Interactionists Theory of Suicide

Michel Dorais

* “Dead Boys Cant Dance”

* influenced by Durkheim => thought that integration matters in a society

* he was even more influenced by interactionists – especially self-image

* he looked at official statistics in different countries and noticed that suicide rate was much higher for young men than young women

* he thought that this was connected to social orientation

* he carried out in-depth interviews with 32 men who had attempted to commit suicide when they were younger

* he found that 24/32 self-identified as being gay, and 8/32 were heterosexual – one of these was often seen as “effeminate”, so people thought he was gay, but he wasn’t

* 20/24 said that their suicide attempt was linked to their sexual orientation

* he said this was because they weren’t integrated => they developed a very negative self-image because of the attitudes of the people around them

* 8/20 men who weren’t gay also had problems with self-image resulting from other factors (financial, family relationships etc)

* “they experienced non-acceptance of their homosexuality, guilt related to having such desires and the conviction that they could never be happy as a homosexuals”

Criticisms

* he doesn’t look at the problem of lesbians => he doesn’t look at why they may commit suicide

* he uses a small sample => is it representative

* he only interviewed failed suicide => is it representative

* in Canadian societies homophobia is strong – but is it so strong in other societies
Definitions of crime and deviance

**Deviance** = actions that stray from society's norms

**Crime** = actions that break the law and can lead to official punishment

It is possible to be deviant without being criminal (e.g. cross-dressing). Also it is possible to be criminal without being deviant (e.g. speeding).

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Deviance is a continuous variable; it constantly changes shape and nature. This is because what is considered as deviant is determined by society. Therefore deviance and crime is a social construct.

*Ken Plummer (1979)* defined societal and structural deviance:

**Societal Deviance** = behaviours that break the law and are considered deviant by most members of society (e.g. armed robbery and paedophilia)

**Situational Deviance** = behaviour that is considered deviant in some contexts (e.g. nudity)

History of crime and deviance

**Before the Enlightenment (Middle-Ages)**

* Punishment was harsh, brutal and arbitrary
* It was focused on physicality with torture
* It was out of proportion to the crime

**Classical Criminology (the Enlightenment 18th – 19th Century)**

* Focus on criminal actors
* Crime was seen as a rational act, criminals have free-will
* Punishment should fit the crime
* There was no essential difference between criminals and non-criminals

**Positivism (19th Century)**

* Focus on the criminal – not the crime
* Criminals are different from non-criminals (may be biological, psychological or environmental)
* Deterministic – criminals are driven to commit crimes and have free-will

**Durkheim**

* Aimed to create a positive science to life, somewhere between positivism and classical criminology
* Focuses on the relationship between the individual and society
* He was concerned with finding the balance between individualism and need for social intergration
1) **What does it mean to describe behaviour in society as structured?**

The underlying essence of functionalism is that they believe society is structured, and that each part of society inter-links with each other. Therefore creating a system of beliefs that are shared by all aspects of society – education, religion and the media for example. Social relationships and interactions are all governed by rules. This means that the different aspects have a duty to get people in society to conform to the norms that the society has.

2) **In what way are society’s institutions a major aspect of the social structure?**

Institutions have a duty to get people to conform to the norms of society. The education system, for example, is a system that each child has to go through and, therefore subjects them to receiving a more rigid socialisation than compared to, maybe when they’re with their peer groups. Each social institution is related to each other, functionalist would agree – they would say that the family is very much related to the education system because they both are teaching children the norms and values of society from a dominant persecute. However some children may rebel against being told what to do and form an alliance which could counter-act as a sub-culture.

3) **What do functionalists mean when they say that an institution has a function?**

Functionalists believe that every institution has a function within society. They believe that societies have basic needs that must be met if they are to survive – functional prerequisites. Socialising new members into society means that they will have to teach the norms and values. Therefore, each institution has a function in providing society with a basic need and value. These needs and values may be expressed in different ways depending on the institution.

4) **Explain the importance of the following to the maintenance of the social system:**

**Value Consensus:**

The value consensus is the general agreement by society on the norms and values that society has. Functionalist argues that society is based on value consensus. Therefore if the major values of society are expressed in the various parts of the social structure, those parts will be integrated.

**Social Order**

Social order refers to a set of linked social structures and social institutions which maintain and enforce norms and values of society. The functionalist theory assumes that a certain amount of order and stability is essential for the survival of the social system. Social order means that people won’t be able to escape society’s institutions expressing the
**Paternalistic Conservatism**

* the collapse in values and the growing underclass pose a threat to law and order  

*Murry (1980)*

* the welfare state has encouraged single parenthood and unemployment

* this had lead to an underclass with norms and values that encourage crime

**Administrative Criminology**

* the emphasis is on increasing the costs of committing crime and reducing opportunity and benefits and rewards

Clark (1980)

* a great deal of time is opportunistic

* the causes of crime are too many and too varied for the government to do anything about it

* therefore, state resources should be channelled into reducing opportunities for committing crime

* ties between police and the public should be strengthened, as the most effective “police officers” are the public themselves

**Right Realism**

* a reaction to liberal and left-wing analyses of crime

Wilson (1975)

* crime is inevitable (agrees with Durkheim) in capitalist society (agrees with Marxists) – but the benefits of capitalism outweigh the costs of crime (disagrees with Marxists)

* getting rid of poverty will not reduce crime

* crime is a result of rational calculation (agrees with classical criminology) – people commit crime when the benefits outweigh the costs

* street crime is important because that is what the public is most concerned about and because it undermines communities

* strong communities deter crime (inform social control – left realists)
4 Key Elements to the Marxist Approach to Crime and Deviance

