



Understanding Crime Sociologically: Insights from Labeling Theory

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Abstract:

Crime is considered one of the social phenomena that has attracted the attention of sociologists and criminologists, as numerous theories have sought to explain its causes and the mechanisms of its spread within society. These explanations have varied between biological, psychological, and social approaches; however, the sociological approach has focused particularly on the role of social structure and social interactions in shaping criminal behavior. Among the most prominent theoretical perspectives in this field is the labeling theory, which emerged within the framework of symbolic interactionism during the second half of the twentieth century. This theory argues that crime is not merely a deviant act, but rather the result of society's labeling and interpretation of that act. According to this theory, individuals who are classified as "criminals" do not necessarily become criminals as a result of their actions alone, but because of the social stigma attached to them, which leads to their marginalization and the repetition of their deviant behavior.

This article aims to explore the relationship between crime and labeling theory, and to analyze how social classification influences the behavior of individuals and societies. Through this analysis, we hope to achieve a deeper understanding of the social mechanisms that contribute to the persistence of crime and to provide new insights into ways of addressing this phenomenon in various social contexts.

Keywords : Crime – Social stigma.

1. Introduction

In contemporary societies, crime is not measured solely by the occurrence of law-breaking acts, but also by the way society treats individuals who have been labeled as offenders. Labeling Theory offers a distinctive perspective that emphasizes the interactive dimensions of crime, highlighting that deviance arises not merely from the act itself, but from the process of classification and labeling imposed by society.

The theory posits that social labeling is not neutral; it is influenced by structures of power and social hierarchies, and may lead to what is known as secondary deviance, where an individual becomes a “criminal” in the eyes of society as a result of interactions with the labels assigned by others. Consequently, crime becomes a complex social phenomenon, in which values and norms intertwine with everyday interactions, rather than being merely the outcome of personal or biological factors.

Crime: From definition to elements and factors:

Crime is a complex social and legal phenomenon, with its effects ranging from individuals to society as a whole. Crime is defined as any act that violates the laws in place within a society, causing either physical or moral harm to individuals or the community. However, crime is not limited to a legal breach; in some contexts, it is also considered a violation of the ethical values and social principles that govern individual behavior. Thus, crime can be seen not only as an infringement of legal systems but also as a breach of the moral standards that maintain social order. Crimes vary in nature, ranging from violent acts such as murder and assault to non-violent offenses like theft and fraud.

Concept of Crime from the Linguistic Perspective:

Crime, in the linguistic sense, derives from the triliteral Arabic root verb *jama*, which means “to cut,” whether the cutting is material or moral. The origin of the word *jarimah* (crime) comes from *jarm*, meaning earning or cutting. The term *jarm* is the verbal noun of *al-jārim*, referring to someone who brings harm upon himself and his people. It also carries the meaning of transgression and sin. Thus, crime or *al-jārim* refers to the one who earns or commits wrongdoing; it is said “so-and-so committed a crime,” meaning he earned sin or guilt. The term also refers to what a ruler takes from an offender as punishment.

Ibn Manzur states in *Lisan al-Arab*: *Al-jurm* means transgression; the one who commits it is a criminal (*mujrim*). One says he committed a crime against them or upon them, meaning he committed an offense. *Ajrama* means he committed a wrongdoing; and when one’s *jurm* becomes great, it means he has sinned. *Al-jurm*, with a *damma* on the letter *jim*, means sin, like *jarimah* (crime)¹.

Alternative Academic Version:

Crime is defined in the Dictionary of Social Science Terms as any act that causes harm to society and is punishable by law. Crime is regarded as a social phenomenon that emerges from personal tendencies, inclinations, and psychological complexes, as well as from the influence of a corrupt social environment. It may also arise from physical deficiencies, intellectual weakness, or emotional disturbances. Moreover, criminalized acts differ from one society to another depending on social norms and legal systems².

Sociological approaches to understanding crime have also emerged. The first approach views crime as encompassing all forms of anti-social behavior, that is, behavior that harms the social interest. The second approach focuses on social control and the norms it entails in regulating behavior. The third approach seeks to formulate a comprehensive definition of crime that includes all criminal acts as well as behaviors that deviate from social norms and are subject to punishment³.

