

## **Decoding Deviance with the *Sons of Anarchy***

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*Abstract: This article explicates the ways that the popular television series *Sons of Anarchy* in conjunction with our content analysis coding tool can be used to teach theories and concepts central to Sociology of Deviance courses. We detail how students learned to understand deviance as a social constructed phenomenon by coding and analyzing the behaviors of their most liked and most hated *Sons* characters. Evidence extrapolated from students' final projects, class discussions, and course evaluations suggests that this pedagogical technique creates a systematic teaching method enabling students to more actively engage in the course while enhancing connections to the course materials.*

*Keywords: deviance, social construction of deviance, popular culture, content analysis*

Using television and film as a pedagogical tool in sociology is far from a new phenomenon. Scholars have attested to the fact that using television and film helps bring to life abstract sociological theories and concepts, helps to better engage students with course materials, and as a result stimulate their sociological imaginations (Burton, 1988; Champoux, 1997; Demerath III, 1981; Donaghy, 2000; Eaton & Uskul, 2004; Hannon & Marullo, 1988; Hutton & Mak, 2014; Khanna & Harris, 2015; Livingston, 2004; Loewen, 1991; Melander & Wortmann, 2011; Nefes, 2014; Trier, 2010; Wosner & Boyns, 2013). For example, when speaking to the benefits of using the cinema as a teaching tool Champoux (1999) states: "viewers are not passive observers. Their responses add to the power of film. Cinema's ability to create unique experiences gives it unbeatable power as a teaching tool" (p. 207). Wosner and Boyns (2013) also speak to the idea that television shows and film create a "willing suspension of disbelief" whereby the stories and characters lead viewers into "sociological universes that are beyond the realm of conventional experience, but at the same time, provide a...reality that illuminates sociological themes present in our social world" (p. 213). Moreover, students are also already used to receiving much information about the social world from the media including television, films, and the internet. Thus, their comfort with these media enhances the likelihood of being able to relate to and empathize with characters, therefore, more easily opening the door for sociological analysis.

In light of these findings, the main purpose of this article is to demonstrate how the show *Sons of Anarchy* combined with a content analysis coding tool has great pedagogical potential for academics teaching the sociology of deviance. In the following sections we first outline how we incorporated *Sons of Anarchy* as a required "text" (Trier, 2010) for teaching deviance and detail the logistics of how the coding tool and show were integrated into the course. In all, the benefits of this pedagogical approach include: enhanced connections to course materials and readings,

more critically informed class discussions, and an avenue for conducting a systematic analysis of deviance in popular culture derived from student compiled data.

Subsequently, we provide evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of this pedagogical approach on student learning. As it is beyond the scope of this paper to include all evidence of student learning we focus specifically on how students learned to understand deviance as a socially constructed phenomenon by coding and analyzing the behaviors of their most liked and most hated *Sons* characters. We chose to focus on the social construction of deviance because it is foundational to any sociology of deviance course and is typically the first topic that students encounter in such classes. Furthermore, evidence is presented detailing students' overall evaluation of the course. Lastly, we speak to how this approach can be tailored to other courses that span various sub-disciplines within sociology.

## Literature Review

### *Why Sons of Anarchy?*

*Sons of Anarchy* is an American crime drama that aired seven seasons on FX from 2008-2014. The show is set in the fictional Northern California town of Charming and follows a fictional, tight-knit, outlaw motor-cycle club (mirrored after the real Hells Angels) known as the Sons of Anarchy Motorcycle Club, Redwood Original (SAMCRO) (O'Hare, 2008). The show's primary focal point and protagonist is Vice President, Jackson Teller (aka Jax), and his on-going struggle to find purpose and meaning amongst the chaos that naturally befalls someone dedicated to a life straddling the worlds of both conformity and deviancy. He, unlike most of the other central *Sons* members, is also burdened with the knowledge of his father's (John Teller's) manifesto that details why the club was originally formed and what it initially stood for. This knowledge eventually leads to an ongoing conflict between Jax and his step-father (the only father he has ever really known) and club President Clarence Morrow (aka Clay) due to their diverging views on how the club should operate. This tension also leads to ongoing deception and frustration on the part of the two lead female characters, Gemma Teller-Morrow (Jax's mother and Clay's "Old Lady") and Tara Knowles (Jax's girlfriend). While technically not allowed to be in the club, each have great influence over the two central male leaders—Clay and Jax.

