

Labeling Theory in Sociology and Its Impact on Deviant Behavior

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Introduction

Labeling theory explains deviance by examining how social reactions influence identity, opportunity, and future behavior. It does not claim that a person automatically becomes whatever others call them, nor does it deny that harmful acts occur before a formal label is applied. Instead, it asks how rules are created, who has the power to enforce them, which people are selected for punishment, and what happens after someone is publicly defined as a delinquent, criminal, addict, troublemaker, or outsider. Edwin Lemert distinguished between primary deviance and [secondary deviance](#), while Howard Becker emphasized that deviance is not an inherent quality of an act but a status produced through rule-making and social response. This essay develops those ideas, explains the mechanisms through which labels can affect behavior, applies the theory carefully to youth and criminal justice, and reassesses the case of John Gotti without treating poverty or neighborhood conditions as excuses or proof of criminal destiny.

Deviance as a Social Definition

Societies establish norms that define acceptable conduct, but norms vary across time, place, institutions, and groups. An action may be illegal in one jurisdiction and permitted in another, condemned in one historical period and accepted in another, or punished differently depending on who performs it. Labeling theory therefore shifts attention from the act alone to the process through which an act and actor are interpreted.

Becker argued that social groups create deviance by making rules and applying them to selected people. This does not mean that injury or wrongdoing is imaginary. It means that official recognition is uneven. Many people break minor rules without being discovered or permanently labeled, while others receive intense surveillance and punishment. Power influences whose conduct is visible and whose interpretation becomes authoritative (Becker, 1963).

Primary and Secondary Deviance

Lemert used the term primary deviance for rule-breaking that has not become central to a person's identity. A young person may skip school, experiment with substances, fight, or commit a minor theft without understanding the behavior as evidence of a deviant self. The act may be temporary,

situational, or similar to behavior committed by peers who are never officially identified (Lemert, 1951).

Secondary deviance develops when social reaction becomes powerful enough to reorganize identity and behavior. Arrest, suspension, public humiliation, family rejection, or repeated labeling may convince the individual that conventional acceptance is unavailable. The person may then embrace the labeled role, join others with similar experiences, or continue behavior that has become part of a public and personal identity. This process is possible, not inevitable. Supportive relationships and fair opportunities can interrupt it.

The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

A label can contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy when expectations alter interactions in ways that make the expected outcome more likely. Teachers who assume a student is disruptive may watch that student more closely, interpret ambiguous behavior negatively, and provide fewer opportunities for trust. Peers may avoid the student, while authorities impose repeated punishment. The resulting frustration and exclusion can increase defiance.

The mechanism is more complex than simple imitation. People do not mechanically obey labels. Labels influence behavior through changed treatment, restricted opportunity, emotional response, and access to social groups. An individual may reject a label, negotiate it, conceal it, or turn it into a source of resistance. Labeling theory is strongest when it explains these social pathways rather than suggesting that words possess magical power.

Stigma and the Spoiled Identity

Erving Goffman's concept of stigma complements labeling theory. A stigmatized attribute can become a "master status" that overshadows other qualities. A person with a criminal record may be viewed primarily as an offender even after completing a sentence, maintaining employment, or caring for family. The label affects how others interpret unrelated behavior (Goffman, 1963).

Stigma can operate formally and informally. Formal consequences include restrictions on employment, housing, education, voting, licensing, or public benefits. Informal consequences include distrust, shame, damaged relationships, and exclusion. These effects may continue long after the original offense, increasing the practical difficulty of reintegration.

Moral Entrepreneurs and Rule Creation

Becker described "moral entrepreneurs" as people or institutions that campaign to create or enforce rules. Their actions may be motivated by genuine concern, professional interest, political advantage,

fear, or moral conviction. Media coverage can amplify these campaigns by presenting a behavior or group as an urgent threat.

Rule creation is not necessarily illegitimate. Societies need laws against violence, exploitation, and theft. Labeling theory asks whether the rule is fair, whether enforcement is proportional, and whether some groups bear greater consequences. It also examines whether public fear exceeds evidence and whether punishment produces more harm than prevention or treatment.

Labeling in Schools

Schools are important sites of labeling because they classify students by ability, behavior, attendance, disability, language, and achievement. Some classifications provide necessary support, but negative labels can lower expectations and influence peer identity. A student repeatedly called lazy, aggressive, or incapable may receive less challenging work, more surveillance, or exclusion from activities.

Discipline can intensify this process. Suspension removes students from instruction and may weaken attachment to school. If minor misbehavior is interpreted as evidence of a fixed character, the student loses opportunities to repair harm and rebuild trust. Restorative practices, behavioral support, counseling, and consistent rules may reduce the chance that one incident becomes a permanent identity.

