

**2023**

**SELF-IDENTITY, SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM  
AND CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR: THE LABELLING  
THEORY STANDPOINT**

Ishaan Deepak Joshi

---

**Recommended Citation**

Ishaan Deepak Joshi, 'Self-Identity, Symbolic Interactionism and Criminal Behavior: The Labelling Theory Standpoint' (2023) 2 IJHRLR 165-175.  
Available at [www.humanrightlawreview.in/vol-2-issue-4/](http://www.humanrightlawreview.in/vol-2-issue-4/).

This Art. is brought to you for free and open access by the International Journal of Human Rights Law Review by an authorized Lex Assisto Media and Publications administrator. For more information, please contact [info@humanrightlawreview.in](mailto:info@humanrightlawreview.in).

# **SELF-IDENTITY, SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM AND CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR: THE LABELLING THEORY STANDPOINT**

Ishaan Deepak Joshi<sup>1</sup>

## **ABSTRACT**

In the course of human civilization, the occurrence of criminal behaviour has persistently afflicted and disrupted many aspects of human society. Throughout the course of history, societies have instituted policies in order to address this harmful behaviour that constitutes a significant threat to the moral basis upon which the community is founded. The establishment of a system of justice that deals with criminals through the application of appropriate punishments has proven to be one of the most important steps in the fight against criminal activity. In spite of the existence of a criminal justice system that is working at full capacity, there has been a consistent rise in the overall rate of criminal activity throughout the society. Sociologists and researchers working in the field of criminology have attempted to address this problem by developing theories that are aimed at elucidating the underlying causes of criminal behaviour and, as a result, providing potential strategies for the problem's mitigation. One of the hypotheses that has been established to provide an explanation for crime and criminality is the Labelling Theory, which was developed by Howard Becker. This theory places an emphasis on the sociocultural processes that are responsible for the categorization and stigmatization of specific behaviours and individuals as belonging to the deviant category. The purpose of this research is to present a comprehensive analysis of Howard Becker's Labelling Model as well as its perspective on the ideas of criminal behaviour and criminal activity.

## **KEYWORDS**

---

<sup>1</sup> NALSAR University of Law and MIT-WPU Faculty of Law.

Labelling, Criminality, Deviance, Stigma, Exclusion, Alienation, Subculture, Internalisation, Law Enforcement

## **I. THE LABELLING THEORY BY HOWARD BECKER**

The conventional positivist approach, which attributed the causes of crime to factors like moral growth and personality, was called into question in the 1960s by the emergence of labelling theory as a prominent perspective within the field of criminology. This theory also seeks to investigate the effects that being labelled criminals by society has on individuals' lives after they have already been stigmatized in this way. Frank Tannenbaum was a sociologist and criminologist. He proposed that the creation of criminals occurs as a result of the processes of tagging, identifying, and separating individuals. Becker's thesis is based on Tannenbaum's work and uses it as its foundation.

Tannenbaum proposed that as a consequence of the act of labelling, people are compelled to behave in a manner that is consistent with the identity that has been assigned to them. In his theoretical framework, Howard Becker proposed that deviance is a construct that is shaped by societal norms and values, wherein certain behaviours are designated as deviant while others are not. Other behaviours are not considered to be deviant.<sup>2</sup> Becker elaborated on the theory of labelling by proposing that social groupings produce deviance through the establishment of norms, the violation of which is deemed to be deviant, and the subsequent application of these rules to specific individuals, thereby classifying them as outsiders.

Instead of concentrating solely on the behaviour in and of itself, the Labelling Theory looks at how other people react to it and places more weight on that reaction than on the behaviour itself. Becker's examination of the phenomenon of deviance sheds light on the

---

<sup>2</sup> Townsend, Kerry. 2001. "Frank Tannenbaum: 'Dramatization of Evil'." Florida State University. Archived from the original on 2009-04-26. Retrieved 2010-05-29.

establishment of social control institutions such as the judicial and law enforcement systems. These institutions have the purpose of classifying individuals as deviant and therefore excluding them from the conventional framework of a law-abiding society. Becker's research sheds light on how these institutions came to be. Becker made the observation that the social stratum that is most likely to be responsible for the production of deviant behaviour tends to be composed predominately of people who are in the middle or higher socioeconomic strata. The explanation for this phenomenon is that having economic or political authority is required in order for one's perspectives to be articulated or put into action. This is the driving force behind the phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> During the process of developing this theory, Becker carried out an empirical investigation focused on the topic of how marijuana is used and how it is regulated. He conducted an in-depth analysis of the processes by which political power was exercised in order to stigmatise marijuana use as a socially unacceptable behaviour. Becker wanted to find out what happens to people when they are labelled as deviant and then observe what happens to those labelled people. The author made the observation that the classification of behaviour as abnormal or typical is not a property of the behaviour itself but rather the result of individuals assigning labels to it and characterizing it in certain ways.

