

# **Sociology Central Teaching Notes**

**Crime and Deviance  
3. Non-Sociological  
Theories**

# **Sociology Study Pack**

## **Aims**

**You will be taught to understand:**

- 1. Non-sociological theories of crime and deviance.**
- 2. The basic principles of sociological theories of crime and deviance.**

## **Objectives**

**To achieve these aims you will be taught to understand:**

- 1. The difference between:**

**Genetic,  
Biological and  
Psychological**

**theories of crime and deviance.**

- 2. Lombroso's theory of crime.**
- 3. Eysenck's theory of crime based around extrovert personalities.**
- 4. The concept of incorrect socialisation.**
- 5. Sociological criticisms of non-sociological theories of crime and deviance.**

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### Introduction

Thus far we've looked at:

1. Ideas concerning the way both concepts of crime and, in particular, deviance can be defined.
2. The various ways that we can begin to understand how conceptions of criminal / deviant behaviour are based on social processes (involving such ideas as social reaction, levels of social harm and so forth).
3. General background information about crime in Britain that focused on some basic patterns of **social distribution** (considered in terms of such concepts as **age**, **sex** and **class**).

These patterns were based on both Official Statistics and information from self-report studies such as the British Crime Survey (a government-sponsored bi-annual survey dating from 1981).

The next step, therefore, is to build on the above and start to look more closely at the nature of crime and deviance (how, for example, various sociologists have theorised the nature of crime)

There are a number of reasons for organising the workload in this way and it might be useful to briefly elaborate them before proceeding any further.

1. Part of the purpose of organising things in this way (apart, of course, from the fact that it is part of the A-Level syllabus), is to introduce you to the idea of a relationship between:

#### **Theories, Methods and Data**

in sociology (something that you will focus on in more detail when you study the "theory" part of the syllabus).

In simple terms, one way of expressing this relationship is to note the following:

- a. The definition of crime / deviance you use in your research will be affected by the **theoretical perspective** that you adopt, as a sociologist.

For example, Functionalist sociologists tend to theorise the nature of crime in a different way to Interactionist sociologists.

- b. In turn, your theoretical perspective may involve the adoption of particular methods of research, depending on the way in which you view their reliability / validity.

For example, Interactionist sociologists tend to adopt unobtrusive methods such as participant observation since they are more concerned than Structuralist sociologists with trying to understand the meanings people give to their behaviour.

- c. This, of course, will affect the type of data that you want / are able to collect.

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For example, while Marxists tend to focus on the various ways that a ruling class create laws that reflect their concerns and interests, Interactionists tend to focus on data that demonstrates the various ways individuals understand and interpret deviant behaviour.

2. The materials that we are about to use have been organised in a specific way in order to help you understand various theories of deviance. That is, they have been organised for our theoretical convenience rather than because each theory develops "naturally and logically" out of the theory that came before. Unfortunately, theoretical progression is not this simple, but it may help you to understand competing theories by presenting them in this logical order.

Thus, this series of Notes relating to theories of deviance has been organised in the following way:

- a. **Non-sociological theories.**
- b. **Functionalist-Type theories.**
- c. **Interactionist theories.**
- d. **Marxist Conflict theories.**

Each of these broad categories contains a number of specific "minor" perspectives (Marxist Conflict theory, for example, examines "Traditional / Orthodox" Marxist theories, Radical Criminology and New Left Realism).

For each major category, however, a general overview of the sociological perspective involved will be presented (in very broad terms), followed by an examination of various theories related to that perspective.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, each minor category ends with a brief resume of the perspective based around a number of important concepts / categories:

- Key sociologists.
- Key concepts.
- How the concept of **social order** is theorised.
- How the concept of **social control** is theorised.
- The assumptions made about **social conformity** to norms.
- The assumptions made about **non-conformity** to social norms.
- How the concept of **power** is theorised.

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### Non-Sociological Explanations of Crime and Deviance.

In this, necessarily brief, overview of a number of non-sociological theories concerning crime and deviance we will look specifically at two main areas:

1. Explicitly **psychological** theories
2. **Genetic / biological** theories (which, for all intents and purposes tend to be psychological in origin).

In this respect, we need to look at such theories because:

- a. They are explicitly **individualistic** (rather than social) in scope.
- b. They provide us with a comparative reference point against which to measure sociological theories in general.

