration. While this baffled professionals, the inmates who surpassed the bonds of their diagnoses through education further confounded administrators and psychologists.

Chapter 5 is descriptive of the social climate within the institution, particularly in relation to how Victorian ideals shaped both the built environment and the standards of proper, “normative” behavior. The majority of this chapter is devoted to examples of the various types of behavior that the inmates displayed, from the “goody-goody” who attempted to expedite her release from the institution, to sexual experimentation amongst inmates, to elaborate lies to garner attention from both staff and other inmates, to episodes of “hysteria” that were perceived as attempts to gain power and attention from others. This culminated in a recognition of the environmental factors that impacted deviant behavior, but many professionals still considered biology to be the driving force in delinquency.

The final chapter advances the overall timeline in the book from the early 1900s to the post-World War II era. During this time, there was an increase in the number of delinquency cases in the legal system, with people from all walks of life admitting to various legal infractions. This period was also marked by a shift from biological

explanations of behavior to psychoanalytic theories of personality development. While the definition of personality was debated, investigation focused on a search for the “normal” or “healthy” personality, based on a white, middle-class ideal of “normal.” While intellectual capacity was no longer linked with delinquency, girls were still more likely to be incarcerated for crimes of deviance.

The book concludes with an epilogue that connects many of the similarities between the time period analyzed and the late twentieth century. The author finds that crime remains similar, both in types of crimes committed and incarceration rates. White girls are still the majority of offenders, while black girls remain overrepresented in media reports. Additionally, higher socioeconomic status is linked with the medicalization and hospitalization of deviant behavior, while lower socioeconomic status is linked with criminalization and incarceration. Girls are still legally punished for behavior that is often overlooked in boys of the same age group, still today pointing to a gender difference in the perception of deviant behavior.

This book gives the reader a good starting place for looking at the social construction of deviance and impairment, while consistently guiding the reader to an introduction to critical historical studies. While the book begins its journey throughout the seventy-year lifespan of the Geneva State Training School for Girls, the majority of the text focuses on the early twentieth century, an era rife with eugenics discourse and Victorian standards. I finished this book wishing that there could have been more attention to the psychological discourses in the post-WWII era, particularly in relation to psychoanalysis and Sigmund Freud. There seems to be a gap in the discussion of hysteria (which is briefly mentioned in chapter 6) and more specifically of borderline personality disorder. Overall, this text allows the reader to think more critically about the history of deviance, delinquency, and the “normal” young female body in the early twentieth century.

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