

Interactionist theories of crime and deviance: labelling theory

Interactionist theories of crime and deviance are most commonly referred to as labelling theory. This suggests many people involve themselves in some deviant or illegal behaviour, so it is hard to sustain a distinction between deviants and non-deviants; attempts to find the *causes* of crime (as in many of the theories examined so far) are therefore pointless. Official crime statistics are regarded as *social constructions*, showing only an unrepresentative group of offenders who have been caught and publicly labelled as 'criminal', because of the stereotypes and explanations that the police and other social control agencies themselves believe give rise to crime.

Labelling theory seeks to explain why only *some* people and *some* acts are defined as deviant or criminal, while others carrying out similar acts are not.

Labelling theory therefore takes as its focus:

- 1 *The interaction between deviants and those who define them as deviant*, and why particular individuals and groups are defined as deviant, and the circumstances in which this occurs.
- 2 *The process whereby rules are selectively enforced*, and why the response to rule-breaking is not always the same. What assumptions are used by the police when they choose whether or not to take action? For example, why might the police respond differently to groups of black male youths compared to white youths engaged in similar activities?
- 3 *The consequences of being labelled 'deviant'*. How do others react – societal reaction – to those labelled as deviant, and what effect does the attachment of the label 'deviant' have on the self-concept – or the way they see themselves – of those labelled? For example, does it prevent further deviance? Is it a self-fulfilling prophecy? Does it make deviance worse (this is called deviancy amplification, and is discussed in relation to the media in Topic 3 – see pages 518–22)
- 4 *The circumstances in which a person becomes set apart and defined as deviant.*
- 5 *An analysis of who has the power to attach deviant labels and make them 'stick'.*

Becker (1997 [1963]) (www.home.earthlink.net/~hsbecker/index.html) is the key figure in labelling theory. He suggests that an act only becomes deviant when others perceive and define it as such, and whether or not the deviant label is applied will depend on *societal reaction* (how an act is interpreted by those whose attention is drawn to it).

The following quotation from Becker's *Outsiders* is a classic, and sums up well the problematic nature of deviance:

Social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labelling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of the rules and sanctions to an 'offender'. The deviant is one to whom the label has successfully been applied. Deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label.

Becker calls agencies, such as the media and the police, who have the power and resources to create or enforce rules and impose their definitions of deviance, *moral entrepreneurs*.

A **moral entrepreneur** is a person, group or organization with the power to create or enforce rules and impose their definitions of deviance.

Selective law-enforcement

Agencies of social control use considerable discretion and selective judgement in deciding whether and how to deal with illegal or deviant behaviour. The police, for example, can't prosecute all crime: it would require very heavy policing, which would not enjoy much public support, and would be a massive drain on resources. So 'criminal' labels are not attached to every breach of the law, even if discovered, and the same courses of action are not always taken in response to the same offence. Labelling theorists therefore suggest it is necessary to study how, and to whom, deviant labels are attached.

Becker suggests that the police operate with pre-existing conceptions and stereotypical categories of what constitutes 'trouble', criminal types and criminal areas and so on, and these influence their responses to behaviour they come across. What action is taken will depend not so much on actual offences or behaviour, but on the stereotypes of groups and offences they hold.



The police force is made up of people from all social classes and, in theory, the police work for everyone in society. However, the institution can work in favour of the ruling class by treating different groups unequally. For example, drug use in a deprived area is much more likely to be investigated and punished than drug use among rich city bankers or celebrities.

The work of Cicourel

Cicourel (1976) uses a phenomenological approach to understand how law-enforcers make sense of and interpret what they see. He suggests their subjective perceptions and stereotypes can affect whether criminal labels are attached, and how these lead to the social construction of crime statistics. In his study of juvenile delinquency in two US cities, he found juvenile crime rates to be consistently higher in working-class areas than in middle-class areas. He found this was because the police viewed the behaviour of middle-class and working-class juveniles differently even when they were engaged in the same behaviour. Cicourel argued that this was because the police had a perception that middle-class youth came from 'good backgrounds' with lots of family support, and so their behaviour was interpreted as temporary lapses, and charges weren't brought. They held the opposite perception of working-class youth, and so more formal police action was taken against them. Cicourel's research suggests we need to look at the choices made by police over where they patrol, who they regard with suspicion, and therefore who they choose to stop and search, arrest and charge.

Primary deviance is deviance that has not been publicly labelled as such.

Secondary deviance is deviance that follows once a person has been publicly labelled as deviant.

The labelling process – primary and secondary deviance

Lemert (1972) distinguishes between primary deviance and secondary deviance.