The sociological school emphasizes that social factors play a fundamental role in the occurrence of crime, asserting that the criminal is a product and outcome of society. Crime and delinquency are viewed as the result of the social conditions and influences to which individuals are exposed. From this perspective, criminal behavior is not merely the result of individual pathology but is closely related to social structure, socialization processes, and environmental influences such as poverty, unemployment, social disorganization, and weak social control.

Some sociologists also argue that crime is a normal and natural phenomenon in any society, as complete conformity to social norms is impossible. Therefore, crime exists in all societies regardless of their level of development, but what differs is its forms, rates, and the ways societies respond to it through social and legal control mechanisms.

According to Émile Durkheim, crime is defined as any act that violates the collective moral values of society and generates a social reaction. Durkheim argued that crime is a normal and inevitable social phenomenon that exists in all societies. He maintained that crime cannot be entirely eliminated because it plays an important role in the evolution and transformation of social values, as well as in defining moral boundaries within society. Furthermore, he considered crime to be a sign of social health, since a society without crime would imply excessive social control and the absence of social change. Therefore, crime is viewed as an integral and necessary component of all healthy societies⁴.

According to Howard S. Becker in his book *Outsiders*, deviance and crime are not inherent qualities of particular acts, but are instead the result of social labeling processes. From this perspective, an act becomes criminal or deviant only when society defines and labels it as such. Therefore, crime is not an objective characteristic of

behavior, but a social construct that emerges from social interaction and the application of social rules and sanctions. In this sense, crime is the outcome of the interaction between individuals and society, particularly through processes of labeling, social reaction, and social control⁵.

From a psychological perspective, the understanding of crime evolved with the advancement of psychological science, particularly with the contributions of the psychoanalytic school and its research methodologies. Early psychoanalytic studies emphasized the role of consciousness, the unconscious mind, and repression arising from internal psychological conflicts. Within this framework, crime was interpreted as an expression of instinctual drives rooted in the unconscious, seeking release through behaviors that are socially unacceptable.

According to Akram Abdul Razzaq Al-Mashhadani, crime from a psychological perspective is an expression of emotional energy that has failed to find a socially acceptable outlet, leading to behavior that conflicts with societal norms and values. Crime is thus viewed as intentional and unlawful behavior stemming from psychological conditions such as repression and internal psychological disturbance, through which the offender attempts to satisfy certain needs that ultimately drive them toward criminal behavior⁶.

Norbert Sillamy defines crime as a serious violation of civil or moral law and distinguishes between pathological and non-pathological crime. Pathological crime is relatively rare and is typically associated with certain mental or neurological disorders, such as epilepsy, schizophrenia, and paranoid disorders, where individuals may commit criminal acts during episodes of mental confusion, delusion, or impaired consciousness, sometimes without awareness or memory of their actions. In contrast, non-pathological crime is committed by individuals who are neither neurotic nor mentally ill, but who consciously choose criminal behavior as a form of social withdrawal, protest, or maladjustment to society⁷.

From a legal standpoint, crime is defined as any act or omission attributable to an individual that harms or poses a threat to a socially protected interest, which is safeguarded by criminal law through the imposition of sanctions⁸. It also represents a breach of the codified social order, often involving violence as a complex social phenomenon. Such behaviors are classified as unlawful acts and fall within the domain of criminalized conduct⁹.

Crime is defined as the commission of an act that is criminalized by law or the failure to perform an act mandated by legal provisions. Within the framework of positive law, neither an act nor an omission is considered criminal unless it is explicitly subject to punishment under criminal legislation¹⁰.

According to Charlotte Seymour in the *Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, crime is

defined as a violation of law that results in punishment and is distinguished from other forms of norm violations because it involves a formal social process through which the offender is processed and sanctioned. The determination of what constitutes a crime is therefore a political issue, as it depends on political authority exercised through legal and judicial institutions. Crimes can be broadly divided into two categories: crimes committed by one individual against another, such as property and personal crimes, and crimes without a specific victim, including offenses against public morals, social customs, and political crimes where the state or political authority is considered the victim¹¹.

