Evaluation Of Interactionist Explanations Of Crime And Deviance

Symbolic Interactionism focuses much more on labels attached after someone commits a crime rather than the crime itself. This theory suggests that most people commit deviant acts, but only some of these people are caught and stigmatised because of it. Because of this, the theory believes that instead of trying to search for the differences between deviants and non-deviants, we should instead focus upon understanding the reaction to deviance, and definition of deviance, rather than on the causes of the initial act.

One interactionist explanation of crime is from Becker. H who came up with the idea of a ‘master status’. This is the idea that once a label is successfully applied to a person, then all other qualities become unimportant. This explanation of crime shows how peoples reactions to crime are often more important than the crime itself. One good example of this is an anthropological study by Malinowski in 1982. This was a study of traditional culture on a Pacific Island. Malinowski looked at how a youth killed himself after receiving verbal abuse from the other islanders because he had been publicly accused of incest. But, on further investigation, it turned out that incest was not uncommon on the island. It was only when an incestuous relation became too obvious within the community that it would become a problem. This led to Malinowski to come to three conclusions; 1. Just because someone breaks a rule it does not mean that others will define this a deviant; 2. Someone has to enforce the rules or draw attention to them; 3. If the person is successfully labelled then consequences follow. This study backs up Becker’s idea of a ‘master status’ as on this island it is shown how one label takes away all other qualities from a person.

However a criticism with this theory brought up by Akers (1967) is that going off the labelling theory alone, it would seem that deviants are normal people who are no different from anyone until someone comes along and puts a label on them. This does not explain why some individuals are labelled while others are not. This is a criticism of the theory because this means that the labelling theory is an incomplete theory.

A functionalist view on crime however believes crime to be inevitable in society. Durkheim argued that all crime is inevitable and in some cases even functional for society. He argued that since we all have individual life experiences, it would be impossible for all of us to be alike, and thus impossible for all of us to agree on one set of morals. He explains that even in a ‘society of saints’ there would be deviance. In such a society there might be no major crimes such as murder, but there would still be deviance as standards are so high for individuals that the slightest slip would be regarded as a serious offence. Durkheim also argued that crime is functional for society as often change will not occur without deviance, he explained this by saying “yesterday’s deviance becomes today’s’ normality”. One good example of something that was a deviant act but was needed for change could be the suffragette movement, as many women had to commit deviant acts to be able to gain equal rights. One criticism with this is that Durkheim assumes that society just accepts all crime as ‘normal’. For example, in the past people may have overlooked domestic abuse, but that does not mean that domestic abuse was ever acceptable, and it does not mean that domestic abuse is functional for society. Some crimes are just wrong, and Durkheim overlooked that fact.

Another interactionalist explanation of crime is the idea of primary and secondary deviance, this idea was created by Lemert. E in 1972. Primary deviance is the act of rule-breaking itself, whereas secondary deviance is the responses of others and the consequences of such responses. Lemert argued that secondary deviance was the most significant form of deviance out of the two. Lemert did a study of the costal Inuits of Canada that explains primary and secondary deviance well and shows how it is useful when explaining crime. In the coastal Inuits of Canada, there was a problem of chronic stuttering. This was deemed to be caused by the importance attached to ceremonial speech making. Children with the slightest speech difficulty were so conscious of their parents' desire to have well-speaking children, that they became anxious surrounding their speech. It was this anxiety that led to stuttering. This study shows the link between primary and secondary deviance and again backs up the interactionalist labelling theory. This study shows how much of an impact responses to deviance can have. In this case, improper speech was seen as a deviant act, and the responses to this deviance worsened the problem and caused anxiety. A criticism with this theory is that it does not give a full explanation towards why crime happens in the first place, although it does show the important link between deviance and societies reaction to the deviance, this link is useless if we cannot understand why deviance happens in the first place. Furthermore, we cannot create a solution to crime if we do not understand what causes crime.

A Marxist explanation of crime would believe that capitalism is the reason for the crime. Bonger argued that capitalism is based upon competition, selfishness, and greed, and because society itself is capitalist, people share many of the same values as capitalism. People are competitive, selfish, and greedy. Bonger argued that crime is a perfectly normal outcome from these values. Furthermore, Bonger also pointed out how those in power in a capitalist society will define crime as anything that threatens their interest. This means that often there will be more of a focus on crime committed by the poor than crime committed by the rich. This is often the reason why in statistics it looks like it is mainly poor working-class individuals who commit crimes when in reality the middle and upper-class are just overlooked. Bonger believed that the poor committed crimes for two reasons; physical needs and wants, and a sense of frustrations caused by injustice by deprivation. A criticism with this however is that it paints out all capitalist societies to be riddled with crime, however, there are many capitalist countries with a low crime rate. Despite the Marxist argument that crime is caused by capitalistic values. For example, Japan has much less crime than in the USA. The homicide rate in Japan is 1.0 per 100,000, whereas, in the USA, this is 5.6 per 100,000. This is a criticism as it shows how not all capitalistic societies have high rates of crime.