Primary deviance is deviance that has not been publicly labelled as such. For example, people might break traffic laws, use illegal drugs, pinch stationery from work, or even download child pornography to their computers. This has few consequences for the person, so long as no one knows about it. However, once an offender is discovered and publicly exposed and the label of 'deviant' is attached, then secondary deviance may occur. The stigma attached to people caught downloading child pornography is a good example.

Becker points out that the attachment of the label may have major consequences for the individual's view of themselves – their self-concept – and their future actions. This is because the deviant label can become a master status – a status that overrides all other characteristics which the individual may possess. For example, if caught downloading child porn, other identities like manager, worker, husband, father, sportsman or vicar become displaced by labels like 'paedophile', 'child pornographer' and 'sex offender', which become seen by others as that person's defining status.

A master status is one which displaces all other features of a person's social standing, and a person is judged solely in terms of that one defining characteristic.

Others see and respond to the individual in light of this master status, and assume that he or she has all the negative attributes of the label. This is where secondary deviance begins, arising from the attachment of the label, and societal reaction to the deviant. Sustaining an alternative image in the deviant's own eyes and in those of others becomes difficult once the master status is applied.

Deviant careers and the self-fulfilling prophecy

Becker suggests that the labelling process and societal reaction can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy and a deviant career similar to an occupational career, as those labelled face rejection from many social groups, are placed outside conventional society and become 'outsiders', and continue to act even more in the way they have been labelled. Institutions like prisons for the punishment of offenders help to make the label stick, and, even after leaving prison, labels like 'ex-con' are still applied. Such labelling may lead to further deviance due to the closing off of alternative legitimate opportunities and a lack of means by which to live their lives and shake off the label. A deviant career begins when the individual eventually joins or identifies with a deviant group facing similar problems, which provides support and understanding for the deviant identity. This may generate further deviance. Becker therefore suggests societal reaction and the application of the deviant label produce more deviance than they prevent. Cohen's (2002 [1972]) work on deviancy amplification and moral panics, discussed later in Topic 3 (see pages 518–22) illustrated this process, with labelling by the media generating more of the deviance it apparently condemned. Young's (1971) participant observation study of hippie marijuana-users in Notting Hill carried out between 1967 and 1969 also demonstrated this process. The two examples shown in figure 6.2, one fictional and one based on Young's research, illustrate the labelling process and its possible consequences.

Evaluation of labelling theory

Plummer (2011) argues that, although few contemporary sociologists now describe themselves as labelling theorists, labelling theory has been enormously influential and is embedded in a vast range of contemporary sociology, such as in the theory of moral panics and the dramatization of crime in the media; crime and popular culture; public attitudes to, and perceptions of crime; stereotyping; social control through police, courts and prisons in the context of reactions to crime; and in post-modernist theories. This influence is demonstrated in the various strengths of the theory, and is also shown in the extensive debates arising from criticisms and weaknesses of the theory.

Strengths of labelling theory

- 1 It provides insights into the nature of deviance not provided by structural theories.
- 2 It challenges the idea that deviants are different from 'normal' people.
- 3 It shows the importance of the reactions of others in defining and creating deviance.
- 4 It reveals the importance of stereotyping in understanding deviance.
- 5 It reveals the way official crime statistics are a product of bias in law-enforcement.
- 6 It reveals the importance of those with power in defining acts and people as deviant.
- 7 It highlights the role of moral entrepreneurs, like the media, in defining and creating deviance and generating moral panics.
- 8 It shows how labelling can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy and to deviant careers.
- 9 It shows how the deviant label can affect the self-concept of the deviant.

Weaknesses of labelling theory

- 1 It tends to remove the blame for deviance away from the deviant and onto those who define him or her as deviant: the deviant becomes a victim too.
- 2 It assumes an act isn't deviant until it is labelled as such, yet many know perfectly well that what they are doing is deviant.
- 3 It doesn't explain the causes of deviant behaviour which precede the labelling process (primary deviance), nor the different kinds of acts that people commit – for example, taking drugs is a different act from murder.

A deviant career is what arises when people who have been labelled as deviant find conventional opportunities blocked to them, and so are pushed into committing further deviant acts.

