

Howard becker studies in the sociology of deviance



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Although there had been prior research into deviant labels, Howard Becker is hailed as the found of the modern labelling theory. Founded in *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, it is this labelling theory that is perhaps his most important influential contribution to sociological and criminological knowledge. Becker's influences came from Cooley's "looking-glass self"[ii], Mead's theories on the internalisation of the self[iii], and Lemert's "social constructionism"[iv]. Becker suggests that deviance is based on reactions and responses of others' labelling an individual as such. He states that "no particular act is inherently deviant unless until a group with socially powerful statuses or positions label it as such".[v]

This approach to labelling deviance has become manifest in criminological and sociological research, and the development of the labelling theory.

Becker opens *Outsiders* writing:

"...social groups create deviance by making rules whose infraction creates deviance, and by applying those roles to particular people and labelling 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 others of rules and sanctions to an 'offender.' The deviant is one to whom that label has been successfully applied; deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label"[vi].

Just as society uses the stigma of the deviant label to justify its disapproval, the individual labelled uses it to justify their actions. Becker attempts "to put a complex argument in a few words: instead of the deviant motives

leading to the deviant behaviour, it is the other way around, the deviant behaviour in time produces the deviant motivation".[vii]

In *Outsiders*, Becker views deviance as the creation of social groups by persons in positions of power rather than the quality of some act or behaviour. Becker disagrees with other theories of deviance, which accept the existence of deviance, and by doing so, simply accept the values and of the majority within a particular social group. According to Becker, studying the act of the individual is unimportant as it is merely breaking the rules made by those in power - the rule breaking behaviour is constant and it is the labelling of such behaviour that changes. He describes rules as " the reflection of certain social norms held by the majority of a society, whether formal or informal"[viii]. Clearly, in a society where criminal activity is the norm, the one who chooses not to conform, should not be labelled as deviant for not committing crimes. Nevertheless, it could be said that they are deviant as they are not acting as expected and are ' deviating' from the norm.

Becker's approach, however, focuses on enforced rules. He views those who are likely to engage in rule-breaking behaviour as essentially different from those of the rule-making or rule-abiding society. He believes that those persons who are " prone to rule-breaking behaviour see themselves morally at odds with those members of the rule-abiding society"[ix]. Becker uses the term ' outsider' to describe a rule-breaker who accepts the label of ' deviant' and therefore view themselves as outside mainstream society.

Becker also focuses on those in positions of power that have the authority to deem what rules society should abide by and who enforce those rules.

According to Becker, the creation and enforcement of these rules is an “enterprising act”[x]. He hints at disagreeing with the morals and reasoning behind those who make and enforce these rules, realising that while some may have a moral crusade to prevent crime, most engage in the process strictly because it is a requirement of their vocation. Becker wrote “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”[xi]. He recognises that individuals who would not normally be prone to rule-breaking may become so by the misuse of labelling powers as a result of the enforcer abusing the great deal of discretion they are armed with.

Becker concludes *Outsiders* by calling for empirical research of his approach to the labelling theory. As a result, there has been a vast amount of response from social scientists. Some research has directly reflected Becker’s approach, whilst others have used his labelling theory as a foundation on which they furthered the theory.

Gideon Fishman, for example, tested his theory by studying a sample of juvenile delinquents in mid-western America. Fishman’s study[xii] looked at negative self-perception and whether this self-perception affects future misbehaviour. His results indicated that, although some accept the label of deviance and further entrench themselves in deviant behaviour, it is by no means universal; individuals react to the label in different ways.

A popular application of Becker's labelling theory is in the research into mental health. Thomas Scheff adopts Becker's views on labelling theory and explains how people are "labelled mentally ill in order to explain certain rule-breaking behaviour that society can't categorise"[xiii]. Wright[xiv] and Pfohl[xv] recognise that Scheff is not concerned with occasional acts of deviance, but the lasting and sporadic deviance that is often considered under mental illness. People who are subsequently labelled as 'mentally ill' often adopt the behaviour they would personally expect of a stereotypical mental health patient as portrayed through the media. Scheff identifies that we will all display symptoms of mental illness at some point in our lives, and "labels are attached to those without power"[xvi]. Scheff argues individuals who become stereotypically mentally ill, or at least behave as such, are "rewarded by enterprising psychology professionals"[xvii]. Empirical evidence of this can be found in several studies by Scheff into the process of mental hospital commitment.

In carrying out his own research into the labelling theory, Edwin Schur modifies Becker's approach in *Labelling Deviant Behaviour*[xviii], by shifting some of the focus to the deviant individual. He claims that, "if people who are labelled deviant can organize and gain power within the society, they will be able to change societal views on what is or what is not considered deviant"[xix]. Schur says that this "change in power may come in the form of uprisings, social movements, and even civil strife, which could ultimately result in the formation of a strong political group."[xx]

Howard Becker has been criticised on much of his work on many levels, and these criticisms must be explored before any evaluation of his contribution to criminological knowledge can be made.

Becker himself examines some of the criticisms made of the theory in his book “ Labelling Theory Reconsidered”[xxi]. Firstly, he addresses those who have said it is not a true theory. He points out that rather than being an all-encompassing theory of deviance, labelling ‘ theory’ was established as “ a way of looking at a general area of human activity”[xxii], and not, he claims, “ a theory, with all the achievements and obligations that go with the title, nor focused so exclusively on the act of labelling as some have thought”[xxiii].

