

Critically assess the  
main arguments in  
outsiders



Arguing that social deviance is a more common phenomenon than perceived and that conventional wisdom that social deviants are pathological is incorrect

Howard S. Becker, born April 18th 1928, is a well known renowned American Sociologist. Of all his many writings, ' Outsiders', which was written in 1963, is one of his most imperative and prominent works, regarded as critical classical study within the discipline of sociology and deviance. It can be said that it is one of Becker's most famous pieces of work which offered one of the first and clearest explanations for the ' labelling theory'. ' Outsiders' continues to be a seminal text on the Interactionist's approach to deviance in society today. He states that " the outsider – the deviant from group rules – has been the subject of much speculation, theorizing, and scientific study" (Becker 1997: 3). Howard Becker elaborates the study of deviance specifically from a social perspective, and considers the processes by which people or different types of acts come to be labelled as deviant. His ideas and arguments are based upon his notion that deviance is not a quality of a bad person but it is the result of someone characterizing and labelling someone's activity as bad.

This essay asks one to critically assess the main arguments Becker puts forward in Outsiders. Becker sets the foundations for his ideas on ' labelling theory' in his book and furthers the notions of other Sociologists such as Edwin Lemert. Lemert has been commonly credited with being the founder and one of the firsts to discuss what has been called the " Societal Reaction" theory. In Lemert's book ' Social Pathology' written in 1951, Lemert summarized an approach which has been regarded and considered to be an

original version of the 'labelling theory'. In his book he focuses on the social construction of deviance and explained deviance to be the product of society's reaction to an act and the affixing of a deviant label to the actor. The book explains the concepts of primary and secondary deviance and according to Lemert; primary deviance is the initial incidence of an act causing someone of authority to label the actor as deviant. This initial labelling of an act deemed deviant would stay primary for as long as the actor can rationalize the process as a function of a socially acceptable role (Lemert 1951). As well as discussing the theory of labelling, Becker appraises the process in where users of marihuana become labelled as deviants and talks about jazz music. The main objective is to attempt to critically evaluate and analyse the ideas and themes contained within the book and assess his arguments.

The book was written in the 60s and as a consequence it is quite outdated, and although some of his ideas and theories are relevant in today's society, some of them can not in context. In addition he uses the term 'Negros' rather than African American to describe black people and he puts homosexuality into the same deviant group such as alcoholics, gamblers and people who are on drugs.

In Becker's book he coins and furthers the term labelling theory. It explains that "if individuals or groups are defined as deviant, there will be important and often unanticipated consequences at the level of behaviour" (Abercrombie et al. 1988: 132).

Chapter one explains what deviance is and Becker argues the limitations of existing attempts to define deviance. He explained for deviance to exist, the behaviour has to be first observed and then judged to be deviant. Becker stated that “ social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance; and by applying those rules to particular people and labelling them outsiders” (Becker 1997: 9). “ When a rule is enforced, the person who is supposed to have broken it may be seen as a special kind of person, one cannot be trusted to live by the tiles agreed on by the group. He is regarded as an outsider” (Becker 1997: 3). Furthermore, Becker points out that what one may define as a deviant; another perhaps in a different society would not. In addition “ the person who is thus labelled an outsider may have a different view of the matter” and may believe that those that have judged them not to be “ legitimately entitled to do so” so then the rule breakers may see those that judged as outsiders. Becker stated that different social groups created deviance by making the rules whose infraction constituted deviance and by applying those rules to particular people and labelling them as “ outsiders”. Becker stated that after one has been ascribed as a deviant, they then progress down the path of a ‘ deviant career’ as that is what they have been labelled as. This then becomes hard to get rid of. Becker claimed though that when we are studying people who are deviant we should not take their deviance for granted due to the fact we “ cannot assume that these people have actually committed a deviant act or broken some rule, because the process of labelling theory may not be infallible”. Furthermore, an individual who has been labelled as a deviant may not have committed the act intentionally believing that it was in fact deviant. In addition, this does not necessarily mean that the individual was

even a deviant in the past which is a critical examination of the book. When a person is labelled as such by society, they then accept this label so because they now seem themselves as criminals they then are likely to continue on their deviant behaviour (Becker 1997). Deviant becomes a master status, it becomes the key definition in the eyes of the wider society of who and what you are.