We believe that *Sons of Anarchy* (much like that of HBO's *The Wire* which has been used to help students better understand urban inequality and crime) is an ideal platform to help students learn about the sociology of deviance given the true-to-life world that Kurt Sutter, the master mind behind the show, has managed to create. In order to make the show as genuine as possible Sutter immersed himself in the academic literature on one-percent motorcycle clubs and also became a participant observer in a chapter of the Hells Angels. Although the term "one-percent" has no official definition and can represent a variety of motorcycle clubs, it was originally embraced as a mark of distinction by the Hells Angels following a claim by the American Motorcycle Association (A.M.A.) that "outlaw clubs were typical of only one-percent of the American motorcycling population" (Quinn, 2001, p. 380). In an interview with Kurutz (2009) of *The Wall Street Journal*, Sutter speaks to what surprised him most about his time with the Hells Angels: "I went up to Northern California and spent quite a bit of time with these guys in an outlaw club. Like most people, I had a preconceived notion of bikers being hard a—s or teddy bears on Harleys. I was moved by the sense of loyalty. Brotherhood to the club had

precedent over everything: personal lives, the community, the laws of the land. Everything else fell behind” (para. 3).

Sutter, who himself plays a *Sons* member (Otto Delaney) in the show, also regularly consulted with the Hells Angels during production to ensure the show's authenticity. Moreover, he even cast several Hells Angels in the show. In addition to the fact that Sutter created a world that is reflective of the scholarly literature on one-percent motorcycle clubs, we also chose *Sons of Anarchy* because of the breadth and depth of deviant activities that are portrayed (e.g., murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, prostitution, pornography, infidelity, blackmail) as well as the combination of individuals from differing statuses/positions of power (e.g., local law enforcement, federal law enforcement, politicians, businessmen, international gangs) whose behavior can be analyzed. Individuals from each of these groups straddle the worlds of deviance and conformity thus blurring the lines between “good and evil” or “right and wrong”. Through these various characters and their relationships we encounter an ongoing struggle that both the characters and the audience find themselves in when it comes to defining who and what is deviant.

### *The Social Construction of Deviance*

When we hear the word “deviance” we often think about people that are “bad” or “mad” or acts that are “bad” or harmful to society. Nevertheless, this is far from the reality of what deviance in fact encompasses. It was Durkheim (1897) who long ago recognized deviance as a social construction stating, “that we do not condemn it [behaviors/acts] because it is a crime, but it is a crime because we condemn it” (p. 163). In other words, he argued that certain acts/behaviors are considered deviant only when society collectively constructs/defines them to be so, as opposed to acts/behaviors being deviant because they are somehow inherently bad or evil in and of themselves. Durkheim also recognized that deviance provides useful functions to society, primarily, social cohesion and progressive social change.

This conception of deviance has led more contemporary scholars to define deviance in various different ways. Some scholars assert that deviance is simply the violation of social norms (i.e., social rules of behavior) (Clinard & Meier, 2008), while others claim that an act must be met with some form of social disapproval in order to be classified as deviant (Goode, 2011). Others agree with Durkheim in terms of the positive functions of deviance and go as far as to assert that deviance can be positive, heroic, and represent a source of beneficial social change (Wolf & Zuckerman, 2012; Wosner & Boyns, 2013). These scholars point to “moral crusaders” such as Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Malcom X, Ghandi and Harvey Milk as positive deviants because they fought against injustice and inequality by rebelling against the laws to bring about social change. Many would also label iconic fictional characters like Robinhood and Batman as positive deviants because they take the law into their own hands to fight corruption and evil when systems of formal social control fail to do so. Others consider these “positive” deviants to be nothing more than an oxymoron (Heckert & Heckert, 2002).