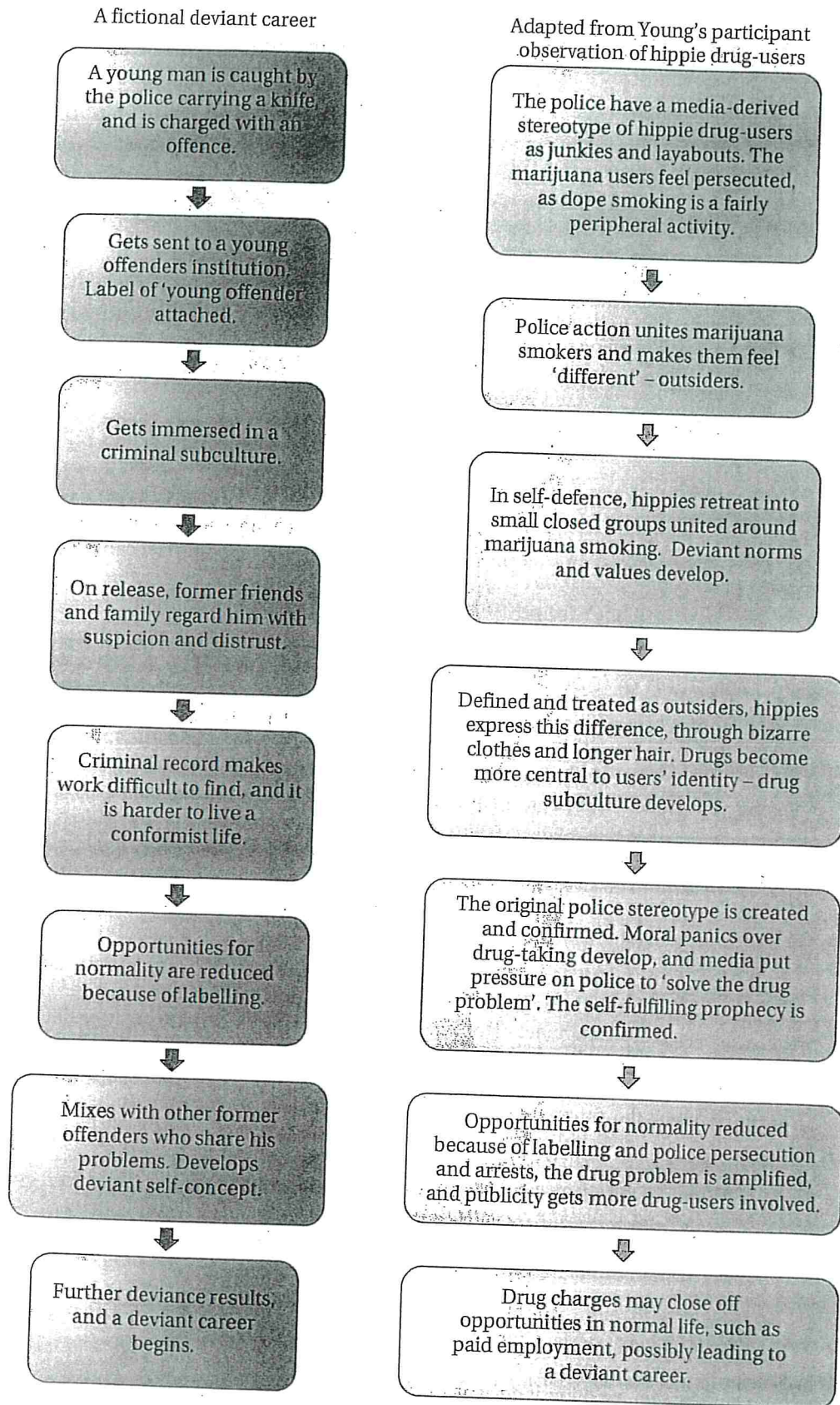


Figure 6.2 Deviant self-concepts, deviant careers and the self-fulfilling prophecy

- 4 It is too deterministic:
 - It doesn't allow that some people *choose* deviance and the attachment of a deviant label or of a deviant identity, like those who, in the past, adopted a gay identity; it is not simply or always imposed on them by societal reaction.
 - Labelling doesn't always lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy and more deviance: the attachment of a deviant label and the stigma attached by societal reaction may reduce deviance rather than increase it, for example a shoplifter may be so mortified by being caught they never want to do it again; Becker himself recognizes that individuals can choose to avoid a deviant career by seeking to rehabilitate themselves.
- 5 It doesn't explain why there are different reactions to deviance, nor where stereotypes come from in the first place.
- 6 It ignores the importance of wider structural factors in creating deviance, and assumes it is all down to societal reaction.
- 7 It has little to say about the victims of crime.
- 8 It has no real policy solutions to crime, beyond making fewer rules and not 'naming and shaming' offenders. This isn't much consolation for the victims of crime.
- 9 It does not explain why some individuals are labelled rather than others, and why some activities are against the law while others aren't. It points to the issue of power in the labelling process, but not, as the Marxists have done, at the structures of power in society which create the wider framework for the labelling process.

Activity

- 1 Explain, with examples, how the definition of deviance does not depend on the act itself but on societal reaction to it.
- 2 List some deviant labels you know of. Explain how and why these labels are applied, and what groups and circumstances are important in making the labels stick.
- 3 Outline and explain two ways that the mass media can act as moral entrepreneurs and how this might affect official crime statistics.
- 4 Outline, with examples, what assumptions you think the police operate with when they go about their work, such as their stereotypes of typical criminals and criminal areas.
- 5 Outline and explain ways how, in the process of interaction, a delinquent may avoid being labelled as such.
- 6 Drawing on Cicourel's research, explain how phenomenologists might explain the pattern in official crime statistics that most criminals are young, male and working-class, with an over-representation of black youth.