In chapter two Becker points out and states that he is not “ here to argue that only acts which are regarded as deviant by others are “ really” deviant (Becker 1997: 19). If we look at this in relation to homosexuality, in the 60s it was deemed as a criminal offence but too those who were homosexual it was who they were. Becker explains two different models of deviance; the simultaneous and sequential models. The simultaneous claims that particular behaviours occur as a result of a number of variables arising at the same time and the sequential model contends that particular behaviours are caused by sequence of occurrences. Becker criticises the implicit theoretical assumption in standard which attempts to explain deviancy; that all factor operate simultaneously and seek to “ predict” behaviour.

Becker used juvenile delinquency as an example and explained and argued that coming from a broken home or in an environment with negative influences will not necessarily lead to juvenile delinquency but rather would be one of a series of sequential events or circumstances. The sequential model in addition is too apparent in the following two chapters which detail and explain how one learns the techniques of how to use marihuana and this in the process assists the formation of an individual identity. this may include joining a social group in which the drug is available and learning their

techniques on how to smoke. For instance, “ most users agree that it cannot be smoked like tobacco if one is to get high” (Becker 1997: 46). In addition “ without the use of some such technique the drug will produce no effects and the user will be unable to get high”.

In relation to a musician career, which is one of the topics Becker discusses, he stated that Members of the musician’s demographic go from being ‘normal’ family men to dance musicians, adapting to the needs of that sub-culture as they do so. For example, a musician may feel pressurized and forced into playing ‘ commercial’ music to meet perceived demand, even if that is not the type of music they wanted to play or produce. Musicians in general continuously adapt their music to the needs of their sub-culture, even if this means compromising the quality of their music. As a result they may have been seen to be “ selling out”, losing their “ integrity” and in addition they would have lost the respect from their musical counterparts. In today’s society this may be apparent in hip hop, with many people complaining that the integrity of the genre has gone with record labels interested on what sells more, rather than good music. In relation to deviance, Becker linked it and explained the processes through which dance musicians find work as deviant. Even though their culture may be different to that of an ordinary job, what they do is no different to what occurs in the music industry today. A popular quote used in show business is “ it’s not what you know, it’s who you know” and it is just as imperative and important today as it was back in the 1960s. Nevertheless there is a contradiction when Becker talks about losing the respect of other dance musicians. It leads to

the question though that how can respect be lost if all dance musicians act in the same way and manner. Thus can it be seemed deviant.

The final chapter looks at problems and sympathies within the study of deviance, where Becker describes a lack of substance in the theories that exist, believing them to be faulty or inadequate. He believes that not enough is known about deviant groups such as homosexuals, and gaps exist not just with homosexuals but with other deviant groups. He also describes how access to information and to the groups that are the focus for study is restricted, because those classed as outsiders in turn reciprocate that label to the rest of society; this forms part of an element of protection on the deviant's part. Questions are posed, such as 'how do researchers find doctors who are drug-addicts themselves, or even homosexuals of certain kinds? Becker even asks what stand-point the researcher will take, due to the many levels of individual characteristics in any social group; essentially, how will a researcher remove any other factors that may influence his study beyond that which he intends to manipulate.

The work analysing how deviance is socially constructed is revelatory. This has pure presence. Becker shows how deviance is created through the appliance of rules by people who define deviance and then search for the miscreants. It is form of institutional violence enacted on the powerless outer groups to create an inner sense of camaraderie; the socially included.

Becker examines some of the criticisms and feels that labelling theory was created as a way of looking at a general area of human activity (1963).

Moreover he suggests that it was created as a way of looking at a general area of human activity (1963).

