

“A” Level Sociology

A Resource-Based Learning Approach

Deviance and Social Control

Unit M7: Interactionism (1)

Introduction

The second major sociological perspective, after Functionalism, at which we have to look is called "**Interactionism**". This perspective is normally considered to consist of three possible variations, namely:

Phenomenology.
Symbolic Interaction.
Ethnomethodology.

Somewhat confusingly, not all textbooks refer to this group of theoretical ideas as "Interactionism" - some refer to them as "phenomenological" theories or "Social Action" theories - but whatever the terminology used, it's evident that they refer to a quite specific way of looking at and explaining the social world - a way that is qualitatively different to both Functionalist perspectives (as we have seen) and Conflict perspectives.

In general, Interactionist perspectives tend to concentrate on relatively small-scale levels of **social interaction** (between individuals, small social groups and so forth) and, for this reason, they are sometimes referred-to as a "**micro** level of sociological analysis".

The **basic ideas** that Interactionist sociologists have in common (and which make them different in many respects to **macro** perspectives like Functionalism and Marxist Conflict theories) can be summarised as follows:

1. They focus on the way in which individuals (or "social actors" as Interactionists like to call them) **act** (that is, make conscious choices about their behaviour based upon the way they interpret situations) - rather than simply **react** to social stimulation.

As you will, no-doubt, recall, positivist sociology (and, in particular, the types of positivist theories we looked at earlier) adopts an opposite viewpoint, whereby people's behaviour is viewed in terms of the way "forces external to the individual" (whether this be "society" in the case of Functionalists, or biology / genes (in the case of non-sociological perspectives).

2. The way in which different social actors **interpret** the behaviour of others is significant as a means of **understanding** the way in which the world is **socially constructed**.

This "social construction" of the world is focused upon the **meanings** people give to behaviour and the way in which they **interpret the meaning** of behaviour.

A simple example here might be if we were standing at some traffic lights waiting to cross the road. If we see a car go through a red traffic signal we may **interpret** that behaviour as "wrong" (because it is dangerous) and / or "illegal" (because it breaks the law).

If, however, the car that races through a red light has a flashing blue light and a wailing siren we may **interpret** that behaviour as "understandable", given that we assume the police officers in the car have a very good reason for acting both dangerously and illegally.

As an aside, this example also illustrates something about the idea of "**meanings**" in Interactionist thought, since if you think about it there is no necessary **relationship** between a "**red light**" and the action "**stop**"; it's only because we

have been socialised to make an association between the two things that a red light actually means stop to us.

If you imagine, for example, someone from a society where cars do not exist, they would not associate red traffic lights with "stop" or "it's dangerous to cross the road when the light is green" because that **symbolic association** between the two things would not be a part of what Interactionists call their "**symbolic system of meaning**" or "**world view**".

The above ideas will, as you might expect, be significant when we look more specifically at crime and deviance since if **social behaviour** is **constructed** from **meanings** and **interpretations** about people's behaviour, the concept of "**crime**", for example, must also be one that is **socially constructed** (and this, if you think about it, will have important **implications** for the way in which we are able to both **think** about "what is crime" and "who are the criminals in our society").

Thinking about the above ideas, if concepts of "criminal behaviour" are socially constructed, what does this tell us about the possibility of explaining criminal behaviour in terms of the personal / social characteristics of people who break the law?

3. The **social context** within which people interact is significant for both their **interpretation** of the behaviour of others and the way they themselves **choose** to behave at any given time.

We can see the relationship between the social context in which interaction takes place and the ability of people to (theoretically at least) behave in any way imaginable by examining two concepts developed by the Symbolic Interactionist **George Herbert Mead** (see "Mind, self and Society", 1933).

Mead argued that while we are each conscious, thinking, individuals, the way in which we choose to behave is conditioned by the social context of that behaviour. In particular, Mead argued that our behaviour as individuals is conditioned by **two aspects** of our **self-awareness** (that is, the ability to "see ourselves" as others see us).

