

# Labeling theory essay sample

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Deviance, like beauty, is in the eyes of the beholder. There is nothing inherently deviant in any human act, something is deviant only because some people have been successful in labelling it so. J. L Simmons The definition of the situation implies that if you define a situation as real, it is real only in its consequences.

## INTRODUCTION

Labelling theory, stemming from the influences of Cooley, Mead, Tannenbaum, and Lemert, has its origins somewhere within the context of the twentieth century. However, Edwin Lemert is widely considered the producer and founder of the original version of labelling theory. This paper, not a summary, provides a brief history of labelling theory, as well as, its role in the sociology of deviance. It attempts to explore the contributions made by labelling theorists, the criticism towards labelling theorists, and the discussion surrounding its reality as an actual theory. In essence, the main focus of this paper besides proving an understanding of Howard Becker, is to describe and evaluate `labelling theory` to the study of crime and deviance, by way of an in depth discussion.

## THEORETICAL IMAGES

The theoretical study of societal reaction to deviance has been carried out under different names, such as, labelling theory, interactionist perspective, and the social constructionist perspective. In the sociology of deviance, the labelling theory of deviant behaviour is often used interchangeably with the societal reaction theory of deviancy. As a matter of fact, both phrases point equally to the fact that sociological explanations of deviance function as a

product of social control rather than a product of psychology or genetic inheritance. Some sociologists would explain deviance by accepting without question definitions of deviance and concerning themselves with primary aetiology. However, labelling theorists stress the point of seeing deviance from the viewpoint of the deviant individual.

They claim that when a person becomes known as a deviant, and is ascribed deviant behaviour patterns, it is as much, if not more, to do with the way they have been stigmatized, then the deviant act they are said to have committed. In addition, Howard S. Becker (1963), one of the earlier interaction theorists, claimed that, social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitute deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labelling them as outsiders. Furthermore, the labelling theoretical approach to deviance concentrates on the social reaction to deviance committed by individuals, as well as, the interaction processes leading up to the labelling. INFLUENCES

Labelling theory was significantly influenced by the Chicago School and Symbolic Interactionism. The sociology department in the University of Chicago is where early labelling theorists received their graduate training. These theorists were trained in terms of symbolic interaction and specific methods of participatory field research. The symbolic interaction theory exposed early theorists to the study of social interaction, as well as, the interpretation of society from the actor's point of view. Everett Hughes and Alvin Gouldner were two of the earliest theorists to train at the Chicago School. However, the foundations of this view of deviance were said to have been first established by Edwin Lemert (1951) and were subsequently

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developed by Howard S. Becker (1963). As a matter of fact, labelling theory has subsequently become a dominant paradigm in the explanation of deviance. Furthermore, the symbolic interaction perspective was extremely active in the early foundations of labelling theory. Labelling theory is constituted essentially by two propositions.

The first is that deviant behaviour is to be seen not simply as the violation of a norm, but as any behaviour which is successfully defined or labelled as deviant. The deviance does not inhere in the act itself but in the response of others to that act. In other words, the deviance is said to be in the eye of the beholder. The second proposition claims that labelling produces or amplifies deviance. The deviant's response to societal reaction leads to secondary deviation by which the deviant comes to accept a self-image or self-definition as someone who is permanently locked within a deviant role. Furthermore, the distinctiveness of the approach is that it draws attention to deviance as the outcome of social imputations and the exercise of social control. Labelling theory is very complex, making it quite different than other theories.

Instead of looking at why some social groups commit more crime, labelling theory asks why some people committing some action come to be defined as deviant, while others do not. Labelling theory is also interested in the effect of labelling individuals. As well, labelling theorists note that most people commit crimes at some time in their lives but not everyone becomes defined as deviant or criminal. How does this process of defining a person as deviant work? Look at a situation where a policeman holds stereotypes about typical criminals. They use these stereotypes to interpret the behaviour of

suspected deviants. In other words, the closer a person comes to the stereotype held by the police, the more likely they are to be arrested, charged, and convicted of the crime. Furthermore, once someone has been successfully labelled or stigmatized as criminal or deviant, the label attached may become the dominant label.

## MASTER STATUS

In labelling theory, the dominant label is most often referred to as the master status. The master status is the attached label that is normally seen as a characteristic of more importance than all other aspects of the person. For example, he or she becomes a hooligan or thief rather than a father, mother or friend. Each label carries with it something. For some people once a deviant label has been applied, in terms of a deviant self-concept, they accept themselves as a deviant, however, this can only make room for further deviant acts to be made. This happens when people start acting in the way they have been labelled. For example, a man caught in an isolated act of stealing may be convicted, sent to prison, labelled as a criminal, and later as an ex-con. Friends will most likely not want to associate with him and employers will not employ him due to his criminal record.

In other words, the man is stigmatized as a general deviant and as a consequence, he is excluded from all conventional associations and contacts. As well, this type of situation makes it very difficult for the man to maintain the identity of a non-deviant person. As a result, the man may begin to see himself primarily as a criminal, especially as he now knows many other so-called ex-cons from his time in prison. Since everyone treats him as a

criminal anyway and he can't get a job, he may then turn to crime as a way of life, perhaps with the aid of the deviant subculture in which he probably made connections with. Furthermore, if this happens, although he may not have had any other choice, nevertheless, he has now embarked on a deviant career.