Feminist theories of crime and deviance

Feminist theories and research are applied in the gender and crime section in the next topic (see pages 487–93). This section will therefore focus on the main features underlying feminist contributions.

'Malestream' sociology and the invisibility of women

Feminism views society as patriarchal, and early feminist critiques of the sociology of crime and deviance focused on the way the subject was male-dominated and characterized by what Heidensohn and Silvestri (2012) called the two themes of 'amnesia' and 'neglect and distortion'. Gender issues and female offending were forgotten or ignored, until fairly recently, in most sociological theories of crime; most studies were about male offenders and deviants. There was therefore little attempt to explain female offending, the gender gap between male and female offending, and other forms of female deviance. For example, studies of working-class crime paid little attention to the fact that working-class women in the same social class position as men

INTERACTIONISM AND LABELLING THEORY

The theories we have looked at so far have all been described as 'problem takers'. That is, they take the official definitions of crime and criminals for granted. Crime is activity that breaks the criminal law, and criminals are the people who behave in this way. They also take it for granted that the official crime statistics are a reasonably accurate picture of the real patterns of crime and who commits it. The main aim of these theories is to discover the causes of crime (for example as a reaction to blocked opportunities or other external forces) and to provide solutions to the 'problem of crime'.

Labelling theorists take a very different approach. Instead of seeking the causes of criminal behaviour, they ask how and why some people and actions come to be labelled as

criminal or deviant, and what effects this has on those who are so labelled.

Similarly, instead of accepting official statistics as a valid picture of crime, they regard them not as hard facts, but as social constructs. This reflects the origins of labelling theory in symbolic interactionism, which takes the view that individuals construct the social world through their face-to-face interactions.

For labelling theorists, this constructionist view applies also to crime and deviance. Crime is the product of interactions between suspects and police, for example, rather than the result of wider external social forces such as blocked opportunity structures.

The social construction of crime

Rather than simply taking the definition of crime for granted, labelling theorists are interested in how and why certain acts come to be defined or labelled as criminal in the first place. They argue that no act is inherently criminal or deviant *in itself*, in all situations and at all times. Instead, it only comes to be so when others label it as such. In other words, it is not the nature of the act that makes it deviant, but the nature of society's *reaction* to the act.

In this view, therefore, deviance is in the eye of the beholder. As Howard Becker (1963) puts it:

'Social groups create deviance by creating the rules whose infraction [breaking] constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labelling them as outsiders.'

For Becker, therefore, a deviant is simply someone to whom the label has been successfully applied, and deviant behaviour is simply behaviour that people so label.

This leads labelling theorists to look at how and why rules and laws get made. They are particularly interested in the role of what Becker calls *moral entrepreneurs*. These are people who lead a moral 'crusade' to change the law. However, Becker argues that this new law invariably has two effects:

- The creation of a new group of 'outsiders' – outlaws or deviants who break the new rule.
- The creation or expansion of a social control agency (such as the police, courts, probation officers etc) to enforce the rule and impose labels on offenders.

For example, Platt (1969) argues that the idea of 'juvenile delinquency' was originally created as a result of a campaign by upper-class Victorian moral entrepreneurs, aimed at protecting young people at risk. This established 'juveniles'

as a separate category of offender with their own courts, and it enabled the state to extend its powers beyond criminal offences involving the young, into so-called 'status offences' (where their behaviour is only an offence because of their age) such as truancy and sexual promiscuity.

Becker notes that social control agencies themselves may also campaign for a change in the law to increase their own power. For example, the US Federal Bureau of Narcotics successfully campaigned for the passing of the Marijuana Tax Act in 1937 to outlaw marijuana use. Supposedly, this was on the grounds of its ill effects on young people, but Becker argues it was really to extend the Bureau's sphere of influence. Thus it is not the inherent harmfulness of a particular behaviour that leads to new laws being created, but rather the efforts of powerful individuals and groups to redefine that behaviour as unacceptable.

Who gets labelled?

Not everyone who commits an offence is punished for it. Whether a person is arrested, charged and convicted depends on factors such as:

- Their interactions with agencies of social control.
- Their appearance, background and personal biography.
- The situation and circumstances of the offence.

This leads labelling theorists to look at how the laws are applied and enforced. Their studies show that agencies of social control are more likely to label certain groups of people as deviant or criminal.

