Encyclopedia of Identity

Labeling

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Labeling, or the labeling perspective, is a conceptual approach to understanding deviant behavior which directs attention away from the behavior per se to the social reaction that such activity generates. The approach, which came to prominence in the 1960s, is most commonly associated with the work of interactionist sociologists such as Howard Becker, Kai Erikson, Aaron Cicourel, and Edwin Lemert. The roots of the labeling perspective can, however, be found in the earlier writings of the criminologist Frank Tannebaum and his argument (in *Crime and the Community*) that “the dramatization of evil,” the assignment of a delinquent label to young offenders, was an important step in their progression to an adult criminal career. At a more fundamental level, the perspective can be seen as drawing inspiration from the theoretical insights of the first generation of symbolic interactionists, in particular George Herbert Mead's programmatic depiction of the social self and W. I. Thomas's dictum that social situations defined as real have real consequences.

Labeling is important to a discussion of identity because labeling and social reactions to labeling can influence an individual's sense of self and his or her behavior. This entry discusses the conceptual framework, application, and criticism of labeling.

Conceptual Framework

At the heart of the labeling approach is the relativization of what counts as criminal or deviant behavior and the rejection of absolutist accounts of these phenomena. According to Becker, deviance is not an inherent property of any activity but rather a label that is bestowed upon it by an audience. Theoretical attention is thus turned to the process of labeling and of how social control agencies can be understood as key actors in the genesis of deviant behavior. There are at least three different ways in which the creation of deviance can be conceptualized. First, and most elementary, it can simply mean that although a great deal of rule-breaking behavior occurs in society, it does not become recognized as deviance until a social group labels it as such. Second, a more complex point, it can also imply that an individual will become a deviant as a result of the social reaction (labeling, ostracism, a police warning, etc.) that accompanies some initial or minor rule infraction. What is suggested here is that

the social reaction experienced has powerful implications for the individual's sense of self, with the result that he or she comes to accept the label and becomes increasingly committed to further deviant activity. This particular aspect of the perspective was given its sharpest formulation in the distinction that Lemert drew between *primary* deviance—widespread acts of rule breaking with no or minimal impact upon one's self-conception—and *secondary* deviance—where the consequences of being labeled come to the fore and the original reasons for engaging in rule-breaking behavior recede. The majority of the theoretical and empirical explorations of the perspectives are concerned with these two senses of labeling. A third way in which labeling can be seen **[p. 414 ↓]** as constitutive of deviance focuses attention upon the everyday organizational and administrative practices of societies' agencies of social control. Also influenced by currents stemming from Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology, this conception of labeling highlights the contingent nature of criminal statistics. The argument is that the official rates of recorded deviance must be seen as a direct outcome of the everyday administrative activities of the social control agencies that handle and process cases of deviance. In this sense, the official crime statistics bear an unknown relationship to the actual amount of rule breaking that is taking place in any society, and they should instead be viewed as indices of the ways that organizations, such as the police, courts, and drug referral agencies, go about their routine business.

Refinements and Applications

Becker was to subsequently argue that the labeling of behavior as deviant must be placed alongside a consideration as to whether the acts concerned were conventionally recognized as "obedient" or alternatively as "rule breaking." These additional variables allowed for the possibility that there could be conforming or obedient behavior that was mistakenly or maliciously labeled as deviant, a category he referred to as "falsely accused." But they also gave rise to a category of "secret deviance," where acts that were in violation of rules or norms were not identified as such. Such a category would be inconsistent with the basic premise of the approach that deviance was to be understood in terms of the public social reaction. Without the bestowal of a label, there can be no deviance.

Much of the empirical work conducted under the auspices of the labeling approach has taken the form of qualitative studies of encounters between social control agents or agencies and persons whose behavior or personal circumstances are of special interest to these agencies. For example, researchers have documented the ways in which police officers pay particular attention to the demeanor of juveniles they come into contact with during regular patrols. Youth who are judged to be uncooperative or lacking in respect are far more likely to be apprehended and subjected to further questioning or even arrested. In contrast, juveniles whose demeanor is deemed contrite, who are respectful to the officers and appear fearful of the sanctions that might be imposed upon them, are typically subjected only to an informal reprimand or admonishment. Factors such as race or ethnicity of the youth, their residential location, neighborhood characteristics, and so on, are likely to be compounding variables in the exercise of these police discretionary practices. However, such practices may well have self-fulfilling consequences. Youth who are innocent of any wrongdoing but who come under repeated scrutiny by the police will conceivably develop hostility to the law enforcement personnel. Such encounters are likely to become routine for the youth concerned, and there will be a concomitant relaxation or diminution in the cooperative demeanor seen by police as the crucial sign of their innocence. This then is seen by the police as proof that their initial targeting and scrutinization were warranted, and a vicious cycle is set in train. The linking of labeling to such self-fulfilling prophecies has been developed by scholars who have considered the role that the mass media play in this process. Stanley Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, published in 1972, is the classic text in this line of inquiry.

