

# Interactionist View of Deviance

## INTERACTIONIST VIEW OF DEVIANCE: HOWARD BECKER ---DEFINING DEVIANCE

*Interactionist View of Deviance/22/3/2000/P.Covington/*

### Introduction:

Interactionists or anti-positivists as some writers call them, work with relative rather than absolute definitions of deviance. That is, they argue that there are **no behaviours** that are intrinsically deviant. Instead deviant actions are simply those, which are **defined as deviant** within a particular setting or culture. It follows from this that there can be no individuals who are intrinsically deviant either. Rather, the behaviour that people exhibit may sometimes be labelled deviant by others, but on other occasions it may be regarded as acceptable and even normal.

Interactionists therefore, are interested in the **social processes** by which particular behaviours come to be understood as deviant and the consequences of these for those who are labelled deviant.

### The Origins of Interactionist Theories of Deviance

While interactionists' explanations of deviance come to the fore in the 1960's and 1970's, their origins can be traced back to the arguments between philosophers in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> C. At that time, there existed some tension between the rationalist philosophers that gave rise to positivism and the idealist philosophers.



### Glossary:

**Master Status:** Describes how **once a label has been applied** to someone, all the actions that a person performs or have **performed in the past** are interpreted in the **light of the label**. We may stop talking of a 'dedicated sociology teacher' and merely refer to the person as a **thief**, etc



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## Basic Approach of Interactionism; why it is Different

The interactionist perspective **differs in two ways** compared to other approaches.

- ✓ Theoretically opposed, it **rejects** the positivistic notion of deviants simply reacting to external forces largely beyond their control.
- ✓ Instead of blaming deviants, and looking at their motivations, pressures and social forces it looks at **interaction between deviants** and those **who define them as deviant**. It particularly looks at how and why certain groups are defined as deviant and the effects of such a definition. I.e. the interaction between deviants, parents, teachers, doctors, police, judges, and probation officers is analysed.
- ✓ It emphasises the importance of the **meanings the various actors bring to and develop within the interaction situation**. Thus it examines the set pictures of the 'typical delinquent' held by the police, black, young, working class etc, and compares this with other groups who are seen as non delinquent i.e. middle class male.
- ✓ It recognises the **meanings are not fixed and clear-cut**. They are modified and developed in the interaction process. Thus, from an interactionist perspective the actors involved negotiate the definitions of deviance in the interaction situation.

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## HOWARD BECKER –

THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT FROM BECKER ARGUES....

Social groups create deviance by making the rules that infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people, and labelling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others to the rule and sanctions to an 'offender'. The deviant one is one to whom the label has successfully been applied; the deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label.

Becker is suggesting that in one sense there is no such thing as a deviant act. An act only becomes deviant when others perceive it to be deviant.

- ✓ He uses **nudity as an example**. Nudity is not seen as deviant in bedroom where man and wife sleep. However, if a third party enters it is. However, in **certain situations** such on a naturist holiday or nude beach, nudity would **not be considered deviant**. A male spectator who streaked might be seen as a 'bit of a lad', but if he exposed himself to the crowd he would be seen as a 'pervert'. **Thus there is nothing intrinsically normal or deviant about the act of nudity.** It only becomes deviant when others label it as such. Whether or not the label is applied will depend upon how the act is interpreted by the audience. This in turn will depend on who commits the act, and when and where it was committed. Becker illustrates his views with the example of a brawl involving young people. In a low-income neighbourhood, it may be defined by the police evidence of delinquency; in a wealthy area as evidence of high spirits. **The acts are the same**, but the meanings given to them by the audience differ. In the same way, those who commit the acts may view it in one way, but those who observe it may see it differently. In a low-income area it may be seen as defending their territory, but may be seen as deviant by power groups. Those who have the power to make the label stick have thus labelled them.



- ✓ Thus deviance is not a quality that lies in behaviour itself, but in the interaction between the **person who commits an act and those who respond to it.**

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## Exercise One

Who Dun It: Decide who you think done it. Give reasons for your suspicions.

**Case:** On the night of the 20<sup>th</sup> the office suite of the Matthews Industries was gutted by fire. Police and Firemen find that the outer door has been forced and no trace can be found of a petty cash box containing £500. The fire is an obvious case of arson since there is evidence that petrol has been splashed about in the office. No fingerprints are found except for those who work in and around the offices every day. Although an outsider may be responsible, the police are considering the following as suspects.

### Mr Matthews

The managing director and major shareholder of the firm. 50 years old with two teenage children. Known as a man of considerable respectability, he is also a Methodist lay preacher. Respected rather than liked by his staff, although he likes to think of the firm as 'being one happy family'. Financial accounts indicate that the company is on the brink of bankruptcy, and the order books are almost completely empty. The factory is one short time working and there is a loan of £20,000 to be repaid and renegotiated in the very near future. The insurance pay out for the fire-damaged block is likely to be in the region of £50,000. He also supports West Ham!



### John Spurge

The main manager, 55 years old, recently widowed. Until the death of his wife he was well liked by the staff, but is now considered morose and unpredictable, frequently taking offence at what others think to be only slight provocation. Rumour has it that he has been at cross-purposes with Mr Matthews for a number of weeks over plans to introduce a new system of stock control.