For example, Piliavin and Briar (1964) found that police decisions to arrest a youth were mainly based on physical cues (such as manner and dress), from which they made

judgments about the youth's character. Officers' decisions were also influenced by the suspect's gender, class and ethnicity, as well as by time and place. For example, those stopped late at night in high crime areas ran a greater risk of arrest. Similarly, a study of anti-social behaviour orders found they were disproportionately used against ethnic minorities.

Cicourel: the negotiation of justice

Officers' decisions to arrest are influenced by their stereotypes about offenders. For example, Aaron Cicourel (1968) found that officers' *typifications* – their commonsense theories or stereotypes of what the typical delinquent is like – led them to concentrate on certain 'types'. This resulted in law enforcement showing a class bias, in that working-class areas and people fitted the police typifications most closely. In turn, this led police to patrol working-class areas more intensively, resulting in more arrests and confirming their stereotypes.

Cicourel also found that other agents of social control within the criminal justice system reinforced this bias. For example, probation officers held the commonsense theory that juvenile delinquency was caused by broken homes, poverty and lax parenting. They tended to see youths from such backgrounds as likely to offend in future and were less likely to support non-custodial sentences for them.

In Cicourel's view, justice is not fixed but negotiable. For example, when a middle-class youth was arrested, he was less likely to be charged. This was partly because his background did not fit the idea of the police's 'typical delinquent', and partly because his parents were more likely to be able to negotiate successfully on his behalf, convincing the control agencies that he was sorry, that they would monitor him and ensure he stayed out of trouble in future. As a result, typically, he was 'counselled, warned and released' rather than prosecuted.

Topic versus resource

Cicourel's study has implications for the use we make of official crime statistics recorded by the police. He argues that these statistics do not give us a valid picture of the patterns of crime and cannot be used as a *resource* – that is, as facts about crime.

Instead, we should treat them as a *topic* for sociologists to investigate. That is, we must not take crime statistics at face value; instead, we should investigate the processes that created them. This will shed light on the activities of the control agencies and how they process and label certain types of people as criminal.

Activity Discussion

The negotiation of justice

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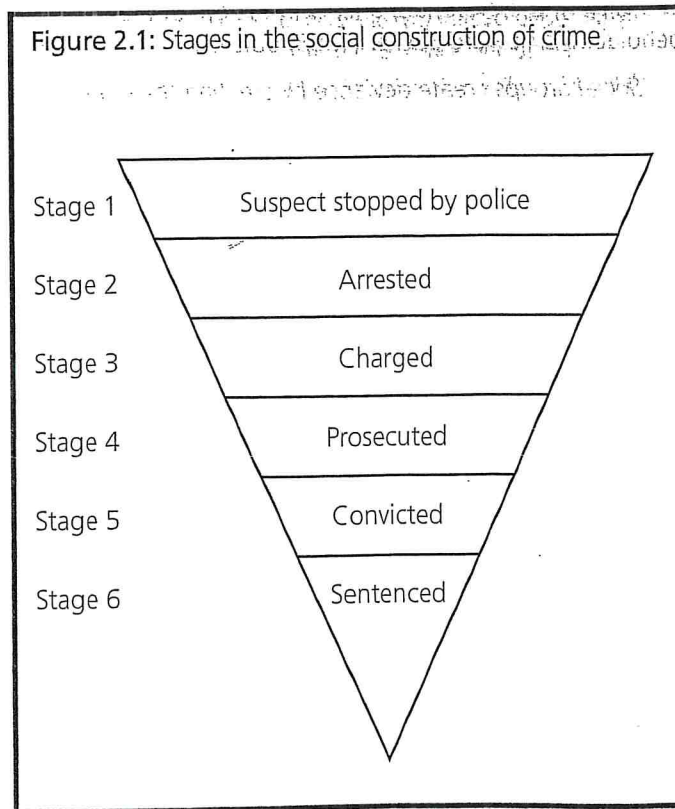
The social construction of crime statistics

Interactionists see the official crime statistics as socially constructed. At each stage of the criminal justice system, agents of social control (such as police officers or prosecutors) make decisions about whether or not to proceed to the next stage. The outcome depends on the label they attach to the individual suspect or defendant in the course of their interactions. This label is likely to be affected by the typifications or stereotypes they hold about him or her.

As a result, the statistics produced by the criminal justice system only tell us about the activities of the police and prosecutors, rather than about the amount of crime out there in society or who commits it. The statistics are really just counts of the decisions made by control agents at the different 'decision gates' or stages in the justice system. As Figure 2.1 shows, at each 'gate', a decision is made, steadily whittling down the number of people in the system.

The dark figure of crime The difference between the official statistics and the 'real' rate of crime is sometimes called the dark figure, because we do not know for certain how much crime goes undetected, unreported and unrecorded.

