

# Howard becker and the term moral entrepreneur

Experience, Human Nature



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Howard Becker is hailed as the founder of modern labeling theory. He also developed the term “ moral entrepreneur” to describe persons in power who campaign to have certain deviant behavior outlawed (Becker, 1963). He claims that many laws are established for such purposes, and that behavior that is defined as criminal is dynamic and changes throughout time. Therefore, the actual criminal behavior is irrelevant to the theory. What really matters is which outlaws are arrested and processed by the criminal justice system (Becker, 1963). As a result of the belief that personal and societal factors do not contribute to motivations for criminal behavior there has been little study of the criminal him/herself and the aforesaid factors. As one might expect, this aspect of Labeling Theory is still being debated. There is one exception to this belief, however most labeling theorists claim that the system is biased toward the lower class, which constitutes the overwhelming majority of arrests and convictions within the American criminal justice system (Wellford, 1975).

This “Labeling Theory,” found in *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (1963), is perhaps his most important and influential contribution to sociology. Influenced by Cooley’s looking-glass self, Mead’s theories on the internalization of the self, and Lemert’s social constructionism, Becker explains that deviance is based on the reactions and responses of others to an individual’s acts. The label of deviant is applied to an individual when others observe their behavior and react to it by labeling that person as deviant. No particular act is inherently deviant until a group with socially powerful statuses or positions label it as such (Becker, 1963). This theoretical approach to deviance has influenced criminology, gender, sexuality and identity research.

This work became the manifesto of the labeling theory movement among sociologists. In his opening, Becker writes:

“...social groups create deviance by making rules whose infraction creates deviance, and by applying those roles to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by other of rules and sanctions to an ‘offender.’ The deviant is one to whom that label has been successfully applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label.”[8]

While society uses the stigmatic label to justify its condemnation, the deviant actor uses it to justify his actions. He wrote: “To put a complex argument in a few words: instead of the deviant motives leading to the deviant behavior,

it is the other way around, the deviant behavior in time produces the deviant motivation.”[9]

## INFLUENCES

Becker’s theory evolved during a period of social and political power struggle that was amplified within the world of the college campus (Pfohl 1994).

Liberal political movements were embraced by many of the college students and faculty in America (Pfohl 1994). Howard Becker harnessed this liberal influence and adjusted Lemert’s labeling theory and its symbolic interaction theoretical background. The labeling theory outlined in *Outsiders* is recognized as the prevailing social reaction approach by Lemert as well as most other sociologists (www. sonoma. edu ). Becker’s approach has its roots in the symbolic interaction foundation of Cooley and Mead, and the labeling influences of Tannenbaum and Lemert.

Charles Cooley’s *Human Nature and the Social Order* (1902) examines the personal perception of oneself through studies of children and their imaginary friends. Cooley develops the theoretical concept of the looking glass self, a type of imaginary sociability (Cooley 1902). People imagine the view of themselves through the eyes of others in their social circles and form judgements of themselves based on these imaginary observations (Cooley 1902). The main idea of the looking glass self is that people define themselves according to society’s perception of them (www. d. umn. edu ). Cooley’s ideas, coupled with the works of Mead, are very important to labeling theory and its approach to a person’s acceptance of labels as attached by society.

George Mead's theory is less concerned with the micro-level focus on the deviant and more concerned with the macro-level process of separating the conventional and the condemned (Pfohl 1994). In *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934), Mead describes the perception of self as formed within the context of social process (Wright 1984). The self is the product of the mind's perception of social symbols and interactions (www. d. umn. edu ). The self exists in objective reality and is then internalized into the conscious (Wright 1984). The idea of shifting the focus away from the individual deviant and looking at how social structure affects the separation of those persons considered unconventional has a great influence on how Becker approaches labeling theory.

