

Labelling theory by becker: summary and evaluation



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Part of the assumption about the way policing and the law works is that punishing criminal behaviour has a deterrent effect. Whatever controversies surround the efficacy of deterrence – and they are myriad – it seemed hard for many early theorists to believe that punishing criminal behaviour does any actual harm to society. What labelling theorists introduced was the idea that, ironically, the singling out of those who had transgressed society's laws actually perpetuated the behaviours it was intended to curb (Lilly, Cullen & Ball, 2002). The idea that the way in which crimes are socially constructed might have important consequences has, however, proved controversial and sparked considerable debate. This essay looks first at labelling theory and then moves on to examine the theory more critically and assess its reach in explaining crime and deviance.

Becker (1973) clearly lays out labelling theory in his book *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. He explains that the interactionist perspective sees crime as an infraction of the rules created by society. It then seeks to find the reasons that a person infringed those rules within both their personality and in their social and economic environment. Becker (1973) believed that this placed the wrong emphasis on where the parameters for crime are set. It is not in the quality of a person's action – the deviant act or, as it were, a deviant person – but rather in the imposition of the label of deviance by society. It is society that prescribes which acts are lawful and which acts are not lawful and, that act of successfully applying the label illegal or deviant to a person, has a number of important consequences.

One assumption often made, once a person has been labelled a deviant, is that they fit into a homogenous category. Becker (1973) argues that this

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assumption is often made by researchers in criminology looking for a root cause or at least some commonality in deviance and crime. This assumption, though, is not correct. Some people may not have transgressed society's laws and yet are, through the failure of the appropriate systems, still labelled deviant. Others may have transgressed but have not been *caught* in their transgression - these people remain unlabelled. As a result of this analysis, Becker (1973) is most interested in how people come to be labelled deviant rather than their particular social or personal circumstances.

This attack on the absolutist nature of deviance or criminal behaviour highlights a number of variables within the system of labelling. What is labelled a crime varies from one time to another; at one time there is 'crackdown' on, for example, drug offences, and the investigation and penalties are stepped up. At another time there may be much more leniency. Another variable is the nature of the person caught breaking the law. The example is drawn by Becker (1973) of the difference between a middle class person and someone from the lower classes - evidence is cited to show that it is the middle class person who is more likely to avoid prosecution. Similarly, crimes committed by individuals tend to be prosecuted by the criminal law, while crimes committed by corporations prosecuted by the civil law. These distinctions emphasise the fact that criminality is not an independent quality of a person, but is intimately related to other people's perceptions - or, alternatively in the modern terminology, to crime's social construction.

After the initial instance in which a person is labelled as a criminal, Becker (1973) asserts that a number of things are naturally attendant. To <https://assignbuster.com/labelling-theory-by-becker-summary-and-evaluation/>

understand the results of labelling it is useful to make a distinction introduced by Edwin Lemert. Lemert (1951) introduced the idea that deviance could be seen as first primary and then secondary. Primary deviancy refers to the situation where a person commits a criminal offence because of sociocultural and psychological circumstances. At this stage, however, the person does not see themselves as deviant, merely as a person who has temporarily strayed from the straight and narrow. Having been caught committing a criminal offence this person is then subjected to society's vilification and labelling through the criminal justice system. As a result of this the person then has to find a method of dealing with this clash between the way they think about themselves and the way other people now view them. This is normally dealt with by accepting the label with all its meaning and consequences attached.

Lilly, Cullen & Ball (2002) explain that labelling theorists used the idea of a self-fulfilling prophecy (developed by Merton, 1968) to explain the effect of labelling. Falsely applying the label of criminal to a person leads to them being seen as morally reprehensible in themselves, even though, at that point, this is probably not true. In people's minds, the fact that a person has committed a criminal offence leads to them being thought of as a criminal, which again leads to them being seen exclusively in this context, above any other. The police, seeing that person as more likely to transgress in the future, will be more likely to visit them to investigate further crimes. A person is socially isolated from their 'non-criminal' friends and probably incarcerated with others who have been labelled criminals - this all serves to reinforce the label. It is this constant pressure from people around them that

encourages those who have committed a criminal offence to accept the label of 'criminal' themselves along with all that it entails. The effect is that, perversely, that crime is perpetuated because of the effectiveness of the systems of criminal justice: the label of 'criminal' becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Williams, 2004).

