

## Doing Sociology 6.1

# Deviance in the Ashley Madison Hack



In this exercise, you will consider the layers of potentially deviant behavior involved in identifying users of a website intended to facilitate extramarital affairs.

AshleyMadison.com was a dating website, but unlike other dating sites, this one was for married people seeking to have extramarital affairs. In July 2015, a group of hackers calling themselves “The Impact Team” stole the Ashley Madison user data and later released users’ personally identifying information, including email addresses. Outcomes of the data breach included public shaming of users, extortion attempts, potentially serious legal consequences (e.g., 1,200 users had email addresses from Saudi Arabia, where infidelity can result in capital punishment), and even several suicides of publicly humiliated users.

The AshleyMadison.com data breach entailed multiple forms of so-called deviance: the theft and public release of the information by “The Impact Team,” the marital infidelity (intended or actual) of the site’s users, and the suicides that resulted.

Consider the following questions:

1. Which of these three do you consider the most deviant, and why?
2. Do you reject the label of “deviant” for any of these behaviors? Why or why not?
3. Considering both legal punishments and personal repercussions, who was likely punished most severely—the website operators, the website users, or the hackers? How would you match the severity of the punishment with the severity of the deviance? Explain.

### The Legalistic Approach

If your rankings depended on whether the behavior was illegal, then you were using a **legalistic approach** to defining deviance. In this approach, any violation of the law is necessarily deviant. Therefore, shoplifting would be considered deviant but your professor wearing a Halloween costume to work (not on Halloween) would not, as the latter would be a violation of a folkway but not a law.

This approach requires us to distinguish between crime, sin, and poor taste (Smith and Pollack 1976). Crimes are violations of the law, such as assault, kidnapping, theft, or murder. Sins are deviant acts, conditions, or beliefs that violate religious or moral prohibitions, many of which are not subject to legal regulation, such as promiscuity or eating food deemed impure by one’s religion. Sins are violations of mores, not folkways or laws. Behaviors, conditions, or beliefs in poor taste are violations of customs or etiquette, such as picking one’s nose in public or wearing a bikini as classroom attire. Folkways indicate what is and is not in poor taste in a given culture. The legalistic approach considers only crime as deviant.

### The Normative Approach

If, in your rankings, you considered what would evoke a disapproving response from others, then you were using a **normative approach**. Unlike the legalistic view of deviance, the normative approach considers violations of any norms—folkways, mores, or laws. And unlike in the statistical approach, behaviors, conditions, and beliefs need not be statistically unusual to be deviant in this perspective. Rather, the collective disapproving response, or sanctions, they garner is sufficient for making them deviant.

### Sanctions

When people break rules they face **sanctions**, which are punishments or penalties. Sanctions can range from benign, informal penalties, such as being ignored or gossiped about, to serious, formal punishment, such as imprisonment or execution. Who is imposing the sanction determines whether the sanction is informal or formal. *Formal sanctions* are enacted by official agents of the state, such as local law enforcement, Child Protective Services, or the Drug Enforcement Administration. *Informal sanctions* come from nonofficial sources, including friends, family members, and strangers.