### Jenny Wright

A Secretary, of 48 years of age. Has been Mr Matthews's secretary for 20 years. It is 'well known' that she is 'sweet on' Mr Matthews and that he has always remained aloof from her. Single, lives with her mother, tells other people that 'life has passed her by' which they take to mean that to Mr Matthews. In the past she has always been willing to work late and to take homework at the weekends. Recently she has taken to leaving exactly on time, taking full lunch breaks and refusing to do any extras.



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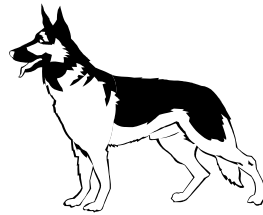
## James Hearn

19 year old, office boy and messenger. Makes the tea and fetches and carries for other staff. Considered being of low intelligence and owing his job to the fact that his father belongs to the same congregation as Mr Matthews. Is clumsy, forgetful, but quite popular with other staff. Is awaiting trial for burning down a bus shelter with a group of other youths. The defence plea is that the others led him astray.



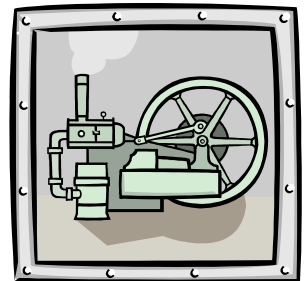
## John Hurry

37 Years of age, caretaker, lives in a flat on the factory site although some way from the office blocks. Has only been in the job for three months. Is thoroughly unpopular with everyone and seems to take delight in scaring the staff with his huge Alsatian dog. Was dismissed from job last week and is working out a months notice. The cause of his dismissal according to Mr Matthews – was his general unsuitability. Mr Matthews himself taking strong exception to Hurry's language and drinking and sexual habits. Police records show a number of prosecutions for petty offences, but no previous record for arson.



## Lee Brink and Tim Browne

Lee Brink, turner in the factory, 46 years of age, and Tim Browne, 42 years old capstan lathe turner. Owing to the financial situation, Matthews has just begun to lay off factory staff. Brink and Browne are both employees of long-standing and only staff as yet to be made redundant. Of the staff at Matthews, Brink and Browne are the only two who are union members, or who have in any way stood up to management over the past 5 years. Both are 'family men' and described by work mates to be 'quiet and respectable'. Police records show that Brink was a member of the Communist Party in his youth, and has attended political demonstrations recently.



## **POSSIBLE EFFECTS OF LABELLING**

I came on like I had turned on (smoking marijuana) many times before, you know. I didn't want to seem like a punk to this cat. See. Like I didn't know the first thing about it – how to smoke it or what was even going to happen or what.

I just watched him like a hawk – I didn't take my eyes off him for a second, because I wanted to do everything just like he did it. I watched how he held it how he smoked it, and everything. Then when he gave it to me, I just came on cool, as though I knew exactly what the score was. I held it like he did and took a poke just the way he did.

**Becker, 1963**

## **Exercise Two:**

Explain the social processes or the appropriate behavioural responses that Becker is exhibiting. Think of other similar processes that occur when, smoking a cigarette, drinking alcohol.

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## The Looking Glass Self: Our Identity is the result of how others see us

**Cooley** suggests that a good way to describe how we see ourselves **is the looking glass self**. By this, he meant that we build **our identity primarily as a result of how others act and respond towards us**. If people comment on how ugly I am, what a large nose I have and how spotty my skin is. I am likely to see myself like this. This view of myself is likely to influence how I act towards other people. For example, I will probably lack confidence in my dealings with the opposite sex and may revert to solitary practices as a result!



Becker notes that....

- † **Label defines an individual as a particular kind of person.** It is not neutral. It is a master status to the extent that it overrides all other statuses confirmed on the individual. If individuals are labelled as criminal, mentally ill or homosexual such labels largely **over rides** their status as parent, worker, neighbour and friend. Others see them and respond to them in terms of the label and tend to assume that they have the negative characteristics normally associated with such labels.
- † Since individuals' **self concepts are largely derived from the responses of others**, they will tend to see **themselves in terms of the label**. This may produce a self fulfilling prophecy., whereby the 'deviant identification becomes the controlling one'.
- † Becker outlines a number of stages in this process.

### Exercise Three

Produce statements to put onto an interactionist whiteboard.

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## BECKER'S STAGES IN THE ABOVE PROCESS

Becker suggested that the process by which people take on an identity given to them by others could be regarded as a '**career**'. We normally use the term career when we are talking about employment, and it means the gradual climb up the ladder to reach a point where one can finally say 'I have made it'. At this stage of the person may have achieved their aim in life.

Becker suggested that this process **is going on all the time** in the area of **deviance**, as people gradually attain status of being anything from a drug addict to a child abuser.

