of meanings. For example, when a person at an auction raises their arm, *they* mean that they are making a bid – but Weber doesn't explain how everyone else present also comes to give this gesture the same meaning.

• Weber's typology of action is difficult to apply. For example, among the Trobriand Islanders, individuals exchange ritual gifts called 'kula' with others on neighbouring islands. This could either be seen as traditional action (it has been practised in the same way

for generations) – or it could be seen as instrumentally rational action (because it is a good way of cementing trading links between kula partners).

• Weber advocated the use of *verstehen* or empathetic understanding of the actor's subjective meaning – where we put ourselves in the actor's place to understand their motives and meanings. However, as we cannot actually *be* that other person, we can never be sure we have truly understood their motives.

others, it is not completely fixed. There is always some room for negotiation and choice in how we perform our roles – even where very strict rules prevail, as in 'total institutions' such as prisons.

Activity	Media

Symbolic interactionism

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apply it to groups such as medical students, marijuana smokers and those suffering from paranoia.

For example, in relation to mental illness, we can see the individual as having a career running from 'pre-patient' with certain symptoms, through *labelling* by a psychiatrist, to hospital in-patient, to discharge. Each stage has its own status and problems. For example, on discharge the ex-patient may find it hard to reintegrate into society. And just as a 'normal' career may give us our status, so 'mental patient' may become our *master status* in the eyes of society.

Interactionism is generally regarded as a voluntaristic theory that emphasises free will and choice in how we act. However, labelling theory has been accused of determinism – of seeing our actions and identities as shaped by the way others label them.

Symbolic interactionism

Symbolic interactionism first developed at the University of Chicago in the first half of the 20th century. Like other action theories, it focuses on our ability to create the social world through our actions and interactions, and it sees these interactions as based on the *meanings* we give to situations. We convey these meanings through symbols, especially language.

G.H. Mead

The work of George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) forms the basis for that of many later interactionists.

Symbols versus instincts

Mead observed that, unlike animals, our behaviour is not shaped by fixed, pre-programmed instincts. Instead, we respond to the world by giving meanings to the things that are significant to us. In effect, we create and inhabit a world of meanings. We do this by attaching symbols to the world. A symbol is something that stands for or represents something else.

Unlike animals, therefore, we do not simply respond to a stimulus in an automatic, pre-determined way. Instead, an *interpretive phase* comes between the stimulus and our response to it – before we know how to respond to the stimulus, we have to interpret its meaning. Once we have done this, we can then choose an appropriate response.

Mead illustrates this with an example. When one dog snarls at another, the snarl acts as a direct stimulus, to which the second dog responds instinctively, automatically adopting a defensive posture. There is no conscious interpretation by the dog of the other's actions.

By contrast, if I shake my fist at you, I am using a *symbol* – one that has a variety of possible meanings. To understand what is going on, you must interpret the meaning of this symbol. For instance, am I angry, or just joking? You may decide I am angry with you. Only then will you be able to choose how to respond.

Taking the role of the other

But how do we manage to interpret other people's meanings? In Mead's view, we do so by *taking the role of the other* – putting ourselves in the place of the other person and seeing ourselves as they see us.

Our ability to take the role of the other develops through social interaction. We first do this as young children: through imitative play when we take on the role of *significant others* such as parents, and learn to see ourselves as they see us. Later, we come to see ourselves from the point of view of the wider community – the *generalised other.*

For Mead, to function as members of society, we need the ability to see ourselves as others see us. Through shared symbols, especially language, we become conscious of the ways of acting that others require of us.

Herbert Blumer

After Mead's death, Herbert Blumer (1900-87) did much to systematise his ideas. Blumer identified three key principles:

1 Our actions are based on the meanings we give to situations, events, people etc. Unlike animals, our actions are not based on automatic responses to stimuli.

2 These meanings arise from the interaction process. They are not fixed at the outset of the interaction, but are negotiable and changeable to some extent.

3 The meanings we give to situations are the result of the interpretive procedures we use – especially taking the role of the other.

Blumer's view of human conduct contrasts strongly with structural theories such as functionalism. Functionalists see the individual as a puppet, passively responding to the system's needs. Socialisation and social control ensure that individuals conform to society's norms and perform their roles in fixed and predictable ways.

By contrast, Blumer argues that although our action is *partly* predictable because we internalise the expectations of

Labelling theory

The best-known application of interactionist ideas is that of labelling theory. Labelling theorists use interactionist concepts in the study of many areas, including education, health, and crime and deviance. Here, we examine three key interactionist concepts that underpin labelling theory – the definition of the situation, the looking glass self, and career.

The definition of the situation A definition of something is of course a *label* for that thing. W.I. Thomas (1966) argued that if people define a situation as real, then it will have real consequences. That is, if we believe something to be true, then this belief will affect how we act, and this in turn may have consequences for those involved. For example, if a teacher labels a boy as 'troublesome' (whether or not he really is), the teacher will be likely to act differently towards him – for example, punishing him more harshly.