Regardless of definition, however, scholars do agree that the nature of deviance itself is much broader than that of crime (i.e., violations of the law) with the number and types of deviant acts far exceeding the number and types of crimes. Deviance encompasses criminal acts but also a variety of things that might be considered amoral (e.g., pre-marital sex, abortion) or just rub people the wrong way (e.g., people chewing with their mouths open, people wearing sandals with socks). Most also agree that what is considered deviant depends upon social and cultural

context. Thus, what one might consider deviant at one time, place, and under certain circumstances will not be defined as deviant at another time and place and under different circumstances.

## Methods

### *How to Use Sons of Anarchy and the Content Analysis Coding Tool in the Sociology of Deviance*

Prior to the data collection we obtained IRB confirmation that this research is exempt from human subjects requirements because of the educational nature of the project. Given that we incorporate evidence in the results section from students' coursework, all students were assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. It should also be noted that students were informed of their right to not have their work used in any publication that could result from the study and that withholding their work would not unduly affect their grade. No students objected to having their work utilized in this study.

At the beginning of the semester all students were notified of the use of *Sons of Anarchy* as a required "text" (Trier, 2010) in the course and were given the syllabus which outlined the specific topics that would be covered. In addition to the foundational sections that cover defining and researching deviance, as well as theories of deviance we chose the following topical areas: violent crime, hate crimes, sexual deviance (e.g., pornography, exotic dancing, and prostitution), substance use and abuse, and deviant identities. While these areas are standard in most deviance courses, we focused primarily on how these topics manifested themselves in the show and then compared them to society more generally. Students were also required to read several empirical articles on one-percent motorcycle gangs and pseudo-bikers (see Barker & Human, 2009; Quinn & Forsyth, 2009; Quinn & Koch, 2010; Thompson, 2008). Beyond this, we included readings on street gangs for comparative purposes, as well as a lecture on Goffman's (1959) presentation of self that led to a discussion on deviant identity formation.

This study was conducted during a six-week summer 2015 session where classes are required to meet for 75 minutes, five days a week, for six weeks at a large public University in the Pacific Northwest. The class was an undergraduate upper-division elective comprised of 10 students (four male/six female; three white/seven non-white) majoring in sociology, criminal justice, psychology, and human development. The course was co-taught by the authors and structured in seminar fashion where Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays served as the lecture/discussion days while Tuesdays, Thursdays, and weekends were designated for students to watch, code, and read independently. This set up was created to ensure that students had adequate time to watch and code two episodes every other day for a total of 26 *Sons* episodes. It was specified on the syllabus and stated in class that a Netflix subscription (or the purchase/rental of DVDs) was needed if they did not have access to the show already. A one-month subscription to Netflix costs approximately \$10. In all, only one student did not already have access to the show so this proved not to be an issue. Assessment of student learning was based upon the following elements: 1) attendance and participation, 2) the watching and coding of the 26 episodes, 3) weekly quizzes on the readings, lectures, and the show and, 4) a final project. Each of these elements was worth approximately 25 percent of the student's final grade.

In preparation for the course the authors viewed seasons one through six of *Sons of Anarchy* and developed a content analysis coding tool (see Appendix A) to help students critically analyze the characters and events in the show. Using this tool, students and both

authors independently watched and coded the entire first two seasons of the show over the course of the six week semester. Students were required to code for the types of criminal/deviant activities and other contextual details surrounding the acts including: time, day, location, number of victims, weapons used, relationships between victim(s) and offender(s), as well as offender motive which was to be tied back to theories of deviance. In addition to these codes, students were also asked to consider whether they viewed the behaviors as deviant given the situational context and to assess the characters' presentation of self. Moreover, all students were required to specify how the course readings for that week, approximately three to five scholarly articles, applied to the episodes watched.