As I've just noted, this is a brief overview of these forms of non-sociological theorising since such theories are many and varied. Since we have neither the time nor the need to look at them all in any detail, I've simply presented a selection of the various types of non-sociological theories of crime that exist.

### Biological Theories

Early **biological** theories tended towards seeing crime as a form of illness, caused by **pathological** factors specific to certain classes of individuals. **Pathology**, in this respect, relates to the idea that the criminal cannot help but commit crime. In this respect, the cause of law-breaking might, for example, be found in a chemical imbalance in the brain.

In this respect, we can perhaps summarise them in terms of the common-sense idea that some people are "born criminals".

A major version of such theorising is contained in the work of **Lombroso** ("L'Uomo Delinquente", 1876), where he argued that criminals were throwbacks to an earlier, more primitive, form of man. In support of this belief, Lombroso claimed to have identified a number of genetically-determined characteristics found in the "criminal classes" - such things as:

- Large jaws,
- High cheekbones,
- Large ears,
- Extra nipples, toes or fingers,
- An insensitivity to pain.

In this respect, such things were the outward manifestations of inborn criminal **predispositions**...

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A couple of problems that can be noted with this kind of approach involve the fact that:

1. Lombroso's **physiological** research was carried-out amongst inmates in Italian prisons. Essentially, therefore, he was studying, in the main, the very poor - people whose physical development had been affected by poverty, poor nutrition and so forth. In this respect, he was basing his theories on a group of people whose physical development had been severely affected by **social deprivations**...

2. Not everyone who breaks the law ends up in prison. This type of theorising neglects the idea that there is a "grey area" of criminality - people who commit crimes but who are not caught and therefore not imprisoned.

There are many reasons for this. Particular groups in any society may possess the **power** to either "hide" their deviance or - more probably - escape having their behaviour classified / **labelled** as deviant in the first place. In this respect, Lombroso's research was hopelessly biased...

⇒ **Briefly explain why Lombroso's prison research would have biased his conclusions about "criminals".**

In a more contemporary vein, Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck claimed to have discovered an apparent relationship between physical build and **delinquent behaviour** in males (The term delinquency is used, sociologically, to refer to deviant / criminal behaviour committed by juveniles). They argued that stocky, rounded, individuals (known as **mesomorphs**) tended to be more active and aggressive than people with other types of physical build.

Again, the main problem with this kind of theorising involves the question of identifying **delinquents**. In effect, it revolves around the question of how societies both define and interpret **delinquency** (and, by extension, deviance).

For example, the behaviour of middle class students "celebrating" the end of their final exams in a rowdy manner could well fall within a category of "delinquency", yet such behaviour is unlikely to be defined as delinquent. It may, instead, be rationalised as "high spirits" - a temporary, understandable, lapse into rule-breaking behaviour and so forth.

In addition, one explanation for the aggressive behaviour of mesomorphs may well be the fact that males with this type of build attract aggressive responses from other males...

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### Psychological / Genetic Theories

The above examples broadly outline the basic theoretical drift of biological theories of deviance. **Genetic** theories of deviance, on the other hand, tend to argue that there is a direct **causal** connection between such things as an individual's genetic make-up and predisposition's towards types of behaviour that are likely to be defined as deviant or criminal in any society.

Hans **Eysenck**, for example, has proposed that there is a connection between "**extrovert personalities**" and criminal behaviour.

According to Eysenck, **extroverts** are personality types who "act impulsively...crave excitement...take risks" and so forth.

Such genetic theorists do not necessarily claim that an individual's genes cause criminal behaviour, as such. Rather, they argue that such personality types are more **predisposed** to behave in ways that lay them open to criminal sanctions.

Thus, the extrovert personality could quite easily find ways of behaving that are quite socially-acceptable (such as in the business world, for example, where the extrovert entrepreneur may well be an admired figure).

Extrovert personalities, therefore, involve a **genetic imperative** (that is, a command that has to be obeyed) that forces people to behave in particular ways - "risk taking" by cutting corners, going after the things they desire in ways that may infringe moral and legal codes of conduct and so forth.

This idea of "not always playing by society's rules" may bring the extrovert into conflict with social norms / laws. Criminality, in this sense, is seen as a combination of genetically-determined personality type and socially-created definitions of crime and deviance.