The looking glass self Charles Cooley (1922) uses this idea to describe how we develop our *self-concept* – our idea of who we are. He argues that our self-concept arises out of our ability to take the role of the other. In interactions, by taking the role of the other, we come to see ourselves as they see us. In other words, others act as a looking glass to us – we see our self mirrored in the way they respond to us. Through this process, a *self-fulfilling prophecy* occurs – we become what others see us as.

Labelling theorists use the definition of the situation and the looking glass self to understand the effects of labelling. For example, an individual may find that relatives or psychiatrists define him as mentally ill and respond to him differently, reflecting their view of him as sick or abnormal.

Through the looking glass self, the label becomes part of the individual's self-concept. He takes on the role of 'mental patient' and a self-fulfilling prophecy is created when he acts it out. Even if the initial definition of him was false, it has become true and may have real consequences. For example, he may find himself detained in a psychiatric hospital.

Career In normal usage, a career is the stages through which an individual progresses in their occupation, each with its own status, job title, problems etc. However, labelling theorists such as Howard S. Becker (1961; 1963) and Edwin Lemert (1962) have extended the concept to

Goffman's dramaturgical model

Labelling theory describes how the self is shaped through interaction. It often sees the individual as the passive victim of other people's labels. By contrast, the work of another interactionist, Erving Goffman (1963; 1967; 1968; 1969), describes how we actively construct our 'self' by manipulating other people's impressions of us.

Goffman's approach is often described as *dramaturgical* because he uses analogies with drama as a framework for analysing social interaction. We are all 'actors', acting out 'scripts', using 'props', resting 'backstage' between 'performances' we present to our 'audiences' and so on. Our aim is to carry off a convincing performance of the role we have adopted – just as the actor aims to persuade the audience that he is really Hamlet.

Impression management

Two key dramaturgical concepts are *the presentation of self and impression management*. For Goffman, we seek to present a particular image of ourselves to our audiences. To do so, we must control the impression our performance gives. This involves constantly studying our audience to see how they are responding, and monitoring and adjusting our performance to present a convincing image.

As social actors, we have many techniques for impression management. We may use language, tone of voice, gestures and facial expressions, as well as props and settings such as dress, make-up, equipment, furniture, décor and premises. By using these techniques skilfully, we can 'pass' for the kind of person we want our audience to believe we are.

Goffman uses the dramaturgical analogy to describe the different settings of interactions. As in the theatre, there is a 'front' or stage where we act out our roles, while backstage, we can step out of our role and 'be ourselves'. For example, the classroom is a front region where students must put on a convincing role-performance for the teacher,

while the common room is a back region where they can 'drop the act'. However, the common room may become another front region where students may have to carry off a different performance in front of their friends.

Application
How might you behave differently at home or with intimate friends compared with when you are in the student common room?

Roles

Goffman's view of roles differs sharply from that of functionalism. Functionalists see roles as tightly 'scripted' by society and they see us as fully internalising our scripts through socialisation. As a result, they become part of our identity and society determines exactly how we will perform them.

Goffman rejects this view. Instead, he argues, there is a 'gap' or *role distance* between our real self and our roles. Like the stage actor who is not really Hamlet, we are not really the roles we play. In Goffman's view, roles are only loosely scripted by society and we have a good deal of freedom in how we play them – for example, some teachers are strict, others easy-going.

The idea of role distance also suggests that we do not always believe in the roles we play and that our role performance may be cynical or calculating. In Goffman's studies, the actor sometimes resembles a confidence trickster, manipulating his audience into accepting an impression that conceals his true self and real motives. In the dramaturgical model, appearances are everything and actors seek to present themselves to their best advantage.

Activity **Media**

Goffman and the performed self

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Evaluation of symbolic interactionism

Interactionism largely avoids the determinism of structural theories such as functionalism. It recognises that people create society through their choices and meanings. However, interactionism is criticised on several counts.

Some argue that it is more a loose collection of descriptive concepts (such as labelling, and Goffman's dramaturgical concepts) than an explanatory theory.

It focuses on face-to-face interactions and ignores wider social structures such as class inequality, and it fails to explain the origin of labels. Similarly, it cannot explain the consistent patterns we observe in people's behaviour. Functionalists argue that these patterns are the result of norms dictating behaviour.

Larry Reynolds (1975) offers some interesting evidence to show that interactionism lacks an idea of structure. Reynolds sent a questionnaire to 124 interactionists, of whom 84 responded. When asked to identify the concepts they felt were essential, the most popular were 'role' (chosen by 38), 'self' (37) and 'interaction' (37). Only two chose 'power' or 'class' – concepts that structural sociologists see as crucial.

Not all action is meaningful – like Weber's category of traditional action, much is performed unconsciously or routinely and may have little meaning for actors. If so, interactionism lacks the means to explain it.

Goffman's dramaturgical analogy is useful but has its limitations. For example, in interactions everyone plays the part of both actor and audience, and interactions are often improvised and unrehearsed.

Ethnomethodologists argue that interactionism is correct in focusing on actors' meanings, but that it fails to explain how actors create meanings (see below).

