

# Labeling Theory

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Labeling theory highlights social responses to crime and deviance. In its narrowest version it asks what happens to criminals after they have been labeled and suggests that crime may be heightened by criminal sanctions. Thus, sending an offender to prison may actually work to criminalize him or her further, and stigmatizing a young offender for minor infractions at too early an age may lead into a criminal career. In its broadest version, labeling theory suggests that criminology has given too much attention to criminals as types of people and insufficient attention to the panoply of social control responses—from the law and the police to media and public reactions—which help to give crime its shape.

Although the elementary understanding of the way in which responses to crime may shape crime goes back a long way—caught in popular phrases like “give a dog a bad name . . .”—the twentieth century origins of the theory are thought to lie with Frank Tannenbaum in his classic study *Crime and the Community*. He argued that:

*The process of making the criminal, therefore, is a process of tagging, defining, identifying, segregating, describing, emphasizing, evoking the very traits that are complained of. . . . The person becomes the thing he is described as being. . . . The way out is a refusal to dramatize the evil (Tannenbaum 1938:19–20).*

The theory also connects to the sociological ideas of Durkheim, G. H. Mead, the Chicago School, Symbolic Interactionism, and Conflict theory, and draws upon both the idea of a “self-fulfilling prophecy” and the dictum of W. I. Thomas that “when people define situations as real they become real in their consequences.”

In the period between the early 1960s and the late 1970s labeling theory became a dominant sociological theory of crime, influential in challenging orthodox positivist criminology. During this hey day the key labelling theorists were usually seen to be the North

American sociologists Howard S. Becker and Edwin Lemert.

Becker, whose work focused on marijuana use and its control, outlined the broad problem of labeling when he stated:

*“We [should] direct our attention in research and theory building to the questions: who applied the label of deviant to whom? What consequences does the application of a label have for the person so labelled? Under what circumstances is the label of a deviant successfully applied?” (Becker 1963:3).*

In what became the canonical statement of labelling theory, he announced:

*Social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. . . . Deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an “offender.” The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied: deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label (Becker 1963:9).*

Edwin Lemert coined two key terms, primary and secondary deviance, to capture the distinction between original and effective causes of deviance: primary deviation arises from many sources but “has only marginal implications for the status and psychic structure of the person concerned,” whereas secondary deviation refers to the ways in which stigma and punishment can actually make the crime or deviance “become central facts of existence for those experiencing them, altering psychic structure, producing specialised organisation of social roles and self regarding attitudes.” (Lemert 1967:40–41). Deviant ascription became a pivotal or master status. It was Lemert who argued that, rather than seeing crime as leading to control, it may be more fruitful to see the process as one in which control

agencies structured and even generated crime. Both of these theorists were sceptical of the overuse of the theory.

By the mid 1970s, the theory had been co-opted into the mainstream of sociological work, as well as becoming the object of much criticism. By the late 1980s, the approach—along with the whole field of the sociology of deviance—was somewhat in decline. The text edited by Earl Rubington and Martin S. Weinberg, however, has continued to be updated and reached its sixth edition in 1998. This is the canonical sourcebook of the approach for many scholars.

### CONTRIBUTIONS

Overall, the theory has covered a surprisingly wide range of issues and produced many classic studies. Kai T. Erickson's (1966) *Wayward Puritans* used Durkheim to show the ways "witch hunts" served to mark out moral boundaries in New England communities of the seventeenth century. Edwin Schur's (1963) *Crime Without Victims* looked at victimless crimes and showed how the legal response to the then criminalized homosexuality, abortion and drug use generated more problems than were solved. Anthony Platt's (1969) *The Child Savers* looked at the historical origins of delinquency categories. David Matza's (1969) *Becoming Deviant* showed the impact of the state and its "ban" on deviant consciousness. Erving Goffman's *Asylums* (1962) and Thomas J. Scheff's (1967) *Being Mentally Ill* developed a controversial theory of mental illness based upon labeling dynamics. And the criminologist Lesley Wilkins's (1967) *Social Policy, Action and Research* used systems theory to show how a process of deviancy amplification works, how small deviations can through a process of feedback by control agencies become major patterns of deviance. This latter idea was subsequently used to great effect by Jock Young in *The Drugtakers* (1971), his study of Notting Hill drug use, and by Stanley Cohen in his seminal work on the Mods and Rockers in England, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972). This was a very productive period in the study of crime and deviance, yet the fadism of much social science has meant that most of these classics are now ignored by contemporary criminologists, even though the ideas they generated have sometimes been incorporated into other theories like social constructionism and moral panic theory.