However, it is not a theory, with all the achievements and obligations that go with the title, nor is it focussed exclusively on the act of labelling as some have thought. Moreover, Becker does mention some of the criticisms given to labelling theory. For example, he states how interactionist theories have been accused of giving aid and comfort to the enemy, be the enemy those who would upset the stability of the existing order of the Establishment. In essence, we have already mentioned the suggestion of Erikson that deviance is a necessary part of society, showing the difference between right and wrong, and encouraging the majority of society to toe the line at the expense of the deviant minority. A further criticism mentioned by Becker is that given by many conservative critics (although other non-conservative critics have also noted this) that is, that interactionist theories of deviance openly or covertly attack conventional morality. Becker acknowledges this, suggesting that intentionally or otherwise, they are corrosive of conventional modes of thought and established institutions. Becker (1967) goes as far as to say that the labelling theorist must side with the deviator, as it is up to the sociologists to remedy unfair situations. However, not all theorists would see the work of Becker and the other labelling theorists as quite so radical. As a matter of fact, many sociologists view labelling theory as an untestable and untrue theory. Furthermore, Becker (1963) acknowledges that his labelling theory is a theoretical approach, not a true theory. As well, Becker suggests that sociologists should attempt establishing empirical tests for his approach. As well, further criticism is given due to the fact that, following behaviour



patterns is the mere result of the behaviour patterns being ascribed to it. Secondly, he suggests that while considering the more usual, everyday types of deviance, such as homosexuality, prostitution, and juvenile delinquency, the labelling theorists have totally ignored a more dangerous and malevolent type of deviance, what Liazos himself terms covert institutional violence. He suggests that this type of violence leads to such things as poverty and exploitation, the war in Vietnam, unjust tax laws, racism, sexism, and so on... (1972). However, it is questionable whether labelling theorists should even attempt to discuss forms of deviance such as this in the same way as more commonplace individual crimes, or whether the two should be kept totally separate, being so different in subject matter. Liazos also criticises the labelling theorists as they do not consider the extent of the importance of power in their substantive analysis, although all stress its importance. He says that the really powerful, the upper classes and the power elite, those that could be referred to as the top dogs, are not considered in any great detail by the labelling theorists. A further criticism of the labelling theory is that of Jack Gibb (1966). He questions the success of the labelling theorists in terms of how they interpret the defining of behaviour as deviant, as well as, how much study is actually done in this area. In addition, Becker (1963) goes out of his way to explain the underlying problems of labelling theory. First of all, he suggests that there are not enough studies of deviant behaviour. He further implies that there are not enough studies of enough kinds of deviant behaviour. Finally, he insists that another deficiency of the labelling theory is that they don't have enough studies in which the persons doing the research achieve close contact with those that they study, in order for them to become aware of the complex and manifold character of the

deviant activity. Becker (1963) also speaks of the difficulty with secrecy. As a matter of fact, in many cases the deviant individual performs deviant acts in secrecy and does not wish this behaviour to be known universally. For example, in the results found by Humphreys in his study of the `Tearoom Trade`, many of the individuals partaking in homosexual behaviour were married with children. When asked later in questionnaires about their views on homosexuality, very few admitted to visiting the tearooms.

In its entirety, the labelling theory has been imperative within the discipline of Sociology. What is more, after extensive critical analysis it appears to be evident that the theory has proven to be very significant in establishing a relative body of empirical research evidence on the study of crime and deviance. After an individual has been labelled a deviant they then lead a life of crime and become deviants which is the main focus Becker stressed. Nevertheless, Becker also pointed out that when studying deviant people one should not take their deviance for granted, as one cannot presuppose they had actually committed a deviant or criminal act for the reason that the process of labelling theory may not be foolproof and reliable. In other words, to be labelled deviant does not necessarily mean that the individual is, or has been deviant in the past.

Some sociologists dispute the labelling theory and insist it is not really a theory. Becker stressed the need for more empirical research on his study of it as he concluded *Outsiders* and many sociologists today have furthered his ideas and explanations. Nevertheless, the labelling theory will forever remain useful as long as deviant behaviour exists in society. Critically, Becker focuses on 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 and no matter what other social status the individual has, they will always be deemed deviant. He declared that one may be someone high in class, perhaps a sibling, parent or spouse nevertheless the first and major status that everyone would focus on was the criminal and deviant label (Becker 1963).