- a. The "**I**" aspect which largely consists of **spontaneous actions** and
- b. The "**Me**" aspect which consists of an awareness of how other people **expect** us to behave at any given moment and in any given situation.

The "**I**" and the "**Me**" are parallel parts of what Mead called "**The Self**" and it is the ability of human beings to develop a "**self-concept**" that, Mead argued, makes us different to the vast majority of animals.

If we look at an **example** of the "**I**" and the "**Me**" both of these points should become a little clearer.

If someone accidentally puts their hand into a fire, the "**I**" aspect of the self is expressed by such things as feeling pain, pulling your hand out of the flames quickly and so forth.

The "**Me**" aspect of the self, however, will condition how the person who has burnt their hand will react.

This reaction will be conditioned by such things as:

1. Who we are (social factors such as gender, age and so forth).
2. Where we are (at home, in public and so forth).
3. Who we are with (family, friends, people we don't know, alone and the like).

Thus, if you are a young child, your reaction to being burnt may be to cry.

If, on the other hand, you are a young man, you may feel that crying is not a socially-acceptable reaction - so you may swear very loudly instead.

Swearing loudly may be acceptable if you are at home by yourself - or with someone who accepts the fact you swear on occasions - but may not be acceptable if, for example, you are fixing someone's fire as part of your job.

Similarly, if you had been messing around with a group of friends when you burnt your hand, their reaction to your accident may be to laugh and make fun of your pain. Laughter would not be an appropriate reaction if it was your child that had burnt their hand...

As you may imagine, the list of **possible responses** to the act of "burning yourself" is many and varied and each will depend upon **who** you are and the **social context** in which the act takes place. This, interestingly enough, also tells us something about the way Interactionists view the possibility of our being able, as sociologists, to **predict** people's behaviour.

This, if you think about it, is going to be **extremely difficult** - if not **impossible** - because **behaviour** is **not**, according to Interactionists, a **simple response** to some form of **external stimulation**. In effect, people will react differently to the same social stimulation depending upon the circumstances in which the act takes place.

If we look at this in relation to crime and deviance, we can see that for Interactionists one of the **problems** we have, in trying to explain why people commit crimes, for example, is that they may not interpret their behaviour as criminal in the first place. If they don't see what they are doing as criminal (or, perhaps more importantly, other people do not interpret it as criminal), then how is it possible for us, as sociologists, to explain behaviour in terms of an individual's social characteristics?

This has implications for the way we can theorise both crime and the criminal, since for a crime to have taken place it is evident that someone has to react to someone's behaviour - and, as we shall see, this is not automatically the case.

Thinking about your own experience, have there been times when you have technically broken the law (for example, taking a pen from work, making a personal 'phone call on your employer's time or perhaps buying something cheaply that you suspect has been stolen) without anyone reacting to your behaviour as if you were a criminal?

If the answer is yes, what does this tell us about the way crime and criminality is socially constructed?

Interactionist Theories of Crime and Deviance

We can begin to look at Interactionist theories of crime and deviance by noting that they are fundamentally **critical** of the type of Functionalist / Ecological and (Functionalist) Sub-Cultural theories at which we have previously looked.

Such criticism stems from the observation that these types of "theories of crime" all assume that various **socially-produced categories** such as "Law", "Crime", "Criminal / Non-criminal", etc. are somehow clear and unambiguous.

By this I mean the idea that somehow we either "all agree" about what constitutes a crime or that we "all know" when someone is a criminal or non-criminal. In basic terms, we can express this idea in the simple formulation that a "criminal" is someone who "breaks the law".

While this may, on one level, be true enough (a criminal is, by definition, someone who has broken a legal rule), Interactionists argue that such a basic idea is not sufficient or sophisticated enough for sociological purposes.