In accordance with the norms and standards that have been established, various social authorities, such as those working in law enforcement, educational institutions, the judicial system, and religious communities, assign the label of deviation to certain behaviours. According to Becker, the social audience is the one responsible for establishing the criteria for deviation and, afterward, applying this label to particular people, which results in those people being marginalized and viewed as outsiders. In 1963, Becker emphasized how important it was to make a distinction

---

<sup>3</sup> Plummer, K 2000, "Labelling theory", Historical, Conceptual, and Theoretical Issues, 1(1): 191-194.

between behaviours that broke the rules and deviance. The author argues that the label of "deviant" is a social construct that is selectively assigned to some people, and he emphasizes that not all instances of rule-breaking behaviours are universally seen as deviant.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, it is essential to acknowledge that not all people who are labelled as deviant necessarily bear the responsibility for violating societal norms. This is an essential point to keep in mind. The theory provided further illumination by demonstrating that actions cannot be universally classified as abnormal or typical. The social rank or race of the person who committed the act also plays a role in how it is understood, and whether or not it is considered to be deviant. Becker provided an illustration to support his claim, in which he highlighted the different ways in which juvenile offenders are treated according to their socioeconomic backgrounds.

This was done so as to provide evidence for his assertion. In particular, he made the observation that people who came from families of a middle-class income were significantly less likely to be involved in legal proceedings in comparison to their counterparts who originated from underdeveloped urban areas.

## **II. CRIME THROUGH THE LENS OF THE LABELLING THEORY**

The concept proposes that the use of labels contributes to an increase in criminal activity by marginalizing certain individuals and rendering them as outcasts in society. This, in turn, makes criminal activity more likely to occur. According to Mesmaecker, all that is required for a person to be labelled as a criminal is the commission of a single act of criminal behaviour. The individual may be subjected to repercussions as a result of this label that are not only long-term but also very likely to continue throughout their entire life.

---

<sup>4</sup> Regoli, R 2009, *Delinquency in Society*, Jones & Bartlett Learning, NY.

According to Becker, societal perceptions have a tendency to label those who have been identified as guilty. This can be seen in the practice of law enforcement authorities to apprehend individuals with prior criminal records while they are investigating a present offence. Because of the stigma that comes with this designation, law enforcement views these individuals as having a disregard for legal norms and anticipates that they will continue to participate in criminal activities. This is because of the stigma that comes with this designation. The potential for adverse outcomes in the event that records pertaining to juvenile offenders were made available to the general public provides the justification for the efforts made by the juvenile justice system to keep the criminal histories of young offenders hidden from public view.<sup>5</sup>

According to Judith and Tina, people who have a criminal history have a more difficult time gaining access to employment and educational opportunities, which may make them more likely to participate in additional illegal activities. The idea also places an emphasis on the role that the judicial system plays in the progression of criminal activity. Becker believes that the justice system may be a contributing factor to the problem rather than the solution in terms of its efforts to deter future criminal behaviour.<sup>6</sup>

The accused will be more likely to engage in additional illegal behaviour if the judicial system labels them as deviant individuals, which will increase the likelihood of further criminal behaviour by the individual. The tagging hypothesis offers an explanation for why the incidence of certain crimes is disproportionately higher in comparison to that of others.

According to Becker, certain behaviours that fall into the category of deviance are more likely to draw the attention of society or the

---

<sup>5</sup> Walklate, S 2007, *Understanding Criminology*, McGraw-Hill International, NY

<sup>6</sup> Judith, B & Tina, M 2003, "Child and Adolescent", *Social Work Journal*, 20(2): 85-98.

authorities. As a consequence of this, interventions that target this behaviour may result in the apprehending of individuals who are involved in these antisocial behaviours.<sup>7</sup> As an illustration of this phenomenon, consider the comprehensive offensive that the government of the United States launched against drug usage in the 1980s. This led to an overrepresentation of crimes associated with drug use within society, which was one of the unintended consequences of this phenomenon.