*Social Pathology* (1951) outlines Edwin Lemert's approach to what many consider the original version of labeling theory. Lemert, unhappy with theories that take the concept of deviance for granted, focuses on the social construction of deviance (Lemert 1951). Lemert (1951) describes deviance as the product society's reaction to an act and the affixing of a deviant label on the actor. *Social Pathology* details the concepts of primary and secondary deviance. According to Lemert (1951), primary deviance is the initial incidence of an act causing an authority figure to label the actor deviant. This initial labeling of a deviant act will remain primary as long as the actor can rationalize or deal with the process as a function of a socially acceptable role (Lemert 1951). If the labeled deviant reacts to this process by accepting the deviant label, and further entrenches his/herself in deviant behavior, this is referred to as secondary deviance (Lemert 1951). Lemert considers the causes of primary deviance as fluid, and only important to researchers

concerned with specific social problems at a certain time. In the years following Social Pathology, Lemert argues for the decriminalization of victimless crimes, advocates pre-trial diversion programs, and has backed away labeling determinism (Wright 1984).

## **BECKER'S LABELLING THEORY**

Howard Becker's approach to the labeling of deviance, as described in *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (1963), views deviance as the creation of social groups and not the quality of some act or behavior.

Becker (1963) criticizes other theories of deviance for accepting the existence of deviance and by doing so, accept the values of the majority within the social group. According to Becker (1963), studying the act of the individual is unimportant because deviance is simply rule breaking behavior that is labeled deviant by persons in positions of power. The rule breaking behavior is constant, the labeling of the behavior varies (Becker 1963).

Becker (1963) describes rules as the reflection of certain social norms held by the majority of a society, whether formal or informal. Enforced rules, the focus of Becker's (1963) approach, are applied differentially and usually facilitate certain favorable consequences for those who apply the label. In short, members of the rule-making society may label rule breaking behavior deviant depending on the degree of reaction over time (Becker 1963).

Becker (1963) views those people that are likely to engage in rule breaking behavior as essentially different than members of the rule-making or rule-abiding society. Those persons who are prone to rule-breaking behavior see themselves as morally at odds with those members of the rule-abiding

society (Becker 1963). Becker (1963) uses the term “ outsider” to describe a labeled rule-breaker or deviant that accepts the label attached to them and view themselves as different from “ mainstream” society. Deviants may consider themselves more “ outside” than others similarly labeled (Becker 1963). Deviant outsiders might view those rule making or abiding members of society as being the outsiders of their social group (Becker 1963).

The final step in the creation of a career delinquent involves the movement of a rule breaker into a deviant subculture (Becker 1963). The affiliation of the labeled deviant with an organized provides the person with moral support and a self-justifying rationale (Becker 1963). Becker (1963) describes how those involved in an organized crime may learn new forms of deviance through differential association.

Becker (1963) also focuses on those in positions of power and authority that make and enforce the rules. Rules are created by a moral entrepreneur, a person that takes the initiative to crusade for a rule that would right a society evil (Becker 1963). The moral entrepreneur’s motive may be to elevate the social status of those members of society below him/her (Becker 1963). The success of the crusade may lead to the entrepreneur to become a professional rule creator (Becker 1963). Becker (1963) states that the success of each moral crusade brings along with it a new group of outsiders, and a new responsibility of an enforcement agency.

According to Becker (1963), the enforcement of society’s rules is an enterprising act. The enforcement of a rule occurs when those that want a rule enforced, usually to some sort of gain to their personal interests, bring

the rule infraction to the attention of the public (Becker 1963). The rule infraction, brought to the attention of those in positions of authority, is dealt with punitively by the entrepreneur (Becker 1963). The enforcement of the rule may involve the mediation of conflicts between many different interest groups by those in positions of power (Becker 1963). The enforcers themselves may have a moral crusade to stop crime, but most engage in the process strictly as a part of their occupation (Becker 1963). Rule enforcers use the process of formal enforcement to satisfy two major interests, the justification of their occupation and the winning of respect from the people he/she patrols (Becker 1963). The enforcer is armed with a great deal of discretion and may use his/her power to label an innocent person in order to gain respect (Becker 1963). The misuse of labeling powers by enforcers may create a deviant out of a person who otherwise would not be prone to rule breaking behavior (Becker 1963).