At the end of the first week we paired students together so that they could compare their coding with a partner. Additionally, we made copies of our own coding sheets and shared them with the students following the class discussion that day. This enabled students to assess the accuracy of their initial coding sheets and also served as an example of the level of detail needed to successfully complete the final project. The students' coding sheets were subsequently collected once a week by the authors and graded for accuracy and thoroughness. Copies were made by the authors to better gauge the students' learning over the course of the semester. Original coding sheets were then returned to the students for discussion purposes and so that they could be used for analysis in completing their final projects (see Appendix B). The first several of rounds of coding that the students turned in were less detailed given that they had yet to develop the knowledge base to make the necessary critical connections being asked of them. As the weeks passed on, however, the coding sheets became more thorough and detailed thus better reflecting the depth of students' learning.

The first part of the final project in the course required students to analyze their own data in order to answer the following questions: Who is your most liked and most hated character and why? What are the three most deviant and/or criminal behaviors that these characters were involved in? Why are these behaviors defined as deviant by society? Are they defined as deviant by the persons engaged in those behaviors? Why did they commit these deviant acts (what were their motives)? How do these motives relate to theories we have discussed in class? How did these characters manage their deviant (or perhaps not so deviant) identities? How did they appear and act in the front vs. the back stage? Did their presentation of self change at all over the first two seasons? Overall how did watching and coding *Sons of Anarchy* help you to understand and critically think about deviance? The second part of the final project required students to create a digital poster of either their most liked or most hated character. These posters were to be a visual character summary and provide insight as to why the character was their most liked or most hated.

For the purposes of this paper we have chosen to narrow down our evaluation of students' learning to how they came to understand deviance as a social construction. Additionally, we incorporate students' general feedback on usefulness of *Sons of Anarchy* combined with the content analysis coding tool as an effective teaching technique in the course. The data presented below are qualitative in nature and are drawn directly from students' final projects, class discussions, and course evaluations. We have chosen to present data in this manner given the small class size (N=10) which inhibits the inclusion of robust quantitative measures.

## Results

### *Decoding the Social Construction of Deviance in Sons of Anarchy*

We have elicited several events from the show that exhibited students' abilities to understand that social and cultural context is paramount in deciding whether an act is considered deviant or not. Generally speaking, the consensus among students was that acts committed by people in positions of power and status to preserve their power and status, no matter the severity, were often viewed as deviant. On the other hand, acts committed for the good of many or the "greater good", no matter the severity, were not viewed as deviant. This often meant that acts that either explicitly or implicitly hurt club solidarity, the sense of family, or the club's survival were often interpreted as deviant. Alternatively, acts that strengthened solidarity, club survival, and sense of community were often interpreted as non-deviant.

One of the characters unanimously classified by students as deviant in class discussions and in assignments was Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) Agent June Stahl. Agent Stahl wanted the personal satisfaction and professional glory of being the only one tough enough take down the *Sons of Anarchy* which ultimately led her to adopt an "anything goes" mentality. This mentality led to what students considered one of the most deviant acts of the first two seasons of the show: the framing of Opie Winston (Jax's best friend from childhood and loyal club member) as a snitch. Agent Stahl was well aware that her actions could lead to Opie's untimely death, however, she had no qualms about setting him up anyway. In the end, another club member was tasked with murdering Opie yet it was Opie's wife who was mistakenly killed. It was actions like these that lead some students to nominate Agent Stahl as their most hated character. As Kenneth states in his final project "Stahl is my most hated character because she abuses her power as a federal agent for her own personal goals to become successful." In their final projects others agreed with this:

Stahl is my most hated character because throughout the whole series she manipulates people for her own benefit, no matter the cost. I believe that the acts she partakes in are far more deviant than the ones of [my favorite] character Jax...Jax was always trying to find a solution to helping the club in a positive way, while Stahl would do anything, moral or not, just as long as she would be on top at the end... Her main concern is failing to meet her goals so she does anything in her power to achieve them (Ethan).

Agent Stahl is my most hated character because she is manipulative, conniving, heartless, mean spirited and overall a bad person. I do view her as deviant because even though most of her deviancy is not technically against the law she is only ever thinking about herself and never seems to be worried about the wellbeing or lives of others around her as she abuses her legal power. And to me this is far more deviant than some of the crimes that Jax and other SAMCRO members commit (Kristy).

