

"suicide" by emile durkheim – labelling theory

Society



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Labeling theory had its origins in *Suicide*, a book by French sociologist Emile Durkheim. He found that crime is not so much a violation of a penal code as it is an act that outrages society. He was the first to suggest that deviant labeling satisfies that function and satisfies society's need to control the behavior. As a contributor to American Pragmatism and later a member of the Chicago School, George Herbert Mead posited that the self is socially constructed and reconstructed through the interactions which each person has with the community.

The labeling theory suggests that people obtain labels from how others view their tendencies or behaviors. Each individual is aware of how they are judged by others because he or she has attempted many different roles and functions in social interactions and has been able to gauge the reactions of those present. This theoretically builds a subjective conception of the self, but as others intrude into the reality of that individual's life, this represents objective data which may require a re-evaluation of that conception depending on the authoritativeness of the others' judgment.

Family and friends may judge differently from random strangers. More socially representative individuals such as police officers or judges may be able to make more globally respected judgments. If deviance is a failure to conform to the rules observed by most of the group, the reaction of the group is to label the person as having offended against their social or moral norms of behavior. This is the power of the group: to designate breaches of their rules as deviant and to treat the person differently depending on the seriousness of the breach.

The more differential the treatment, the more the individual's self-image is affected. Labeling theory concerns itself mostly not with the normal roles that define our lives, but with those very special roles that society provides for deviant behavior, called deviant roles, stigmatic roles, or social stigma. A social role is a set of expectations we have about a behavior. Social roles are necessary for the organization and functioning of any society or group. We expect the postman, for example, to adhere to certain fixed rules about how he does his job. Deviance" for a sociologist does not mean morally wrong, but rather behavior that is condemned by society. Deviant behavior can include both criminal and non-criminal activities. Investigators found that deviant roles powerfully affect how we perceive those who are assigned those roles. They also affect how the deviant actor perceives himself and his relationship to society. The deviant roles and the labels attached to them function as a form of social stigma. Always inherent in the deviant role is the attribution of some form of " pollution" or difference that marks the labeled person as different from others.

Society uses these stigmatic roles to them to control and limit deviant behavior: " If you proceed in this behavior, you will become a member of that group of people. " Whether a breach of a given rule will be stigmatized will depend on the significance of the moral or other tenet it represents. For example, adultery may be considered a breach of an informal rule or it may be criminalized depending on the status of marriage, morality, and religion within the community. In most Western countries, adultery is not a crime.

Attaching the label " adulterer" may have some unfortunate consequences but they are not generally severe. But in some Islamic countries, zina is a <https://assignbuster.com/suicide-by-emile-durkheim-labelling-theory/>

crime and proof of extramarital activity may lead to severe consequences for all concerned. Stigma is usually the result of laws enacted against the behavior. Laws protecting slavery or outlawing homosexuality, for instance, will over time form deviant roles connected with those behaviors. Those who are assigned those roles will be seen as less human and reliable.

Deviant roles are the sources of negative stereotypes, which tend to support society's disapproval of the behavior. [edit]George Herbert Mead One of the founders of social interactionism, George Herbert Mead focused on the internal processes of how the mind constructs one's self-image. In *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934),[1] he showed how infants come to know persons first and only later come to know things. According to Mead, thought is both a social and pragmatic process, based on the model of two persons discussing how to solve a problem.

Our self-image is, in fact, constructed of ideas about what we think others are thinking about us. While we make fun of those who visibly talk to themselves, they have only failed to do what the rest of us do in keeping the internal conversation to ourselves. Human behavior, Mead stated, is the result of meanings created by the social interaction of conversation, both real and imaginary. [edit]Frank Tannenbaum Frank Tannenbaum is considered the grandfather of labeling theory. His *Crime and Community* (1938),[2] describing the social interaction involved in crime, is considered a pivotal foundation of modern criminology.

While the criminal differs little or not at all from others in the original impulse to first commit a crime, social interaction accounts for continued acts that

develop a pattern of interest to sociologists. Tannenbaum first introduced the idea of 'tagging'. [3] While conducting his studies with delinquent youth, he found that a negative tag or label often contributed to further involvement in delinquent activities. This initial tagging may cause the individual to adopt it as part of their identity.