A number of problems are apparent with the above:

1. In the first place, genetic explanations of human behaviour are simply **unproven hypotheses**, where the onus is on the theorist to demonstrate **empirically** (that is, using factual evidence) the nature of the relationship between genes and behaviour. While geneticists, for example, have been successful in the isolation of genes that govern such things as a person's physical characteristics:

Eye colour,  
Hair colour,  
Basic body structure and so forth,

no gene (or genetic combination) has been discovered that **directly** controls human behaviour. Where genes have been found to influence behaviour there is invariably some form of associated physical disability or abnormality present.

Whether this lack of **empirical** evidence means there is no relationship between genes and behaviour - or simply that genetic science is not sophisticated enough (as yet) to isolate this

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relationship - is a question that remains unanswered. However, the lack of **empirical verification** of Eysenck's hypothesis remains a serious weakness...

2. The idea of **personality** is one that many sociologists (in particular Interactionist writers such as Mead, Becker, Garfinkel and Berger) have questioned. In this respect, we can identify two basic problems with Eysenck's concept of personality:

a. The nature of human personality is by no-means clear. Is it, as Eysenck seems to suggest, basically one-dimensional - that people can be classified into basic either / or "personality types" (such as either **extrovert or introvert** and so forth)?

The question here, therefore, is the extent to which we can talk about individual personalities as if people only behaved in one particular way at all times, regardless of their social situation and any appreciation of the consequences of behaviour that over-steps the boundaries of permissible behaviour.

If you think about your behaviour, for example, it should be evident that it is changed and modified depending on such things as:

- The nature of the social situation in which you are behaving,
- The familiarity or otherwise of the people with whom you are interacting,
- Your perception of the norms operating in that social setting and so forth.

In addition, it's clear that people are able to modify their behaviour consciously to take account of such things as the appropriateness or otherwise of particular behavioural forms.

We will develop the above ideas in more detail when we look at the work of George Herbert Mead and his concept of self-development.

b. Secondly, this genetic view of personality implies that people who are genetically-predisposed towards behaviour that may bring them into conflict with legal / moral norms are somehow **socially abnormal** (deviant). In this respect, the deviant individual is seen as being **abnormal** in a society that is fundamentally **normal**. This, however, begs a number of questions:

Why are some extrovert personalities successful while others attract deviant labels?

Are criminals a minority in any society?

Are criminals fundamentally different to everyone else in some non-social way?

Can the distinction between people who are criminals and people who are non-criminals be usefully sustained?

In particular, of what significance is the fact that many people commit crimes for which they are never caught - what do / can we know about such people?

From the above, we can conclude that both psychological / genetic explanations of deviant behaviour share a number of basic assumptions:

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1. Both see the deviant as being somehow different from the majority of people in a given society. In effect, deviants are different in a way that can be directly traced back to the deviant. In this respect, such ideas tend to reflect the idea that definitions of crime and deviance are largely **unproblematic**. That is, they tend to assume that "everyone knows" what we mean by deviant behaviour. In this sense, such ideas tend to neglect the development of any realistic conception of the nature of legal and moral norms.

The social world - when its possible nature is even recognised - is seen as something static and largely unchanging. In simple terms, the concept of "society" tends to be seen as little more than a collection of relatively isolated individual personalities.

2. In tandem with the above, both forms of explanation treat the deviant as being **abnormal** in a normal society. In this respect, the majority of people are seen to be law-abiding and little attention is given to the idea that the distinction between deviant and non-deviant behaviour is highly **problematic**. For many sociologists the idea that people are not simply "criminal" or "non-criminal" in terms of their behaviour is not one that can be easily sustained.

This **methodological assumption** leads such theorists to try and account for apparent abnormality in terms of the individual and his / her personality, genetic make-up or whatever.

For geneticists, individual abnormality is rooted in genetic make-up - people are inherently predisposed towards obeying or disobeying social rules.

For psychologists such as Eysenck (basing their psychological theories on a particular conception of human genetics), explanations of abnormality reside in such things as the psychological mediation of social norms through individual experiences in society.

This leads to ideas such as **deviant socialisation** - the idea that we learn to be deviant - and incorrect or **faulty socialisation** through the family, mass media and so forth. In this respect, the deviant is seen as a victim of forces beyond his / her control and the motor of abnormality, here, is individual experience rather than individual genes.

3. Thirdly, both types of explanation use the idea of abnormality as a means of explaining deviant behaviour. The deviant personality is abnormal because the abnormal personality is deviant - a form of circular argument (a **tautology**) whereby the thing that is to be explained (deviant behaviour) becomes both the **cause** and the **effect** of the explanation.

