Sociology Shortcuts

D4. Interactionism

Two basic ideas underpinning this general approach are that deviance is relative and socially constructed.

The same behaviour can be deviant in one context (or society) but non-deviant in another and Becker (1963) argues this means deviance is *not* a quality of what someone *does* but a quality of how others react to what they do.

In other words, if people ignore criminal behaviour - no one is pursued, processed or punished - the offender is, to all intents and purposes, law-abiding.

'Criminals', therefore, are only different to 'non criminals' when they are publicly labelled as such - and this means that to look for the "causes of crime" in the qualities, both psychological and / or sociological, of criminals is doomed to failure.

Labelling theory

Although labels are just names given to behaviour that identify what we're seeing, they have two important qualities:

1. When we apply a label to people's behaviour we also give it a meaning - what we understand something to be. Labels, in other words, are not *neutral* - they carry with them a set of social characteristics that define those so labelled.

For example, the label "criminal" publicly identifies someone as a "law-breaker" and it carries a range of:
▪ characteristics (shifty, dishonest, violent, troubled…) given to the deviant.
▪ meanings that shape how we see and treat deviants (as people not to be trusted, to be shunned - or embraced - etc.).

A significant feature of labelling, therefore, relates to how it shapes and impacts two aspects of people's identity:

1. Social identities that relate, in this context, to the *general characteristics* assigned to a label by a particular culture. In our society, for example, different characteristics are assigned to labels like "old" and "young" and these define appropriate behaviours for these age statuses.

2. Personal identities that relate, in this context, to the different ways individuals, with their different cultural histories, interpret a label. Not all "old people" interpret the label in the same way.

These ideas inform labelling theories of deviance because they suggest that when a deviant label is successfully applied to someone, their subsequent behaviour is interpreted in the light of this label - depending, of course, on the nature of the deviance.

Attracting the label 'murderer' or 'paedophile' has more-serious consequences than the label 'speeding motorist'.

This idea is related to what Becker (1963) calls master labels and statuses; these are so powerful that *everything* about a person - their past, present and future behaviour - is *reinterpreted* in the light of the label.

The outcome of a labelling process is not, however, pre-defined or certain. Just because someone *tries* to attach a label doesn't necessarily mean they will be successful. Labels can be successfully:

▪ Rejected - by someone demonstrating they do not deserve it.
▪ Deflected - by successfully arguing it should not be applied. Allegations of police corruption, for example, may be deflected by the argument that while a small minority may be corrupt, this label should not be applied to all police officers.
▪ Negated - by, for example, questioning the right (or ability) of someone to impose it.

The 11 most common micro-crimes
▪ Paid someone cash-in-hand so that it costs less, knowing they won't pay tax
▪ Illegally streamed TV shows, movies or music
▪ Illegally downloaded TV shows, movies or music
▪ Avoided paying for a fare on public transport
▪ Told someone your food order was to take away rather than eat-in because it costs less
▪ Lied about your own age/situation to get a cheaper deal on something
▪ Taken a plastic bag at a supermarket without paying for it
▪ Lied about your child's age to get a cheaper deal on something
▪ Refilled your drink without paying extra: 16% Eaten loose fruit/pic'n'mix at a store without paying for it
▪ Put a product through a self-service till for less than it should actually cost

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Interactionism questions the assumption ideas like 'crime' and 'deviance' are clear and unambiguous; most of us 'break the rules' but suffer no consequences for our offending because no one reacts to our behaviour. Interactionism stresses any explanation of deviance must consider two things:

1. Concepts of power and social control, in terms of the ability to make rules and apply them to people's behaviour.

2. Ideology, in terms of decisions about which behaviours are considered deviant, criminal, both or neither.

By *problemising* concepts of crime and deviance, Interactionism suggests no behaviour is *inherently deviant* and that its meaning is always based on how people see and interpret it within different social contexts.

The meaning of "killing someone", for example, can be interpreted in many different ways, from criminal (murder) through negligence (manslaughter) to heroism (killing the enemy in war time).

To understand crime, therefore, we need to understand how, why and under what conditions people react to some forms of behaviour but not others.

Evaluation
One problem with this change of focus is that it takes attention away from *why* people deviate. Some individuals and groups are more involved in criminal behaviour than others and this can't be easily explained in terms of social reactions.

While the consistently greater involvement of young working class males in criminal behaviour can be partly explained by control agencies targeting them, the consistency of data within and across societies suggests some other social processes at work.

Interactionism has been criticised for implying the *only* difference between criminals and non-criminals is that the former have been so labelled. This leads to the idea law-breakers, rather than being seen as aggressors, are somehow victims of a labelling process. While this idea might be sustainable in relation to *minor* forms of deviance it's more difficult to sustain in the case of armed robbers or corporate criminality.

While Interactionists refer to power as an important variable in understanding deviance, it is rarely, if ever, developed beyond the simple observation that some have greater power than others to attach labels.

Marxists, for example, have criticised this approach for its failure to explain how and why the working class are consistently the object of ruling class power; their behaviour is not only more likely to be criminalised but control agencies are also more-likely to enforce the law against the relatively powerless.