Alternative statistics Some sociologists use victim surveys (where people are asked what crimes they have been victims of) or self-report studies (where they are asked what crimes they have committed) to gain a more accurate view of the amount of crime. These can add to our picture of crime, but they have several limitations. For example, people may



forget, conceal or exaggerate when asked if they have committed a crime or been the victim of one. In addition,

such surveys usually only include a selection of (generally less serious) offences.

The effects of labelling

Labelling theorists are interested in the effects of labelling upon those who are labelled. They claim that, by labelling certain people as criminal or deviant, society actually encourages them to become more so.

Primary and secondary deviance

Edwin Lemert (1951) distinguishes between primary and secondary deviance. Primary deviance refers to deviant acts that have not been publicly labelled. Lemert argues that it is pointless to seek the causes of primary deviance, since it is so widespread that it is unlikely to have a single cause, and in any case it is often trivial, e.g. fare dodging, and mostly goes uncaught.

These acts are not part of an organised deviant way of life, so offenders can easily rationalise them away, for example as a 'moment of madness'. They have little significance for the individual's status or self-concept. In short, primary deviants don't generally see themselves as deviant.

Master status However, some deviance *is* labelled. Secondary deviance is the result of societal reaction – that is, of labelling. Being caught and publicly labelled as a criminal can involve being stigmatised, shamed, humiliated, shunned or excluded from normal society. Once an individual is labelled, others may come to see him only in terms of the label. This becomes his *master status* or controlling identity, overriding all others. In the eyes of the world, he is no longer a colleague, father or neighbour; he is now a thief, junkie or paedophile – in short, an outsider.

This can provoke a crisis for the individual's *self-concept* or sense of identity. One way to resolve this crisis is for the individual to accept the deviant label and see themselves as the world sees them. In turn, this may lead to a *self-fulfilling prophecy*, in which the individual acts out or lives up to their deviant label, thereby becoming what the label says they are. Lemert refers to the further deviance that results from acting out the label as *secondary deviance*.

Deviant career Secondary deviance is likely to provoke further hostile reactions from society and reinforce the deviant's 'outsider' status. Again, this in turn may lead to more deviance and a *deviant career*. For example, the ex-convict finds it hard to go straight because no one will employ him, so he seeks out other outsiders for support. This may involve joining a *deviant subculture* that offers deviant career opportunities and role models, rewards deviant behaviour, and confirms his deviant identity.

Jock Young (1971) uses the concepts of secondary deviance and deviant career in his study of hippy marijuana users in Notting Hill. Initially, drugs were peripheral to the hippies' lifestyle – an example of primary deviance. However, persecution and labelling by the *control culture* (the police) led the hippies increasingly to see themselves as outsiders. They retreated into closed groups where they began to develop a deviant subculture, wearing longer hair and more 'way out' clothes. Drug use became a central activity, attracting further attention from the police and creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The work of Lemert and Young illustrates the idea that it is not the act itself, but the hostile societal reaction to it, that creates serious deviance. Ironically, therefore, the social control processes that are meant to produce law-abiding behaviour may in fact produce the very opposite.

However, although a deviant career is a common outcome of labelling, labelling theorists are quick to point out that it is not inevitable. As Downes and Rock (2003) note, we cannot predict whether someone who has been labelled will follow a deviant career, because they are always free to choose not to deviate further.

Application

Suggest two ways in which a person might try to resist a label.

Deviance amplification spiral

The deviance amplification spiral is a term labelling theorists use to describe a process in which the attempt to control deviance leads to an increase in the level of deviance. This leads to greater attempts to control it and, in turn, this produces yet higher levels of deviance. More and more control produces more and more deviance, in an escalating spiral, as in the case of the hippies described by Young.

Labelling theorists have applied the concept of the deviance amplification spiral to various forms of group behaviour. An example of this is Stanley Cohen's (1972) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, a study of the societal reaction to the 'mods and rockers' disturbances involving groups of youths at English seaside resorts.

Press exaggeration and distorted reporting of the events began a moral panic, with growing public concern and with moral entrepreneurs calling for a 'crackdown'. The

police responded by arresting more youths, while the courts imposed harsher penalties. This seemed to confirm the truth of the original media reaction and provoked more public concern, in an upward spiral of deviance amplification. At the same time, the demonising of the mods and rockers as 'folk devils' caused their further marginalisation as 'outsiders', resulting in more deviant behaviour on their part. (See Topic 7 for more about the media's role in moral panics.)

We can see the deviance amplification spiral as similar to Lemert's idea of secondary deviance. In both cases, the societal reaction to an initial deviant act leads not to successful control of the deviance, but to further deviance, which in turn leads to a greater reaction and so on. It also illustrates an important difference between labelling theory and functionalist theories of deviance. As Lemert (1967) puts it, these theories:

'rest heavily on the idea that deviance leads to social control. I have come to believe the reverse idea, i.e. social control leads to deviance.'

