

Labeling Theory

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of labeling theory, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Symbolic Interaction Theory and Labeling Theory
2. Erving Goffman and Stigma
3. Retrospective and Projective Labeling
4. Medicalization of Deviance

1. SYMBOLIC INTERACTION THEORY AND LABELING THEORY

Recall that symbolic interaction theory holds that society is constructed through a multitude of micro-level interactions.

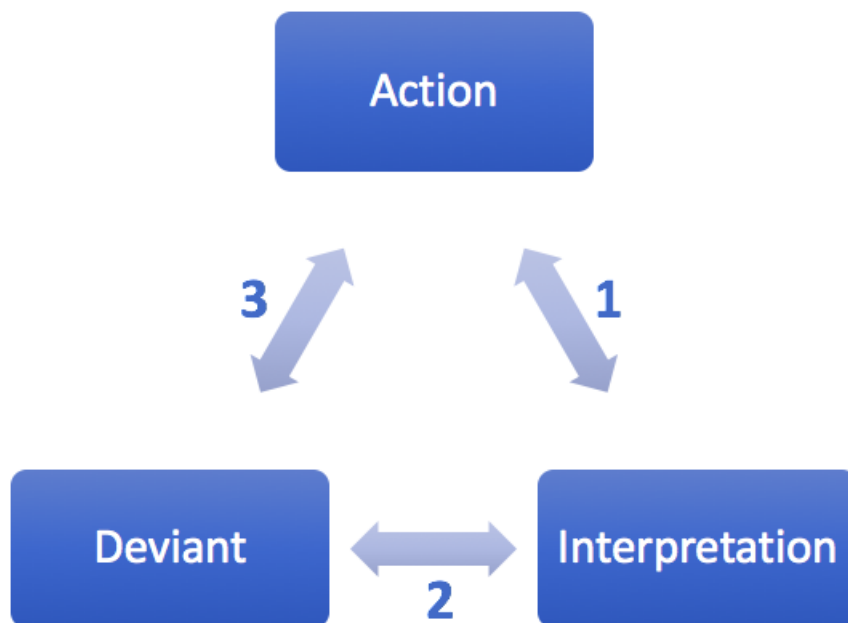
🔗 **EXAMPLE** If you are talking to someone else, you're constantly interpreting their words and actions to arrive at some kind of definition and understanding of the situation. Meaning is essentially created through social interaction.

However, people might not always be on the same page with these meanings, and that can cause problems. In your conversation, you might think it means one thing, but the other person might actually mean something else, resulting in a difference in meanings.

How does this relate to deviance? How people define deviance is subject to the same process of interpretation, and **labeling theory** is the way that symbolic interaction theorizes deviance.

Labeling theory holds that observers to any given social action may define the situation differently and attach different labels (such as deviant), thereby arriving at different meanings and interpretations of the action.

This following diagram illustrates the relationship of labeling theory and deviance:



1. The process starts with some kind of social action, and then people--observers to this action--interpret this action.
2. In this interpretation process, they arrive at some kind of meaning of the action, the 'meaning-making' phase. What is the person doing? What do they intend? Is their action deviant? Is it not deviant?
3. If and when the action is defined as deviant, the action then takes on a whole new meaning in the observer's eyes. If it is made known that the observers think the action is deviant, the 'offender' might internalize this deviant category.

It's a triangular process: action, interpretation, labeling, reverting back to action, interpretation, and labeling.

IN CONTEXT

Suppose you have a roommate who is packing up to move out of your shared house. You own a set of nice plates that you originally brought to the house. As your roommate is packing up his stuff, you notice that the plates are gone. Would you be thinking, "Why did he take the plates? Did he do this maliciously to bother me, a case of deviant behavior, or was he simply oblivious and thought that the plates were his, with no idea that they were mine?"

Either way, it's frustrating, but as you can see, you would have been engaged in this process of trying to interpret his actions. You would have labelled them as either malicious and deviant, or careless and oblivious. The process includes multiple realities--there is your reality, or interpretation of the situation, and there is your roommate's reality, or definition of the situation. In this instance, your interpretation was being contested and constructed through the interaction. You had to interpret the facts and arrive at a definition. You had to label his behavior, which is significant because it has consequences for the future interaction between you and your roommate.

What if the actual reality was that your roommate was oblivious and mistakenly thought the plates were his? You may have lost your plates, but it wasn't a deviant act. It was just an oblivious act, but if you had labeled it deviant, you might have been quite angry with him, and it may have had a negative impact on your friendship. You can see, therefore, labels are not inconsequential things.



TERM TO KNOW

Labeling Theory

The idea that deviance results from the meanings and labels that people give to our actions.

2. ERVING GOFFMAN AND STIGMA

People respond to the labels that they're given. When you define situations and label them, people on the receiving end can internalize these labels and adjust their actions based upon how they're being labeled. Sociologist **Erving Goffman**, who contributed immensely to developing the symbolic interactionism perspective, theorized this process in regards to deviance.

