

## Crime and Deviance 2



## Theories of Crime and Deviance

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## Different theories of crime, deviance, social order and social control.

In Part 1 we examined a number of Structuralist explanations for crime and deviance, so, to redress the balance somewhat, Part 2 focuses on both Interactionist and Postmodern forms of explanation.

### Interactionist Perspectives: Observations

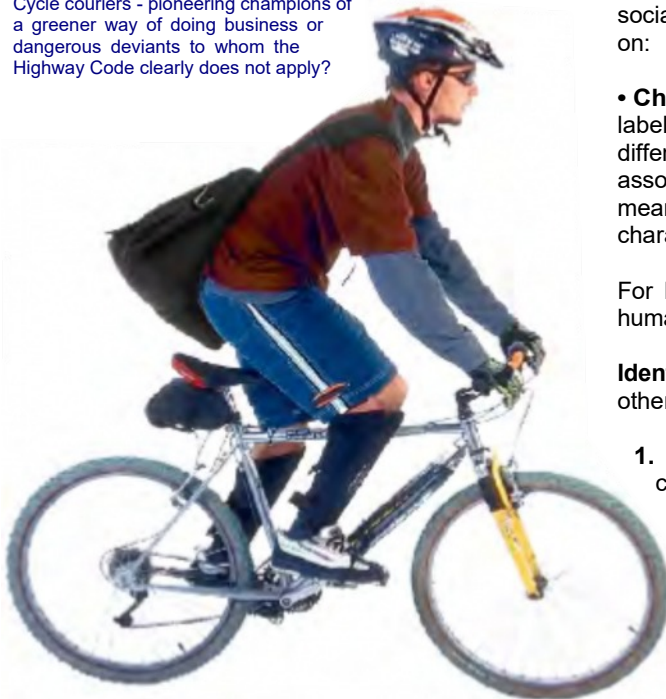
At the start of Part 1 of this text we made a distinction between **absolute** and **relative** concepts of deviance and, in so doing, left open the question of whether some people may be inherently deviant (predisposed, for whatever reason, to deviance). Interactionist sociology answers this question by arguing that deviance is:

**Socially constructed**, a concept that has two main dimensions:

**1. Deviance:** Every society makes rules governing deviant behaviour and applies them in different ways.

**2. Deviants:** If the same behaviour can be deviant in one context (or society) but non-deviant in another, it suggests, as **Becker** (1963) puts it, "...deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an "offender"

Cycle couriers - pioneering champions of a greener way of doing business or dangerous deviants to whom the Highway Code clearly does not apply?



From this position, therefore, deviance is 'behaviour that people so label', and although this relative concept of deviance is not unique (**Durkheim** (1895), for example, noted: 'What confers (criminal) character...is not some intrinsic quality of a given act but the definition which the collective conscience lends it'), a further dimension does confer this quality.

**Social reaction:** The quality of deviance is not found, to paraphrase **Becker**, in some kinds of behaviour and not others, just as it doesn't reside in different types of people (those supposedly 'predisposed to crime'). Rather, the essence of deviance is in the interaction process; only when people interact - to make and break rules, to name and shame (maybe) offenders - does deviance arise as a quality of how people react to what someone does. If people don't react to criminal behaviour - no one is pursued, processed or punished - the offender is, to all intents and purposes, law-abiding. 'Criminals', therefore, are different to 'non-criminals' only when they are publicly labelled as such by a control agency,

### Interactionist Perspectives: Explanations

#### Labelling Theory

'Labels' are names we give to phenomena ('football', for example) that identify what we're seeing. Labels, however, aren't *just* names - they have further, important, qualities:

- **Meanings** - what we understand something to be.
- **Interpretations** - how we are encouraged (through socialisation processes) to understand meanings based on:
- **Characteristics** attached to the label. Think of a label attached to a closed box. Inside the box are different (personal and social) characteristics associated with the label. If we understand the meaning of the label, we also understand the characteristics associated with the label.