When a community labels a particular behaviour as deviant and then draws attention to it, there is a tendency for the perception of an increase in such criminal activity to emerge. This is because of the attention that is being directed towards the deviant behaviour. The labelling hypothesis acknowledges the tendency of society to classify people into different categories based on whether or not they have broken predetermined norms or regulations.

An individual is now more likely to be categorized as a member of a homogenous group than previously, when they were viewed as a unique entity in their own right. This new perception places an individual in the same category as other people who have participated in similar illegal activities. Because of this classification, there is a chance that the individual will be excluded from the social collectives to which they had previously been affiliated. This is a risk that the individual will face.

The possibility exists that the individual will experience a dissolution of social connections with his family and friends, which has the potential to have a detrimental effect on the individual's overall well-being. As a direct consequence of this, the person who has been stigmatized has a greater propensity to identify with the subculture or category of deviant behaviour that society views him as belonging to.

---

<sup>7</sup> Becker, H 1963, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, Free Press, New York

The individual is more likely to participate in more deviant behaviours as a result of the new group's acceptance of their lifestyle choices. Individuals have a propensity to engage in behaviours that are consistent with the label that has been assigned to them, as stated by McGrath. Consequently, individuals who have been socially labelled as deviant or people who see themselves as deviant have a tendency to conform to the expectations of society and behave in a manner that is consistent with this conformity.<sup>8</sup>

### **III. ANALYSING CRIMINALITY THROUGH THE LABELLING PERSPECTIVE**

According to the labelling hypothesis, the act of attributing a label to a person has a significant effect on that person's perception of themselves and their place in the world. An individual who engages in deviant behaviour may be driven by a number of factors that are independent of their sense of self. However, once an individual is stigmatized as a deviant, their self-perception undergoes a transformation from being perceived as normal to being perceived as a deviant. This occurs when they go from thinking of themselves as normal to thinking of themselves as deviant. After assuming this newly formed identity, the person starts the process of self-definition and introspection, during which he perceives and conceptualizes himself through the lens of the label of deviant that has been bestowed upon him. This continues until the person reaches a point where they are satisfied with their understanding of themselves.<sup>9</sup>

The acquisition of deviant status as a result of the violation of a societal norm, which Becker's theoretical framework deems to be the equivalent

---

<sup>8</sup> McGrath, A 2009, "Offenders' Perceptions of the Sentencing Process: A Study of Deterrence and Stigmatisation in the New South Wales Children's Court", *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 41 (1): 24-46.

<sup>9</sup> Mesmaecker, V 2010, "Building social support for restorative justice through the media: is taking the victim perspective the most appropriate strategy?", *Contemporary Justice Review*, 13 (3): 239-267.

of assuming the role of a master position, is considered to be a master position. As a consequence of this, the person has an innate propensity towards deviance as their primary status, with any other considerations of status occupying a subordinate position. People who view themselves as criminals are more likely to engage in criminal behaviour than those who do not have this perception of themselves. The Labelling Theory elucidates the fact that individuals who are categorised as deviant may not necessarily have violated pre-existing social norms, despite the fact that they are considered to be deviant.

The act of labelling individuals within a society can occasionally include making broad generalizations, which can result in the classification of individuals as deviants, even in situations in which they have not yet participated in any behaviour that would be considered deviant. Becker contends that individuals who are labelled as deviant in public are more likely to engage in career deviance as a natural progression because of the stigma attached to them. According to the labelling hypothesis, the attribution of a deviant label to an individual raises the likelihood that the individual will participate in additional criminal activities beyond the initial offence for which the label was assigned.

Plummer provides evidence in support of this viewpoint by pointing out that individuals who are detained for one deviant action are more likely to participate in additional deviant behaviours due to the perception that society has of them as deviant. This, in turn, increases the likelihood that these individuals will associate with others who have been classified in a manner that is analogous to their own. This assertion is supported by empirical evidence relating to the Juvenile Justice System in the United States.<sup>10</sup> In the middle of the 1990s, a number of governors from different states in the United States put forward proposals in which they advocated for the transfer of juvenile offenders into the adult criminal

---

<sup>10</sup> Clausmeier, D 2007, "Child criminal justice", *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 18(1): 171-173

justice system as a means of reducing crime rates through the use of deterrence.