The behavior of Gemma (Jax's mother/Clay's wife) is not so cut and dried as that of Agent Stahl. During in class discussions students had a more difficult time defining her behaviors as deviant. Gemma stood out as a character that, much like Stahl, was deceptively

deviant though this deviance was masked behind the cover of a protective mother who would go to great lengths to protect her family and ensure the club's survival—hence the struggle to define her as deviant. In fact, on several occasions Gemma stated something to the effect that “nothing gets in the way of me taking care of my family, especially my conscience.” Even after acknowledging her lying and manipulative ways, students couldn't quite define Gemma as a deviant because the intentions behind her behaviors were “good.” Savannah, Nicole and Pamela speak to this in their final projects:

Making a choice on my most liked and most hated character from the drama was hard. I think the reason that Gemma is my favorite is because of her perspective on family. I personally see family as my most important thing in life and I too would do whatever it takes to protect them (Savannah).

Gemma was my favorite character in the show because she never took shit from anyone. I liked that despite her manipulative and aggressive nature, she continued to support her family. Family was her main priority and that is something that I can relate to. I found her deviant but I felt the reasons behind her actions were valid so I was always rooting for her (Nicole).

Gemma is my favorite character in the show so far. She has been able to get things done using manipulation, yet there is also a motherly side of her that makes it difficult for you not to like her. There are times when she is overbearing, especially when it concerns Jax, but you can tell that she cares a lot about the club and the members. Despite all the deviant acts that she committed, whether it was cheating, assaulting someone, or using deception to get her way, you see that she is important to the club. Thus, I do not define her as deviant (Pamela).

Arguably, many students found Gemma's fierce “mama bear” mentality to be a noble pursuit even through her lack of conscience resulted in the same “anything goes mentality” utilized by Stahl. The students downplayed Gemma's behavior, however, because she was “acting in the best interests of her family and the club” as opposed to Stahl who was acting in the best interests of herself. Interestingly, while students struggled with defining Gemma as deviant, they had no difficulty pointing the finger at Clay. Clay, unlike Gemma, could not hide behind the caring, motherly, good-intentioned cover and was often found to be in open opposition to Jax (a favorite for some and definitely a second favorite for most) who was seen as trying to make the club better by steering them back to a more simple, unadulterated time. In their final projects Jacob and Pamela speak to their dislike of Clay for this very reason:

Clay is my most hated character...He is all about making money and having power...he lies, cheats, and uses his position in the club to make everybody else do what he wants. It's all about his end game (Jacob).

Clay is a character I have grown to really dislike. He has made some really unwise decisions for the club that just complicated things more. I also find him deviant because he is a hypocrite. He promotes brotherhood, yet doesn't do a great job of protecting his

brothers and all of his careless mistakes just made me worry for Jax and the rest of the club (Pamela).

When it came to defining the behaviors of Jax and the club more generally as deviant, students in class discussions often reverted to pointing out that many of their actions would fall under the umbrella of positive deviance, and therefore, were not deviant in the “bad” sense of the word. Even though the club was engaged in both illegitimate (e.g., gun running, money laundering) and legitimate (though perhaps deviant) enterprises (e.g., auto repair, pornography production) much of their time was also spent acting as the primary protectors of Charming. This role entailed making sure to rid the community of any evils that not only undermined or put in jeopardy their lives, the lives of their families and/or their livelihoods, but also those evils that hurt the community as a whole. Often times this meant engaging in deviancy in order to prevent or control “worse” or more “reprehensible” deviancy.

One primary example of positive deviance discussed early in the class was the murder of ATF Agent Josh Kohn. Agent Kohn was one of the first characters to be vilified by the students who were quick to label him as a “creeper” for his unhealthy infatuation with Tara. While he and Tara were once romantically involved, the relationship ended when Agent Kohn became overly obsessive and controlling causing Tara to flee back to her hometown of Charming. It was in his quest to find Tara that Agent Kohn uncovers her connection to the *Sons of Anarchy* and learns of her rekindled relationship with Jax. Eventually, Agent Kohn confronts Tara and during an attempted rape is non-fatally shot as she was defending herself. Jax is then called in to finish the job.