For labelling theorists, the application of labels to human behaviour is significant because they impact on:

**Identity** (how we see ourselves and our relationship to others). Labels, here, have two main dimensions:

- 1. Social identities** relate to the general characteristics assigned to a label by a particular culture. Think about, for example, the different characteristics our society assigns to the label 'man' or 'woman' or "adult" and "child" (how each is supposed to behave, for example)
- 2. Personal identities** relate to the different ways individuals (with their different cultural



histories) interpret a label. For example, when I think about myself as 'a man' this label carries certain cultural characteristics, some of which I may include as part of my personal identity, others of which I may (perhaps) reject, something **Thomas** (1923) relates to '...the ability to make decisions from within instead of having them imposed from without'.

### Master Labels

These ideas are significant for labelling theories of deviance because they suggest two things:

**1. Cultural expectations:** When a deviant label is successfully applied to someone, their subsequent behaviour may be interpreted in the light of this label - depending, of course, on the nature of the deviance. If you are given the label 'murderer' or 'paedophile', this is likely to have more serious consequences than if you attract the label 'speeding motorist', an idea related to:

**Master labels.** **Becker** (1963) suggests these are such powerful labels that everything about a person is interpreted in the light of the label.

"Disability" is an example of a (non-criminal) deviant master label in our culture. Our behavioural expectations of "the disabled" tend to be defined in terms of this label,



**2. Individual behaviours:** The outcome of a labelling process is not certain. Just because someone tries to label you in some way doesn't necessarily mean they will be successful. You may, for example:

- **Reject** the label by demonstrating you do not deserve it.
- **Negate** the label by, for example, questioning their right (or ability) to impose it.

Interactionism questions the assumption that ideas such as 'crime' and 'deviance' are clear and unambiguous (many of us 'break the rules' but suffer no consequences for our offending because no one reacts to our behaviour). Instead, it stresses that any explanation of deviance must consider:

**Power and social control** in terms of the ability to make rules and apply them to people's behaviour, and

**ideology** in terms of decisions about what forms of behaviour (and why) are considered deviant, criminal, both or neither.

### Social Contexts

Labelling theory, therefore, switches the focus away from searching for the 'causes of crime' in people's social/psychological background, to understanding how 'deviant situations' are created. This involves understanding how behaviour is put into social contexts - both deviant/non-deviant - through a:

**Definition of a situation:** In terms of crime, **Thomas** (1923) argues that societies provide 'ready-made' definitions of situations that allow people to both 'understand what's going on' and, more significantly, know how to respond to this behaviour.

Interpretations within situations can, of course, be subtle - making behavioural distinctions between, for example, a private motorist running through a red traffic light and a fire engine doing the same. Both are 'deviant' (illegal), but the reaction to the latter is mitigated and transformed by knowledge of a 'higher moral purpose' (the law is being broken in order to save lives).

### Deviancy Amplification

An example of an Interactionist explanation for deviance is represented by the concept of a:

**Deviancy Amplification Spiral:** As originally formulated by **Wilkins** (1964), deviancy amplification (or a 'positive feedback loop') built on ideas developed by **Lemert** (1951) based on the distinction between two types of deviation:

