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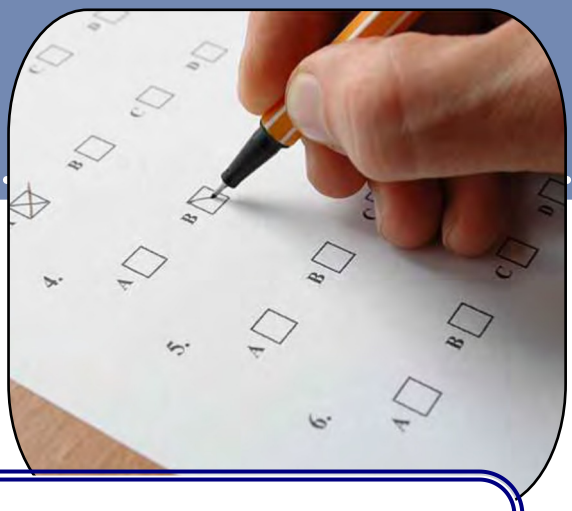
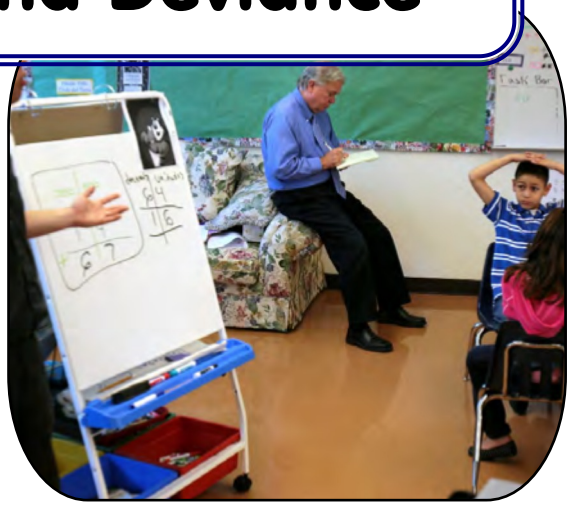


Crime and Deviance



Left Realism

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Left Realism

The Three-Cornered Approach

A three-cornered approach used by Left Realism to understand deviant behaviour and its relationship to social control involves, as Young (2003) puts it,

"t*ackling all three sides of the deviancy process."*

In other words, where administrative criminology, for example, focuses on one or other of these areas, left realism focuses on both the content of each area and, more importantly perhaps, the interaction between them. This represents a 'realistic approach' in two senses:

First, 'the problem of crime' is not an academic one in that, to use Mills' (1959) formulation, crime is both a:

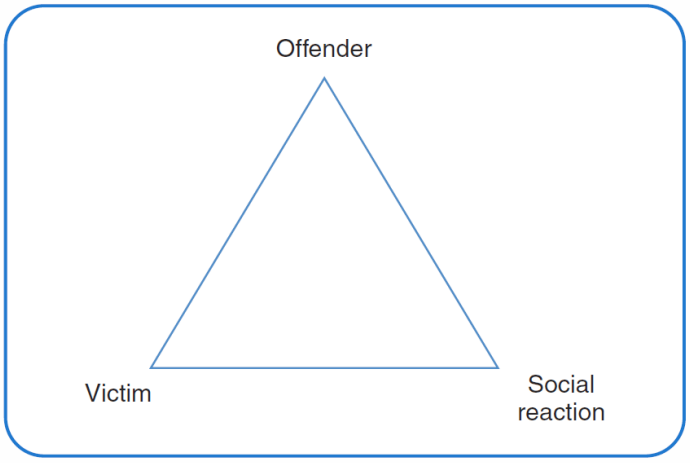
• private problem, in the sense of its social and psychological effects on victims, and a

• public issue, in the sense of the cultural impact it has on the quality of people's lives and experiences.

Second, it addresses the multidimensional nature of crime in terms of the relationship between offender, victim and social reaction – something we can understand more easily by considering each dimension in turn.

Offender profiles

These suggest the majority of crime in our society is committed by young, working-class males. Although there may be areas of overrepresentation (black youths, for example, figure disproportionately in official crime statistics) and under-representation (the extent of middle-class or female criminality, for example), the statistical picture is, for left realists, broadly accurate – there is not, for example, a vast reservoir of undetected 'crimes of the elderly'.



1. The criminogenic triangle:

Lea and Young (1984) suggest that three related factors explain why people choose or reject criminal behaviour:

a. **Relative deprivation**: Concepts like poverty and wealth are subjective categories relative to what someone feels they should have when compared with others (a reference group such as 'society', peers or whatever). An objectively rich individual may, for example, feel relatively deprived when they compare their situation to a reference group that has greater income and wealth.