Becker's work pays particular attention to the way society reacts to people with "criminal" labels. He proposes that this label becomes a person's master status, meaning that this is a constant label, affecting and over-riding how others will view them. The status people use to identify and classify a person will always be that of a criminal. Any other statuses a person occupies are no longer heeded. A person could be a parent, employee, spouse, etc., but the first and major status that will come to mind to other people and themselves is that of the criminal (Becker, 1963).

Becker's *Outsiders* (1963) uses two cases to illustrate his approach to labeling theory. Becker (1963) analyzes the history of marijuana laws in the



United States and how individuals progress into the recreational use of the drug. Becker (1963) chooses to analyze marijuana because the progression of use can be observed. The first time user of marijuana finds the experience as somewhat unpleasant, but as the user imitates peers he/she learns to perceive the effects of marijuana as enjoyable (Becker 1963).

Becker (1963) identifies three stages of marijuana use: the beginner, the occasional user, and the regular user. The three self-explanatory categories of marijuana users can be manipulated through the use of social controls (Becker 1963). Control of the marijuana supply has both positive and negative effects (Becker 1963). A diminished supply of marijuana may lead to a decreased use of the drug among some people, but it may also drive a user to associate with an organized group of deviants to obtain marijuana (Becker 1963). Becker (1963) believes that while control of marijuana supply is an important social control, it does not deter use. The best way to deter a user is to control his/her individual moral view of marijuana use.

A marihuana user is labelled to be deviant as it contravenes the rules and norms of the society. Becker researched on marihuana users and used it in supporting his labelling theory . Becker notes that this deviant behaviour is based on the given kind of behaviour as an end product of a sequence of social experiences during which the person acquires a comprehension of the meaning of the behaviour, the perceptions and judgements of objects and situations, all of which makes the activity possible and desirable. An individual will only be able to use marihuana for pleasure if he goes through a process of learning to conceive of it as an object where he is able to

recognise the effects and connect them with drug use; to inhale in a way that produce real upshot; and learning to enjoy the sensation he comprehends. Once the ability to achieve enjoyment is acquired, he will continue to use it. (continuing usage of the marihuana is the secondary deviant) Considerations of morality and appropriateness, occasioned by the rejoinder of society, may hamper and impede use, but use persists to be a possibility in terms of the notion of the drug. The act will only be impossible when the ability to achieve the enjoyment is vanished, through a revolutionize of user's conception of the drug occasioned by certain kind of experience with it.

Becker (1963) uses a participant observation study of the lives of Chicago dance musicians to illustrate the social life of a deviant subculture. Although dance musicians as a group are law-abiding, their unconventional lifestyles lead them to feel as outsiders (Becker 1963). Becker (1963) describes how being a dance musician involves a change in attitudes and opinions in order to conform to the subculture. The culture of the dance musician is rich in its own language and gestures (Becker 1963). Many of the dance musicians live a conventional family life during the day and change into their role as musician at night (Becker 1963).

Another aspect of labelling theory in which Becker outlines as problematic, is the concept of morality. He questions a situation where the researcher's sympathies should lie. He contemplates on whether one should side with the underdog or simply judge criminal behaviour as inherently wrong? He stresses the sociological difficulty of this decision. He claims that the

researcher, whether taking either side, will be accused of taking a one-sided and distorted view, but how is it possible to see the situation from both sides simultaneously (Becker, 1963)? Despite many contributions, the evaluation of labelling theorists is normally considered with an excessive amount of criticism.

Becker concludes *Outsiders* (1963) by emphasizing the need for empirical research of his approach to labeling theory. Social scientists produced a vast amount of literature in response to Becker's request. Much of the research involving labeling theory directly reflects Becker's approach, while others use Becker (1963) as a foundation for theory development.