Having outlined a number of aspects and criticisms of these kinds of non-sociological explanation, it might be useful to consider some of the **methodological** aspects and implications of the above (this links neatly with the "**Theory and Methods**" section of the course).

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### Methodology

While the above has concentrated on **individualistic** explanations of crime and criminality (and the many **assumptions** about both individuals and the social world therein), it is clear that important methodological problems are involved in these kinds of non-sociological explanations.

1. In the first place, both genetic and psychological explanations tend to allow - to a greater or lesser extent - the idea that the **social environment** within which a person lives plays a part in the creation of deviants.

For **geneticists**, this social aspect is allowed in relation to the roles played by particular personality types. For example, the personality traits that create the successful thief - cunning, the ability to deceive, the failure to recognise the rights of others and so forth - might also be applicable to the successful businessman or woman. The reasons why a particular personality type chooses to follow either a socially-acceptable or socially-unacceptable path are to be found in the social environment.

For **psychologists**, the social aspect is allowed in relation to the experiences of the individual (mainly in their early years). Frequently, reference is made to problems within the **socialisation** process. Something, somewhere or somehow has "gone wrong" in this process, so as to produce not a well-rounded, well-adapted, individual but, on the contrary, a **maladjusted** personality - one, moreover, that is predisposed not to recognise various rules and regulations that exist within a society.

Various psychologists, from **Freud** onwards, have identified childhood experiences as bring the key to our understanding of deviant behaviour. Usually, it is the mother whom takes the blame for producing maladjusted offspring...

John **Bowlby** ("44 Juvenile Thieves"), for example, has argued that the failure of the mother to satisfy her child's "basic human need" for emotional security can result in the production of a **psychopathic personality**. The psychopath is seen as an individual who acts without a sense of guilt or recognition of the rights of others. Psychopaths cannot be deterred from criminal behaviour because they have no sense of right and wrong - they merely follow their own sense of personal need.

A major problem with this kind of explanation is that it is methodologically naive:

Bowlby's study, for example, was **ethnocentric** in that it failed to examine different types of society on a comparative basis to see whether or not the idea that **maternal deprivation** resulted, in every instance, in the development of a psychopathic personality.

Basically, the argument here revolves around the status of the mother and her relationship to her offspring:

Bowlby argues that the relationship between mother and child is of central importance; deprived of a mother's affection and interest, the child develops an abnormal personality. Bowlby sees the main social role of the mother as being that of looking after and responding to the needs of her child.

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Feminist writers such as Ann **Oakley**, however, have suggested that such a view of women is a "male myth" - a projection of male fantasies about women onto the lives of women themselves that rationalises and excuses **male domination** and **female subordination** in terms of it being "natural" or "God-given".

Oakley's studies of non-western societies expose this **ethnocentric** dimension to the work not only of psychologists such as Bowlby, but also the work of (mainly Functionalist) sociologists such as Parsons and Merton.

For example, in Alor (an Indonesian island), Oakley found that the role of women was quite different to the type of role they are generally expected to play in Western, industrial, societies.

Women in Alor society had a significant role to play in the food-gathering process; they were not simply tied into the role of wife and mother. Their economic role necessitated long periods away from their home and children - and the child-rearing role was frequently given-over to men (brothers, fathers, grandparents and so forth). Oakley found no evidence to support the idea that this resulted in the creation of maladjusted individuals.

2. The degree to which the environment is supposed to influence behaviour is consciously downplayed in these types of non-sociological explanation - yet it is by no means clear how, methodologically, we can precisely measure the supposed degrees of influence either genes or environment have in the development of social behaviour.

How, for example, is it possible to isolate an individual from the influence of his / her environment? We are all born into a society that already exists; a society that has its particular **institutions, norms, values** and **beliefs**. How then can we separate individual behaviour (that is, psychological personality) from the multitude of social influences that surround us from the moment we are born?

3. A major methodological problem - one not simply restricted to genetic / psychological explanations but also applicable to some forms of sociological analysis - with these forms of explanation is the tendency to treat both conceptions of crime and criminality as largely **unproblematic**. That is, to assume that we all implicitly know what is meant by these ideas - that criminals are, by definition, law-breakers and non-criminals are, equally, non-law-breakers.