He points out that the concept of morality can be problematic in its research and interpretation. He contemplates on where the researcher’s sympathies should lie and considers whether one should side with the ‘ outsider’ or simply ascertain criminal activity as intrinsically wrong? He stresses the difficulties of the sociologist of this decision, recognising that the researcher, “ whether taking either side, will be accused of taking a one-sided and distorted view. So we then ask how is it possible to see the situation from both sides simultaneously”[xxiv]? I agree that Becker is right in raising this criticism, as it is somewhat impossible to be completely un-bias on the basis that no researcher is capable of not carrying any sort of pre-conformed opinion or view on society and will, without doubt, have moral values, right or wrongly. In Whose Side Are We On[xxv], Becker 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”[xxvi].

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Becker also points out there is problems with secrecy. The deviant individual, in many cases, will commit deviant acts in secrecy and will not want their actions to become universally known, especially when those acts are criminal. This poses difficulty in gaining a true insight into the world of the deviant individual and therefore jeopardises the validity of the labelling theory. Becker's claim was found to be correct by Humphrey in his study 'Tearoom Trade'[xxvii]. In many cases, the individuals participating in homosexual behaviour in the tearrooms were married with children, and consequently, when later asked in a questionnaire about their views on homosexuality, very few admitted their own visits to the tearrooms. This notion of secrecy among deviants will undoubtedly cause problems for researchers and their research.

It is also very difficult for researchers to observe the day-to-day lives of deviant individuals, in what are perhaps highly dangerous places, as there are problems of infiltration and gaining the trust of what may be violent and dangerous people. If the researcher is able to gain such access, they then face the tasks of remaining impartial in their observations, to continue to observe without becoming involved in criminal activity themselves, and even trying to prevent crimes being committed. This can be seen in Parker's "View from the Boys"[xxviii], where he studied boys in an area of Liverpool. Parker was only able to gain insight as he had previously met the boys he was studying at a centre for Liverpool's deprived children. He says, however, "If I had not been young, hairy, boozy, willing to keep long hours, accept permissive standards, the liaison would never have worked"[xxix]. He also admits that his presence affected the behaviour and actions of the boys. On

occasions he prevented them from committing crimes and even went as far as to help them if they were caught.

In his research and development of the labelling theory, Becker doesn't address how factors such as biology, genetic effects and personal responsibility can influence, if at all, deviant individuals behaviour. After this met a barrage of criticism, he answered his critics in his 1973 edition of his work. He wrote that while sociological researchers are dedicated to finding an understanding about society, they are "often too careful to look too closely". Becker noted "" 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"[xxx]. Francis Cullen believed Becker was overly generous with his critics. He recognised that after 20 years, far from being supplanted, have been corrected and absorbed into an expanded "structuring perspective"[xxx]. Becker's suggesting that rather than simply criticise him for not including these factors in his research, these sociologists should use those factors to help develop the labelling theory themselves.

What I believe to be the greatest flaw in the labelling theory is the notion that "no acts are inherently criminal"[xxxii], they only become criminal when society has deemed them as such. This seems to be suggesting that without the persons in power trying to "satisfy two major interests: the justification of their occupation and the winning of respect from the people"[xxxiii]by implementing laws, there would be no 'deviant'. So does <https://assignbuster.com/howard-becker-studies-in-the-sociology-of-deviance/>

this mean that simply because it couldn't be 'labelled' as such, it wouldn't exist? Just because something can't be specifically labelled as such does not mean that it ceases to occur. I agree with Becker's argument that people become deviant if they are 'expected' to become so by society, but I fail be of the same mind that this is the reason behind the majority of deviant behaviour. In my opinion, the labelling of deviance comes after the deviant act occurs.

The theory also claims that for a criminal to be successfully labelled, an audience must be present to provide a reaction to the crimes committed. So does this mean that if a murder is committed and the killer avoids suspicion or being caught, they are not a criminal and will not think of themselves in such a way? It is probable that the killer will have some idea of morals and what is conceived to be inherently right and wrong as a result of their own socialisation, and so could initialise self-labelling, but the theory clearly states the labelling must come from a third party.

In attempting to evaluate the contribution of Becker to the study of criminology and more specifically the sociology of deviance, it is important to note that it depends on how the theory is viewed. If the theory is considered as "a theory, with all the achievement and obligations that go with the title"[xxxiv]then its flaws are many. Yet, if we consider the theory, as Becker suggests we do, as a mere way of looking at deviance, then the contribution could be said to be significant. Becker, unlike previous theorists, did not only look at the after-effects of a deviant act but considered the way one begins to fall deviant. In his study of marijuana users, for example, he considers how one begins to smoke. Whether one agrees or disagrees with Becker's <https://assignbuster.com/howard-becker-studies-in-the-sociology-of-deviance/>

approach to the labelling theory, the majority, if not all, will use that opinion to then form their own ideas and approaches to the study of deviance, as is evident from the amount of critique Becker has obtained. As a result, one can conclude that Becker's approach to the labelling theory continues in its usefulness, and will remain to do so as long as deviant behaviour continues to exist.