Students viewed the murder of Agent Kohn by Jax as not deviant given that Jax was the only one willing to do what was necessary to protect her. When talking about this incident in her final project Mileah states that, “Jax killing Tara’s stalker was not deviant, nobody was doing anything to protect her.” Kristy and Ethan reiterate this point in their final projects when they state:

Jax is not deviant, he’s just protecting Tara in the long run, doing what others wouldn’t. The system [criminal justice system] can only do so much (Kristy).

Society looks at murder as a deviant act, however, in this context I do not consider it deviant due to the fact the he was protecting the one who he loves....Agent Kohn was using his power as a federal agent to get around a restraining order as a means to get closer to Tara. The criminal justice system was not working for her in this situation (Ethan).

Beyond this, there are various other acts of vigilante justice committed by the *Sons of Anarchy* throughout the first two seasons that students defined as positive/heroic. Those discussed most often in class included: 1) the castrating of a carnival worker who raped a local teenage girl, 2) the murder of several white supremacists who gang raped Gemma and, 3) the murder of several Irish Republican Army (IRA) members who kidnapped Abel, Jax’s infant son. Ultimately, this weeding out of deviants in service to themselves and to the Charming community was viewed by students as something that needed to be done and that in many ways could only be done by the club. In all, it is clear to us that the evidence presented here

demonstrates students' understanding that defining who or what is deviant is dependent upon social and cultural context.

*Overall Evaluation of Using Sons of Anarchy and the Content Analysis Coding Tool in the Sociology of Deviance*

When asked in their final projects to reflect upon the usefulness of watching and coding *Sons of Anarchy* in helping them to better understand the concepts and theories presented throughout the course most, if not all, students had positive things to say. Here are a few student responses:

Watching *Sons of Anarchy* throughout the semester really benefitted my learning. It made it a lot easier for me to understand how sociological theories of deviance can be applied to real life situations. It also helped me to understand how all these theories intertwine and play off one another (Nicole).

*Sons of Anarchy* helped my understanding of deviance in a great way. It shows perfectly that not all deviant acts are bad. Or that the things that happen in the show may be against the social norms but to them [the club] are not deviant but are everyday tasks (Ethan).

*Sons of Anarchy* immensely helped me to think critically about deviance. By seeing different situations play out in the show I was able to understand that just because something may not be murder or against the law, it can still be seen as deviant to some...Through content analysis, watching the show, and recording observations, I was able to recognize patterns and identify situational deviance much easier than by simply reading about it. I thoroughly enjoyed this class and its innovative way to learn the material (Kristy).

At first, I was not interested in the show and found it a chore to watch. However, as the episodes progressed, I was drawn in. Watching *Sons of Anarchy* better helped me to understand the course material because it gave me the chance to observe and apply what I learned...Overall, the show was an excellent tool in helping me to understand and apply course concepts (Jacob).

Additionally, students submitted anonymous course evaluations at the conclusion of the semester. When asked what they liked most about the course the qualitative feedback from the students was overall positive in terms of the structure and the co-teaching setup. Comments that more directly touched upon the use of *Sons of Anarchy* and the content analysis coding tool included:

The drama we were required to watch and apply on the coding sheets (Student 1).

This course was different from anything I have ever taken. Incorporating the show was such a cool new way to learn and apply knowledge. Really enjoyed it (Student 2).

I really like the use of a television show to teach deviance. The coding sheets were at times tedious but really helped (Student 3).

Lastly, when asked what suggestions they have for helping the instructors improve this course, one student mentioned, “more examples on how to do the coding sheets”. From these comments we gather that while students may have initially felt that watching the show and/or coding episodes was tedious, ultimately they felt positive towards the overall setup of the course.