The broad contributions of labeling theorists were many. They highlighted the importance of categories and labels regarding deviance, often showing that their historical roots were to be found in status and class conflicts. They enabled constant challenge to hitherto taken-for-granted deviance categories and gave impetus to a radical definition of those categories supported by master institutions of power. They researched the social control process, providing studies of courtroom

interactions and police-juvenile encounters, and showing how decisions taken by officials often had to do less with the nature of the offense and more with the contingencies surrounding the offender. Ethnicity and class became key dimensions for understanding this process. In general, labeling theorists lacked the moral disapproval shown by sociologists of earlier decades, and indeed they often had a so-called "underdog bias" (in the days before a great deal of attention was given to victims of crime). They often challenged mainstream studies which viewed deviance through the eyes of the establishment and the correctionalist. They also took on the difficulties of defining deviance itself. Becker's classic statement (1963) dispensed critically with definitions that evoke statistical, pathological, or dysfunctional criteria before suggesting his own which highlighted the application by others of sanctions to an offender.

Popular criticisms notwithstanding, the labeling perspective brought political analysis into deviancy study. It recognized that labeling was a political act and that "what rules are to be enforced, what behaviour regarded as deviant and which people labelled as outsiders must... be regarded as political questions" (Becker 1963:7). From there, it went on to produce a series of empirical studies concerning the origins of deviancy definitions through political actions in such areas as drug legislation, temperance legislation, delinquency definitions, homosexuality, prostitution, and pornography, as well as the political bias in the apprehension and adjudication of deviants.

Closely allied to this political analysis was the view of deviance as a form of resistance. People did not simply accept the labels of deviance that others placed upon them. Instead, they employed a series of secondary adjustments—rebellious, retreating, rejecting, rationalizing. Here were studies of the crafting of the deviant identity, where self-labeling, deviance avowal, and deviance neutralization took place.

Labeling theory, with its rejection of so-called positivistic criminology, was closely allied to the development of the sociology of deviance. This sociology not only changed the theoretical base for the study of criminals, but also brought in its wake a dramatic restructuring of empirical concerns. Sociologists turned their interests to the world of expressive deviance, the twilight, marginal worlds of tramps, alcoholics, strippers, dwarfs, prostitutes, drug addicts, nudists, to taxicab drivers, the blind, the dying, the physically ill and handicapped, and even to a motley array of problems in everyday life. It opened up the field of inquiry, so that it was possible to discuss a range of areas hitherto neglected—blindness, subnormality, obesity, smoking, and interpersonal relationships—thereby building the foundations for a formal theory of deviance as a social property and creating a method for understanding the routine and the regular through the eyes of the

ruptured and the irregular. Whatever these studies had in common, it was not criminology. Of course, some continued to study crime, but only as one instance of deviance—an uneasy coexistence was established.

### CRITIQUE

Throughout the 1970s, labeling theory came under attack from all sides. From the neo-Marxists of the so-called New Criminology, it was seen as a neo-liberal theory which gave too little attention to the state, power, and the economy. From the political right, it was seen as overly sympathetic to the criminal and deviant—a proposal for going soft on crime. For rigorous positivist-minded social scientists, it was either untestable or, if tested, found to be severely lacking in supportive evidence. The criminologist was usually unhappy about its neglect of the origins of deviance. For the emerging feminist criminology, it was guilty of the same neglects and biases as mainstream criminology (cf. Plummer 1979).

The most frequently cited limitation of labeling theory was that it failed to provide any account of the initial motivations towards deviance; it ignored the origins of deviant action. Popular as this criticism was, it seems a little unfair to attack a theory for not doing what it manifestly did not set out to do. Indeed, labeling theory wanted to turn attention away from the over-researched area of prime causes and on to the ways that the control processes shaped crime. A theory of labeling, they argued, was not a theory of criminal behavior. Yet in two curiously telling phrases, Becker suggested that “at least in fantasy, people are much more deviant than they appear” (1963:26); and

*Instead of deviant motives leading to the deviant behaviour, it is the other way round; the deviant behaviour in time produces the deviant motivation. Vague impulses and desires—in this case—are transformed into definite patterns of action through the social interpretation of a physical experience which is in itself ambiguous (1963:42).*

Becker's view had much in common with control theory.