Neighborhoods, Gangs, and Youth Identity

A teenager who lives in an area associated with gangs may be treated as a gang member because of clothing, friendships, address, race, or family connections. Such assumptions can increase police attention, school discipline, and social exclusion even when the adolescent has not joined a gang. If legitimate activities and relationships become less accessible, gang membership may appear to offer belonging and protection.

However, labeling theory should not imply that neighborhoods force all residents into crime. Communities experiencing poverty and violence also contain families, organizations, schools, businesses, faith groups, and residents working against harm. Structural disadvantage increases risk and shapes opportunity, but individuals respond in varied ways. Analysis should avoid stigmatizing an entire neighborhood while attempting to explain the pressures within it.

Criminal Justice and Differential Enforcement

Labeling theory highlights the difference between offending and official processing. Police discretion, prosecutorial decisions, bail, legal representation, sentencing, and parole all influence who acquires a

criminal record. Two people who commit similar acts may experience different outcomes because of age, race, class, location, prior contact, or access to counsel.

Once a person enters the system, surveillance increases the likelihood that later violations will be detected. A probation condition may criminalize behavior that would not be an offense for someone else. This cumulative process can create the appearance that officially labeled people are uniquely deviant when part of the difference results from greater observation.

The Case of John Gotti

John Gotti grew up in a large, economically struggling family and lived in New York neighborhoods where organized crime networks were active. He became involved with associates connected to the Gambino crime family at a young age and later rose to a leadership position. Labeling theory can help analyze how neighborhood reputation, peer networks, early justice contact, and identification with criminal groups reinforced an outlaw identity.

It would be inaccurate, however, to say that poverty or labels compelled Gotti to become a crime boss. Many people raised in similar conditions did not choose organized crime, and Gotti made repeated decisions that harmed others. Labeling theory explains social processes; it does not eliminate agency or responsibility. It is also less suited to explaining the initial attraction of organized crime than theories of opportunity, differential association, strain, social learning, and rational choice.

Differential Association and Labeling

Differential association theory proposes that criminal behavior is learned through interaction with others who communicate techniques, motives, and favorable definitions of law violation. This helps explain how direct participation in criminal networks can shape behavior before or alongside formal labeling. In Gotti's case, access to older organized-crime figures provided relationships, opportunities, and models.

Labeling theory adds an explanation of what happens when the identity becomes public, reinforced, and difficult to leave. The theories are complementary: one focuses on learning within groups, while the other examines social reaction and identity (Muncie, 2010).

Criticisms of Labeling Theory

A major criticism is that labeling theory may underexplain primary deviance. People often engage in harmful conduct before authorities react, and serious violence cannot be reduced to social definition. The theory may also romanticize offenders if it focuses so strongly on unfair reaction that it neglects victims and accountability.

Another limitation is that labels do not affect everyone equally. Personal resilience, family support, employment, community ties, and institutional opportunities influence whether a label is internalized. Some people actively reject stigmatizing identities. The theory therefore needs empirical attention to conditions under which labeling effects are strongest.

Policy Implications

Labeling theory supports policies that avoid unnecessarily turning temporary misconduct into a permanent identity. Diversion programs can keep eligible low-risk individuals out of formal processing while requiring accountability. Record-sealing, fair-chance hiring, treatment, education, and reentry support reduce the collateral consequences that make lawful participation difficult.

In schools, responses should distinguish conflict, developmental mistakes, disability-related behavior, and serious threats. Clear expectations and proportionate consequences can coexist with opportunities for restoration. In criminal justice, reducing biased enforcement and excessive surveillance can improve legitimacy without ignoring public safety.

Identity, Agency, and Reintegration

Desistance research shows that people often stop offending as they develop new roles and relationships. Employment, parenthood, partnership, education, spirituality, and community involvement can support a noncriminal identity. Institutions can either reinforce the old label or recognize change (Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Language matters. Referring to a “person with a conviction” rather than permanently defining someone as a criminal acknowledges accountability without denying the possibility of transformation. Reintegration is not the removal of responsibility; it is the creation of realistic pathways through which responsibility can lead to lawful participation.

Conclusion

Labeling theory demonstrates that deviance is shaped not only by conduct but also by rule-making, selective enforcement, stigma, and altered opportunity. Lemert’s distinction between primary and secondary deviance explains how social reaction can turn an episode into an identity, while Becker’s work reveals the role of power in defining outsiders. The theory is useful for understanding school discipline, neighborhood stigma, criminal records, and reintegration. It should not be used to claim that labels automatically cause crime or that poverty removes personal responsibility. In the case of John Gotti, labeling and environment may illuminate part of the pathway, but criminal learning, opportunity, ambition, and choice are also necessary. The strongest use of labeling theory is therefore neither excuse nor condemnation; it is a critical examination of how social responses can reduce

harm or unintentionally deepen it.

References

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