## **APPLICATION**

Gideon Fishman tests Becker's labeling theory by studying a sample of midwestern juvenile delinquents (Friday and Stewart 1977). Fishman's research design measures negative self-perception and whether this self-perception affects future delinquency (Friday and Stewart 1977). The results of Fishman's study show that secondary deviance is not universal and individuals react to deviant labels in different ways (Friday and Stewart 1977).

A popular application of Becker's labeling theory (1963) is in the area of mental health. Thomas Scheff embraces Becker's approach to labeling and describes how people are labeled mentally ill in order to explain certain rule-breaking behavior that society can't categorize (Holstein 1993; [www. sscf. ucsb. edu](http://www.sscf.ucsb.edu) ). Scheff is not concerned with occasional acts of deviance, rather it is the residual or episodic deviance that often falls under the label of

mental illness (Wright 1984; Pfohl 1994). People labeled as mentally ill adopt the behaviors of the stereotypical mental patient as portrayed through the mass media (Wright 1984). Scheff argues that those who express the stereotypical behavior of the mentally ill are rewarded by enterprising psychology professionals (Wright 1984; Pfohl 1994). According to Scheff, everybody expresses the popular symptoms of mental illness at some point in their life and labels are attached to those without power (Wright 1984). Scheff provides empirical evidence in the form of several studies of the process of mental hospital commitment (Holstein 1993; Pfohl 1994; Wright 1983; [www.sscf.ucsb.edu](http://www.sscf.ucsb.edu) ).

Many social scientists challenge Scheff's arguments on theoretical and empirical grounds. James A. Holstein (1993) attacks Scheff's approach for focusing on the deviant and not the moral entrepreneurs that attach the labels. Florence Ridlon (1988) criticizes Scheff's work for being deterministic and argues for a less causal model to explain mental afflictions such as alcoholism. Walter Gove (1980), an adamant critic of Scheff, believes that Scheff should not dismiss the influence of psychopathological variables on mental illness. Gove (1980) also criticizes Scheff's empirical methodology and operations.

Edwin Schur modifies Becker's labeling theory in *Labeling Deviant Behavior* (1971) by shifting some of the focus to the individual deviant. Schur (1971) also theorizes that as persons labeled deviant gain power and organize, they progress in social definition from an uprising, social movement, and civil war to the formation of a mainstream political party.

Schur argues in *Labeling Women Deviant* (1983) that women in America are automatically labeled deviant by the male-dominated society. Women accept the deviant label as their master status and limit their life chances (Schur 1983).

## CRITICISMS

Becker's theory of labeling, while maintaining a great deal of popularity today, does encounter several criticisms (Pfohl 1994; [www. mpcc. cc. ne. us](http://www.mpcc.cc.ne.us) ; Ridlon 1988). Many sociologists view labeling theory as untestable and, by definition, not a true theory (Ridlon 1988). Becker (1963) acknowledges that his labeling theory is a theoretical approach, not a true theory, and that sociologists should attempt to establish empirical tests for his approach. Another major criticism of labeling theory is its failure to explain primary deviance ([www. mpcc. cc. ne. us](http://www.mpcc.cc.ne.us) ). Both Lemert (1951) and Becker (1963) believe that primary deviance is influenced by many different and changing variables and the research of primary deviance causes is futile. Pfohl (1994) details the criticism of many sociologists that labeling theory is causal or deterministic. Becker (1963) qualifies his approach to social reaction theory by stating that some groups of rule-breakers may be able to choose alternative courses of action.

Becker's immensely popular views were also subjected to a barrage of criticism, most of it blaming him for neglecting the influence of other biological, genetic effects and personal responsibility. In a later 1973 edition of his work, he answered his critics. He wrote that while sociologists, while dedicated to studying society, are often careful not to look too closely.