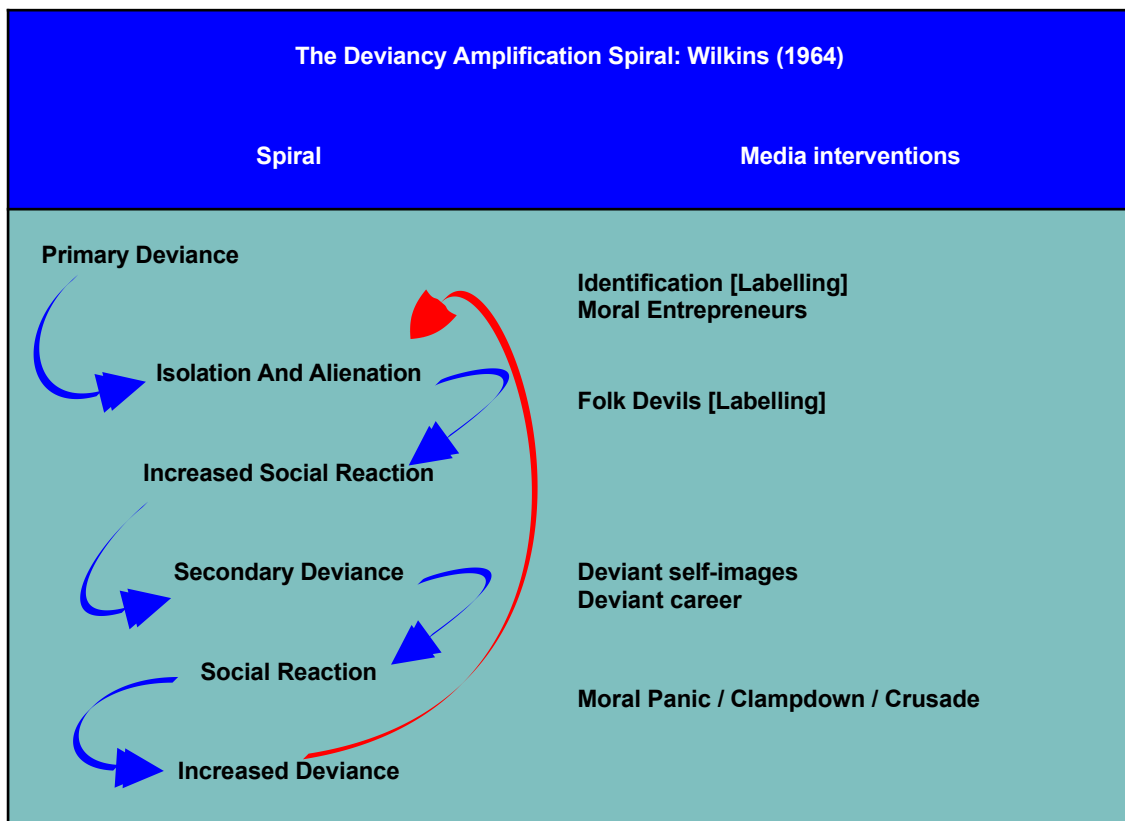
**Primary deviation** is deviant behaviour in its 'pure form'; it represents some form of rule breaking (real or imagined).

**Lemert**, however, argued that unless and until attention is drawn - and sanctions applied - to primary deviation, it has little or no impact on the 'psychological structure of the individual' (they may not, for example, see themselves as deviant).

**Secondary deviation** refers to how someone responds to being labelled as 'deviant'.

For **Lemert**, this involves the offender interpreting their behaviour in the light of the labelling process, where repeated deviance becomes 'a means of defence, attack or adaptation' to the problems created by being so labelled.

We can outline the amplification process diagrammatically (including some indication of the role of the mass media in this general process).



**Positive Feedback Loop**

The basic idea here is that deviancy

amplification represents a:

**Positive feedback loop** involving a number of ideas.

- **Primary deviance** is identified and condemned, which leads to the deviant group becoming:
- **Socially isolated** and resentful of the attention they're receiving. This behaviour leads, through a general labelling process, to an:
- **Increased social reaction** on the part of the media, politicians and formal control agencies (less toleration of deviant behaviour, for example).

This develops into:

- **Secondary deviation** if the deviant group recreates itself in the image portrayed by these agencies. Once this happens the:
- **Reaction from 'the authorities'** is likely to increase, leading to new laws (criminalisation of deviants) or increased police resources to deal with 'the problem'.

In other words, after the initial identification and condemnation of deviant behaviour, each group - deviant and control - feeds off the actions of the other to create a 'spiral of deviance' (or "positive feedback loop").

**The Role of the Media**

In complex modern societies where people rely, to some

extent, on the media for information about their world, its role in any amplification spiral can be crucial. We can identify the various points the media may intervene in the process in the following way.

**Identification** involves bringing primary deviance to the attention of a wider audience through:

**Moral entrepreneurs** - people who take it upon themselves to patrol society's 'moral standards'. They may be individuals (politicians, for example) or organisations (such as newspapers). Entrepreneurs add a moral dimension to primary deviance by reacting to and condemning behaviour, something that's part of a wider labelling process.