According to the data that is currently available, juvenile offenders who were processed through the adult criminal justice system had a greater likelihood of engaging in criminal behaviour after their release from correctional institutions. This was the case regardless of whether or not they were sentenced as adults. This can be attributed to the stigmatizing label they were given as a result of their involvement in the adult system, which caused them to become involved in the adult system. The stigma that is attached to the label has an effect on the manner in which individuals behave in society. According to the findings of a study that was carried out by McCarney, individuals who have a criminal history suffer negative effects on their future employability and a decline in their social standing.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, it is important to note that individuals with criminal histories are frequently subjected to stereotyping and stigmatization, and are consistently perceived as criminals, despite having completed their sentences and, as a result, fulfilling their obligations for their previous transgressions. This is despite the fact that it is noteworthy that these individuals have a criminal history. Individuals who formerly engaged in criminal behaviour have, in the majority of cases, gone through a process of rehabilitation and are now ready to contribute positively to the community as productive citizens.

However, the manner in which individuals are perceived and treated by society compels them to alter their identities in order to conform to the deviant classification. Moreover, society encourages this behaviour. As a direct result of this, individuals are more likely to engage in illegal behaviour, either as a way to support themselves financially or as a form

---

<sup>11</sup> McCarney, W 2002, "Restorative justice: International approaches", *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 3(1): 2-13.

of social retaliation against the society that has wronged them.

According to the Labelling Theory, the expansion of sensitivity towards criminal activity and aberrant behaviour within the framework of the justice system will result in significant positive outcomes. In the event that such a scenario occurs, there is a possibility of embracing a restorative strategy that critically examines the efficacy of punitive measures along with labelling to be the most effective means of addressing criminal behaviour. This would be a possibility.<sup>12</sup>

According to Mesmaecker, this particular strategy has the potential to reduce the feeling of alienation that the parties involved in the judicial process experience, thereby significantly lowering the offenders' perception that the system is unfair. Individuals who have already committed criminal acts would not feel the need to commit additional crimes if they adopted this particular point of view because it would help them realize that engaging in deviant behaviour is not a fundamental component of their identity.<sup>13</sup>

#### **IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The purpose of this work is to conduct an analysis of Becker's Labelling theory and provide a comprehensive explanation of its perspectives on criminal behaviour and lawbreaking. The theory of labelling investigates the potential outcomes that people might face as a result of being singled out and positioned in a certain social category. The observation that was made earlier suggests that people who are considered to be on the periphery of a society are more likely to engage in anti-social behaviour due to the assumptions and expectations that have been placed upon them by that society. Because the hypothesis behind this research is that people who aren't typically considered deviant end up adopting an

---

<sup>12</sup> Slattery, M 2003, *Key Ideas in Sociology*, Nelson Thornes, Boston.

<sup>13</sup> Ishaan Deepak Joshi, 'A Dissection of Durkheimian Literature: Anomie, Deviance and Suicide' (2023) 2 IJHRLR 137-148. Available at [www.humanrightlawreview.in/vol-2-issue-4/](http://www.humanrightlawreview.in/vol-2-issue-4/).

identity that's consistent with the label that's been placed on them, the author of this study looked into the relationship between labelling and the progression of criminal behaviour.

Individuals have a propensity, after being given a label, to internalise the label and accept it as true, thereby adopting a deviant identity and engaging in deviant behaviours. According to the labelling hypothesis, society plays a significant role in the continuation of criminal activity by ascribing deviant labels to individuals, which, in turn, contributes to the individuals' participation in criminal activity. Therefore, it is plausible to reduce crime and criminal behaviour by reducing stigmatisation and adopting a more humane and inclusive approach to the reintegration of individuals who have been convicted of a crime in the past.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Ishaan Deepak Joshi, 'Strain Theories: Hypothesizing Criminality through a Societal Pressure Perspective' (2023) 2 IJHRLR 149-164. Available at [www.humanrightlawreview.in/vol-2-issue-4/](http://www.humanrightlawreview.in/vol-2-issue-4/).