## DEVIANT CAREER

The concept of a deviant career refers to a sequence of stages through which the rule-breaker may evolve into a full-fledged deviant or outsider (Becker, 1963). According to Becker, after the individual has been labelled as deviant, they progress down the path of a deviant career and it becomes hard to shake off the deviant label as others see it as a master status of the individual. He points out that when studying deviant people one should not take their deviance for granted, as one 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. In other words, to be labelled deviant does not necessarily mean that the individual is, or has been deviant in the past. In addition, Kai T. Erikson (1966) also highlights the way social reaction affects the deviant individual.

He reinforces what Becker had previously suggested saying that deviance is not a property inherent in certain forms of behaviour, it is a property conferred upon these forms by the audiences which directly or indirectly witness them (Erikson, 1966). He suggests that deviance is necessary to society's stability, rather than being responsible for its breakdown, as the deviant individual serves as a marker of the difference between good and

evil, right and wrong, and as Erikson writes, in doing so, he shows us the difference between the inside of the group and the outside. He goes on to bring forward the question of whether or not the labelling of deviant individuals is necessary in holding society together. As well, is it fair to say that in order to perpetuate this, societies are organised in such a way as to promote this resource. In other words, is it possible that the procedure of creating deviant individuals, although unfair, must continue, as scapegoats are necessary for the moral safety of the rest of society?

### NEGATIVE LABELLING

Aaron V. Cicourel (1968), explains the treatment of delinquents in two similar Californian cities by using labelling theory. He claims that a difference in juvenile justice can be accounted for by different policies of the police, and by the ability of middle class parents to negotiate justice. He concludes by stating that some individuals are more likely than others to be labelled as deviant, due to their status in life. This theory was reinforced by E. M. Schur(1971), who discusses the drug addiction of many doctors, or the likelihood of bank tellers to misappropriate funds. Schur suggests that in both cases the actor has legitimate access to drugs or money, which gives them some protection against being discovered, as opposed to the case of an addict buying drugs on the street, or an armed robber holding up the bank.

He suggests that resistance to negative labelling is built into ‘opportunity’ (1971). Schur claims that opportunity structures may determine initial deviation, but societal reactions to such deviation will significantly determine

future opportunities. However, labelling theorists have had their work criticised on many levels, and these criticisms must be examined before any evaluation of the contribution of the labelling theorists to the sociology of deviance can be made.

## CRITICISM

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). 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. The conservative nature of labelling theory was also criticized, specifically by E. M. Schur. He suggested that although the sociology of the underdog is indispensable in the alleviation of the unnecessary suffering of the deviant individual, the labelling theorists are guilty of romanticizing certain non-political deviations and avoiding a truly radical critique of the social system as a whole (1971). However, one of the major criticisms of labelling theory is that it is deterministic.

As a matter of fact, it specifically treats the individuals as if they were no more than passive organisms, herded into behaviour by the act of the labels being given to it. 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. For instance, Herbert Blumer (1969) suggests that the human being is seen as an active organism in his own right, facing, dealing with, and acting toward the object he indicates. On the other hand, Alexander Liazos (1972) provides for three criticisms based on the work of labelling theorists. First of all, he notes that although a labelling theorists aim is to humanise the deviant individual and show that he or she is no different than other individuals, except perhaps in terms of opportunity. However, by the very emphasis on the deviant and his identity problems and subculture,

the opposite effect may have been achieved (Liazos, 1972). 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

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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.

#### RESEARCH BY LABELLING THEORISTS

In many cases of deviance, secrecy will create problems when researching. As a matter of fact, it is extremely difficult for a researcher to observe the deviant individuals in their everyday lives, especially in dangerous areas of society in which there may be problems of infiltration, gaining trust and violent people. It may also be difficult for the researcher to observe impartially, or to continue without being led to either commit the crimes themselves, or to try to prevent the crimes from being committed. An example of this can be seen in Parker's *View from the Boys* (1974), where he studied boys in an area of Liverpool. Parker was able to gain acceptance only because he had previously met some of the boys at a country holiday centre for Liverpool's deprived children. According to Parker (1974), If I had not been young, hairy, boozy, willing to keep long hours and accept permissive standards, the liaison would never have worked. However, Parker admits that his presence affected the behaviour of the boys.

For example, on occasions he stopped them from committing crimes and helped them out when they were caught. 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. CONTRIBUTION

In attempting to evaluate the contribution of the labelling theorists to the study of the sociology of deviance, it depends on how the theory is viewed. If labelling theory is actually considered to be a theory, its flaws are many. However, if we attempt to consider the theory as a mere way of looking at deviance (as it was intended according to Becker), the contributions are many, as they opened up a whole new study of the individual after he or she has committed an act of deviance. It is also important to know that, labelling theorists do not merely consider the after-effects of the deviant act, as it is sometimes suggested. For example, in one of Becker's studies, he considers the individual and how he began to smoke marijuana. Furthermore, labelling theory along with the labelling theorists, will continue in their usefulness as long as deviant behaviour exists. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, labelling theory has now spread outside the confines of the sociology of deviance. For example, the imputation of the label `insane` to a  
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person may represent an important stage in the process of becoming mentally ill. Labelling theory has also been used to explain witchcraft. Nevertheless, the theory in its entirety has provided a beneficial development of the sociological understanding of self-conceptions, relationships between deviance, social reaction and social control. Furthermore, after thorough analysis it is evident that labelling theory has proven to be very significant in establishing a relative body of empirical research evidence on the study of crime and deviance.

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