Lea and Young use this concept for two reasons:

• Deprivation alone cannot 'cause criminality'; many poor people do not commit crimes.

• Relativity allows them to include the affluent in any explanation of offending.

b. **Marginalisation** relates to social status. As writers such as Willis (1977) have shown, young, working-class men are frequently 'pushed to the margins of society' through educational failure and low-pay, low-status work.

A further aspect of (political) marginalisation is the idea that, where deviant individuals see themselves as facing problems and need to resolve grievances, 'no one is listening'.

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Criminal activity, therefore, becomes the social expression of marginalisation, especially when it combines with:

c. **Subculture** (although the concept of *neo-tribes* would probably fit just as neatly – loose conglomerations of people who have something in common). The ability to form and move around in groups (whether such groups are "real", in the sense of face-to-face interaction – a gang, for example – or as may increasingly be the case, "virtual", in the sense of forming loose agglomerations of "like-minded individuals" through web sites, forums and social media) is seen as a collective response to a particular social situation.

In this instance, the form of the subcultural / tribal group is determined by feelings of relative deprivation and marginalisation. Specific subcultural values, in this respect, are not independent of the culture in which they arise and, for Lea and Young, it is precisely because working-class youths, for example, accept the general values of capitalist society that they indulge in criminal behaviour – the pursuit of desired ends by illegitimate means.

These ideas come together, Young (2011) argues, in something like the 2011 English riots: "*The background of urban riots is almost formulaic. A substantial section of the population [subculture] who are economically excluded [relative deprivation], a situation of political marginalisation where there is no party or politician to speak for them and, then, the final straw, an act of police injustice – real or perceived*".

When thinking about the "criminogenic triangle" it's important to see the three corners as closely connected, such that each feeds off and builds-upon the other; in basic terms, those most-likely to involve themselves in criminal behaviour have all three characteristics – feelings of relative deprivation, political marginalisation and well-developed subcultural support.

The importance of this relationship can be evidenced, for example, by noting that the elderly – one of the least-likely groups to engage in criminal behaviour – may well experience relative deprivation and political marginalisation but are unlikely to develop strong subcultural support links. In other words, while each corner in the triangle is individually important in a theoretical sense it is only when they combine that criminal behaviour becomes a probability.

One strength of this general theory is that 'subcultural-type groupings' are not restricted to the young and the working class – middle-class company directors who deal illegally in shares or fix prices to defraud the public may have their behaviour supported by a (sub)culture that sees such behaviour as permissible.

Victim profiles

As Burke (1999) notes, left realism tries to bring victims into the picture in a number of ways:

1. Problematising crime: In this respect Burke notes 'crime is a problem for ordinary people that must be addressed' by criminologists, especially the 'plight of working class victims of predatory crime' whose views have been variously ignored (by radical criminologists, for example) or marginalised (by administrative criminology and the New Right).

2. The "lived experiences" of crime victims (or those who live in high-crime areas) need to be considered and addressed. In other words, we need to understand how 'fear of crime', for example, is related to 'lived crime rates'. That is, how the experience of crime is localised in the sense of affecting different individuals and groups in different ways – the chances of being a victim differ in terms of factors such as class, age, gender, ethnicity and region. As Burke notes, official crime statistics suggest women are less likely to be murdered than men, but black women have a greater chance of being murdered than white men. Victim impact is similarly fragmented; men tend to feel anger, whereas women are more likely to report shock and fear, and such impact, Burke suggests, 'cannot be measured in absolute terms: £50 from a middle class home will have less effect than the same sum stolen from a poor household'. In addition, someone living on a council estate is more likely to experience crime than someone who owns a country estate, and,

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in a similar way to their New Right counterparts, left realists argue that part of the process of understanding and combating the effects of crime is to work with local communities to build safer environments.

3. Relationships: Many forms of criminology over-determine the relationship between offender and victim. In other words, the two are seen as practically, and therefore theoretically, distinct and separate, while other forms of criminology under-determine the relationship; everyone is seen as a 'potential offender', an idea reflected in increasingly restrictive forms of social control and surveillance in the school, workplace and community. For left realists the offender–victim relationship, for many types of everyday crime, is more complex in two ways:

• Personal: Offenders may be well known to their victims.

• Cultural: People may be, at different times, both offenders and victims.

The ideas we've just noted concerning offenders and victims impact on the third corner of the left realist approach.

The Square of Crime

Unlike Interactionist sociology, which has been concerned largely with demonstrating how different forms of public reaction contribute to the 'problem of crime', left realism focuses on how different types of social relationship (between police and public, offender and victim, and so forth) create different social reactions and, more importantly, different (policy) solutions to the problem of crime.