Such "**common-sense**" definitions and prescriptions might suffice in everyday life; for the sociologist interested in explaining human behaviour, however, they are clearly **inadequate**, since it is evident that not everyone who breaks a law is considered to be a criminal (we may not, for example, know that someone has broken the law). Similarly, as I've already suggested, people may technically break the law without seeing themselves as anything other than a morally upright citizen

Think about the laws you've broken - do you consider yourself to be a criminal and if not, why not?

If you have broken a law and do not consider yourself to be a criminal think about:

a. Would you consider someone who has done exactly the same thing as a criminal?

b. What type of act would you consider to be "really criminal"?

In the previous theories at which we have looked, there appears to be a common thread of shared meaning that sees "criminals" as people who have both broken - and been subject to the due process of - the law. Such people are, as we have seen, considered to be "different" from the vast majority of "law-abiding" citizens and the task of this type of sociology, therefore, is to discover how such people are different - whether this difference is located in such things as:

- Their socialisation (**Merton**)
- Differential Association (**Sutherland**)
- Status frustration (**Cohen**)

or whatever.

According to Interactionists, theories of crime and deviance that simply accept the distinction between "criminals and non-criminals" as unproblematic (and then try to explain this difference in some way) are guilty of a **logical error**, namely the error of **assuming that deviance is a quality of what someone does...**

In **Interactionist** terms, we can express this as the idea that **deviance is not a quality of the act** (what someone does or doesn't do).

Methodologically, we can note that because various types of Positivist / Functionalist theory make the (unwarranted according to Interactionists) assumption that deviance is a quality of what someone does, they are led inexorably to theorise deviance in terms of the qualities that people do or do not possess...

To explore this idea further - and to begin to see how Interactionists theorise the nature of crime and deviance - we need to start to look at the way societies produce various forms of legal rules (and why they produce them) and, most importantly, at the way in which various formal and informal rules of behaviour are enforced.

If deviance is a quality of what someone does, how might a Functionalist sociologist explain the fact that while drinking alcohol is legal over a certain age in Britain but illegal in a country such as Saudi Arabia?

Are Criminals Different To Non-Criminals?

As we have seen, Interactionists begin by **questioning** the **assumption** that ideas such as "law" and "crime" are clear and **unambiguous**. Instead, they stress the idea that such social categories are, by definition, **socially produced** - and that they change over time (in the same society) and space (between different societies).

Necessarily, therefore, any theoretical explanation of crime and deviance must consider two major concepts:

- a. **Power** - in terms of the ability to make laws, apply them to people's behaviour and so forth.
- b. **Ideology** - in terms of decisions that have to be made by someone as to which types of human behaviour are to be criminalised and so forth.

In this sense, the concepts of power and ideology combine to define both the nature of law, crime and so forth and, by extension, criminality. Thus, although in one sense a criminal is someone who breaks the law, it does not follow logically that the only people who break laws are "criminals".

As **self-report studies** frequently show, while many people in our society break a variety of different laws, only a proportion of "potential criminals" are actually criminalised. In effect, people may extensively "break the law" without ever being arrested, charged and convicted of an offence.

Given the general extent of law-breaking in any society (Interactionists sometimes refer to the discrepancy between law-breaking and criminalization as the "**dark figure of crime**" representing a form of "**hidden deviance**"), it follows that one of the main questions asked by Interactionists is that of, "**Are deviants really different to non-deviants**".

More importantly, **how** can we tell if they are and **can** we maintain the (criminologically) convenient idea that there is a relatively easy distinction to be made between deviants and non-deviants / criminals and non-criminals?

The implication of the above is that if large numbers of apparently "law-abiding" people in our society routinely break the law (either accidentally or deliberately) - yet are not viewed as criminals (either by themselves or by others) this must tell us something significant about the process of criminalization.

What it should tell us, Interactionists argue, is that deviance is not a quality of what you do (your behaviour). As **Becker** ("Outsiders", 1963) puts it:

"Deviance is not a simple quality present in some kinds of behaviour and absent in others. [It] is not a quality that lies in the behaviour itself, but in the interaction between those who commit acts and those who respond to them".

