

Labeling Theory

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October 2, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *Labeling Theory*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=31625>

Labeling Theory

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Sociology, Criminology, Social Psychology

Proponents: Edwin Lemert, Howard S. Becker, Erving Goffman

1. Core Principles

Labeling Theory posits that the identity and behavior of individuals are profoundly shaped by the classifications and labels society applies to them. It fundamentally shifts the focus from the inherent qualities of an act or individual to the societal reaction to that act or individual. According to this perspective, an action is not intrinsically deviant or criminal; rather, it becomes so when it is defined and labeled as such by significant social actors or institutions. This process of labeling can have profound consequences, influencing an individual's self-perception, social interactions, and future trajectory.

A central tenet of Labeling Theory is the notion that 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." Therefore, deviance is not a characteristic of behavior, but a property conferred upon that behavior by the audience. This theory highlights the immense power of societal definitions and reactions in shaping the reality of deviance. It suggests that once a person is labeled, particularly with a negative or deviant label, it can become a master status, overriding other aspects of their identity and influencing how others perceive and interact with them.

Furthermore, Labeling Theory introduces the crucial distinction between primary deviance and secondary deviance. Primary deviance refers to initial acts of rule-breaking that are often sporadic, minor, and do not significantly affect an individual's self-concept. These acts may arise from various social, psychological, or situational factors and are typically rationalized or ignored by the individual and society. However, when society reacts to these acts by officially labeling the individual as a "deviant" or "criminal," it can lead to secondary deviance. Secondary deviance occurs when the individual internalizes the label, reorganizes their self-identity around it, and subsequently engages in behavior consistent with the label, often as a direct response to the societal reaction. This dynamic underscores how the very act of social control can paradoxically perpetuate the behavior it seeks to eliminate.

2. Historical Development

The intellectual roots of Labeling Theory can be traced back to the broader sociological paradigm of symbolic interactionism, which gained prominence in the early 20th century. Pioneers like George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley emphasized the role of social interaction, shared meanings, and the development of the self through the "looking-glass self" in shaping human behavior and identity. These foundational ideas laid the groundwork for understanding how societal

perceptions and reactions could significantly influence an individual's self-concept and actions. The notion that reality is socially constructed and that meanings arise from social interaction is central to Labeling Theory's premise that deviance is not an objective fact but a social definition.

The formal development of Labeling Theory as a distinct criminological and sociological perspective largely began in the 1950s and 1960s. Edwin Lemert is widely credited with articulating many of its core tenets, particularly through his works such as "Social Pathology" (1951) and "Human Deviance, Social Problems, and Social Control" (1967). Lemert introduced the critical concepts of primary and secondary deviance, explaining how societal reactions transform sporadic rule-breaking into a stable deviant identity. His work emphasized that social control processes, rather than merely containing deviance, could actually intensify and solidify it by creating a deviant self-concept.

Following Lemert, Howard S. Becker's seminal work, "Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance" (1963), further solidified Labeling Theory's position within sociology. Becker famously stated, "Social groups create deviance by making rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders." His work highlighted the role of "moral entrepreneurs" in defining what is considered deviant and how power dynamics influence the labeling process. Concurrently, Erving Goffman's work on stigma and total institutions, particularly in "Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity" (1963) and "Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates" (1961), complemented Labeling Theory by exploring the profound impact of institutionalization and stigmatization on individuals' identities and life chances.

3. Key Concepts and Components

Deviance as a Social Construct: At its core, Labeling Theory asserts that deviance is not an inherent quality of an act or person, but rather a product of social definition and reaction. An act is only deviant because society, or certain powerful groups within it, defines it as such. This perspective challenges objective definitions of deviance, emphasizing subjective interpretation and the role of power in shaping moral boundaries.

The Labeling Process: This refers to the sequence of events and interactions through which an individual comes to be officially designated as deviant. It involves initial rule-breaking, detection, apprehension, and the formal or informal application of a label (e.g., "criminal," "mentally ill," "delinquent"). The process is often influenced by factors such as social status, race, class, and the visibility of the act, leading to differential application of labels.

Primary Deviance: These are the initial, often minor, acts of rule-breaking that are typically sporadic and do not lead to a lasting deviant identity. They may be transient, excusable, or rationalized away by the individual. According to Lemert, these acts do not yet reflect a fundamental change in the individual's self-concept or social status.

Secondary Deviance: This occurs when an individual internalizes a deviant label that has been publicly applied to them and subsequently reorganizes their life and identity around that label. The label becomes a master status, influencing interactions, opportunities, and self-perception, often leading to further deviant behavior that is a direct consequence of the societal reaction and the label itself.