Young (1997) sketches the broad relationships involved in the understanding of social reactions in terms of what he calls the 'square of crime'.

In this respect, social reactions are mediated through a range of different reciprocal relationships, such as that between the police and offenders – how, for example, the police view 'potential and actual offenders' and, of course, the reverse view, how potential offenders view their relationship with control agencies. This general relationship, and different levels of social reaction, is multidimensional, in the sense that the relationship between formal control agencies and offenders will be mediated further by things like how the general public (informal control agencies) views both offenders and their victims.

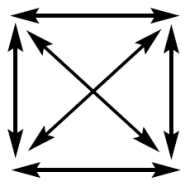
For example, where an offender or victim can't be easily identified, public reactions may be muted (or uncooperative), which, in turn, may hinder formal police attempts to control a particular type of offending (as may occur with complicated and opaque forms of white-collar/business crime). Similarly, in relation to 'victimless crimes' (such as illegal drug use) 'offender' and 'victim' may be the same person.

For Left Realism, therefore, policy solutions to crime are framed in terms of different 'forms and points of intervention' in the deviancy creation process, and such interventions occur at all levels of society. For Young (1997), therefore, the concept of social reaction involves reacting to 'crime' as a general behavioural category rather than simply reacting to criminal behaviour at particular moments (such as when a crime is committed). Reactions, therefore, shouldn't just focus on what to do after an offence; rather, interventions (or reacting prior to an offence) need to occur at all levels of society:

• Cultural/ideological in terms of improving our understanding of the causes of offending, the role and relationship of the police and public, and so forth.

• Economic in terms of things like educational provision and prospects, support for families, job creation and training.

The square of crime (Young, 1997)



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• Political in terms of both punitive aspects of control (a variety of ways of dealing with different offenders) and the general climate within which offenders and victims operate (levels of tolerance over crime, for example).

Although we've isolated these ideas for theoretical convenience, they are, of course, interrelated; economic interventions (such as providing education and training) are mediated through ideological interventions (how we view different types of offender and victim, for example) and political interventions (the practical measures developed to control crime).

Evaluation

Left Realism suggests the relationship between crime, deviance and social control is a complex one that requires complex theorising and solutions. The problem of crime is not one (as history shows) that can be solved by relatively simplistic 'solutions' (the idea that imprisonment is both appropriate for all forms of crime and that 'it works' as a deterrent rather than simply as a form of punishment, for example).

'Solutions to crime' require complex analyses that involve thinking about the genesis of deviant behaviour in terms of offenders – the social and psychological conditions that give rise to such behaviour – and control agencies (the role of the public, police and courts, etc.). We can, however, identify three problematic areas:

1. *Operationalisation*: The complexity of the left realist position makes it difficult to operationalise in its totality, and although complexity is not a criticism, it does mean that certain forms of intervention are more likely to be pursued than others. These include, for example, the types of intervention common to both administrative criminology and New Right realism, which in some circumstances makes it practically impossible to disentangle these different types of theory. On a practical level it's difficult to see how specific concepts like relative deprivation and political marginalisation can be measured, and if we can't quantify something like 'marginalisation', how do we know it has occurred for an offender?

2. *The central concepts of the "three-cornered approach" have also been questioned*; relative deprivation is a "catch-all" category that can be applied to explain almost any behaviour, concepts of "marginalisation" are similarly vague – its existence can only be "predicted after the event"; evidence of political marginalisation is inferred once an offender has been identified – a methodological approach that lends itself to the cherry-picking of evidence to support an argument. Interactionist and postmodern approaches have also questioned the usefulness of subculture as both a concept and its usefulness in explaining young male criminality. If subcultural groupings do not exist in the form specified by Left realism – if they are simply very loose gatherings rather than tight-knit groupings – this raises questions about the theoretical basis of the three-cornered approach.

3. *Common sense*: Mugford and O'Malley (1990) argue that a significant problem with Left Realism is the 'over-determination of the real'; in other words, it makes what people believe about crime (in terms of its causes and explanations) a central theoretical consideration. The experiences of 'ordinary people', in this respect, are considered 'more real' than explanations produced by social scientists, and this leads to the idea that the police concentrate on working-class forms of crime because 'that is what people want'.

Although this may reflect the idea that street crime, for example, is a cause for concern for people, it neglects the idea that less visible, more subtle forms of white-collar crime may have greater long term impact on the general quality of people's lives.

This "too-ready acceptance of conventional definitions of crime" has led feminists such as Smart (1990) to argue the focus on narrow legal definitions and simplified acceptance of official crime statistics – at a time when both their reliability and validity has been questioned – exaggerates the significance of low-level street crime and downplays wider questions of harm, particularly as this idea relates to male violence against women.

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