A Neo-Marxist explanation of crime is the myth of black criminology. This has similar aspects to the interactionist labelling theory. Hall. S argued that ethnic minorities are stereotyped and labelled more as deviant or criminal than the white population. Hall et al (1979) studied street crime among black youths in London in the 1970s. Newspapers were writing about a new craze of mugging, however, this was not a new issue and in fact, had always been an issue in London. Furthermore, many black men were being scapegoated for these crimes. The government and the media were promoting racism and demonising young black men to distract attention from the ongoing political problems and a poor economy. Because of these injustices, young black men were protesting against this systemic racism, but in the process, the media labelled them as deviant and criminal. This is a similar issue to the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, protests born out of a long-standing issue of racism within the country. But to deflect the issue, the government and media demonised these protests to just violent riots and did not take into account the deeply rooted racism that was the cause of these protests. Hall's

argument gives another explanation of how people react to what is deemed as ‘deviant acts’. This theory is a good example of how deviance can be born from frustration. However, a criticism with this view is that it does not explain all crimes. This view cannot explain why people murder, or rape. Furthermore, another criticism is that this view does not take into account middle and upper-class crimes. This is a criticism as if you do not look at every aspect of a crime you can never fully explain it.

A similar interactionist explanation of crime is that often unintentional labels are attached to individuals. This idea was explored by Goffman. E. Goffman stated that labels given to individuals affect how we see people, and how others react to that person. Often those who are not labelled with treat those who are as inferior or ‘other’. An example of this is someone being labelled as mentally ill, and others staying away from that person because they deem them to be ‘crazy’. Often people distance themselves from being stigmatised, and in return view those who are as ‘not like me’. This can result in hostilities towards those who have unintentional labels attached, and can often lead to crimes such as hate crimes. This explanation starts to give some form of explanation to why crime takes place, however, still does not offer a full explanation. This idea of unintentional labels is still useful when looking into crime, however. A criticism with this is that it does not take into account the quite how harmful labels are towards minority groups. Goffman only briefly mentions it when talking about hate crime, but he does not explain how labels can affect people of a different class, gender, ages, and ethnicities. In these minority groups, labelling is extremely harmful and can often lead to death or violence.

Another explanation of crime is status frustration. This term is a functionalist idea that was developed by Cohen. Working-class boys are judged by middle-class standards in school and because of this, they are unable to compete. This causes them to experience status frustration. They develop subcultures with values that are hostile to middle-class values and reject the system, which rejects them. Certain deviant acts such as vandalism and truancy would give them status within their subculture, and thus would encourage them to commit these acts more often. However a criticism with this is that it only explains minor offences, it does not explain why people would commit major crimes such as murder, or more impulsive crimes. Often when a person commits a crime it's unlikely that they have consciously thought out whether mainstream society would consider this act unacceptable. It is much more likely that they commit crimes simply out of boredom, and this idea of status frustration does not explain that.

A postmodernist called Stephen Lyng spoke about a term called edgework. Edgework assumes that people enjoy the emotional intensity of danger or fear, for example, people may participate in extreme sports to enjoy proximity to death. Lyng argues that for many young people taking part in crime is a form of edgework due to the risk and sense of fear combined with extreme excitement and control. This helps sociologists to understand why crime takes place in the first place. However, a criticism with this is that it is quite a basic idea, for this to be a full theory it would need the backing of other theories or ideas. On its own, it is not enough.

In conclusion, the interactionalist explanation of crime is based around the labelling theory. Interactionalism itself does not give much explanation as to why crime takes place, however, it does explain how people react. Because interactionalism does not give a full explanation, it would need to be used alongside another theory to give a full explanation. However, that being said, interactionalism still does show how much of an impact labelling has on others. Contrary to Becker’s idea of a master status, in interactionalism, there is still the idea of rejecting labels. In Resis’s 1961 study of young male prostitutes. The men regarded what they did as work, and

maintained their images of themselves as being ‘straight’ despite engaging in sex with men. This shows how they rejected the label of homosexual. This ability to reject labels is important as it shows how people can move on after being given a harmful label.