These different definitions of crime demonstrate that crime cannot be understood from a single perspective. Psychological theories focus on internal motives, legal definitions focus on the violation of law, while sociological theories emphasize the role of society in defining and reacting to deviance. This is where labeling theory becomes important, as it shifts the analysis from the act itself to the social reaction and the process through which individuals are labeled as criminals.

Elements of the Crime:

The elements of a crime are considered among the fundamental topics in the analysis of criminal phenomena. Crime is generally interpreted as an unlawful act that requires the existence of specific elements in order to be legally recognized as a crime. The definition of crime typically includes three essential elements: the material element, the moral element, and the legal element.

1- The Material Element:

The material element refers to the commission of an act or utterance that is prohibited by law or, in the context of religious law, by Sharia. Mere contemplation or preparation does not constitute a crime unless the act reaches the stage of execution¹².

The material element encompasses the criminal conduct, the outcome of the act, and the causal relationship linking the conduct to its consequence. It represents the observable behavior or action undertaken by an individual, which triggers legal intervention and may subject the perpetrator to criminal liability. In essence, the material element constitutes the external component of the crime, through which the law identifies, evaluates, and sanctions the unlawful act¹³.

The material element consists of three fundamental components¹⁴:

- The perpetrator: The offender may act either primarily or secondarily, meaning they can commit the act individually or as an accomplice.
- The criminal outcome: The intended criminal result must be realized, or any potential criminal consequence that could reasonably occur.
- Causation: There must be a causal link between the act and the resulting

outcome, establishing that the offender's conduct directly led to the criminal consequence.

These components collectively define the external aspect of the crime, enabling the legal system to attribute responsibility and impose sanctions based on observable actions and their consequences.

2- The Moral Element :

The moral element refers to the criminal intent, which manifests through the offender's awareness and the deliberate direction of their will toward committing the act. The offender's intent indicates the conscious and voluntary decision to commit the criminal act with the purpose of achieving the criminal outcome. Moreover, the moral element encompasses the psychological or mental link that connects the material components of the crime with the offender's mental state¹⁵.

Criminal intent is understood as the mental state or intention possessed by the perpetrator at the time of committing the crime. This may involve a fully deliberate crime, in which the intention to commit the act is explicit, or it may involve a crime resulting from negligence, recklessness, or indifference. In all cases, the moral element is essential for establishing culpability and determining the degree of responsibility attributed to the offender.

3- The Legal Element:

The legal element refers to the statutory provision that defines the act constituting a crime and specifies the punishment to be imposed on its perpetrators¹⁶.

. It also implies that the criminal act must not fall under any justification or legal excuse that would exempt the offender from criminal liability. A crime exists only when the act is unlawful and explicitly sanctioned by law¹⁷.

An act is considered unlawful if it is explicitly prohibited by legislation and is not committed under circumstances that would render it legally permissible. This element emphasizes the necessity of a legal text criminalizing the offender's conduct. In other words, for an act to be punishable it must be legally prohibited; if the act is not criminalized by law, no penalty can be imposed. The legal element thus requires the existence of a statutory provision clearly stipulating that the act constitutes a crime subject to legal sanctions.

Causes of Crime

Crime is considered a complex social phenomenon in which multiple economic, social, and psychological factors interact to produce deviant behavior. Understanding the causes of crime requires a comprehensive study of the motivations that may drive individuals to commit criminal acts. In this context, several theoretical explanations emerge, such as social factors, poverty, and the lack of legal awareness, in addition to

psychological and educational influences that shape an individual's personality. By exploring these causes, societies can strive to develop effective solutions to reduce the spread of this phenomenon.

- **Social and Economic Factors:**

Crime is closely associated with social and economic conditions. Individuals who live in extreme poverty or in environments characterized by persistent unemployment may face difficulties in meeting their basic needs, which may drive them to resort to criminal activities such as theft or assault.

