

# Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

## Lemert, Edwin M.: Primary and Secondary Deviance

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Edwin M. Lemert posited the notion of primary and secondary deviance in his 1951 text *Social Pathology*. The discussion of these distinct forms of deviance took only a few pages, but the effect on various theories of criminal behavior, particularly labeling theory, were rich and far-reaching. Lemert further delved into this dichotomy in his 1967 *Human Deviance, Social Problems, and Social Control*, painting a fuller picture of how he believed that societal reactions to a violation of social norms could lead an individual to continued violation of these norms (including the commission of crimes) and an eventual self-identification with behaviors and groups existing outside of the established (i.e., mainstream) societal framework. According to Lemert, this self-identification would cement an individual's status in society as that of a deviant.

For Lemert, primary deviance is behavior that departs from a social norm yet causes no long-term consequences for the offender. This lack of consequence may be because the initial deviation prompts no reaction or, if the deviance does prompt a reaction, that reaction is not particularly negative or stigmatizing. Primary deviance does not lead to a permanent label from external observers or to a deviant self-identity on the part of the offender. Secondary deviance is not simply a violation of social norms, but a violation of social norms that results from a realignment of an individual's self-concept either with the deviance itself or with a subgroup that is considered deviant in relation to the social norms.

The remainder of this entry unfolds in three parts. First, the theoretical roots of Lemert's ideas are discussed briefly. Next, more detail is provided about the process of negative labeling, which serves to distinguish primary and secondary deviance. The essay concludes with a discussion of the status of Lemert's ideas in contemporary criminological theory and practice.

## Theoretical Basis

Lemert's concepts of primary and secondary deviance draw from George Herbert Mead's perspectives on social interaction and from labeling theory, the genesis of which is usually attributed to Frank Tannenbaum in his 1938 *Crime and the Community*.

Mead's insights, which eventually evolved into symbolic interactionism, focused on how the individual defines himself or herself through the feedback received from the community at large. Through this interaction, an individual learns the rules and norms that the society has developed, and discovers how to act within this context to successfully integrate into the larger group. The individual then is able to communicate those norms to new individuals who seek entrance.

Labeling theory follows Mead's line of logic in the examination of social reactions to individual behavior outside the norms set forth by the larger group. According to Tannenbaum, violators of norms are given labels such as troublemaker, criminal, delinquent, or other stereotypes that carry negative connotations. The individual, then "labeled," is consistently viewed and treated differently from "normal" members of the social group. The labeled individual is placed in groups, by social definition if not by physical location, with other individuals who have the same label. This new grouping both erects barriers for the individual's future reintegration into the larger social group and [p. 551 ↓ ] provides a behavioral model for further violations of norms. In short, a person actually becomes the label placed on him or her by the social group and exhibits behaviors along those lines. A person labeled as "criminal" because of past actions will be more likely to commit crimes in the future.

Lemert attempted to give a more thorough exploration of the process by which a person's behaviors lead to his or her labeling and potential exclusion from the larger social group. The core of this inquiry was the delineation of an individual's normative violations as either primary or secondary deviance.

## The Deviance Process

Not all violations of social norms have long-term negative consequences. Some acts that violate criminal law, for instance, are undetected by law enforcement or other persons. Other acts, even if detected, result in a "corrective" penalty. In other words, a detected crime might be subject to a punishment that serves to deter the individual from further violations. Norm violations such as these are what Lemert referred to as primary deviance. Primary deviance is quickly forgotten, and the offender proceeds, for the most part, with "normal," law-abiding behavior.

The deviance about which Lemert spoke could consist of anything from a student speaking out of turn in class to the commission of a crime. The social reaction to such behavior could range from chastisement and stereotyping to imprisonment or other severely punitive action. Primary deviance receives no social reaction or mild, corrective reaction. However, as deviant behavior is repeated or becomes persistent, the societal reaction is likely to become stronger and more punitive. If continued violations of the norms produce societal penalties strong enough to cause stigmatization, secondary deviance can result.