**Folk devils:** If entrepreneurial activity is successful (and there's no guarantee it will be), the media may create what **Cohen** (1972) calls folk devils - people who, in **Fowler's** (1991) words, are 'outside the pale of consensus' and can be:

- **Represented** - as threats to 'decent society', for example
- **Labelled** - as 'subversive', 'perverted' and the like
- **Scapegoated** (blamed for social problems).

The media have the opportunity and the power to represent groups in this way and may also have a significant role to play in:

**Deviant self-image.** This refers to how the deviant group, as part of secondary deviation, comes to define itself in reasonably coherent terms (they may, for example, accept the 'deviant label' as a form of resistance). A possible role for the media here is in areas like:

- **Publicising deviant behaviour** to a wider audience (some of whom may, ironically, decide they want to participate in the 'deviant subculture').

- **Labelling deviant groups** ('chavs', 'goths', 'predatory paedophiles') and suggesting they represent a coherent social grouping (rather than, perhaps, a disparate group of individuals).

**Moral panic: Cohen** (1972) suggests that this is a situation where a group is 'defined as a threat to societal values' and is presented in a 'stereotypical fashion by the mass media' as a prelude to the demand for 'something to be done' about their behaviour. Moral panics have attendant attributes of a:

**Moral crusade**, where 'the media' take up arms against a particular type of offender or deviant - paedophiles being an obvious example but other examples in recent times have included street begging, illegal immigrants and "ecstasy-fuelled raves" - and demand a:

**Moral clampdown** on the deviant and their behaviour.

These ideas and processes, **Miller and Reilly** (1994) argue, reflect ideological social control as a prelude to political action. In other words, a moral panic represents a way of 'softening up' public opinion so that people are prepared to accept repressive social controls (new laws, for example) as 'solutions to a particular problem'.

Finally, an idea that arises from the above discussion, and has implications for social policies designed to limit and control deviance, is a:

**Deviant career: Becker** (1963) argued that the successful application of a label frequently has the effect of 'confirming the individual' as deviant, both to themselves and others around them (teachers, employers and the like). This may block off participation in 'normal society' (a criminal, for example, may be unable to find work), which, in turn, means the deviant seeks out the company of similar deviants, resulting in increased involvement in deviant behaviour.

The public stigmatisation ('naming and shaming') of paedophiles in the UK media, for example, may illustrate this process; paedophiles are shunned by 'normal society' and so start to move in organised groups whose development, arguably, increases the likelihood of deviance.

Britain "Full-Up" Shocker!



**Evaluation**

Although deviancy amplification demonstrates how the behaviour of control agencies may have 'unintended consequences' in terms of creating a class of deviant behaviour (such as crime) out of a situation that was only a minor social problem, it's not without its problems or critics.

**Prediction:** Although the concept uses a range of constructionist ideas (labelling, for example), it was originally presented by Wilkins (1964) as a model for predicting the development of social behaviour. However, the general unpredictability of the amplification process - sometimes a spiral develops, but at other times it doesn't - means its strength is in descriptive analyses of behaviour 'after the event'. **Young's** (1971) classic analysis of drug takers is a case in point, as is **Critcher's** (2000) explanation for the development of moral panics surrounding 'rave culture' and its use of Ecstasy.



A homophobic Ugandan newspaper campaign designed to "name and shame" homosexuals...



**Moral panics:** McRobbie (1994) argues that this concept has become such common currency in our society that its meaning and use have changed in ways that reflect a certain 'knowingness' on the part of the media and, in some respects, well-organised political targets (such as environmentalist groups). In this respect, McRobbie suggests we should neither automatically assume 'the media', in every instance, is part of the overall control structure in society (slavishly following whatever moral line the political authorities would like people to believe), nor should we ignore the ability of some groups to use the media to defuse moral crusades.

McRobbie and Thornton (1995) also contend that the media have become so sophisticated in its understanding of how amplification and moral panics work that 'moral panics, once the unintended outcome of journalistic practice, seem to have become a goal'. Miller and Reilly (1994) also point out the problem of understanding how and why moral panics ever end.

**Power:** Although Interactionist sociology clearly sees power as a significant variable in the creation (and possible negation) of labels, there's no clear idea about where such power may originate. In addition, the power of the state to commit various forms of crime (against humanity, for example) doesn't fit easily into constructionist concepts of deviance.