Instead, he wrote: “ I prefer to think of what we study as collective action. People act, as Mead and Blumer have made clearest, together. They do what they do with an eye on what others have done, are doing now, and may do in the future. One tries to fit his own line of action into the actions of others, just as each of them likewise adjusts his own developing actions to what he sees and expects others to do.”[10]

Francis Cullen reported in 1984 that Becker was probably too generous with his critics. After 20 years, his views, far from being supplanted, have been corrected and absorbed into an expanded “ structuring perspective.”[11]

From a logical standpoint there are flaws within the main points of labeling theory. Initially the theory states that no acts are inherently criminal (Wellford, 1975). Meaning that acts are only “ criminal” when society has deemed them as such. The implications of this being that criminal law is dynamic and ever-changing, differing from society to society. But if this is true then why are certain acts illegal within the majority of the civilized world? Murder, rape, arson, armed robbery. All these are considered crimes in any society or country one could care to name.

Also the theory claims that for a criminal to be successfully labeled an audience must be present to provide a reaction to the crimes committed. Does this mean that if a murder is committed where the killer has successfully avoided anyone’s suspicion that the act is then not criminal and the killer will not think of him/herself as such? It’s probable that the murderer’s socialization and/or value system could initialize self-labeling, but

the theory clearly states the labeling must come from a 3rd party (Hagan, 1973).

For the sake of argument, if self labeling is possible and a person has obtained a self-initialized criminal master status/label, how do they react to it? Do they become criminals or try to “ rationalize” as stated by Foster, Dinitz, and Reckless (Foster & Dinitz & Reckless, 1972)?

Becker’s labelling theory has also drawn to a considerable criticism. One of such is that his labelling theory failed to answer the etiological question about primary deviance, for example: What causes deviance? Jack Gibbs pointed out that the theory failed to provide ample answers to three etiological questions: Why does the prevalence of a particular act vary from one population to the next? Why do some persons commit the act while others do not? Why is the act in question considered deviant and criminal in some societies but not in others? This clearly shows that labelling theory is mere humanistic-antideterministic or voluntaristic hypothesis only . Then again, recent activists of the theory beginning to shift the labelling theory into a more scientific, deterministic one, and this approach is apparent in empirical studies of the secondary deviance. Instead of describing the process of interaction between labellers and the labelled that leads to secondary deviance, these revisionists defined, operationalised or measure labelling as a causal variable of secondary deviation.

## CONCLUSION

Social scientists disagree on the future of labeling theory. Pfohl (1994) recognizes labeling theory as very influential in today’s studies of deviance.

Some social scientists view labeling theory as declining in importance due to lack of empirical support and a conservative political climate (www. mpcc. cc. ne. us ). Becker (1963) believes the future of labeling theory lies in the widespread empirical study of deviance and kinds of deviance.

Becker's analysis gives us a dynamic account of how a person can be funneled into a deviant career by labeling processes. This is also a compellingly humanistic theory of deviance. We can identify and sympathize with the deviant who has been the victim of labeling processes, even to the extent of realizing that it could happen to any of us. In this and many other respects, Becker's micro-relativistic approach to deviance theory contrasts markedly with normative theories that emphasize in a detached, " objective" way the fundamental differences between deviants and nondeviants. If Becker makes us understand the human implications of reactions to deviance, then he has accomplished one of his major theoretical goals.

In attempting to evaluate the contribution of the labelling theorists to the study of the sociology of deviance, it can be said that it depends on how the theory is viewed. If the theory is considered as " a theory, with all the achievements and obligations that go with the title", then its flaws are many. Yet if, as Backer suggests, we attempt to consider the theory as it were intended, that is, as a mere way of looking at deviance, then the contribution can be said to be weighty, as it opened up a whole new study of the individual after he has committed an act of deviance. At this point it must be mentioned that labelling theorists do not merely consider the after-effects of the deviant act, as it is sometimes suggested. Becker, for example, considers



the individual and how he begins to smoke marijuana. As Schur sums up, labelling theory “ is not a revolutionary new approach to the analysis of social problems but rather a recording or emphasis of such analysis, a reordering that may help us to view deviance and control in a realistic, comprehensive, and sociologically meaningful light”. As such, one can conclude that labelling theory continues in its usefulness, as long as deviant behaviour continues to exist.