The crux of Tannenbaum's argument is that the greater the attention placed on this label, the more likely the person is to identify themselves as the label. Kerry Townsend writes about the revolution in criminology caused by Tannenbaum's work: " The roots of Frank Tannenbaum's theoretical model, known as the " dramatization of evil" or labeling theory, surfaces in the mid-to late-thirties. At this time, the 'New Deal' legislation had not defeated the woes of the Great Depression, and, although dwindling, immigration into the United States continued (Sumner, 1994). 4] The social climate was one of disillusionment with the government. The class structure was one of cultural isolationism; cultural relativity had not yet taken hold. 'The persistence of the class structure, despite the welfare reforms and controls over big business, was unmistakable. '[5] The Positivist School of Criminological thought was still dominant, and in many states, the sterilization movement was underway. The emphasis on biological determinism and internal explanations of crime were the preeminent force in the theories of the early thirties.

This dominance by the Positivist School changed in the late thirties with the introduction of conflict and social explanations of crime and criminality... "

One of the central tenets of the theory is to encourage the end of labeling process. In the words of Frank Tannenbaum, " the way out is through a

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refusal to dramatize the evil", the justice system attempts to do this through diversion programs. The growth of the theory and its current application, both practical and theoretical, provide a solid foundation for continued popularity. [6]: [edit]Edwin Lemert It was sociologist Edwin Lemert (1951) who introduced the concept of "secondary deviance." The primary deviance is the experience connected to the overt behavior, say drug addiction and its practical demands and consequences. Secondary deviation is the role created to deal with society's condemnation of the behavior. With other sociologists of his time, he saw how all deviant acts are social acts, a result of the cooperation of society. In studying drug addiction, Lemert observed a very powerful and subtle force at work.

Besides the physical addiction to the drug and all the economic and social disruptions it caused, there was an intensely intellectual process at work concerning one's own identity and the justification for the behavior: "I do these things because I am this way." There might be certain subjective and personal motives that might first lead a person to drink or shoplift. But the activity itself tells us little about the person's self-image or its relationship to the activity. Lemert writes: "His acts are repeated and organized subjectively and transformed into active roles and become the social criteria for assigning status....."

When a person begins to employ his deviant behavior or a role based on it as a means of defense, attack, or adjustment to the overt and covert problems created by the consequent societal reaction to him, his deviation is secondary" [7] [edit]Howard Becker While it was Lemert who introduced the key concepts of labeling theory, it was Howard Becker who became their

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champion. He first began describing the process of how a person adopts a deviant role in a study of dance musicians, with whom he once worked. He later studied the identity formation of marijuanas smokers. This study was the basis of his *Outsiders* published in 1963.

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] 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

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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] [edit] Albert Memmi In *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1965) Albert Memmi described the deep psychological effects of the social stigma created by the domination of one group by another. He wrote: "The longer the oppression lasts, the more profoundly it affects him (the oppressed).

It ends by becoming so familiar to him that he believes it is part of his own constitution, that he accepts it and could not imagine his recovery from it. This acceptance is the crowning point of oppression. "[12] In *Dominated Man* (1968), Memmi turned his attention to the motivation of stigmatic labeling: it justifies the exploitation or criminalization of the victim. He wrote: "Why does the accuser feel obliged to accuse in order to justify himself? Because he feels guilty toward his victim. Because he feels that his attitude and his behavior are essentially unjust and fraudulent....

Proof? In almost every case, the punishment has already been inflicted. The victim of racism is already living under the weight of disgrace and oppression.... In order to justify such punishment and misfortune, a process of rationalization is set in motion, by which to explain the ghetto and colonial exploitation. "[13] Central to stigmatic labeling is the attribution of an inherent fault: It is as if one says, "There must be something wrong with these people. Otherwise, why would we treat them so badly?" [edit] Erving Goffman

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Perhaps the most important contributor to labeling theory was Erving Goffman, President of the American Sociological Association, and one of America's most cited sociologists. His most popular books include *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, [14] *Interaction Ritual*, [15] and *Frame Analysis*. [16] His most important contribution to labeling theory, however, was *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* published in 1963. [17] Unlike other authors who examined the process of adopting a deviant identity, Goffman explored the ways people managed that identity and controlled information about it.