## **Discussion/Conclusion**

This study expands on the growing body of sociological literature that incorporates television and film into the classroom environment to enhance student learning in several important ways. First, similar to other teaching scholars drawing on films like *Batman* (Wosner & Boyns, 2013) and popular television shows like *The Simpsons* (Eaton & Uskul, 2004; Nefes, 2014), *Desperate Housewives* (Melander & Wortmann, 2011), and *The Wire* (Trier, 2010), we illuminate the ways in which *Sons of Anarchy* was able to stimulate and enhance students’ understanding of the sociology of deviance. Additionally, we expand on this pedagogical practice by incorporating a content analysis coding tool, which when combined with the show, creates a systematic teaching method enabling students to more actively engage in the course while enhancing connections to the course materials.

The connections to course materials that we focus on here are students’ understanding of deviance as a socially constructed phenomenon. In defining *which characters* were deviant, students reported that individuals with institutional and/or organizational power and status who engaged in behaviors to preserve their power, no matter the severity, were perceived as deviant. On the other hand, individuals acting on behalf of the “greater good”, no matter the severity, were not characterized as deviant. In defining *what acts* were deviant, students formulated their decisions by drawing upon the situational context surrounding any given act as opposed to legal definitions. Non-illegal behaviors such as lying, manipulation, cheating, and snitching were perceived by students as deviant. Alternatively, illegal acts such as murder, aggravated assault, extortion, and money laundering were seen as non-deviant so long as they were done for the good of the club, family, or the larger community.

Ultimately, after analyzing students’ final projects, class discussions, and course evaluations, it is clear to us that incorporating the *Sons of Anarchy* in conjunction with the content analysis coding tool resulted in a synergistic learning environment for our sociology of deviance course. Due to space constraints we are unable to demonstrate evidence of students’ learning on a variety of other topics addressed in this course including: personal troubles/public issues, criminological theory, techniques of neutralization, deviant identity formation, and the comparison of *Sons* with empirical research on motorcycle gangs more generally.

For those interested in incorporating *Sons of Anarchy* and the content analysis coding tool in their own deviance courses, a number of topics can be explored. For example, students can compare and contrast motorcycle clubs with street gangs or other criminal enterprises, explore the club’s involvement in street vs. white-collar crime, or investigate the gendered nature of offending/deviance. Another possibility entails coding and comparing *Sons of Anarchy* with other crime dramas to see how crime/deviance is portrayed across an array of shows in popular culture and whether the shows are reflective of empirical reality. Students can also be more

involved in the creation of the coding tool and rather than draw on just their own data, students can work in groups analyzing different episodes, seasons, or series. More importantly, the content analysis coding tool can be tailored for other courses to help students examine the sociological content of a wide variety of shows. For example, students could perform a gender analysis of the show *Girls*, explore the institution of healthcare in *Grey's Anatomy*, or assess the portrayal of female offending and incarceration in *Orange is the New Black*.

We recognize that the pedagogical potential for using television is highly dependent upon class size (i.e., it is easier done in a seminar style classroom with small class size), easy accessibility to the show of choice, and a willingness to develop the course around topics related to that show. While we felt a minimum of two seasons of *Sons* was necessary to witness character development and to accumulate enough data to analyze this does not mean that watching one season, or even a couple of episodes would not be valuable, especially when utilizing the content analysis coding tool and teaching specific topics. Moreover, we acknowledge this study lacks quantitative assessment of students' comprehension yet it was the small number of students in this course that allowed us the opportunity to pilot this study. Lastly, although co-teaching may not be an option in most courses we found that this set up enhanced our ability to more accurately assess student learning during in-class discussions. Despite these possible logistical issues, it should be noted this set-up was found to enhance in-class discussions, participation, and attendance. Each day the students came to class energized to share and when specific examples were discussed everyone was on the same page and better able to make connections to course materials.