Examples of this idea are not particularly difficult to find:

You can steal a book and be arrested, charged and eventually criminalised.

I, on the other hand, can steal a book and not be arrested, charged or criminalised.

What are the implications of the above for:

a. The methodological question of the identification of criminals?

b. Theories of crime and criminality that rest upon Official Statistics of crime?

Similarly, the **same** basic form of behaviour can be considered deviant in one context but perfectly normal in another. For example,

In **peace** time, killing someone may be seen as murder - everyone has a duty not to go around killing each other. Murdering someone is a crime and hence deviant.

In time of **war**, however, the reverse is true. To kill the enemy is considered a duty, whereas refusing to kill an enemy is seen as deviant.

The above involves the same basic form of behaviour (killing someone) - but the key point to understand is the idea of **differential perception** – and hence **interpretation** - of that behaviour.

In this respect, the social context within which behaviour takes place is significant insofar as it tells us how to interpret behaviour.

Not only does it tell us how to interpret behaviour, of course, it also tells us how to **act towards** that behaviour - and this, according to Interactionists, represents the **key** to understanding crime and deviance.

How Do Interactionists Study Deviance?

Having looked briefly at what, according to Interactionists, crime and deviance are **not**, it would be useful to examine how various Interactionist sociologists have argued that we should perceive and study these phenomena.

In the first place, deviance is seen fundamentally as a quality of how we, as individuals, identify and **interpret** the social context of people's behaviour.

This idea is normally expressed as a process of labelling (hence the idea of "**Labelling Theory**" - an area that we will examine in more detail in a moment).

Secondly, it must also be a quality of how we **react** to people's behaviour.

This idea is normally expressed as the "**social reaction**" to behaviour.

In **methodological** terms, according to Interactionist sociology:

1. All human behaviour has a social context.
2. The social context is defined by the participant's involvement in - and perception of - the situation in which they find themselves. This idea is frequently expressed as the individual having to ask him / herself: "What is going-on in this situation?" before they can decide how to adopt appropriate forms of behaviour for the situation.
3. If we put this in methodological terms, the "ideological frameworks" that people bring into any social situation will be used to:
 - a. Tell them what is going-on (that is, how to interpret behaviour).
 - b. Tell them how to react / respond appropriately.

An **example** here might be as follows:

If you drive through a red traffic light and are identified by a police officer, you are liable to be criminalised (that is, once you have been put through a legal process, you will be labelled as a criminal). In Interactionist terms, there happened to be a strong social reaction to your behaviour, principally because you were seen by a police officer - and it is their job to arrest people who break the law.

If, on the other hand, you had not been seen by anyone, then there clearly would have been no strong social reaction to your behaviour (mainly because no-one was there to see it). It is, of course, perfectly possible that you, as a law-abiding citizen, could decide that you have witnessed a criminal act and could then proceed to arrest yourself - possible, but not very likely...

However, if you had been driving a fire engine (rather than your 16-valve, triple-cam, turbo-charged Reliant Robin with the "go-faster" stripes) on your way to a fire when you were identified by a police officer going through a red light, the social context of your behaviour has changed - and hence the interpretation of that behaviour will also change. The police officer is likely to interpret your motive for breaking the law in a different way - one that rationalises your behaviour and hence involves no strong social reaction (on the contrary, the police officer might well congratulate you for driving so well in a potentially dangerous situation).

As **Bilton** et al ("Introductory Sociology") note:

"We need to ask why is it that behaviour in some contexts and engaged in by some people comes to be defined and processed as "criminal", while other behaviour and actors experienced no such labelling?".

David Matza: "Delinquency and Drift", 1964.

Matza's analysis of deviance (in particular **juvenile delinquency**) stems from a basic **rejection of Functionalist-derived sub-cultural theories**.

In this respect, he begins by arguing that **deviants do not necessarily reject the values of wider society**. On the contrary, according to Matza, deviants are **similar** to everyone else.