### Postmodern Criminology: Observations

So far we've looked at 'classic constructionist' ways of seeing crime and deviance and we can bring these ideas up to date by focusing on some postmodern-influenced ideas about the nature of crime and control in contemporary societies. Given that postmodernism gives media analysis a central role, we can begin by exploring the concept of:

**Discourse:** The role of the media here is twofold. First, media are important because they propagate and, in some senses, control, organise, criticise, promote and demote (marginalise) a variety of competing narratives. Second, none of these is especially important in itself (teachers and students, for example, probably do most of these things); they become important, however, in the context of power and the ability to represent the interests of powerful voices in society.

In a situation where knowledge, as Sarup (1989) argues, is 'fragmented, partial and contingent' ('relative' or dependent on your particular viewpoint), and Milovanovic (1997) contends 'there are many truths and no over-encompassing Truth is possible', the role of the media assumes crucial significance in relation to perceptions of crime and deviance in contemporary societies. In this respect, media organisation takes two forms:

**1. Media discourses** (generalised characterisations such as crime as 'a social problem') and

**2. Media narratives** - particular 'supporting stories' that contribute to the overall construction of a 'deviance discourse' - instances, for example, where deviance is portrayed in terms of how it represents a 'social problem'.



Do crimes (real or imagined) committed by governments fit easily into the social constructionist explanations of deviance?

The main point here is not whether media discourses are 'true or false', nor whether they 'accurately or inaccurately' reflect the 'reality of crime'; rather, it's how media discourses affect our perception of these things. The difference is subtle but significant since it changes the way we understand and explain concepts like 'crime' and 'deviance'. Examples of media deviance discourses take a number of forms:



Some media discourses are less subtle than others...

**Domination discourses** involve the media mapping out its role as part of the overall 'locus of social control' in society. In other words, the 'media machine' is closely and tightly integrated into society's overall mechanisms of formal and informal social control. In this respect, the media are both a witting and unwitting mouthpiece for control expression, in both calling for new, tougher punishments and criticising 'soft on crime, soft on the causes of crime' approaches. This particular discourse weaves a variety of narratives that draw on both traditional forms of punishment (prisons, for example) and newer forms of technological surveillance (CCTV, biometric identity cards and the like) to create a discourse that locates 'criminals' and 'non-criminals' in different physical and moral universes.



**Democratic discourses** involve the media acting as a watchdog on the activities of the powerful - the ability to expose political and economic corruption, for example, or, as in the case of the Iraq war in 2003, to act as a focal point for oppositional ideas.

**Danger discourses:** However we view the role of the media, a range of narratives are woven into the general fabric of media presentation and representation of crime. In particular, two main themes are evident within this type of discourse:

**1. Fear:** Crime and deviance are represented in terms of threat - 'the criminal', for example, as a cultural icon of fear (both in personal terms and more general social terms). Part of this narrative involves:

- **Warnings** about behaviour, the extent of crime, its consequences and

- **Risk assessments**, in terms of the likelihood of becoming a victim of crime, for example.

**2. Fascination:** Crime and deviance represent 'media staples' used to sell newspapers, encourage us to watch TV programmes (factual and fictional), and so forth.

Danger discourses - a heady combination of Fear (warnings and risk) and Fascination (someone must want to read this rubbish...).



On a clear day they can see forever...



