

Labeling Theory

- Labeling Theory
- Background
- Immensely popular during the 1960s
- Social disillusionment and change in the U.S.
- Failure of the New Deal, promises made but not kept
- Questioning government accountability
- Subjectivity of morality, decline of the consensus model
- Less focus on the individual
- Labeling Paradigm
- Crime as a question of social definitions; social construction of crime.
- Society is not stable or made up of a consensus of beliefs; societies are conflict-oriented.
- Considered a societal reaction theoretical approach.
- Frank Tannenbaum
- First "labeling" theorist (1893-1969)
- Served one year in prison for unlawful assembly during the unemployment unrest of 1913.
- Believed prisons did not serve to reintegrate people and in fact created more problems.
- Tannenbaum
- By labeling individuals are "delinquents" or "criminals" and by reacting to them in a punitive way, the community encourages these individuals to redefine themselves in accordance with community definitions.
- "Dramatization of evil" (1938)
- Tannenbaum
- A change in self-concept occurs.
- Individuals become what others say that they are...
- Even if they act good in the future, their goodness will not be believed.
- Once stigmatized, they find it extremely difficult to be free of the label of "delinquent" or "criminal".
- Tannenbaum
- Self-fulfilling prophecy

- Criticized mainly for timing; tensions mounting in Europe with Hitler and Mussolini; not a good time to criticize government (before his time!)
- Edwin Lemert (1951; 1972)
- 1912-1996
- Founder of societal reaction paradigm.
- Primary deviance: initial criminal act.
- Secondary deviance: criminal acts associated with the individual's acquired status as a criminal and his/her ultimate acceptance of it.
- Lemert

1. Primary deviance (initial act)

2. Social penalties

3. Further primary deviance

4. Stronger penalties and rejections

5. Further deviance, with an increase in hostility and resentment toward those doing the penalizing.

- Lemert

6. Stigmatizing of the deviant

7. Strengthening of the deviant as a result of the stigmatizing

8. Acceptance of the deviant social status

9. Secondary deviance occurs

- Howard S. Becker (1963)
- Founder of labeling theory
- Born in 1928; Chicago School
- The creation of rules and their enforcement is not necessarily a universally agreed upon phenomenon.
- *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (1963)
- Becker
- Law creators and law enforcers are "moral entrepreneurs" who believe that society is the victim of various social problems that in their judgment, could be corrected only through their political action.
- Moral entrepreneurs often believe that they have taken society's best interests into consideration; create and enforce rules that label particular individuals as outsiders.

- Becker

“Social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act a person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules or sanctions to an ‘offender’. The deviant is one to whom that label has been successfully applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label.”

- Becker

- Being a criminal becomes a person’s “master status” secondary to any other status.

- Public scrutiny leads to identity change, deviant self-image, association with similarly labeled deviants.

- Studies show a lower class bias. Boys will be boys versus delinquent label.

- Becker

- Four types of behavior

- Conformist: obedient behavior, not perceived as deviant.

- Falsely accused: obedient behavior, perceived as deviant.

- Pure deviant: rule-breaking behavior, perceived as deviant.

- Secret deviant: rule-breaking behavior, not perceived as deviant.

- Criticisms of Labeling Theory

- Empirical testing is difficult to conduct; main criticisms center on the issue of testability.

- Simplistic view of behavior causation.

- More of a perspective than a theory.

- Criticisms of Labeling Theory

- Never really explains the origins of deviant behavior.

- Doesn’t really explain white collar or corporate crime or violent offenses.

- No systematic analysis of female criminality.

- Support for Labeling Theory

- Recent studies have found that labeling theory does support SOME elements of crime and deviance.

- For example, research has shown that because of the stigma surrounding being mentally ill, some people avoid treatment and keep their problem a secret.

- Another example, because of the stigma surrounding convicted felons and associated problems seeking employment and starting a new life, recidivism rates are skyrocketing.