Law Enforcement

* enforced selectively with a systematic bias towards the ruling class
* crimes of the ruling class are seldom discovered or prosecuted
* crimes of the working class are scrutinised and heavily prosecuted
* this results in inner-city areas populated by young working class, often black men being over-policed
* however the monetary value of ruling class crimes (white-collar crime) far exceeds that of working class crimes

Creation of Law

* control of economic capital gives the ruling class control of social institutions, including the state and the legal system
* allows ruling class to create laws that benefit their interests
* there are a large number of laws protecting property, cornerstone of capitalist society
  * Chambliss => law increased after industrialisation and growth of capitalism
  * Snider => the state is often reluctant to pass laws that might impinge on the profits of big business (e.g. laws against pollution)
Neo-Marxist Views of the Media and Crime

Agenda Setting

* the media cannot tell us what to think, but it can tell us what to think about

* the media can set the agenda through a process of gatekeeping (selection and omission) and prominence (giving weight to one view rather than others)

* neo-Marxists argued that moral panics were influenced, not just by news values, but by deliberate agenda setting

* they argue that the process of deviancy amplification and moral panics can be used to promote capitalism

* moral panics provide convenient scapegoats who can be blamed for social problems, distracting attention from the real cause (capitalism)

* Stuart Hall was a neo-Marxist who looked critically at the role of the media in amplifying deviance – Policing the Crisis
New Criminology (Radical Criminology)

* key theorists: Taylor, Walton and Yong

* a fully social theory of deviance

* the new criminologists attempted to marry Marxist perspectives with interactionism, particularly labelling theory:
  - Marxist element => look at the wider capitalist society that creates conditions (social inequality/deprivation) that encourage crime and deviance (structural element)
  - interactionist element => one must take into account how the state defines activities as illegal/criminal and the effect that has on those that are labelled, and how individual deviants and agents of social control react and negotiate meaning

* this work grow out of the dissatisfaction of existing theories, particularly Marxism

* Taylor, Walton and Young developed a ‘fully social theory of deviance’, which had 7 dimensions:
  1) the wider origins of the deviant act => the radical criminologist needs to locate the deviant act within the wider social system (capitalism and class divisions) [what is happening in wider society?]
  2) the immediate origins => the next step is to look at the immediate social context within which the deviant act takes place – why does an individual choose to commit a crime and what are the circumstances leading up to that decision [what is happening around the individual?]
  3) the act itself => attention needs to be given to the meaning given to the specific act by the individual [what does the act mean to the individual?]
  4) the immediate social reaction to the act => they need to look at the social responses of those around the individual, especially the police [how do those around the individual react?]
  5) the wider social reaction => attention must be given to those social groups whose reaction has power over the individual, particularly power to make the law [how does society as whole react? Who has the power to change the law?]
  6) the outcomes of the social reaction => the affects of this labelling process on the deviant [what effect does this labelling have on the individual? Usually further deviance]
  7) the nature of the deviant process as a whole => these six steps need to be connected together [how can we string all of this together to make sense of it?]
Post-Marxist Approaches to Crime and Deviance

* Post-Marxist approaches grew as a response to traditional Marxist approaches, which was seen as deterministic and with narrow emphasis on the role of the economy.

**Marxist Subcultural Theory**

* Working class crime and deviance are best seen as a response by those in oppositional subcultures: those in marginal social positions respond by rejecting the values of the wider capitalist society.

**New Criminology**

* New criminologist attempted to marry a Marxist prospective with Interactionalism, particularly labelling theory.

**Left Realism**

* Developed a new criminology ideas by trying to create a complete holistic analysis of crime using a combinational of structural and social action approaches.

* It also focused much more firmly on victims and argues that it’s approach is more realistic than the previous romanticised view of crime held by Marxists.
Strengths and Weaknesses of Marxist Explanations

**Strengths**

* draws attention to the wider power relations in society, which are not emphasised by internationalists

* draws attention to the fact that crime is committed across all social classes—Marxists were the first theorist to draw attention to white collar crime

**Weaknesses**

* overemphasises the role of capitalism as a cause of crime—there is crime in communist countries, too => however, crime rates shot up in Eastern bloc countries after the fall of communism

* romanticise street crime and working class offenders: most of the victims are also working class, and Marxist approaches appear to pay little attention to them
CRIME: AN EXPLANATION

MEANING OF CRIME

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING

STORIES OF CRIME

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF NARRATIVES

QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE EVIDENCE

MORAL PANIC

DOUBTS ABOUT NARRATIVE, NARRATIVE => MORAL PANIC

EXPLANATIONS OF CRIME?

STRUCTURE VS. AGENCY
Evidence

* statistics would seem to provide evidence of relative deprivation and marginalisation:
  - rates of unemployment are three times higher among black groups than white
  - a black graduate is seven times more likely to be unemployed than a white graduate

* however:
  - these are official statistics and can be seen as a social construct
  - Left Realists have provides little empirical research to back up their causal explanation – what motivates offenders
  - rates are higher because of bias in the criminal justice system

Theory

* interactionists reject official crime statistic, seeing them as a social construct =>
  they reject the idea that ethnic minorities commit more crime – they argued that the different rates are the result of bias in the criminal justice system
  - Becker – the social distribution of crime and deviance is the result of interactions between the deviant and powerful agencies of social control
  - powerless groups, such as black people and the working class, are more likely to be labelled as deviant => more likely to be stopped and searched by police
  - the label becomes a master status which leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy

* new criminologists (Taylor, Walton and Young) also reject official crime statistics, and point even more strongly to police bias
  - Hall (Policing the Crisis) argued that ‘black mugging’ was the result of wider causes (such as the crisis in capitalism and long-term unemployment) and immediate causes (police racism)
  - the law is enforced selectively against ethnic minorities
  - they argued that moral panics in the media amplified deviance