The principle of “anomie,” proposed by Robert K. Merton, demonstrates that the absence of equal opportunities may lead to social disorganization that pushes individuals to seek illegal means to achieve success. Merton explained that the discrepancy between socially approved goals and the legitimate means of achieving them can lead individuals to deviate from conforming behavior. He argued that deviance occurs when individuals are unable to attain socially accepted goals through lawful means¹⁸.

Moreover, the relationship between crime and socio-economic conditions is not always direct or deterministic, but rather mediated by social environment, family structure, education, and community institutions. Individuals living in disadvantaged environments are often exposed to social disorganization, weak social control, and limited institutional support, which may increase the likelihood of involvement in criminal behavior. In addition, income inequality and social stratification can create feelings of relative deprivation, where individuals compare their situation with others in society and experience frustration and injustice, which may, in turn, encourage deviant behavior. From this perspective, crime can be interpreted as a social response to structural pressures rather than merely an individual choice. Therefore, effective crime prevention strategies should focus on improving social conditions, promoting social justice, strengthening educational systems, and providing equal opportunities for social and economic advancement.

- **Psychological Factors:**

Psychological factors play a significant role in shaping criminal behavior. Individuals who suffer from psychological disorders such as Antisocial Personality Disorder often display violent or criminal behaviors. This also includes individuals who were raised in harsh environments and experienced traumatic events during childhood. Some research indicates that genetic factors may contribute to a person's tendency to commit crimes. Psychological and environmental factors both influence individual behavior, as the absence of social and family bonds can be a major cause of crime. As Hirschi explains, the absence of social bonds may increase individuals' propensity

toward deviance, noting that adolescents who are not strongly attached to family or school are more likely to engage in criminal behavior¹⁹.

Furthermore, psychological instability, low self-control, frustration, and feelings of rejection or marginalization may increase the likelihood of criminal behavior. Individuals who experience emotional neglect, lack of parental supervision, or exposure to violence during childhood may develop aggressive tendencies and weak moral restraint. In this context, crime can sometimes be interpreted as a behavioral response to psychological conflict, social pressure, or emotional deprivation. Therefore, the study of crime requires not only sociological and economic analysis but also psychological analysis that focuses on personality development, childhood experiences, and emotional and social adjustment.

- **Cultural Factors:**

Societal culture plays an important role in explaining crime. In some societies, crime may become part of the social culture, especially when certain behaviors are justified or socially tolerated. For example, in some poor neighborhoods or areas dominated by gangs, violence may become part of the “code of the street,” where resorting to violence to resolve conflicts becomes normalized. Popular culture and the media may also contribute to reinforcing such behaviors. Consequently, the culture of the “street code” in urban communities becomes a suitable environment for the spread of crime as part of everyday culture²⁰.

- **Socialization and Family:**

Socialization is one of the fundamental factors influencing the development of individual behavior. Children who grow up in broken or unstable families, such as families in which children suffer from neglect or domestic violence, are more likely to experience behavioral deviance in the future. Studies have shown that the absence of proper social development within the family can be a major factor in individuals’ involvement in criminal activities. Moreover, areas that lack cohesive social structures tend to experience higher rates of juvenile delinquency.

Furthermore, the family is considered the primary institution of social control, where individuals learn social norms, values, and acceptable behavior. Weak parental supervision, lack of emotional support, and inconsistent discipline may contribute to the development of deviant behavior among adolescents. In addition, peer groups may replace the family’s role in cases where family bonds are weak, which may increase the likelihood of involvement in delinquent subcultures. In this context, Hirschi argues that “delinquents are often free of serious intimate attachments, aspirations, and moral beliefs that bind most people under the theory of social control,” highlighting the centrality of social bonds in preventing deviant and criminal behavior. Therefore, effective crime prevention should focus on strengthening family cohesion, improving

parenting practices, and supporting socialization processes that promote conformity to social norms and values²¹.

- **Political and Societal Disruptions:**

Wars and political conflicts lead to the collapse of social structures, creating a fertile environment for the spread of crime. In such contexts, individuals are exposed to constant threats and chaos, which may drive some to commit crimes as a means of survival or to gain power. Moreover, political conflicts can contribute to the proliferation of organized crime, as weakened governance and law enforcement create opportunities for criminal networks to operate with impunity²².