Stigma: Introduced prominently by Erving Goffman, stigma refers to a deeply discrediting attribute that significantly alters how others perceive and treat an individual. Once a deviant label is applied, it often carries a powerful stigma that can lead to social exclusion, discrimination, and a "spoiled identity," making it difficult for the individual to reintegrate into conventional society.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: A critical mechanism within Labeling Theory, this concept describes how a belief or expectation, once stated, can influence behavior in such a way that the belief eventually comes true. When an individual is labeled as deviant, others may treat them accordingly, leading the individual to internalize the label and act in ways consistent with the expectation, thereby fulfilling the prophecy.

Master Status: A master status is a social position that is so dominant it overrides all other statuses and identities in an individual's life. For labeled deviants, the deviant label (e.g., "ex-con," "drug addict") often becomes their master status, defining them in the eyes of others and themselves, overshadowing their positive attributes or roles.

4. Applications and Examples

The practical implications of Labeling Theory are extensive, particularly within the criminal justice system, education, and mental health. A common example, echoing the provided source, involves a teenager caught skipping class and subsequently labeled a "delinquent." Initially, the truancy might be a primary deviant act. However, if school authorities, parents, and peers consistently treat the teenager as a "troublemaker" or "no-hoper," this negative label can become internalized. The teenager might then conclude that efforts to conform are pointless, believing that no one expects them to succeed anyway. This can lead to further truancy, academic failure, and engagement in other rule-breaking behaviors, thus fulfilling the prophecy of the "delinquent" label. The original act of skipping class, once a minor infraction, transforms into a stable pattern of secondary deviance driven by the societal reaction.

In the context of the **criminal justice system**, Labeling Theory provides a critical lens through which to view the effects of arrest, prosecution, and incarceration. For instance, an individual convicted of a crime and labeled a "felon" faces significant barriers to employment, housing, and social integration even after serving their time. The criminal record acts as a powerful label, leading to a stigma that can preclude legitimate opportunities. This lack of legitimate avenues may, in turn, push individuals back into criminal activities, demonstrating how the system designed to control crime can inadvertently perpetuate it. Juvenile justice systems, in particular, have been influenced by labeling perspectives, advocating for diversion programs and less formal processing to avoid

the stigmatizing effects of official labels on young offenders.

Beyond crime, Labeling Theory is also highly relevant in the field of **mental health**. Diagnostic labels, while intended to facilitate treatment, can also carry significant social stigma. A person diagnosed with a mental illness might internalize the label, leading to a diminished self-concept or reluctance to seek help due to fear of social ostracism. Others may treat them differently, assuming the label defines their entire personality or capabilities, which can hinder recovery and social integration. Similarly, in **education**, practices such as "tracking" students into vocational or academic streams, or labeling students with learning disabilities, can inadvertently limit their potential and shape their academic and career trajectories based on initial assessments rather than their evolving capabilities.

5. Criticisms and Limitations

Despite its profound insights and significant influence, Labeling Theory has faced several criticisms. One of the primary critiques is that it tends to be overly deterministic, suggesting that once a label is applied, the individual is almost inevitably drawn into secondary deviance. Critics argue that individuals retain agency and can resist labels, or that not everyone who is labeled responds by conforming to the deviant identity. It does not adequately explain why some individuals internalize labels and others do not, nor does it account for varying degrees of internalization.

Another significant limitation often pointed out is the theory's perceived failure to adequately explain the causes of primary deviance. Labeling Theory primarily focuses on the societal reaction to deviance and its consequences, rather than the initial motivations or circumstances that lead individuals to commit deviant acts in the first place. Critics argue that this oversight leaves a crucial gap in understanding the full spectrum of deviant behavior, as it does not address underlying psychological, economic, or social factors that might predispose individuals to rule-breaking.

Furthermore, some critics contend that Labeling Theory might romanticize deviance or appear to absolve individuals of responsibility for their actions by placing too much emphasis on societal reaction. By focusing on the "victimization" of the labeled, it can be interpreted as downplaying the harm caused by the initial deviant acts themselves. Methodological challenges also exist, as empirically testing the causal link between labeling and secondary deviance can be complex, making it difficult to isolate the effects of the label from other confounding variables that might contribute to persistent deviant behavior.

Further Reading

[Labeling theory - Wikipedia](#)

[Labeling theory - Britannica](#)

[Howard S. Becker - Wikipedia](#)

[Edwin Lemert - Wikipedia](#)

[Erving Goffman - Wikipedia](#)

[Symbolic interactionism - Wikipedia](#)

[Self-fulfilling prophecy - Wikipedia](#)

[Master status - Wikipedia](#)

[Social stigma - Wikipedia](#)

Becker, Howard S. (1963). *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. Free Press.

Lemert, Edwin M. (1967). *Human Deviance, Social Problems, and Social Control*. Prentice-Hall.

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