Lemert explained further how this strong societal reaction can create further deviance. As the penalties and rejections of the larger society become stronger and the individual becomes more and more indelibly marked as deviant, the individual begins to resent not only the norms being violated but also the social structures themselves levying the penalties. Further, non-deviant opportunities might be blocked due to the stigmatization of the label (i.e., jobs denied due to the label of “convicted felon”). Once an individual reaches a certain level of resentment toward the larger group, the individual begins to create a self-concept as actually *being* whatever the larger group defines as deviant.

In Lemert's view, the internalization of the label leads to *deviance amplification*. This causes a rejection of the larger society and an association with other “deviants”—for whom the deviant behavior is not seen as problematic. Deviant behaviors stemming from this identification with an excluded group are thus termed secondary deviance. As Lemert (1951, p. 76) puts it, “When a person begins to employ his deviant behavior or a role based upon it as a means of defense, attack, or adjustment to the overt and covert problems created by the consequent social reaction to him, his deviation is secondary.”

Secondary deviance is often more severe than primary deviance and, most importantly, it is characteristic of an entrenched self- and social-identity as “deviant.” Additionally, an individual who manifests secondary deviance is also much more likely to align himself or herself with others who have been similarly labeled, thus becoming part of a subculture that stands outside of the framework created by the norms of the original social group.

Lemert offers up the example of the “errant schoolboy” (p. 275) to illustrate his point. In this example, a child plays a prank in class and is mildly punished by his

teacher (primary deviance). Later, he accidentally causes another disturbance and is again reprimanded (again, primary deviance). However, because of these repeated disturbances, the teacher begins using terms such as “bad boy” and “mischief maker” toward the child. The child then becomes resentful of the labels and may act out, fulfilling the role that he sees as expected of him, especially if he discovers that there is a certain status among a certain group of peers in playing that role (secondary deviance). That group of peers then may form their own subculture within which the behavior deemed deviant by the larger society is accepted and encouraged.

## Beyond Lemert

In the 1960s and 1970s, criminologists such as Howard Becker, Kai Erickson, John Kitsuse, and [p. 552 ↓ ] others began focusing on what they deemed “social reaction” theory, which stemmed directly from the ideas set forth by Tannenbaum and Lemert. The study of societal reaction and other symbolic interactions as a major driver of criminal behavior was a marked departure from “traditional” criminological theories, which presumed that criminal behavior drove societal reaction. For a brief time, labeling theory became a dominant paradigm in the field.

This dominance was short-lived, however, as a number of critiques emerged that targeted the empirical validity of many of the core assumptions of these theories. For instance, the effects of an individual's day-to-day experience (family structure, social networks of acquaintances, educational attainment) were assumed to be of less import in determining the likelihood of future deviant behavior than being arrested and/or incarcerated. Empirical evidence simply does not support the idea that these characteristics of daily life and social environment are unimportant; much research suggests that there are many criminogenic conditions beyond being formally labeled as deviant. Further, developmental research has revealed that many of these criminogenic conditions occur well before official labels are applied (i.e., pre-natal or early childhood influences). Finally, radical non-intervention was the implied policy stemming from the work of Lemert and the labeling theorists of the 1960s. This policy implication, while popular during the 1960s, increasingly became viewed as impractical and potentially dangerous. Due to such limitations, labeling theory fell out of favor during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

However, Lemert's concepts experienced a rejuvenation in the 1990s as more empirically sound theoretical frameworks based upon labeling theory emerged. John Braithwaite's theory of reintegrative shaming and Lawrence Sherman's defiance theory are two such examples. While these contemporary approaches still largely ignore criminogenic factors that precede labeling, they are valuable in re-focusing attention on the potentially harmful effects of some reactions to crime. However, rather than advocating radical non-intervention, contemporary theories of labeling have been especially important in informing the concept of restorative justice as a reform strategy.

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*See also*

- [Becker, Howard S.: Labeling and Deviant Careers](#)
- [Braithwaite, John: Reintegrative Shaming Theory](#)
- [Schur, Edwin M.: Radical Non-Intervention and Delinquency](#)
- [Sherman, Lawrence W.: Defiance Theory](#)
- [Tannenbaum, Frank: The Dramatization of Evil](#)

#### References and Further Readings

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