Folk devils vs. the dark figure Folk devils are in a sense the opposites of the dark figure of crime. While the dark figure is about unlabelled, unrecorded crime that is ignored by the public and the police, folk devils and their actions are 'over-labelled' and over-exposed to public view and the attentions of the authorities. In terms of law enforcement and the justice system, the pursuit of folk devils draws resources away from detecting and punishing the crimes that make up the dark figure, such as the crimes of the powerful.

Labelling and criminal justice policy

Studies have shown how increases in the attempt to control and punish young offenders can have the opposite effect. For example, in the USA, Triplett (2000) notes an increasing tendency to see young offenders as evil and to be less tolerant of minor deviance. The criminal justice system has re-labelled status offences such as truancy as more serious offences, resulting in much harsher sentences. As predicted

Lemert's theory of secondary deviance, this has resulted in an increase rather than a decrease in offending. De Haan (2000) notes a similar outcome in Holland as a result of the increasing stigmatisation of young offenders.

These findings indicate that labelling theory has important policy implications. They add weight to the argument that negative labelling pushes offenders towards a deviant career. Therefore logically, to reduce deviance, we should make and enforce fewer rules for people to break.

For example, by decriminalising soft drugs, we might reduce the number of people with criminal convictions and hence the risk of secondary deviance. Similarly, labelling theory implies that we should avoid publicly 'naming and shaming' offenders, since this is likely to create a perception of them as evil outsiders and, by excluding them from mainstream society, push them into further deviance.



▲ Disintegrative shaming - convicted of burglary in Dougherty, Georgia, USA, this woman was sentenced to stand outside the courthouse wearing the sign.

Reintegrative shaming

Most labelling theorists see labelling as having negative effects. However, John Braithwaite (1989) identifies a more positive role for the labelling process. He distinguishes between two types of shaming (negative labelling):

- **Disintegrative shaming**, where not only the crime, but also the criminal, is labelled as bad and the offender is excluded from society.
- **Reintegrative shaming**, by contrast, labels the act but not the actor – as if to say, 'he has done a bad thing', rather than 'he is a bad person'.

The policy of reintegrative shaming avoids stigmatising the offender as evil while at the same time making them aware of the negative impact of their actions upon others, and then encourages others to forgive them. This makes it easier for both offender and community to separate the offender from the offence and re-admit the wrongdoer back into mainstream society. At the same time, this avoids pushing them into secondary deviance. Braithwaite argues that crime rates tend to be lower in societies where reintegrative rather than disintegrative shaming is the dominant way of dealing with offenders.

Activity Webquest

Reintegrative shaming

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Mental illness and suicide: the sociology of deviance

Interactionists are interested not just in crime but in deviant behaviour more widely. Here we focus on two important areas generally regarded as deviant: mental illness and suicide.

Suicide

Suicide has been an important topic in the development of sociology. Durkheim (1897) studied it with the aim of showing that sociology is a science. Using official statistics, he claimed to have discovered the causes of suicide in how effectively society integrated individuals and regulated their behaviour.

However, interactionists reject Durkheim's positivist approach and his reliance on official statistics. They argue that to understand suicide, we must study its meanings for those who choose to kill themselves.

Douglas: the meaning of suicide

Jack Douglas (1967) takes an interactionist approach to suicide. He is critical of the use of official suicide statistics for the same reasons as interactionists distrust official crime statistics. Both are socially constructed and they tell us about the activities of the people who construct them, such as police (in the case of crime) and coroners (in the case of suicide), rather than the real rate of crime or suicide in society.

For example, whether a death comes to be officially labelled as suicide rather than, say, an accident or homicide, depends on the interactions and negotiations between social actors such as the coroner, relatives, friends, doctors and so on.

For instance, relatives may feel guilty about failing to prevent the death and press for a verdict of misadventure rather than suicide. Similarly, a coroner with strong religious beliefs that suicide is a sin may be reluctant to bring in a suicide verdict.

The statistics therefore tell us nothing about the meanings behind an individual's decision to commit suicide. If we want to understand their meanings, Douglas argues, we must use qualitative methods instead, such as the analysis of suicide notes, or unstructured interviews with the deceased's friends and relatives, or with people who have survived a suicide attempt. This would allow us to 'get behind' the labels coroners attach to deaths and discover their true meaning.

Atkinson: coroners' commonsense knowledge

Max Atkinson (1978) agrees that official statistics are merely a record of the labels coroners attach to deaths. He argues that it is impossible to know for sure what meanings the dead gave to their deaths.

Atkinson therefore focuses instead on the taken-for-granted assumptions that coroners make when reaching their verdicts. He found that their ideas about a 'typical suicide' were important; certain modes of death (e.g. hanging), location and circumstances of the death, and life history (e.g. a recent bereavement) were seen as typical of suicides. One coroner said that if the deceased had taken more than ten sleeping pills, 'I can be almost sure it was a suicide'.

