

Crime and deviance are the product of labelling processes essay sample

[Law](#), [Criminology](#)



When studying crime and deviance, in particular the causes of crime, it is often useful to look at the reasons behind why people commit crimes in the first place. For interactionists, crime and deviance is a product of labelling. They believe that when a crime is committed, it is because a public application of a negative description of a powerless individual has occurred and that is the reason why a crime has been committed by that individual. Labelling is deterministic of your future life. Interactionists reject official statistics on crime, seeing them as little more than a social construction. They maintain that they vastly underestimate the extent of crime and do not present an accurate picture of crime in society.

The interactionist Jock Young conducted a participant observation in London on marijuana usage by hippies. In the past hippie usage of marijuana was minor and relatively insignificant. Over time, the police started to see the hippies as dirty and scruffy, thus giving them a negative label. Due to this police reaction, the hippies united, feeling different from the rest of society. They then retreated into small closed groups, cut off from society and deviant norms and values developed. They were treated as outsiders and chose to accentuate and express their differences by becoming more and more unconventional. Thus, a deviant career developed. Interactionists would argue that because the police had labelled them so negatively they had caused more crime. Jock Young called this deviancy amplification. Before, the hippies had not been causing any trouble; they weren't hurting or bothering anyone, until the police labelled them. Once they had been given this label, they couldn't help but fulfil their master status.

Lemert supports Becker's ideas on the consequences of labelling. He maintains that primary deviance which has not been labelled has few consequences for the individual concerned. However, he claims that once deviance is labelled it becomes secondary and impacts on the individual, e.g. in terms of gaining a master status and later developing a self fulfilling prophecy.

Interactionists see various institutions as confirming the label of deviance, for example mental institutes. Erving Goffman looked at mental institutes and the treatment patients received whilst in there. Whilst studying these institutes he saw a series of interactions which had a negative effect on the patients and placed pressure on them. The effects were that they suffered degradation, humiliation, profanities of self and went through a mortification process where they were stripped of their identity. The patients were left without self concepts meaning that when they left these institutes they were unable to function in the outside world. This was because of their label.

There are two distinct approaches towards mental illness. One is the medical model view, in which people who exhibit signs of bizarre behaviour need to be treated by medical practitioners and are behaving in this way because of hormonal imbalances or previous disturbing experiences. Interactionists take the labelling model approach in that they say mental illness does not exist

According to the latest recidivism statistics, 50% of criminals reoffend.

Interactionists would argue that this is because they have been negatively labelled and as a result feel the need to reoffend, Once you have been given a label, they believe that this label sticks with you through your life and you

fulfil the prophecy that you have been given. Howard Becker said that once an act is labelled deviant, you are known as a criminal, this is your master status; you are known purely for your label, for example, a drug user will always be known in the area they live as a drug dealer. Self fulfilling occurs due to this master label and a deviant career develops. According to sociologist Roger Roots, due to the increasing computerization and accessibility of criminal records, a negative impact is occurring for recidivism rates as technology advances, more and more.

Prior to the computer revolution, persons with criminal records were often able to relocate and start their lives over with clean slates in new communities. Once they moved to a different area, the slate was wiped clean; they were treated as normal individuals and given all the chances that other people have. When you are known as a criminal, you are treated differently, you aren't given jobs or homes and people treat you differently, because of your label. If you are always seen as a criminal, and are not given any chances, the likelihood is that you are going to recommit crimes just to get by in life, thereby increasing recidivism rates. However, the rates of recidivism in the UK have gone down, this is due to a focus on rehabilitation and education of prisoners in the UK compared with the US focus on punishment, deterrence and keeping potentially dangerous individuals away from society.

Recently, in the news it was reported that Gordon Brown wants to "name and shame" youths with ASBO's. Currently youths see their ASBO's as "badges of honour." The plan is that every local authority will be told to

publish names and photographs of offenders online and elsewhere.

Interactionists would strongly oppose this, saying that once secondary deviation has occurred and crimes are publically acknowledged, things start to go downhill. Once people know you are a criminal, disintegrative shaming occurs, wherein you experience disapproval and are therefore more likely to continue committing crimes.

If re-integrative shaming was to happen, where the act committed rather than the actual criminal is labelled negatively, interactionists such as Braithwaite argue that less crime is likely to happen, because it is not the individual who is being disapproved of but it is their actions which are, and that is the issue that needs to be addressed. And is it fair to brand, in this way, a young tearaway, who may have, a year or so down the line, atoned for their misdeeds? In theory, such public castigation could affect their employability and other relationships for the rest of their lives. But Brown argues that people have a right to know what is happening in their area, and what to be aware of. He also says that the public have a right to receive information that they want on local individuals who have blighted their communities with anti-social behaviour. While ever people don't feel safe when they go out, he will not be satisfied and he believes that "naming and shaming" youths is the answer.

This leads onto the idea of rehabilitation being the solution to crime and recidivism. Interactionists believe that people who commit crime should be rehabilitated into society, and not labelled negatively, in order for crime rates to be reduced. Currently in the UK, there are bail hostels for prisoners

who have been released from prison and need reintegrating into society. Bail Hostels are a type of Open Prison, used as an alternative to full prison, and a resettlement aid for prisoners who are nearing the end of their sentences.

Interactionists would say that bail hostels are a positive step forward towards less crime. However, undercover BBC filming showed that criminals who had committed more serious offences, such as paedophilia, were housed in residential areas.

One could argue that this isn't safe. For example, the BBC report found a convicted paedophile and child-killer befriending children whilst at a bail hostel. Is the interactionists solution to crime always going to work? Are serious offenders capable of being trusted within these bail hostels? The controversial scheme to house bailed and tagged defendants and inmates in residential areas may be expanded; Justice Minister David Hanson has said that the scheme is a success because it has reduced prison numbers. But many residents who live near the bail homes - which are unsupervised and without formal planning approval - say they bring the risk of crime far too close to their homes. Is the interactionists solution always practical? Are there not other ways to reduce crime? Such as trying to stop people from being labelled in the first place?

As I have previously said, Braithwaite offered a solution of re-integrative shaming, in which an act rather than the deviant is labelled negatively and it is the act which needs to be addressed.

Due to the interactionists, the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act has been brought in. This means that a rehabilitation period is a set length of time from the date of conviction. After this period, with certain exceptions, an ex-offender is not normally obliged to mention their conviction when applying for a job or obtaining insurance, or when involved in criminal or civil proceedings. Interactionists believe that by avoiding giving people a negative concept or label crime can be reduced.

Ethnomethodologists support the interactionist view that deviance is based on subjective decision making, and hence a social construction. They argue that 'deviance is in the eye of the beholder'; what one person might see as deviant another might not. This can be illustrated with debates about modern art. Some see the work of contemporary artists as deviant, whereas others celebrate it as original and inspirational.

Marxists have criticised the interactionists. Whilst Marxists accept that labelling theory raises important questions, they argue that the theory has a weak view of power and social control. For example, the theory fails to explain why the nature and extent of crime and deviance is socially constructed. They also argue that interactionists fail to consider the wider structural origins of crime and deviance. This suggests that labelling theory only offers a partial view on crime and deviance. It is criticised for failing to explain the origins of labels, and why people are labelled what they are in the first place. However, Marxists would partially agree with the labelling in that they believe it is always the working class who get labelled, thus creating deviancy.

Whilst interactionists would point out crime and deviance as being the product of labelling, due to numerous things, others would argue that crime is a result of other things such as capitalism.