

Labelling theory on crime and deviance

[Law](#), [Crime](#)



To begin, Stephen Jones (1998) has received the policy implications of interactionist and labelling theories. First of all, he argues that they have two main implications. Initially they suggested that as many types of behaviour as possible should be decriminalized. Secondly, they imply that, when the law has to intervene, it should try to avoid giving people a self-concept in which they view themselves as criminals. This might involve trying to keep people out of prison or warning people rather than prosecuting them.

Both of these approaches have had some influence. For example, in Britain the independent newspaper started a campaign in 1997 to legalize cannabis. In countries such as the Netherlands some “soft” drugs have been effectively legalized. However, in Britain, the main impact of such thinking has probably been on juvenile justice. Jones suggests that there have been rather consistent policies in this area, but for adults, the only measure of this nature was contained in the rehabilitation of offenders, once a period of time (which depended on the offense) had elapsed.

Additionally as Jones points out, such policies became less popular during the 1990's. In some quarters there has been a renewed emphasis on the public shaming of offenders in order to deter others. In terms of sociological theory in the 1960's, the interactionist view of deviance enjoyed wide popularity. For many sociologists, the work of writers such as Becker, Lemert and Goffman became the accepted, orthodox perspective on deviance.

Nevertheless, in the 1970's it began to provoke strong criticism. Interactionists rallied to the defense of their work and attempted to show that the criticism was unjustified. The third major criticism of the interactionist perspective is that it is too deterministic. It assumes that once a person has

been labelled, their deviance will inevitably become worse. The labelled person has no option but to get more and more involved in deviant activities.

Thus, Ronald Ackers stated; one sometimes gets the impression from reading the literature that people go about minding their own business, and then 'wham' bad society comes along and slops them with a stigmatized label, Forced into the role of deviant the individual has little choice but to be deviant. Critics like Ackers are suggesting that individuals might simply choose to be deviant, regardless of whether they have been labelled. Thus, Labelling does not cause most terrorists to turn crime; they are motivated by their political beliefs to break the law. As Alvin W.

Gouldner notes in his critique of as someone who is passive and controlled by a man-on-his-back, rather than as an active 'man-fighting-back'. If individuals can choose to take part in deviance, they may also decide to ignore a label and to give up deviance 'despite' it. The Swedish sociologist Johnnes Knutssen ((1977) argues that interactionists have not produced sufficient evidence to show that labeling will amplify deviance. Knutssen feels that labelling theories have taken the effects of labels to be 'self-evident-truths', without producing the research findings necessary to support their case.