The core, social psychological, assumption in the labeling approach—about the importance of the self and the criminogenic tendency attendant on the bestowal of a deviant label for an individual's self-conception—was given an important reinstatement in the theory of reintegrative shaming, which emerged nearly two decades later in the work of an Australian criminologist, John Braithwaite. According to this theory, a core part of the societal reaction to acts of deviancy is some sense of shame experienced by the offender. However, shame can take one of two forms: It can be stigmatizing, or it can be reintegrative. Shaming that is stigmatizing—as in the core precepts of the original labeling approach—is likely to result in deviancy amplification or increased commitment to a deviant lifestyle. Stigmatization will typically involve, among other

elements, strong disapproval and even humiliation of the offender; the labeling of the offender, and not just the deed perpetrated, as evil; and ceremonies to assign the label or certify the deviance that are not matched by corresponding ceremonies to decertify the deviance. In **[p. 415 ↓]** contrast, reintegrative shaming exhibits at least some of the following: disapproval of the deviant act while maintaining a relationship toward the offender that is respectful; ceremonies certifying deviance that are matched by ceremonies decertifying the deviance; and the disapproval of the evil of the deed committed but without labeling the perpetrator as evil. The theory of reintegrative shaming has proved extremely influential and has served as the basis for a range of practical noncustodial interventions into juvenile justice, such as community or family conferences where offenders and their victims are brought together and discuss the harm that has been done and agree upon appropriate reparations.

Evaluation

Although there is an undisputed core of received wisdom to the perspective, it has also been subject to criticism from several quarters. Scholars who espouse more conventional approaches to the explanation of crime and deviance have criticized it for the absence of any explicit theoretical propositions that can be tested. Critical criminologists have argued that it ignores inequalities and exploitation and denies agency on the part of the deviant actor. Finally, it has also come under attack from later, more radical, social action approaches for its failure to document the detailed socially organized language-based processes through which labels are assigned and, perhaps, challenged or resisted.

Labeling, it now appears, was never intended to be understood as a theory of crime or deviance in the sense of a causal explanation of its incidence and scope. Becker admits this in his essay “Labeling Theory Reconsidered,” in the second edition of his *Outsiders*, although the point had also been made by a number of commentators in the 10 years since the publication of the book's first edition. In an ironic comment, he regarded it as “unfortunate” that the perspective on understanding deviance that he and others had introduced had been labeled as a theory. He suggests the approach should be better described as an interactionist theory of deviance. Nevertheless, much of the initial critique of the approach focused on what was seen as the excessive emphasis

on the label and its effects. In one of the most piquant discussions of the perspective, Ronald Akers argued, “One sometimes gets the impression from reading this literature that people go about minding their own business, and then—“wham”—bad society comes along and slaps them with a stigmatized label. Forced into the role of deviant the individual has little choice but to be deviant” (p. 463). This criticism was also echoed by left-wing or Marxist criminologists who argued that the perspective's preoccupation with audience reaction downplays agency in that individuals may actively seek out deviant lifestyles as solutions to structural problems in their lives.

Strikingly absent from any of the writings of the original labeling theorists, or the work inspired by the approach, is a detailed exploration of the ways in which, in interaction, actors assign labels to people and events. Part of the general way in which the business of the production and recognition of descriptions is conducted in social life, the invocation and application of labels in settings such as courtroom cross-examinations, police interrogations, parent teacher interviews, medical consultations, and many others, is both inferentially rich and morally impregnated. For labeling theory this domain is something of a conceptual black hole, but it has figured prominently in research on the deployment of membership categories and category bound activities, research that was inspired by Harvey Sacks's pioneering studies in conversation analysis.

Maria Wowk has shown the way in which a suspect under interrogation in a murder case artfully deploys labels by constructing an account of his victim's character and conduct in such a way that she could be seen as at least partly responsible for the events that led to her death. Wowk shows how the suspect accomplishes this “indirectly” by attributing to his victim activities that he hopes the police interrogator will “hear” as commonsensically tied to a particularly “morally deviant” category of female. To the extent that labeling has a viable place in social science research, it is likely to be in the detailed investigation of these ordinary interactional practices.

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See also

Further Readings

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