In this view, we can only obtain knowledge about the world through our mental acts of categorising and giving meaning to our experiences. The world *as we know it* is, and can only be, a product of our mind.

Schutz's phenomenological sociology

Alfred Schutz (1899-1959) applies this idea to the social world. He argues that the categories and concepts we use are not unique to ourselves – rather, we share them with other members of society.

Typifications

Schutz calls these shared categories *typifications*. Typifications enable us to organise our experiences into a shared world of meaning.

In Schutz's view, the meaning of any given experience varies according to its social context. For example, raising your arm means one thing in class and quite another at an auction. The meaning is not given by the action in itself, but by its context. For this reason, meanings are potentially unclear and unstable – especially if others classify the action in a different way from oneself. Imagine what would happen if, at an auction, you behaved as if you were in class and raised your hand to ask a question.

Fortunately, however, typifications stabilise and clarify meanings by ensuring that we are all 'speaking the same language' – all agreeing on the meaning of things. This makes it possible for us to communicate and cooperate with one another and thus to achieve our goals. Without shared typifications, social order would become impossible. For example, if you see a certain object as a desk (for writing at), while I take it for an altar (for worshipping at), considerable problems might result.

However, in Schutz's view, members of society to a large extent do have a shared 'life world' – a stock of shared typifications or commonsense knowledge that we use to make sense of our experience. It includes shared assumptions about the way things are, what certain

situations mean, what other people's motivations are and so on. Schutz calls this 'recipe knowledge': like a recipe, we can follow it without thinking too much, and still get the desired results in everyday life. For example, we all 'know' that a red light means stop or danger and this knowledge enables us to drive safely.

This commonsense knowledge is not simply knowledge about the world – it is the world. As we saw, for Husserl the world as we know it can only be a product of our mind. Similarly, for Schutz the social world is a shared, inter-subjective world that can only exist when we share the same meanings. For example, a red traffic light only 'means' stop because we all agree that it does.

The natural attitude

However, society *appears* to us as a real, objective thing existing outside of us. To illustrate this, Schutz gives the example of posting a letter to a bookshop to order a book. In doing so, he says, we assume that some unknown and unseen individuals (postal workers, a bookshop owner) will perform a whole series of operations in a particular sequence – and that all this will result in our receiving the book.

The fact that we *do* get the book encourages us to adopt what he calls 'the natural attitude' – that is, it leads us to assume that the social world is a solid, natural thing out there. However, for Schutz, it simply shows that all those involved (the book buyer and seller, the postal workers) share the same meanings, and this allows us to cooperate and achieve goals.

However, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1971) argue that while Schutz is right to focus on shared commonsense knowledge, they reject his view that society is merely an inter-subjective reality. Although reality is socially constructed as Schutz believes, once it has been constructed, it takes on a life of its own and becomes an external reality that reacts back on us. For example, religious ideas may start off in our consciousness, but they become embodied in powerful structures such as churches, which then constrain us – for example, by influencing laws about our sexual relationships

Phenomenology

In philosophy, the term 'phenomenon' is used to describe things as they appear to our senses. Some philosophers argue that we can never have definite knowledge of what the world outside our minds is really like 'in itself' – all we can know is what our senses tell us about it. This is the starting point for the philosophy known as phenomenology, developed by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938).

Husserl's philosophy

Husserl argues that the world only makes sense because we impose meaning and order on it by constructing mental categories that we use to classify and 'file' information coming from our senses. For example, a category such as 'four-legged furniture for eating off' enables us to identify a particular set of sensory data as 'table'.

Ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodology (EM for short) emerged in America in the 1960s, mainly from the work of Harold Garfinkel (1967). Garfinkel's ideas stem from phenomenology. Like Schutz, Garfinkel rejects the very idea of society as a real objective structure 'out there'.

Like functionalists such as Parsons, Garfinkel is interested in how social order is achieved. However, he gives a very different answer from Parsons. Parsons argues that social

order is made possible by a shared value system into which we are socialised. Parsons' explanation is in keeping with h top-down, structural approach: shared norms ensure that we perform our roles in an orderly, predictable way that meets the expectations of others.

Garfinkel takes the opposite view – social order is created from the bottom up. Order and meaning are not achieved because people are 'puppets' whose strings are pulled by

Arizona, USA: female prisoners in a chain gang.

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

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In pairs, consider the following three scenarios in which an individual is caught apparently shoplifting:

a The shop takes the goods back and warns the individual not to do it again.
b The shop immediately calls the police. The individual is arrested, taken to the police station and given a caution.
c The shop immediately calls the police. The individual is arrested, charged, tried and convicted.

1 For each scenario, who would be aware of the crime?
2 For each scenario, what might be the impact on the individual?
3 What would be the impact of each scenario if the person was innocent?

Learning objectives

After studying this Topic, you should:
- Understand why interactionists regard crime and deviance, and official statistics on crime, suicide and mental illness, as socially constructed.
- Understand the labelling process and its consequences for those who are labelled.
- Be able to evaluate the strengths and limitations of labelling theory in explaining crime and deviance.