Labelling theory has been criticised on a number of grounds. Many researchers have attempted to bring empirical evidence to bear on labelling theory. Gove (1975), for example, found no evidence of the influence of negative sanctions on sustained criminal careers. Sherman & Berk (1984) compared, in a field experiment, those who had been arrested for domestic violence, with those who had not. They found that those who had been arrested did, in fact, show a reduced level of violence compared to those who had not. Foster, Dinitz & Reckless (1972) found that self-reports of problems amongst apprehended boys did not affect the relationship between deviance and sanctions. Other evidence, however, has supported the contentions of labelling theory. Kaplan & Johnson (2001) describe some of this evidence. Palamara, Cullen & Gersten (1986) found that juvenile delinquency was affected both directly and through other interactions by contact with the police, as well as mental health services. Importantly, the level of the effect was found to be different depending on the type of behaviour that was being measured.

Kaplan & Johnson (2001) assert that part of the explanation for the mixed empirical results may be methodological problems. For example, measuring levels of delinquency before and after intervention by the criminal justice system is extremely problematic. Kaplan & Johnson (2001) argue that, in the <https://assignbuster.com/labelling-theory-by-becker-summary-and-evaluation/>

research carried out by Foster et al. (1972), it is possible the boys were trying to protect their self-image which was why they didn't report any problems to researchers. Similarly, though, the results of Palamara et al. (1986), which relied on the opinions of mothers and teachers, might simply reflect the effects that labelling has on labelling - obviously a circular argument.

Gove (1975) argues that part of the problem with testing labelling theory is that it is simply untestable in many of the ways that researchers have applied. Aside from empirical evidence, researchers have also criticised labelling theory on theoretical grounds. Gove (1975) argues that there is no solid evidence that being labelled and then committing crimes is a self-fulfilling prophecy. In addition, Gove (1975) criticises labelling theory on the grounds that it has difficulty explaining all the different types of deviant behaviour. Plummer (1979) characterises this as a problem with explaining how primary deviance occurs in the first place. Labelling theory, therefore, has a particular problem with paedophilia, for example, which is generally thought to result from abnormal psychology. For this reason it cannot be largely affected by labelling and self-fulfilling prophecies.

More phenomenological problems are pointed to in labelling theory by, amongst others, Philipson & Roche (1971). They point out that labelling theory makes many perhaps unwarranted assumptions. The way that society reacts to the labelling of criminals is mostly assumed by the original researchers, and hardly investigated. Theoretically, there is limited linkage between the processes that occur at an everyday level and how these translate into the societal reaction. There is too much reliance on ideas that

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are deemed 'common sense' and also on anecdotal evidence. Plummer (1979) states that labelling theory tends to minimise, or not to address, the question of power and the effects this has on the criminal justice system. A more general criticism is its compatibility with social determinism, the idea that people may have no choice, or at least little choice, in their behaviour. These ideas are also linked to moral criticisms, that labelling theory excludes the moral aspects of crime - choosing to commit a criminal act is a moral choice.

In defence of labelling theory, and the criticisms that have been levelled at it, Becker (1973) ascribes a more limited role to its applicability. Becker (1973) argues that labelling theory was not intended to explain *why* people commit crimes, but the focus of it is on the interactional elements. It is the interactional elements in explaining crime that had previously been ignored or minimised - labelling theory was an attempt to highlight the fact that crime cannot be explained without considering the effects that people have on each other. It is clear that many criticisms of labelling theory are based on different conceptions. Indeed, modern theorists now often see labelling theory as split into three different parts. Davies & Tanner (2003) splits it into the strain that concentrates on secondary deviance, the strain that focuses on social psychological effects and, finally, the strain that examines the effect of labelling on life chances.

In conclusion, what many proponents of labelling theory claim is that it attempts to demystify acts of crime and deviancy. Rather than seeing them as discrete and recognisable categories that are somehow 'other' from the 'normal' law-abiding citizens, it sees them as part of a fluid process within

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which all members of society, or a collective, exert some influence. It acknowledges a continuum and attempts to describe the processes involved in moving along that continuum. Critics of labelling theory have attacked with both theoretical arguments and empirical evidence. As can clearly be seen, though, labelling theory is difficult to test empirically and, perhaps, with the defence provided by Becker (1973) is impossible to test this way. Criticisms of theoretical aspects are somewhat muddled by different understandings of what labelling theory constitutes. Despite this, it is possible that more detailed and precise research could provide a clearer empirical result – whether positive or negative. References

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