Goffman theorized that primary deviance is the first act of deviance. Once you do something that is labeled as deviant, even if it is minor in consequence, that constitutes your first act of deviance, primary deviance. People can begin to look at you as a deviant, and this can begin to shape your own view of yourself.

If, then, deviance proceeds to build off of the internalization of the original deviant label and you continue to act out because you have internalized the label, it can become secondary deviance. It may even develop into a stigma. **Stigma** is a negative social label that people acquire, that of an 'outsider', that profoundly affects their idea of themselves and their worldview.

This is a very social process; people don't arrive at these self concepts and worldviews on our own. They get labeled deviant by society through their initial acts of deviance, and then it's possible that these labels will result in secondary deviance, furthering the original label and transforming into a stigma.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Labels such as prostitute, child abuser, meth addict, alcoholic, and social pariah are all examples of stigmas.



TERM TO KNOW

Stigma

A highly negative label that signifies the status of a deviant outsider, having profound effects on self-image, identity, and worldview.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Erving Goffman

Famous sociologist who contributed to developing the symbolic-interaction perspective and gave us the idea of social "stigma."

3. RETROSPECTIVE AND PROJECTIVE LABELING

When a person is labeled as deviant, others can adjust the way they view that person's past biography and future potential for action. A person's past actions are reinterpreted in light of the new deviant behavior.

IN CONTEXT

Consider all of the media coverage that surrounds a mass shooting. When such a crime occurs, people try to understand the past. Perhaps the shooter was always a little shy and kept to himself. Many interpretations start to emerge because outside observers look at the person's past and interpret that past action in light of the deviant behavior. That is called **retrospective labeling**.

Projective labeling is the opposite, where observers look into the future and theorize the person's behavior in relation to the deviance, saying, "They acted like this now so they're always going to act like that in the future. Next time, they're going to act like negatively." Even though nothing has happened yet, these people are labelled beforehand.



TERMS TO KNOW

Retrospective Labeling

Labeling back into the past in response to deviant behavior in the present.

Projective Labeling

Labeling into the future in response to deviant behavior in the present.

4. MEDICALIZATION OF DEVIANCE

The **medicalization of deviance** occurs when behaviors that used to be labeled deviant, are transformed and labeled as sickness. In short, you're either sick or well, and there's an entirely different institutional fabric designed to treat you - hospitals rather than prisons. Somebody who's deviant might go to prison or jail, but somebody who's sick needs treatment, and they'll go to a hospital to be treated by doctors and psychiatrists. With medicalization, the labels are shifting--so the treatment is shifting.

IN CONTEXT

In the last half of the 20th century, the growing influence of psychiatry in medicine contributed to the concept of the medical deviant, meaning that there are more and more behaviors in society coming to be seen as medical conditions. This happened in the 20th century with alcoholism and drug abuse.

At one point, when you were an alcoholic, you were simply labeled as a drunkard, but now you're labeled as somebody who suffers from the disease of alcoholism. Doctors today are even looking for the gene for alcoholism and discussing whether or not people have genetic propensities towards alcoholism.

Behaviors that were once punishable are now viewed with pity, and people are seen in need of treatment. There's an entire power structure embedded in this medicalization of deviance because the doctor is the one who determines the label. The doctor decides what the patient, who is powerless relative to the doctor, is experiencing and therefore decides the appropriate prescriptions

and treatments. The doctor is critical to this labeling process.



THINK ABOUT IT

Think about a jury trial. Why would the defense go to great lengths to paint a picture of their client as criminally insane? If they can establish insanity, then their client won't necessarily go to prison. They'll go to a hospital and a whole other set of treatments follow.

These are interesting times because more and more deviant acts are coming to be viewed medically.



EXAMPLE Tiger Woods' sex addiction, which may have been viewed differently in the past, is now seen as a legitimate sickness, a current example of the medicalization of deviance.



TERM TO KNOW

Medicalization of Deviance

The transformation of deviance from labels of good and bad to labels of sick and well.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about **symbolic interaction**, the **labeling theory**, and **Erving Goffman's concept of stigma**. You also learned about **retrospective** and **projective labeling**, and the **medicalization of deviance**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



TERMS TO KNOW

Labeling Theory

The idea that deviance results from the meanings and labels that people give to our actions.

Medicalization of Deviance

The transformation of deviance from labels of good and bad to labels of sick and well.

Projective Labeling

Labeling into the future in response to deviant behavior in the present.

Retrospective Labeling

Labeling back into the past in response to deviant behavior in the present.

Stigma

A highly negative label that signifies the status of a deviant outsider, having profound effects on self-image, identity, and worldview.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Erving Goffman

Famous sociologist who contributed to developing the symbolic-interaction perspective and gave us the idea of social "stigma."