What we have to question is the assumption that just because people do not appear in Official Statistics relating to crime, for example, they have not / do not break the law.

The methodological roots of the above forms of explanation can be found in the way in which they have developed around two main areas:

- a. Firstly, that **empirical evidence** (mainly in the form of Official statistics) represents a factually-based bed-rock on which can be built explanations of crime and deviance.
- b. Secondly, that the task of theory is to simply provide explanations of this factual / empirical evidence.

Thus, in returning to the idea that these "facts" about crime are not seriously questioned or treated as problematic (part of a social process of construction whereby some groups of people

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are under-represented by such "facts"), such forms of analysis proceed on the basis that certain factual statements can be made concerning the nature of crime and criminality in any society and, from these "undisputed" facts we can construct a logically-consistent series of observations / theories concerning criminal behaviour.

⇒ **This idea relates specifically to the way in which theories can be constructed within Sociology. Can you identify any problems (based on the above) with the idea that the "task of sociological theory" is to explain the relationship between "known facts"?**

To answer this question, you need to focus on the questions of how "facts" are socially constructed and what happens to a theoretical explanation if such "facts" can be disputed.

There are two main (methodological) reasons for questioning this type of theory construction in relation to crime and deviance:

1. Firstly, as I have repeatedly noted, it tends to assume that "facts" are not socially constructed - that it doesn't really matter that our "objective" knowledge concerning crime derives from the (**subjective**) **assumptions** we make about the nature, extent and measurement of crime.
2. Secondly, it involves the rather peculiar methodological device of taking-for-granted that which requires explanation. Such theories, because they treat crime as unproblematic, construct explanations of criminal behaviour that seek to explain "observed facts" (for example, the observation that most crime in our society is committed by young, working class, males or the observation that women commit less crime than men).

The main point to note, here, is that in attempting to construct theories that "account for the facts" there is the danger that such explanations are not accounting for "real" social phenomena but are, on the contrary, simply providing explanations of a form of social reality that has been constructed from a partial understanding of the social process of crime production in our society.

In this respect, we need to consider the idea that **empirical knowledge** is not something that can be simply assumed - we have to look beyond this level of simple or common sense reality to look at the way in which empirical knowledge (such as Official Statistics about crime) may itself be the product of social process involving decisions about what constitutes crime, how people are criminalised, how people escape the criminalisation process and so forth.

In this respect, when considering theories of crime and deviance, the nature of observation and theory construction and so forth, we need to be aware that all knowledge about the social world can be questioned and that, as sociologists, we should be wary of not questioning the nature of the ways in which knowledge about crime and deviance, for example, is produced in our society.

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### Sociological Theory: Crime and Deviance

If, following **Paul Rock's** characterisation, we can loosely define a "theory" as:

**"A set of linked, explanatory or descriptive statements that are pitched at a fairly abstract and general level",**

it is evident that, in relation to crime and deviance, the sociological literature is littered with theories that claim to explain - either specifically or very generally - the nature and origins of criminal behaviour.

As I've noted, the intention, here, is to review some of the main theoretical explanations produced by sociologists working within a variety of different perspectives (over the past 150 years or so) in order to:

- a. Provide you with a theoretical background / context to the study of crime / deviance
- b. Provide a sense of historical development and continuity (in the sense that "theories" do not suddenly develop, fully-fledged, without reference to any work that has been developed before).

In the way in which various theoretical positions are elaborated here, a number of points should be noted:

1. A theoretical position is rarely explicitly stated by a sociologist
2. Theories are rarely "complete in themselves"

They may, for example, seek only to explain a particular form of deviance occurring in a specific time and place.

3. Sociologists tend to use bits and pieces of various theories in their work
4. The main purpose here is to demonstrate the basic principles of different perspectives, rather than to look at each theory in great detail.

It is important, therefore, to keep in mind the fact that much sociological theorising about crime and deviance is not well-formed and neatly-rounded (unlike in the **Natural Sciences**, for example, sociologists are - because their subject-matter has **self awareness** and **consciousness** - rarely afforded the luxury of high levels of precision and specialisation) In this respect, two things are particularly important:

1. A theoretical perspective rarely claims to be able to explain all forms of deviance. Few sociologists have either the time, inclination or resources to construct the kind of "grand, all-encompassing" theory of a Durkheim, Marx or Weber...
2. Sociological theorising should not be seen as some kind of "either / or" choice:

**Either** you totally accept everything about a theory,

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Or you totally reject it.