He supports this contention - deviants are not particularly "different" - by arguing that murderers, for example, frequently demonstrate what he argues is both a genuine sense of **remorse** and a recognition that they have "**done something wrong**".

In sociological terms, therefore, the significance of such evidence is that in order to recognise / acknowledge that you have "done something wrong" you must hold very **similar values** to the people who are condemning your behaviour.

In order to feel **shame, guilt** and so forth, you have to hold the kind of values shared by people in society as a whole - since if you didn't, you would feel that you had done nothing wrong for which to feel guilty.

Two points are useful to note here:

Firstly, in psychological terms, the condition where an individual does not feel guilt for his / her actions is called "**psychopathy**". A **psychopathic personality** cannot be held responsible for their wrong-doing because they suffer from a mental disorder that prevents them recognising the rights of others.

A major question here, of course, is the ability to prove, empirically, that such a "personality-type" actually exists - an important question that needs to be considered, but, in this context, we'll simply **assume** that psychopathy is a mental disorder.

Secondly, it is always possible that people who express remorse, guilt and so forth for their behaviour only **seem** to do so **after** they have been caught - it is, as Matza recognises, entirely possible that such expressions are simply part of a social process whereby the apprehended criminal expresses such things because they either feel it is expected of them or, of course, because they hope for more lenient treatment...

Assuming, for the sake of argument, that Matza's interpretation is correct, this has important ramifications for his theory, because it indicates that it may not be possible to easily differentiate between "criminals" and "non-criminals" on the basis of some form of **commitment** to a "**deviant sub-cultural value system**".

For Matza, the **solution** to the apparent **contradiction** noted above (doing something deviant and feeling remorse for having done it) is to be found in the idea of a "**dual value system**".

Conventional and Subterranean values

Matza argues that, as part of the general socialisation process in society, people are socialised into what he called:

"Conventional values":

These are the basic values that we try to live up to in our normal, everyday, life. In terms of deviance, perhaps, a conventional value might be that you do not murder people.

However, although we are mainly socialised into such values (through both our primary and secondary socialisation), we are also necessarily aware of what Matza called:

"Subterranean values":

These are values that **coexist** with conventional values, in the sense that we know they exist (we know, for example, that people murder other people and that murder is considered criminal).

This "co-existence" however is one in which subterranean values are normally buried "deep-down" in our personal value system - we know these things exist and are possible but, by and large, we do not give into them.

What are the implications of this idea of a "dual value system" for theories which depend upon a clear separation between "criminals" and "non-criminals"?

If we assume, therefore, that such a **dual value system** potentially exists, the next problem to solve is that, if subterranean values are normally kept "well-hidden", why do they "come to the surface" in some people's behaviour?

Matza argues that in **certain social contexts** people may "give-in" to their knowledge of subterranean values (for example, amongst a group of friends who are telling sexist jokes we may feel obliged to laugh along with the crowd even though, normally, we may feel that we are not sexist and we may feel uneasy or guilty about our behaviour).

For Matza, therefore, the major **distinguishing feature** of, for example, juvenile delinquents, is that they are **more-likely** to be people who give-in to the expression of subterranean values in "inappropriate" ways and social settings.

Thus, for **young males and females** their "normal" leisure lifestyle tends to put them into social contexts where **pressure** for the expression of subterranean values can be relatively **high**. For **example**:

Frequenting pubs and night-clubs in groups;
Competition between males in order to "impress" others;
Social behaviour that may involve large amounts of alcohol, soft drugs and so forth that may temporarily cause individuals to "lose control").

For **older males and females**, on the other hand, if they have a more-conventionally-settled lifestyle (a bit of DIY, the evening spent watching television and so forth) then the pressure to give-in to subterranean values may not be as great, simply because their social situation is different (or, of course, they may give-in to different subterranean values – beating your partner, for example - that can be more-easily hidden).

