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## Labeling Theory

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Labeling theory is part of a social science paradigm that organizes theory and method known as *symbolic interactionism*. Symbolic interactionism offers microlevel, or individual, explanations of human motivation and behavior. Most scholars credit George Herbert Mead with the inception of the symbolic interactionist paradigm with his 1934 book *Mind, Self, and Society*. The principle components of Mead's version of symbolic interactionism include acts, gestures, symbols, the mind, and the self. The paradigm is concerned with how people communicate and how communication informs the sense of self and, ultimately, social relations in society. Mead's notion of the self and how it develops in regard to generalized others is of particular importance to labeling theory.

The concept of the *self* is formed through interaction with significant or meaningful others. For example, people initially take on roles and act just as they think others expect them to behave. Labels are akin to stereotypes or self-fulfilling prophecies. A person who uses a label is taking a cognitive shortcut in determining how to interact with the person she is labeling. Labeling theory, as it pertains to the study of law and society, has the general premise that punitive sanctions applied by formal legal authorities in response to minor deviant or law-breaking behavior actually stigmatize individuals by labeling them as “criminal” or “delinquent.” Although this process determines how generalized others will treat a labeled individual, the stigmatization also influences the self-concept of the labeled individual. The application of stigmatizing labels, then, amplifies the original or primary deviance for which the individual was initially labeled.

Several scholars are credited with proffering labeling theory as an explanation of crime and delinquency, among them Howard Becker, Erving Goffman, and Edwin Lemert. These three scholars have made major contributions to labeling theory. Becker developed a typology of behavior with conformists, pure deviants, the falsely accused, and secret deviants. Under this conceptualization, people appropriately label both the conformists and the pure deviants; others' perceptions of the actions of conformists and pure deviants mirror their actual behavior. However, labels applied to the falsely accused and secret deviants are inaccurate. In the first instance, individuals who are stigmatized or labeled but actually engage in conformist or nondeviant behavior are then falsely accused. Secret deviants, on the other hand, are persons who actually engage in nonconformist or deviant behavior yet somehow avoid detection and labeling

by others. Goffman added that individuals who are labeled or stigmatized are more likely to incorporate the deviant label into their selfconcept or identity and therefore engage in additional deviance, crime, or delinquency because of spoiled identity. Lemert acknowledged that secondary [p. 894 ↓ ] deviance occurs through a dynamic process of negative social reaction and strong penalties or sanctions that result in persistent misconduct.

Since the 1960s, interest in labeling theory has waned somewhat in the United States. Empirical tests of labeling as an independent variable or cause of crime and delinquency failed to uncover a strong effect of labeling on recidivism. Moreover, John Braithwaite stressed that social reaction to deviance could have reintegrative as well as stigmatizing effects on behavior, since the culture in which an individual was socialized also influenced that individual's reaction to labeling.

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- [Ethnomethodology](#)
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#### Further Readings

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