Clearly the career cannot progress without other people labelling a person and then responding to them in such a way that eventually they accept that this is their identity or master status. They then begin to act in a manner, which reflects this perception of them. In turn the final acceptance of the label and adjustment of behaviour will either confirm to others that they were right all along



1. Initially the individual is **publicly labelled as deviant**. This may **lead to a rejection from many social groups**. Regarded as a Junkie, a 'queer' a 'nutter' a 'wino' or a 'tearaway' he or she may be rejected by family and friends, lose his or her job and be forced out of the neighbourhood.
2. This **may encourage further deviance**. For example, drug addicts may turn to crime to support their habit since 'respectable employers' refuse to give them a job.
3. The **official treatment** of deviance **may have similar effects**. Ex cons may have difficulty in finding employment and be forced to return to crime for their livelihood. Becker argues that the treatment of deviants denies them ordinary means of carrying on the routines of everyday life, open to most people. Because of this denial, the deviant must of necessity develop illegitimate routines.
4. The deviant career is **completed when individuals join an organised group**. In this context they confirm and **accept their deviant identity**. Others surround them in a similar situation that provides them with **support and understanding**.

Within the group a **deviant sub-culture develops**. The subculture often includes beliefs and values, which **rationalise justify and support deviant identities and activities**. For example, Becker states that organised male homosexual groups provide the individual with a rationale for deviance. Explaining to him why he is the way he is, that other people have also been that way, and why it is all right for him to be that way. The subculture also provides ways of avoiding trouble with conventional society. The young thief, socialised into a criminal subculture, can learn various ways of avoiding arrest from older and more experienced group members. Becker argues that that once individuals join an organisation deviant group, they are more likely than before to see himself or herself as deviant and to act in terms of this self-concept. In this context the deviant identification tends to become the controlling one.

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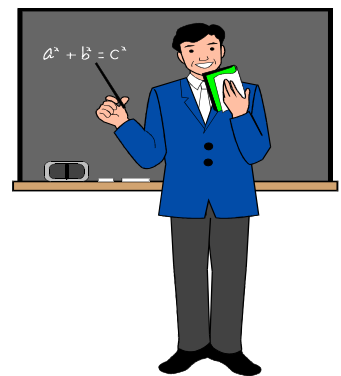
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## Exercise Four

In each of the cases below

- † **Identify a label**, which may be attached to the person as a result of their deviant behaviour.
- † **Outline how a deviant career may develop** by describing the possible consequences of the labelling for the person's future life and relationships.
- † Suggest ways in which that person **might avoid being labelled** even after they have committed the deviant act.

1. A young woman who is caught shoplifting in Fiveways.
2. A male teacher who publicly declares himself to be gay.
3. A person who is temporarily admitted to a mental hospital as a result of a nervous breakdown.
4. An 18-year-old man who gets arrested during a fight at a football match.



## Exercise Five

Consider a young person breaking a window. Give as many interpretations of this act as you can think of. Think in particular of ways in which the act is not deviant.

### Resources Used in this Handout

Sociology Themes and Perspectives: Michael Haralambos

An Introduction to Sociology: Ken Brown

Sociology an Interactive Approach: Nik Jorgensen

The Handbook For Sociology Teachers: Edited by Pat McNeill

Investigating Crime and Deviance: Stephen Moore, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition

Sociology A Modular Approach: Denis Gleeson

*Deviance*: Peter Aggleton, Society Now Series of Books.



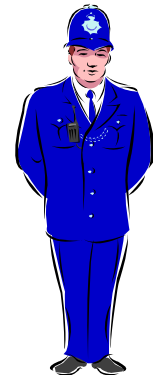
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## EXERCISE SIX

The following extract is from a *Police Training Manual* by **David Powis**, Deputy Assistant Commissioner to the Metropolitan Police. What does it show about the way police stereotype people as potential offenders and therefore label them as suspicious.

### The following indices of suspiciousness emerge:

- † Young people generally, but especially in cars (and even more so if in groups in cars)!!!
- † People in badly maintained cars, especially are they have tatty, dog-eared licence.
- † People of untidy, dirty appearance – especially those with dirty shoes (even manual workers, if honest, he says, are clean and tidy)
- † People who are unduly nervous, confident or servile in police presence (unless they are doctors, who are usually naturally confident)
- † People whose appearance is anomalous in some way – e.g. their clothes are not as smart as their car.
- † People in unusual family circumstances
- † Political radicals and intellectuals, especially if they spout extremist babble, and are in possession of a 'your rights' card (as supplied by NCCL) these people are also particularly likely to make unjust accusations against the police.



### NORMAL PEOPLE

- † Normal unsuspecting people are those outside the above categories, especially if they are of smart conventional appearance (which commands natural authority and respect) and even more so if they smoke a pipe!!!!!!
- † These points add up to a fairly clear-cut picture: respectable, unsuspecting people conform to extremely conventional middle-aged, middle-class/respectable working class modes of appearance, lifestyle and political belief. Anything else is suspicious, and the further it deviates from that model, the more suspicious it becomes.

### SOURCE:

**Taken from: The signs of crime: a field manual for police, David Powis, 1977**

1. According to the extract how would the police stereotype you, friends, or parents.
2. Would the label be justified, and could it affect the behaviour of those labelled.