Having explained why people give-in to subterranean values, Matza has next to show that - having "given-in" - people have to **resolve the contradiction** between their conventional values and their deviant behaviour. In order to "square this moral circle", Matza argues that people are forced to try and **rationalise** (to themselves and to others) their lapse into subterranean values. To do this he argues that they employ "**techniques of neutralisation**" - that is, ideas which somehow serve to both justify and explain why the individual did something that was "out of character".

Techniques of Neutralisation

Matza notes a number of classic "techniques of neutralisation" and these include such things as:

1. Denial of Responsibility:

The idea that "something made me do it" (for example, "I was drunk...").

2. Denial of Victim:

Although, in itself, deviance is seen as wrong, the victim somehow deserved what happened (for example, "He kept taking the mick out of me in front of my friends all night long...so I hit him."). An ugly variant of this form of neutralisation sometimes occurs in cases of rape, whereby the act is "justified" by arguing that the victim "led me on".

3. Denial of Injury:

The victim is not seen as having been harmed (for example, stealing something from the workplace - "The company didn't miss it. They can afford it and anyway, everyone does it...").

4. Condemnation of the Condemnators:

Again, this involves a clear admission that the act was wrong but is neutralised by the idea that "everyone does it" ("I know I shouldn't drink and drive, but I thought a couple of pints on my way home wouldn't hurt"). This may also involve the actor neutralising their deviance by reference to luck, fate or whatever ("If I hadn't turned down that road I'd never have been caught...").

5. Appeal to Higher Loyalties:

This makes reference to some "higher" moral standard against which the deviant's behaviour should be judged. For example, "My mate was attacked. I couldn't just leave him to get beaten-up". This may also involve a form of "conspiratorial closeness" between the deviant and social control agents - the idea that deviant act was something that any "normal person" would have done in the circumstances (such as "helping a mate in trouble").

Having explained the idea of "**delinquency**", Matza then uses the concept of "**drift**" to explain the relationship between conventional and subterranean values. In so doing, he also explains why young people (and especially males) appear to go through periods of "trouble" in their late teens while, once they are older they no longer exhibit similar forms of behaviour.

Deviance is not seen by Matza to involve a commitment to "deviant values"; therefore, people tend to "drift" into and out of deviant behaviour. For young people especially, in our society, Matza sees this period in their lives as one of transition from the norms that govern childhood behaviour to the norms that govern adult behaviour. In this period of "normative confusion", the individual is perhaps "more-likely" to give-in to subterranean values at inappropriate times. Once the passage to full adulthood is made - and greater responsibilities are taken-on by the individual - Matza argues that the pull of subterranean values is loosened and conventional values start to exert a much stronger influence.

What implications does Matza's theory have for the way "juvenile delinquents" should be treated by control agencies such as the police and courts?

Suggest policing strategies that could be adopted to deal with "juvenile delinquents"

Could the strategies you have suggested be used effectively with non juvenile crimes (please explain why / why not)?

Evaluation

To evaluate Matza's ideas, it might be useful to firstly note a number of potential **problems** before, secondly, looking at the evidence of other studies of juvenile behaviour.

1. Firstly, Matza's theory seems to explain **some** forms of juvenile deviance, but how applicable is it to other forms of deviance? (You might like to think about whether it is intended to apply to crimes such as murder, fraud, rape and so forth where they are committed by adults).
2. Secondly, it is by no means certain that juveniles are actually **able** to drift into and out of deviance in this way. What happens, for example, when a juvenile is punished / stigmatised - is it possible to then simply re-enter "conventional society" on the same terms as prior to the stigmatisation?
3. Finally, Matza doesn't adequately explain why juvenile delinquency is primarily a male phenomenon - where does females figure in this picture?

Further Studies To Consider

Both **Peter Willmott** ("Adolescent Boys in East London") and **David Downes** in his similar study of East London adolescents provide evidence to suggest that Matza's concept of delinquency and drift may have some substance:

Willmott, by default, criticised sub-cultural theories because he found little evidence to support the idea that juvenile deviance was either planned or based around clear sub-cultural values. In this respect, Willmott argued that deviant behaviour by working class boys was both highly visible and more-likely to come to the attention of the police.