### Appendix 1: Content Analysis Coding Tool

#### Content Analysis Coding Tool: *Sons of Anarchy* (Seasons 1 & 2)

1. Season/Episode; Title of Episode\_\_\_\_\_

2. Type of Criminal/Deviant Activity (check all that apply)

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Murder 1            | <input type="checkbox"/> Liquor Laws/Drunkenness                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Murder 2            | <input type="checkbox"/> Driving Under the Influence (DUI)       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Forcible Rape       | <input type="checkbox"/> Forgery/Counterfeiting                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Aggravated assault  | <input type="checkbox"/> Fraud                                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Robbery             | <input type="checkbox"/> Embezzlement                            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Burglary            | <input type="checkbox"/> Stolen property                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Larceny-theft       | <input type="checkbox"/> Offenses against family and/or children |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Motor Vehicle theft | <input type="checkbox"/> Disorderly Conduct                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Kidnapping          | <input type="checkbox"/> Vandalism                               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Arson               | <input type="checkbox"/> Suspicion                               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Simple assault      | <input type="checkbox"/> Curfew & Loitering laws                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Weapons offense     | <input type="checkbox"/> Runaways                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Prostitution        | <input type="checkbox"/> Vagrancy                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Infidelity          | <input type="checkbox"/> Gambling                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sex offenses        | <input type="checkbox"/> Other? (please specify_____)            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Drug abuse          |  |

3. Was a weapon used? \_\_\_\_yes \_\_\_\_no

If yes, please specify \_\_\_\_\_; How was it used?

4. Other details of crime(s):

a. Time of day: (early morning, late night, etc.)\_\_\_\_\_

b. Location: (home, street, strip club, parking lot, in prison, etc.)\_\_\_\_\_

c. #of Victims/# of Offenders:\_\_\_\_\_; \_\_\_\_\_

d. Relationship between victim(s) & offender(s) (husband-wife, parent-child, rival gang member, etc.) Explain.

e. Offender Motive(s): (money, jealousy, hate, rage, revenge, accident, etc.). Link this up to THEORY!

f. Other important details surrounding the offense(s). Explain.

5. Symbolism/Presentation of Self:

Presentation of self:

Front-stage vs. backstage:

Hiding/managing stigma (Link with techniques of neutralization!):

6. Do YOU consider the behaviors listed deviant given the situational context? Why or why not?

7. How do the assigned readings for this day apply to what happened in these episodes?

## Appendix 2: Final Project Assignment

### *Sons of Anarchy* Final Project Requirements

Step 1: Pick your most liked AND most hated character from *Sons of Anarchy*. This means that you will be analyzing two characters!

1) Introduce your reader to each character—who are they? What is their relationship to the club? What role do they serve to the club/in the club?

Step 2: Using your content analysis coding tool, identify the three most deviant and/or criminal acts/behaviors that each of these individuals was involved in. Remember that deviant behavior does not necessarily equate to criminal behavior. Also remember that deviance can be both positive and negative!

1) Describe each act/behavior and WHY they are defined as deviant? Are they defined as deviant to the person(s) engaged in them? Why or why not? WHY did they commit these deviant and/or criminal acts? What THEORIES can you use here? (You must pick a minimum of 2 theories). Are these acts/behaviors the result of personal troubles or public issues? Explain!

2) How did these characters manage their deviant (or perhaps not so deviant) identities? How did they appear and act in the front vs. the back stage? Did their presentation of self change at all over the first two seasons? (If they happen to be in the first two seasons). Explain!

Step 3: Explanation of choices.

1) Why is \_\_\_\_\_ your most liked character? Did you find yourself rooting for this person even though they were engaged in deviant and/or criminal behavior? How can this be? Would you personally define this person as deviant? Why or why not?

2) Why is \_\_\_\_\_ your most hated character? Were the acts/behaviors that they were engaged in any more or less deviant than your most liked character? Would you personally define this person as deviant? Why or why not?

3) Overall, how did watching and coding *Sons of Anarchy* help you to understand and critically think about deviance?

Step 4: Create a Digital Poster

1) Using pictures, words and/or quotes create a digital poster of either your most liked or most hated character! Thus, the poster is only about one person! This poster should be a visual character summary and should give your audience insight into WHY they are your most liked or most hated character. You will present this poster to the class during our final class meeting.

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