However, Atkinson's approach can be used against him. If he is correct that all we can do is have interpretations of the social world, rather than real facts about it (such as how many deaths are really suicides), then his account is no more than an interpretation and there is no good reason to accept it.

Mental illness

As with crime and suicide, interactionists reject official statistics on mental illness because they regard these as social constructs. That is, they are simply a record of the activities of those such as psychiatrists with the power to attach labels such as 'schizophrenic' or 'paranoid' to other. Crime, suicide and mental illness statistics are artefacts (things made by human beings), not objective social facts.

Paranoia as a self-fulfilling prophecy

As with crime, interactionists are interested in how a person comes to be labelled as mentally ill, and in the effects of this labelling. An example of this is Lemert's (1962) study of paranoia. Lemert notes that some individuals don't fit easily into groups. As a result of this primary deviance, others label the person as odd and begin to exclude him.

His negative response to this is the beginning of his secondary deviance, and it gives others further reason to exclude him. They may begin discussing the best way of dealing with this difficult person. This seems to confirm his suspicions that people are conspiring against him. His reaction justifies their fears for his mental health, and this may lead to a psychiatric intervention, resulting in being officially labelled and perhaps placed in hospital against his will.

CHAPTER 2

As a result, the label 'mental patient' becomes his *master status*. Henceforth, everything he says or does will be interpreted in this light.

An example of this comes from Rosenhan's (1973) 'pseudo-patient' experiment, in which researchers had themselves admitted to a number of hospitals claiming to have been 'hearing voices'. They were diagnosed as schizophrenic and this became their master status. Thus, despite acting normally, they were treated by staff as mentally ill. For example, the pseudo-patients kept notes of their experiences, but staff interpreted this as a symptom of illness.

Institutionalisation

Goffman's (1961) classic study *Asylums* shows some of the possible effects of being admitted to a 'total institution' such as a psychiatric hospital.

On admission, the inmate undergoes a 'mortification of self' in which their old identity is symbolically 'killed off' and replaced by a new one: 'inmate'. This is achieved by various 'degradation rituals', such as confiscation of personal effects. Goffman notes the similarities with other total institutions such as prisons, armies, monasteries and boarding schools.

Goffman also shows that while some inmates become institutionalised, internalising their new identity and unable to re-adjust to the outside world, others adopt various forms of resistance or accommodation to their new situation.

An example of this comes from Braginski et al's (1969) study of long-term psychiatric patients. They found that inmates manipulated their symptoms so as to appear 'not well enough' to be discharged but 'not sick enough' to be confined to the ward. As a result, they were able to achieve their aim of free movement around the hospital.

Evaluation of labelling theory

Labelling theory shows that the law is not a fixed set of rules to be taken for granted, but something whose construction we need to explain. It shows that the law is often enforced in discriminatory ways, and that crime statistics are more a record of the activities of control agents than of criminals. It also shows that society's attempts to control deviance can backfire and create more deviance, not less.

However, it is criticised on several grounds:

- It tends to be deterministic, implying that once someone is labelled, a deviant career is inevitable.
- Its emphasis on the negative effects of labelling gives the offender a kind of victim status. Realist sociologists argue that this ignores the real victims of crime.
- It tends to focus on less serious crimes such as drug-taking.
- By assuming that offenders are passive victims of labelling, it ignores the fact that individuals may actively choose deviance.
- It fails to explain why people commit primary deviance in the first place, before they are labelled.
- It implies that without labelling, deviance would not exist. This leads to the strange conclusion that someone who commits a crime but is not labelled has not deviated. It also implies that deviants are unaware that they are deviant until labelled. Yet most are well aware that they are going against social norms.
- It recognises the role of power in creating deviance, but it fails to analyse the source of this power. As a result, it focuses on 'middle range officials' such as policemen who apply the labels, rather than on the capitalist class who (in the view of Marxists) make the rules in the first place. It also fails to explain the origin of the labels, or why they are applied to certain groups, such as the working class.

Topic summary

For labelling theory, an act only becomes deviant when labelled as such, through societal reaction. Not every offender is labelled, and labelling theory is interested in how the laws are selectively enforced against some groups. This means official statistics are invalid: they only tell us about the types of people the control agencies have labelled, not the real patterns of crime.

Labelling may cause the label to become the individual's master status. A deviance amplification spiral may result, in which increased control leads to increased deviance. Interactionists have applied labelling theory to the study of suicide and mental illness.

Labelling theory has implications for criminal justice policies, suggesting we should avoid labelling individuals unnecessarily. Labelling theory is criticised for determinism and failing to explain primary deviance and the origin of labels.