The police - by identifying this group, ideologically, as "trouble" - consequently target them for closer observation and, thereby, find evidence to confirm their perception of such people as "potential troublemakers".

Downes, similarly, found **no evidence** to support sub-cultural theories such as "**status deprivation**" (A. Cohen) and **little resentment at lack of employment opportunities** (Cloward and Ohlin).

What he did find, however, was that the lack of satisfaction through work led the youths in his study to stress "leisure values" which made them more disposed than their middle class peers to indulge in "fun" and "exiting" activities that led them into conflict with the law / police. Like Matza, Downes saw these forms of deviance as unplanned, relatively petty and involved no long-term commitment to "deviant values".

Matza's ideas, while forming a bridge between sub-cultural and Interactionist theories are, as has been noted, relatively **limited** in their explanatory scope (they basically focus upon the behaviour of young working class males).

What would be useful now, therefore, is to look at further developments in Interactionist theorising - and to do this we need to look at a particular form of theory - "**Labelling Theory**" - that has been the hallmark of Interactionist perspectives on crime and deviance for the past thirty years.

Labelling Theory

The main basis of labelling theories of crime and deviance is the idea that, in order to understand these social phenomena, we have, as sociologists, to take account not simply of what people do or do not do (behaviour) but also, more importantly, the **social context** of that behaviour.

In this respect, we are dealing with such questions as:

How behaviour is interpreted (and by whom)

Why it is interpreted in particular ways at different times.

Methodologically, since questions about "how" and "why" behaviour is interpreted inevitably involves **subjective judgements** (both on the part of the participants and sociologists who gather data through interpretive methods - such as overt / covert observation, unstructured interviews and so forth), this form of sociology is frequently referred to as "**subjective sociology**".

In terms of "theoretical explanations of deviance", labelling theory is significant because it **switches the focus of attention** away from trying to find "causes of crime" in people's behavioural background (**what you do**) onto the location of behaviour within a **subjective social context**, whereby the most significant variable involved is **how people react to what you do** or, in many instances, do not do (you may recall that we've come across this idea before, in relation to **Hagan's** attempt to operationalize the concept of deviance).

For labelling theorists, therefore, the "causes of crime" (if we can presume to talk about such ideas as "causality" in such a context - a methodologically-debatable point) are to be found not in the qualities possessed by "deviants and criminals" but, rather, in the **patterns of social interaction** that exist in any social group, institution or society.

In this respect, one argument here is that if crime and deviance can only be understood - as social behaviour - by our understanding of how people interpret behaviour (their subjective understanding and so forth), it appears a somewhat futile exercise to try and theorise / explain crime in "objective" terms. For example,

Although "**crime**" is an **objective social category**, insofar as we can measure it by reference to the existence of law (if you break the law then you are technically a criminal), the idea of "**criminality**" is rather-more of a **subjective category** - mainly because it is dependent upon the social reaction to the behaviour of the "law-breaker".

Explain, in your own words, the idea of criminality being a "subjective categorisation".

In effect, although people break laws all the time, only a certain proportion of all law-breakers are ever identified and labelled as criminals.

For Labelling theorists, therefore, understanding criminality involves a dual process, namely: **Behaviour** and the **Social Reaction** to that behaviour.

It is because of this subjective element of "social reaction" that, according to such theorists, it is not possible to understand the former without taking account of the latter - they are, in effect, two sides of the same coin. In order to understand crime and, more importantly, the process of criminalization, therefore, it is evident that we must look at such things as:

The law makers

Who makes laws and why are laws made?

The law-breakers

In particular, the social reaction to people's behaviour.

The law enforcers

That is, the role of the police, courts, etc. in the labelling process. In addition, the role of the mass media, moral entrepreneurs and so forth will be important in relation to both definitions of law breaking (social reaction) and law enforcement (this idea will be developed further when we look at Deviancy Amplification).

