

Interpretive Theories

Explain how interpretive theories approach the study of deviance, and describe how symbolic interactionism gives rise to other interpretive theories.

Interpretive theories focus on the processes by which we come to perceive and understand particular behaviours, other people, and ourselves in certain ways. In the context of this specific course, these theories address how we develop understandings of deviance and conformity or normality. Three different interpretive theories are addressed in this module (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Interpretive theories of deviance.

As you progress through this part of the module, you will notice that these three theories are not as distinct from each other as was the case with the positivist theories addressed in the previous module. Instead, there are connections between the ideas presented in each theory.

Symbolic interactionism proposes that we come to perceive particular behaviours in certain ways as a result of our interactions with others. **Labelling theories** argue that those perceptions have important consequences. Once we perceive people as deviant, our reactions to them have an impact on how they perceive and understand themselves. The **theory of the deviant career** highlights the experience of being deviant—that is, how people’s understandings evolve and change as they progress through deviance. Each of these three

theories is described in more detail over the next few module pages.

Symbolic Interactionism: Communication Creates Understanding

In the previous module, you learned that when functionalists look at society, they see social structures that fulfill functions. When learning theorists look at society, they observe the processes of learning that are occurring. When control theorists view society, they see forms of restraint. In contrast, when symbolic interactionists look at society, they see people interacting with each other, using symbols (that is, language, gestures, clothing, emoticons) to communicate. Sometimes we interact directly with others in the same physical space (for example, a shopping mall) or virtual space (for example, through text, email, or Zoom). At other times we engage in indirect social interactions. For example, when you are reading a novel you are engaged in an indirect interaction with its author; when you are listening to music you are engaged in an indirect interaction with the songwriter and the performer. Through all of these interactions and communications, we create meaning in our lives and understandings of the world around us, other people, and ourselves.

Symbolic interactionist theorists describe how various people and processes contribute to the development of our understandings, mainly with respect to role-taking, the looking-glass self, significant others, and the

generalized other. These key concepts are described as follows:

Role-Taking: Children often play dress-up and pretend to take on the role of a parent, a celebrity, or someone in a certain occupation. This is similar to the process of *role-taking* (or *role-playing*), in which we try to understand a situation from another person's perspective. You may be able to think of situations when you have tried to view a situation through another person's eyes, such as when you are preparing for a job interview.

The Looking-Glass Self: A "looking-glass" refers to a mirror. When we interact with other people, we see something about ourselves reflected back to us. The process of the *looking-glass self* begins with trying to imagine what that person is seeing when they look at us. Next, we imagine how they judge that appearance. Finally, that perceived judgement is integrated into our own self-concept (Yeung & Martin, 2003). We often see ourselves in the same way that we think other people see us. The process of the looking-glass self is stronger for some individuals than for others. Those with a stronger

looking-glass self orientation (LGSO) are more dependent on others' views of them, and frequently have less stable identities and lower levels of self-esteem.

Significant Others: *Significant others* play an especially important role in our understandings of ourselves, others, and the world around us. These are the people who are personally important to us. We are interested in, and care about, what they think. Whose opinion do you care about the most in your own life?

Generalized Other: Although significant others play an especially important role, our understandings are also influenced by the multitude of nameless, faceless people who make up "society." As we mature through childhood and adolescence, we grow to consider the views of a multitude of assorted people simultaneously; this is the *generalized other*.

In response to the people and processes described above, we come to perceive particular behaviours and people, as well as ourselves, in certain ways. One person's interactions may lead them to develop one

interpretation of a specific behaviour, while another person's interactions may result in a very different interpretation of the same behaviour. That is how the **deviance dance** emerges—that is, debates over and different points of view about deviance and normality (Bereska, 2018)

Think of a behaviour about which there are varying points of view—for example, vaping, cannabis use, or body piercing. First, consider your own point of view about that behaviour. Is it unacceptable? Is it acceptable? Is it acceptable under only certain conditions? Second, consider how you understand yourself in relation to that issue. Have you engaged in any of these behaviours in the past? In the present? Are these behaviours (or the absence of them) a part of your identity—of who you see yourself being? Third, think about how you have developed these understandings of those behaviours and of yourself. What role did the looking-glass self, significant others, the generalized other, and role-taking play in the development of your understandings?

As you begin to learn about other interpretive theories of deviance, you will see the ways that they are informed by the core assumptions of symbolic interactionism (Bereska, 2018).

Labelling Theories: Becoming an Outsider

Symbolic interactionism proposes that as a result of our social interactions, each of us develops certain perceptions of deviance and normality. Labelling theories argue that those perceptions can have significant implications. Based on those perceptions, we attach deviant labels to some people. Once that label is

attached, an important interpretive process begins (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The labelling process.

