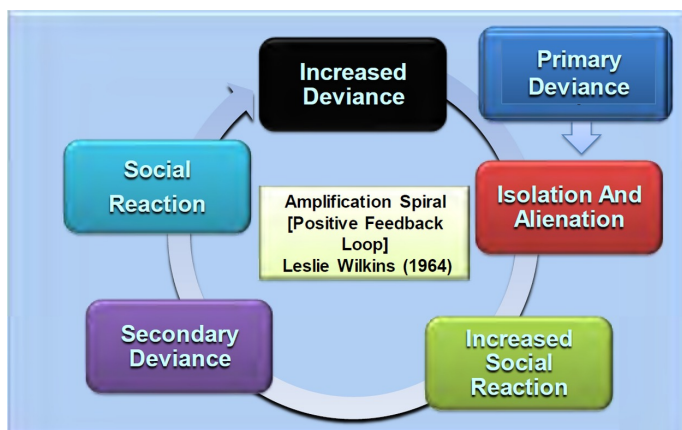


Sociology Shortcuts

D5. Deviancy Amplification



The **Deviancy Amplification Spiral**, originally formulated by **Wilkins** (1964), is a useful example of an Interactionist approach to deviance both in itself and because it involves a wide range of concepts used throughout Interactionist sociology. Built on ideas developed by **Lemert** (1951), it's based on two types of deviation:

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

However, 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, consider themselves deviant.

- **Secondary deviation** refers to how someone *responds* to being **labelled** as **deviant**. The offender interprets their behaviour in the light of the labelling process, where **repeated deviance** is “*a means of defence, attack or adaptation*” to the problems created by being so labelled.

Deviancy amplification involves a **positive feedback loop** based on the idea that behaviour that begins as relatively minor deviance is amplified into more-serious forms of criminal deviance by the *heavy-handed* intervention of control agencies such as the police and mass media.

Process

Primary deviance is identified and condemned. This leads to:

Social isolation and resentment on the part of the deviantly-labelled group. This leads to an:

Increased social reaction on the part of control agencies. This might involve things like less tolerance of deviant behaviour and develops into:

Secondary deviation: the labelled group come to see their deviance as increasingly central to their sense of individual and group identity and their deviant behaviour increases. This leads to:

Increased social reaction as **informal control agencies** such as the media demand action and **formal control agencies** such as the police respond to these demands. As more resources are committed to “fighting the deviant menace” more deviance is discovered and formal responses, such as the creation of new laws, lead to the **criminalisation** of deviants.

In this way each group - deviant and control - feeds off the actions of the other to create a “spiral of deviance”.



Click image to play video

The Role of the Media

The various points the media may contribute to the amplification process include:

Bringing primary deviance to the attention of a wider audience through the activities of **moral entrepreneurs** - individuals, such as politicians, and organisations, such as newspapers, who take it upon themselves to patrol society's "moral standards". Entrepreneurs add a *moral dimension* to primary deviance by reacting to and condemning behaviour, something that's part of a wider labelling process.

More-recently the growth of **social media** - and sites such as Twitter in particular - has meant moral entrepreneurs are increasingly likely to be individuals and groups acting through this medium.

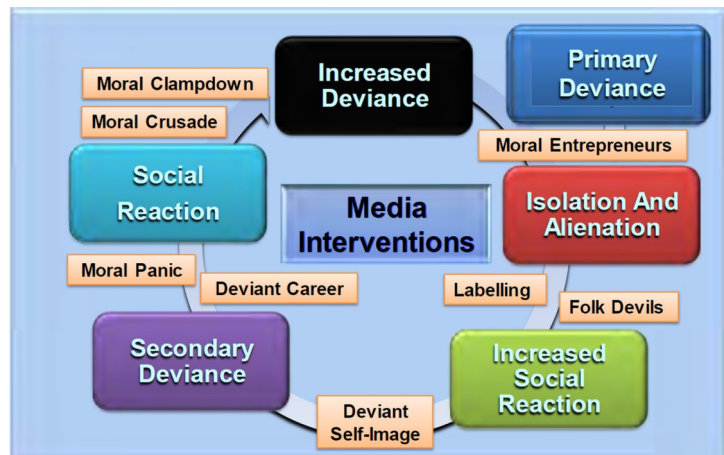
If entrepreneurial activity is successful (and there's no guarantee it will be), the media creates what **Cohen** (1972) calls **folk devils** - people who, in **Fowler's** (1991) words, are "*outside the pale of consensus*" and can be:

- **represented** - as threats to the moral order.
- **labelled** - as "subversive", for example.
- **scapegoated** - blamed for social problems.

These representations in both traditional and new media play a role in the creation of a **deviant self-image**: how a 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). Media play a role here in areas like:

- **Publicising** deviant behaviour and bringing it to a wider audience, some of whom may decide they want to be part of the "deviant subculture".
- **Labelling** deviant groups ("chavs", "terrorists", "predatory paedophiles") to suggest they represent a coherent social group (rather than, perhaps, a disparate group of individuals).

This may also involve the development of a **moral panic** - a situation, **Cohen** (1972) argues, 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.



This can take the form of a **moral crusade**, where 'the media' take up arms against a particular type of offender - paedophiles being an obvious example - and demand from the authorities 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.

Moral panics represent 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 and has implications for **social policies** designed to limit and control deviance, is that of a **deviant career**: **Becker** (1963) argued the successful application of a label frequently has the effect of '*confirming the individual*' as deviant, both to themselves and others (teachers, employers, etc.). This may block off participation in 'normal society' (a criminal, for example, may be unable to find legal 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.

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.

1. 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.

2. **McRobbie** (1994) argues the concept of a moral panic has been so **overused** by the media - to describe any kind of behaviour that seems to upset people - it has lost whatever sociological meaning it once had.

In addition, **McRobbie and Thornton** (1995) suggest some parts of the media have become so sophisticated in understanding how amplification and panics work that "*moral panics, once the unintended outcome of journalistic practice, seem to have become a goal*".

In other words, attempts are made to create them for their **shock value** rather than because there is an actual moral outrage fanning their generation.

3. **Miller and Reilly** (1994) point out the problem of understanding how and why moral panics ever end. 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.



4. **Waiton** (2010) argues contemporary societies generate a range of fears and associated panics that are of a different order to the classic "Mods and Rockers" moral panic originally described by **Cohen** (1972).

He argues moral panics are less likely to occur because societies no-longer have a strong central **moral core** shared by most of the population.

In its place we have "**competing moralities**" where a wide range of moral viewpoints are believed or tolerated and he suggests **amoral panic** is now a better description of media-fuelled panics - from the MMR jab "causing" autism to bird-flu - that generally *lack a clear moral dimension*.

KATIE HOPKINS

"Show me bodies floating in water, play violins and show me skinny people looking sad. I still don't care."