- **Media and the Culture of Image:**

The media play a significant role in shaping societal perceptions of crime. It has been observed that the portrayal of crime in the media often enhances the image of crime as an exciting or central aspect of everyday life. This can lead to the normalization of violence and criminal behavior in the minds of the public. Additionally, certain media programs promote violence, which may have a negative impact on individuals, particularly younger audiences.

As Surette notes, the media contribute to constructing an exaggerated image of crime, making it appear more acceptable in the eyes of the public²³. Furthermore, repeated exposure to violent imagery and sensationalized crime stories can influence social learning, particularly among adolescents, by providing models for deviant behavior and reinforcing subcultural norms that tolerate or glorify crime. In this sense, media not only reflects crime but can actively participate in the socialization process that shapes attitudes toward criminality, contributing to the internalization of deviant behaviors as part of everyday cultural practices.

Interpretation of Crime in Light of Labeling Theory

Labeling theory is grounded in a fundamental assumption that crime does not reside in the act itself as much as it is constructed through a social process in which certain acts or individuals are defined as criminal. This perspective was articulated by the American sociologist Howard S. Becker, who argued that social groups create deviance by establishing rules and subsequently applying them to particular individuals, thereby labeling them as criminals²⁴. In the same vein, Erving Goffman points out that social stigma constitutes a process through which an individual's social status is reduced due to an attribute or behavior perceived as socially unacceptable²⁵.

The Theoretical Foundations of Labeling Theory

Labeling theory is associated with the symbolic interactionist school, which views social reality as being constructed through daily interactions between individuals and the meanings they assign to their own behavior and the behavior of others. The

early foundations of this theory appeared in the works of the American sociologist Frank Tannenbaum, who introduced the concept of the “dramatization of evil.” He argued that society may exaggerate certain minor deviant acts and transform their perpetrators into criminals in the eyes of others, which in turn pushes the individual to adopt this identity²⁶.

This idea was later developed by the sociologist Edwin Lemert, who provided a more in-depth analysis of the process of deviance by distinguishing between two types of deviance: primary deviance and secondary deviance. Primary deviance refers to rule-breaking acts that individuals may commit without affecting their social identity, whereas secondary deviance emerges when social reaction and labeling lead the individual to adopt a deviant identity and continue engaging in criminal behavior²⁷.

However, the most influential development in this direction came with the works of Howard S. Becker, who formulated the theoretical framework of labeling theory.

Howard Becker is considered one of the most prominent scholars of labeling theory. The theory was fully developed and clearly articulated in his well-known book *Outsiders* (1963). Becker argues that deviance is always attached as a label to actions and individuals through societal audiences. He maintains that deviance is not the act committed by the individual itself, but rather the consequences of the application of rules and norms by others to those who commit such acts. Thus, the deviant is the person to whom the label has been successfully applied, while deviant behavior is the behavior that people so label²⁸.

According to Becker, the process of labeling an individual as deviant does not require more than the commission of a single offense for the individual to be labeled and subsequently perceived and treated as deviant on that basis. The individual who is subjected to labeling becomes socially cut off and isolated from participation in conventional groups, even though the deviant behavior itself may not necessarily cause isolation if members of conventional society were unaware of the individual’s deviant status or if no social reaction had occurred in response to that behavior.

The Concept of Stigma

The term stigma originates from a Greek word referring to a mark or brand that was cut or burned into the skin of criminals, slaves, or traitors in order to identify them clearly as morally tainted individuals who should be avoided, especially in public places²⁹.

Social stigma, on the other hand, refers to the rejection of or discrimination against an individual based on socially perceivable characteristics that distinguish them from other members of society. Social stigmas are commonly associated with culture, gender, race, intelligence, and health³⁰.

In the sociology of deviance, the term stigma is used interchangeably with the social reaction theory of deviance. It is considered a result of social interaction and social control rather than the outcome of factors related to individual psychology or hereditary characteristics³¹.