Through the process of the looking-glass self, and the role of significant others and the generalized other, labelled individuals begin to see themselves as outsiders. The deviant label becomes a part of the person's own identity, and they then act accordingly.

Various theorists describe this process in slightly different ways. Becker (1963) suggests that a deviant label becomes a **master status**, that is, it becomes the primary means by which others identify the individual; being assigned a deviant master status turns the person into an outsider. Tannenbaum (1938) says that we **tag** someone with a deviant label, and then the **dramatization of evil** begins: Instead of seeing a "bad behaviour" we start to see a "bad person." Lemert (1951) describes this process as a transition from **primary deviance** to **secondary deviance**. You will read more about these theorists in the assigned reading.

The **dramaturgical approach** paints a more complex picture of the labelling process and identifies multiple outcomes (Goffman, 1959). The stage is used as a metaphor for social life. Much like actors in a play, each of us, in our lives, is assigned (or assumes) particular roles. When in front of certain groups (that is,

“audiences”), we play those roles in certain ways. We control the images we present and the messages we convey to others. That is, we present our **front-stage selves**. We can also discard those roles, and just be ourselves when we are not performing before a given audience (that is, our **back-stage selves**).

We all have multiple front and back stages. If you work as a restaurant server, you may act in a certain way when in front of your customers, but perhaps in a different way when you step into the kitchen. In a classroom, you may suddenly sit up straight and stop talking when your professor enters the room. You may act differently with your intimate partner than with your work colleagues. And you may even act differently when you are completely alone than when with your intimate partner.

If the role we have each been assigned (based on a label that others have attached to us) is deviant in nature, we become **stigmatized**. We can respond with a variety of **stigma management techniques** that range from trying to hide one’s deviant label to showcasing it proudly (Goffman, 1963). For instance, because food is a central part of many social gatherings, people with celiac disease (that is, their bodies cannot process gluten) often feel stigmatized. Because they must exercise such extreme caution in restaurants, other people may start to exclude them from gatherings that involve food—such as going out for pizza. In response, some people with celiac disease report trying to prevent others from learning about their condition. In a food-related setting, they might claim that they ate before arriving and so are not hungry. Some people indicate that they even eat food

they know will make them extremely sick later, just so they can maintain a positive social identity (Schroeder & Mowen, 2014). In contrast, other people with celiac disease talk openly about their condition in an effort to educate people or to increase the number of gluten-free options on restaurant menus; these efforts are intended to remove the stigma that is attached to their condition.

The Theory of the Deviant Career: Progressing Through Deviance

The theory of the deviant career proposes that the experience of deviance is similar to the experience of a career. Both involve stages of development in a larger interpretive process. When you start a new job, you have to learn how to successfully complete the tasks that you are responsible for and familiarize yourself with the norms of the workplace. Similarly, interviews with people who grow marijuana (in regions where doing so is illegal) reveal that the practice requires that an individual is able to obtain high quality seeds, learn to make cuttings of female plants, learn how to handle questions (such as visitors asking what that smell is in the house), learn how to hide the tell-tale signs of a grow-op, and keep the yard extremely neat to prevent any unwanted attention from one's neighbours (Maggard & Boylstein, 2014).

At a certain point in your job, you may encounter a **career contingency**, that is, a turning point at which you give careful thought to whether you will remain in

your current position or look for a new job. Similarly, should a marijuana user's supplier become unavailable, the individual must make a choice (Becker, 1963): Stop using marijuana? Find another casual supplier? Start hanging out with more criminal elements in order to ensure a steady supply?

Finally, some people's identities are more firmly tied to their jobs than is the case for others. Similarly, Hannem and Bruckert (2017) find that owners and managers working in the indoor commercial sex industry (e.g., body rub parlours) identify with their work in a variety of ways. Initially, they become aware of a "pimp" stereotype as "everything you've ever seen in a movie about hos and pimps" (p. 828)—a stereotype that is often racialized (i.e., black) and gendered (i.e., male). Then they start to consider that they might have that discreditable identity; this usually arises from an external cause, such as being arrested or having someone else refer to them as a "pimp." Finally, they negotiate their identities in different ways. Many reject that identity through defensive othering, pointing out the differences between themselves and "pimps": "A pimp is someone who preys on weak, troubled women..." (p. 829). Others offer a counternarrative, such as by taking on an alternate identity (e.g., madam).

Table 1. *Interpretive Theories: Understandings of Deviance and Normality*

Theory	Emphasis
Symbolic Interactionism	We develop understandings of deviance and normality through our symbolic communications with others
Labelling Theories	A deviant label leads to rejection by the conforming world, which affects the individual's own identity and subsequent behaviours
The Theory of the Deviant Career	Progression through deviance and progression through a career are both interpretive experiences that involve stages of development and career contingencies