Closely linked to the criticism regarding motivation is the argument that labeling theorists had rescued deviants from the deterministic constraints of biological, psychological, and social forces only to enchain them again in a new determinism of societal reactions. Thus Bordua (1967) suggests that labeling theory “assumes an essentially empty organism or at least one with little or no autonomous capacity to determine conduct” (p. 154), and Gouldner (1968) comments that it has “the paradoxical consequence of inviting us to view the deviant as a passive nonentity who is responsible neither for his suffering nor its alleviation—who is more sinned against than sinning” (p. 106). Such critiques

seem overstated. Even those studies which seem to provide the most crude model of labeling are often firmly within a humanist tradition which sees the labeled person as sensitively playing a part under the weight of the deviant label. There are many instances in the labeling literature of persons working to fight off labels and neutralize their possible impact. Albert Reiss's boy prostitutes, who develop normative systems which insulate them from homosexual self-conceptions, constitute one early instance of this tradition (Reiss 1964). Other studies show deviants actively seeking out the deviant label rather than having it cast upon them by others. The Braginsky's theory of mental illness (*Methods of Madness* 1969) centers on the idea that people seek out labels of madness in order to resolve problems of everyday life. In other words, although there may be instances of “passive labeling” both in the literature and in the empirical world, there are also many instances where the passive picture simply does not apply.

Finally, some critics have suggested that labeling theory is empirically wrong; research provides little support for its arguments. Testing propositions like “Rule breakers become entrenched in deviant roles because they are labelled deviant by others and are consequently excluded from resuming normal roles in the community” (Mankoff 1971:204), the theory can be easily falsified. Empirical research can show that many people become “deviants” without being directly labeled by others or are labeled because of their behavior and not merely because of the contingencies that surround them.

Most prominent in mounting this critique was Walter Gove, who organized a conference designed to test the validity of labeling theory over a wide range of areas—subnormality, alcoholism, disability, heroin addiction, sexual deviance, crime and delinquency. Gove concluded that “The evidence reviewed consistently indicates that it is the behaviour or condition of the person that is the critical factor in causing someone to be labelled deviant” (Gove 1975:295). Nevertheless, the testers ignore the idea that labeling theory is a perspective serving to reorientate research towards a vast array of new concerns and propositions; they prefer to focus instead upon a vulgarized and distorting version which, while making the theory testable, also renders it trivial (cf. Schur 1971).

### CONTINUITIES

Although labeling theory is always cited as one of the major sociological theories of crime and deviance, the original research and controversies that surrounded it during the 1970s have largely abated. The theory has become a quiet orthodoxy for some sociologists while being ignored by most criminologists. Yet several of its

key themes have entered research under different guises. Three can be highlighted here.

The first is the theory of moral panics. An idea discussed by Howard Becker over the initial concern with drugs in the United States, it was developed further by Stanley Cohen in his research on the teenage panics of Mods and Rockers at English Bank Holiday beach resorts in the 1960s. The focus here becomes the exaggerated responses of control agencies (largely the media) in stirring up concern and anxiety. The study of moral panics has been applied to many areas and has become a staple feature of sociological research (Thompson 1998).

The second is the theory of social constructionism. Much recent labeling theory has moved under this different name. This is an approach in sociology which argues that "conditions must be brought to people's notice in order to become social problems" (Best 1990:11). Once again closely allied to Becker's notion of moral enterprise, this theory looks at the ways individuals, groups, and societies come to label certain phenomena as problems and how others then respond to such claims. Best, for instance, traced the "rhetoric and concern about child victims," whilst Joseph Gusfield (1981) has traced the drunk-driving problem. Broadly, there is a "social problems marketplace" in which people struggle to own social problems. These theories continue to examine the rhetorics, the claims and the power struggles behind such definitional processes.

A third area is the enhanced understanding of social control. Traditionally, many labeling theorists were concerned with the excessive encroachment upon the personal life of technology, bureaucracy, and the state—often in its grossest forms such as the increasing medicalization of deviance, the bureaucratization of the control agencies and the concomitant dehumanization of the lives of their "victims," as well as the direct application of technology in the service of control. With the political shift to the right in many Western democracies in the 1980s, such concerns were co-opted as part of a market-based, laissez faire liberalism which aimed to roll back the state and introduce privatization into so-

cial control. Despite this, labeling theorists have long been concerned with policies of decriminalization, deinstitutionalization, demedicalization, deprofessionalization and the creation of social movements concerned with such activities (Cohen 1985).

In sum: labeling theory highlights societal reactions to crime and deviance. It has a long history but becomes particularly prominent in the 1960s and 1970s. Since that time and after a number of critiques, the theory has become something of an orthodoxy. Currently, the theories of moral panics and social constructionism and theories of social control have become its modern day incarnations.

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