The Community (the "**general public**"):

Again, since the social reaction from the "general public" tends to be articulated through the mass media, the role of the latter in the labelling will need closer investigation.

Where Functionalists, for example, assume that laws - and the moral values upon which they are based - are somehow absolute (based upon fundamental, deeply-held values - or "mores"), Interactionists argue that all behaviour - and hence all systems of law - is morally relative:

What disgusts me, for example, might appear quite normal to you...

For labelling theorists, however, the central idea of "**moral relativism**" (while clearly important in a theoretical sense) is of less significance than the idea that I may be able to do something to you as a result of my disgust at your behaviour. In this respect, two ideas / concepts are important here:

1. Ideology:

If all behaviour is seen to be morally relative (that is, nothing is absolutely and forever right or wrong), it follows that, in order for me to define your behaviour as deviant, I have to impose upon you my conception of morality.

2. Power:

While it is all very well my being disgusted by your behaviour (defining it as deviant), in order for me to do something about your behaviour I have to possess the power that gives some substance to my disapproval - only if I possess power can I try to stop you behaving in a way that disgusts me.

Using a textbook, make a note of how the concepts of "ideology" and "power" are defined.

We can use an **example** to explore these two ideas as follows:

Let's imagine that you "borrow" my pen and refuse to return it.

This is behaviour of which I disapprove (ideology) and if I am powerless to react to this situation then all that effectively happens is that I lose a pen and you gain one. I know that you are a slimy, sneaky, thief (and so do you) but since I can do nothing to make the label stick to you, then effectively you are not a criminal / deviant.

However, although I may be personally powerless to stop you stealing my pen, it just so happens that the pen was given to me by my uncle who is a policeman. As you may imagine, he is very upset at my allegation of theft and he decides to go around to your house, whereupon he arrests you on suspicion of theft (it's nothing personal, you understand).

You are eventually charged, the case goes to court and you are convicted of theft. Unfortunately you couldn't afford to hire an expensive lawyer and are sentenced to three years imprisonment (my lawyer asked for "hard labour", but the judge took pity on you).

In prison, you spend your time associating with other criminals and, by-and-by, you pass the time learning all kinds of new crime techniques (**Terry Morris**, in case you're interested, has called prisons "Universities of Crime" because of the way in which they routinely involve a process of "criminal education").

Having paid your debt to society, you leave prison, but are unable to find a job because of the stigmatising "criminal" label that has been successfully attached to you (Interactionists call this particular form of labelling a "master label" because all of your behaviour is subsequently interpreted by others in the light of the label you have attracted). Alone, poverty-stricken and without a friend to call your own, you turn to the only thing you have left - your new-found crime skills.

Being a generally vindictive sort of person, you decide to burgle my house and steal my pen and - because you are now so good at your job - you leave no clues. I am powerless to act against you (because I don't know who burgled my house) and you retire to Brighton to live-off your ill-gotten gains. You have now, according to Interactionists, embarked upon a "deviant career".

A silly example perhaps (aren't they all?), but it demonstrates the crucial idea that power is a significant variable in the criminalization / labelling process. The power to:

- a. Define behaviour as deviant (did you really steal my pen or simply, as you claim, borrow it?).
- b. Apply labels such as "criminal".
- c. Make those labels stick. Even though you rejected the label of "criminal", I was able to do something to you that forced the label to stick (I got you sent to prison).

In order to examine the relationship between ideology, power and deviance more closely, we can look at a classic Interactionist model, namely that of the "**Deviancy Amplification System**". We can use this model (which was originally proposed by Leslie **Wilkins** in 1962) to illustrate a number of the processes involved in the criminalization process and, in particular, we can use it to look at the role played by the **mass media** as a powerful agency of social control.

This is discussed in greater detail in the next set of Teachers' Notes: "**Deviancy Amplification: An Interactionist Model**".