**Postmodern Criminology: Explanations**

**Postmodern Spectacle**

These two narratives (fear and fascination) come

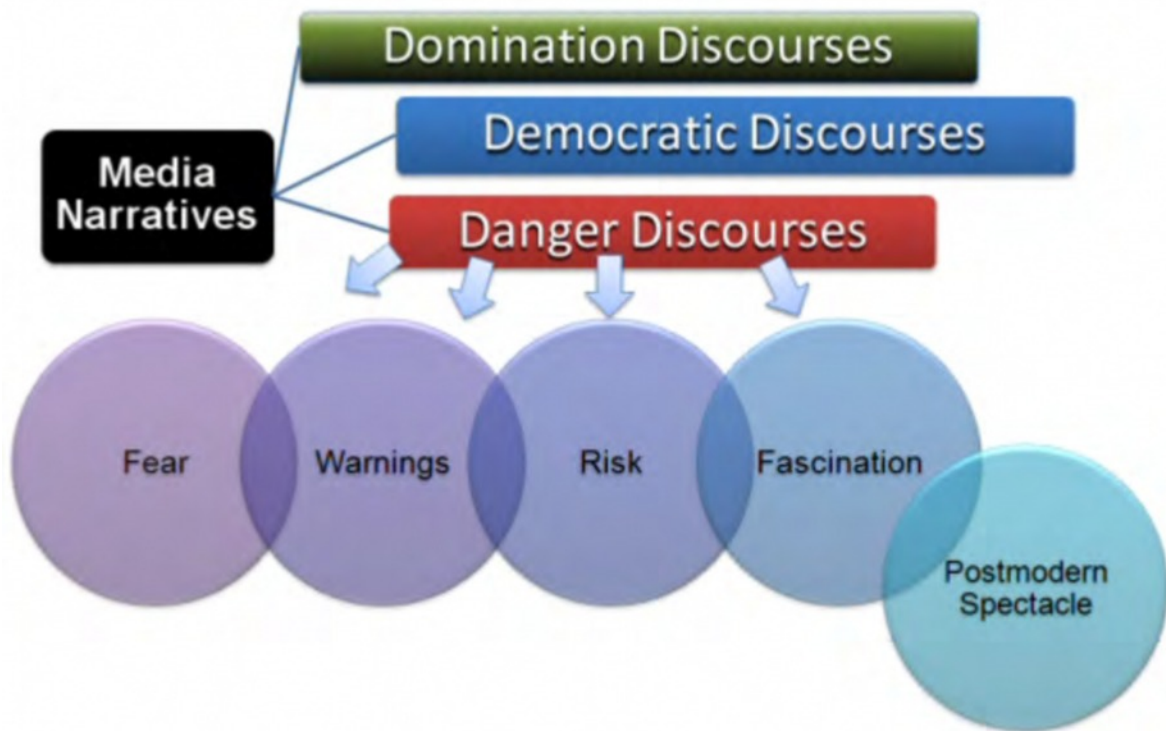
together when postmodernists such as **Kidd-Hewitt and Osborne** (1995) discuss deviance in terms of:

**Spectacle** - crime is interesting (and sells media products) because of the powerful combination of fear and fascination.

An example of 'postmodern spectacle' is the attack on the World Trade Center (sic) in 2001, not only because of the 'fear aspect', but also because of the way the attack seemed to key into - and mimic - a Hollywood disaster film. The attack demonstrated an acute understanding of both fear and fascination -by 'making real' that which had hitherto been merely 'make-believe' - that both repelled (in terms of the terrible loss of life) and fascinated (drawing the viewer into an appalling disaster-movie world of death and destruction).

Although this is an extreme example, the basic argument here is that 'spectacles' are an integral part of the 'crime and deviance' narrative in postmodern society, not just in terms of the 'reality of crime', but also crime as 'entertainment', whether this be the 'reality crime' version (reconstructions and real-life crime videos, for example) or the 'fantasy crime' version (television cop shows and the like).





For postmodernism, this is expressed in terms of:

**Intertextuality:** Both 'reality' and 'fiction' are interwoven to construct an almost seamless web of 'fear and fascination', where the viewer is no longer sure whether what they are seeing is real or reconstruction. **Kooistra and Mahoney** (1999) argue that tabloid journalism is now the dominant force in the representation of crime and deviance. Presentation techniques once the preserve of tabloid newspapers, for example, have been co-opted into the general mainstream of news production and presentation (where 'entertainment and sensationalism' are essential components for any news

organisation trying to break into particular economic markets or preserve and enhance market share in those markets).