It is perhaps in the nature of sociological theorising that different theories explain some forms of deviance well and other forms badly. Sociologists are not, of course, above cannibalising the theories of other sociologists, dressing them up in shiny new concepts and presenting them as a radical departure from all that's gone before:

**Durkheim's** original theory of **anomie**, for example, was adopted, adapted and changed by Robert Merton (although both were working within a basically Functionalist perspective).

In turn, **Merton's** use of **anomie** to talk about the social disjunction between

"Socially desired ends and socially-produced barriers surrounding the means to achieving these ends"

has been adopted and adapted by writers working within the framework of the **Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS)** in the production of theories expounded in **Hall and Jefferson's "Resistance Through Rituals"** - an explicitly non-Functionalist attempt to understand various forms of youth deviance.

The irony here, of course, is that an explanation produced by an essentially conservative sociologist (Merton) reappears as part of a "radical" sociological perspective...

Two main points can be noted from the above:

1. While it is important to understand the (piecemeal) historical development of sociological theorising about crime and deviance, it is necessary to understand that its practical significance lies more in this being a convenient way of organising the literature than anything else.
2. Sociological theorising needs to be understood in relation to the **social context** in which it was produced (either the particular theoretical concern of the writer or the wider social context within which they were writing).

In this respect, for example, the general movement in sociological analysis has tended, for the moment, to focus specifically on practical problems of crime and deviance and much current theorising reflects this. For this reason, the final section in this set of notes looks at "Neo-conservative" theories ("New Right Realism"), primarily because, in terms of their affect on current social / criminological policy in Britain and America, they are currently dominant and deserve a wider critical evaluation.

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### **Summary**

1. Early biological theories tended towards seeing crime as a form of illness, caused by pathological factors specific to certain classes of individuals.
2. A major version of such theorising is contained in the work of Lombroso (“L’Uomo Delinquente”, 1876), where he argued that criminals were throwbacks to an earlier, more primitive, form of man.
3. Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck claimed to have discovered an apparent relationship between physical build and delinquent behaviour in males. They argued that stocky, rounded, individuals (known as mesomorphs) tended to be more active and aggressive than people with other types of physical build.
4. The psychologist Hans Eysenck has proposed that there is a connection between “extrovert personalities” and criminal behaviour.
5. A key concept in the above is that of deviant socialisation - the idea that we learn to be deviant - through the family, mass media and so forth. In this respect, the deviant is seen as a victim of forces beyond his / her control and the motor of abnormality, here, is individual experience rather than individual genes.
6. Various psychologists, from Freud onwards, have identified childhood experiences as bring the key to our understanding of deviant behaviour. Usually, it is the mother whom takes the blame for producing maladjusted offspring.
7. John Bowlby has argued that the failure of the mother to satisfy her child’s “basic human need” for emotional security can result in the production of a psychopathic personality.
8. Feminist writers such as Oakley have suggested that such a view of women is a “male myth” - a projection of male fantasies about women onto the lives of women themselves that rationalises and excuses male domination and female subordination in terms of it being “natural” or “God-given”.
9. A major methodological problem with genetic / biological / psychological explanations is the tendency to treat both conceptions of crime and criminality as largely unproblematic. That is, to assume that we all implicitly know what is meant by these ideas - that criminals are, by definition, lawbreakers and non-criminals are, equally, non-law-breakers.

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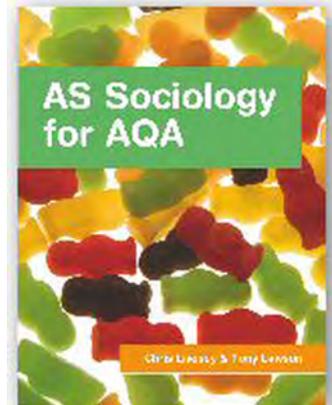
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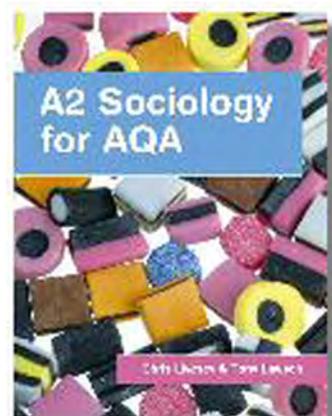
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