Principles of Labeling Theory:

Labeling theory is based on five main principles³²:

1- Labeling an individual as a criminal may be accurate or inaccurate; however, society may form this perception of the individual, and this perception may remain firmly rooted in society's view of them.

2- There exists a relationship filled with suspicion and doubt between the offender and the society that has labeled them as criminal or deviant.

3- Society's labeling of an individual as a criminal may lead the individual to perceive themselves as such, since society's evaluation of the individual influences the individual's self-evaluation. The individual's feeling of being a criminal lowers their self-worth and injures their feelings, which may push them toward committing more serious crimes against society.

4- Crimes are classified into two types:

✓Primary deviance, which refers to crimes actually committed by the individual, such as murder, theft, and fraud.

✓Secondary deviance, which refers to crimes committed by the individual as a result of the negative perception that society holds toward them, often following a previous offense, even if it was minor or moral in nature.

5- The causes of criminal behavior and deviant conduct are not related solely to the offender themselves or to the objective circumstances they experience; rather, they are related to society's labeling of the offender as a criminal. This label is what may push the individual toward delinquency and crime.

Stages of the Process of Labeling the Deviant

The process of attaching a stigma to a deviant individual passes through several overlapping, reciprocal, and interconnected stages, which were identified by Lemert as follows³³:

1- Primary deviance or the stage of suspicion and accusation, sometimes based on rumors and hearsay, where the individual commits their initial deviant act while observing society's reaction to what they have done.

2- The stage of negative social reactions, expressed through disapproval and condemnation, which may involve only informal or moral sanctions. Society responds to the individual's behavior through various forms of punishment established by social norms or social systems.

3- The stage of repetition of primary deviance, where the rate or frequency of deviant behavior increases as a reaction to the negative responses the individual faces due to suspicion, accusation, rumors, or gossip. The frequency of deviance at this stage

becomes greater than the first occurrence.

4- The stage of more severe social reactions, where social responses become more violent and harsh, leading the individual to feel rejected by the people with whom they normally interact.

5- The stage of increased deviance and hostile acts, directed toward those who impose negative reactions or punishments on the individual.

6- The stage of official social reaction, in which society takes formal measures against the individual. This represents the formal labeling process and is referred to as the secondary stage or secondary deviance.

7- The stage of using deviance as a form of challenge or retaliation against society, where the individual increases deviant behavior as a direct response to society's toward them, attempting to confront social stigma through revenge by increasing deviance and criminal behavior. As a result, stigma increases and social reactions intensify.

8- The final stage, in which the deviant individual accepts their new social status as a criminal or deviant and attempts to adapt to their new identity and social role as a stigmatized offender.

Labeling theory is based on the idea that crime is not merely an individual behavior resulting from psychological or biological dysfunction; rather, it is the outcome of a social process in which factors of power and social interaction are intertwined. Society does not apply rules and norms equally to all its members; instead, certain social groups are often more vulnerable to labeling and criminal classification.

In this context, numerous studies indicate that the criminal justice system may sometimes contribute to the reinforcement of crime rather than its reduction. This occurs through the processes of classification and labeling to which individuals are subjected after entering the judicial system. Labeling an individual as a criminal reduces their opportunities for social integration, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and social relationships, which may ultimately push them toward continued engagement in criminal behavior³⁴.

Moreover, labeling an individual as a criminal may lead to their social isolation from conventional society and push them toward integration into deviant groups that share the same social identity. This process leads to what is referred to in sociological literature as the amplification of deviance.

Conclusion

Labeling theory is considered one of the most significant sociological frameworks that has contributed to rethinking the concept of crime and deviance. It shifts the focus from searching for the causes of crime in individual characteristics to examining the role played by society in the construction of criminal identity. This theory demonstrates that processes of social labeling and institutional reactions may contribute to the reinforcement and reproduction of deviance, particularly when they result in the exclusion of individuals from opportunities for social integration. Accordingly, understanding crime from a sociological perspective requires an analysis of social interactions and the mechanisms of social classification that determine who is defined as deviant within society.

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