#### Constitutive Criminology

We can outline an example of a postmodern

criminology in the shape of:

**Constitutive criminology:** The basic idea here is to adopt what **Henry and Milovanovic** (1999) call a holistic approach, involving a 'duality of blame' that moves the debate away from thinking about the 'causes of crime' and the 'obsession with a crime and punishment cycle', towards a 'different criminology' theorised around what **Muncie** (2000) terms:

**Social harm:** To understand crime we have to 'move beyond' notions centred around 'legalistic definitions'. We have to include a range of ideas (poverty, pollution, corporate corruption and the like) in any definition of harm and, more importantly, crime (which, as **Henry and Milovanovic** put it, involves 'the exercise of the power to deny others their own humanity').

#### Redefining Crime

In this respect, a constitutive criminology 'redefines crime as the harm resulting from investing energy in relations of power that involves pain, conflict and injury'. In other words, some people (criminals) invest a great deal of their time and effort in activities (crime) that harm others physically, psychologically, economically, and so forth. In this respect, **Henry and Milovanovic** characterise such people as:

**Excessive investors** in the power to harm others - and the way to diminish their excessive investment in such activities is to empower their victims. Thus, rather than seeing punishment in traditional terms (imprisonment, for example, that does little or nothing



The attack on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center (sic) on September 11th 2001 is an example of postmodern spectacle - people around the world were both appalled and fascinated as television cameras recorded the attack and its aftermath...

for the victim), we should see it in terms of:

**Redistributive justice**, something that **De Haan** (1990) suggests involves redefining 'punishment', away from hurting the offender (which perpetuates the 'cycle of harm'), to redressing the offence by 'compensating the victim'. This form of **peacemaking criminology** focuses on reconnecting offenders and their victims in ways that actively seek to redress the balance of harm.

**Evaluation**



If "punishment" is the answer postmodern criminology suggests we're asking the wrong kinds of questions about crime and criminality

Constitutive criminology moves the focus on to an assessment of 'harm' caused to the victims of crime and, by extension, the social relationship between offender and victim. It draws on a range of sociological ideas, both theoretical (holistic approaches to understanding deviance, for example) and practical (such as the concept of 'redress'), to argue for a less punitive approach to deviance and a more consensual approach to understanding the complex relationship between crime, deviance, social control and punishment. There are, however, a couple of points we need to consider here.

**Harm:** As **Henry and Milovanovic** (1999) define it, 'harm' results 'from any attempt to reduce or suppress another's position or potential standing through the use of power'. The danger here, however, is that it broadens the definition of crime and deviance in ways that redefine these concepts out of existence (which may, of

course, be the intention). Such a definition could, for example, apply equally to a teacher in the classroom or an employer in the workplace.

**Crime:** Extending the notion of crime to include, for example, 'linguistic hate crimes' (such as racism and sexism) may not cause too much of a problem; however it does raise questions about where such a definition should begin and end (it may, for example, have the unintended consequence of criminalising large areas of social behaviour that are not currently seen as criminal).

**Redress:** Without a radical rethink/overhaul of the way we see and deal with crime and deviance as a society, 'redistributive justice' may simply be incorporated into conventional forms of crime control. In this respect we

might characterise this type of criminology as:



**Idealistic**, in the sense that, rather than providing an alternative to conventional forms of 'crime and punishment', ideas about redistributive justice simply provide another link in the chain of social control.

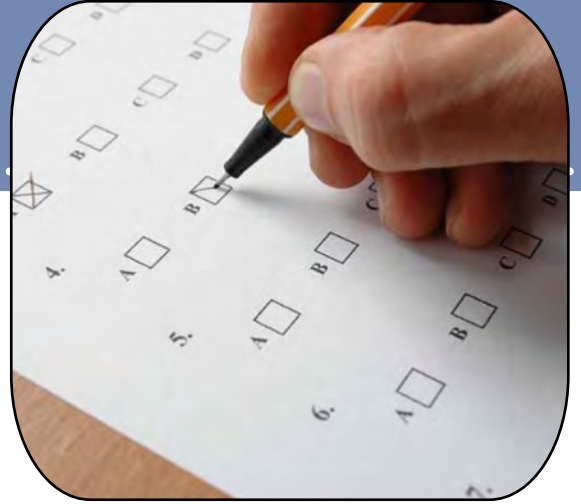
Does constitutive criminology potentially extend the meaning of "crime" into areas that are not currently seen as criminal or deviant?

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