

# Labeling Theory

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## Introduction

This study was centered around the sociological discipline of criminology. Criminology doesn't study the actual crime itself, but rather, the underlying structural factors and perhaps individual motivations that caused the crime to be committed. Crime is not looked at as an individual issue. It is studied as a societal issue. There are many different criminological perspectives and theories out there. This study focused on labeling theory. Labeling theory states that a if a person is labeled a criminal early on, they will conform to fit that label often committing other crimes to fit the label. This is rooted in symbolic interactionism. We often become what others think we are. By the logic of labeling theory, someone immediately labeled as a success or a high achiever will act in order to fill that role. However, for our purposes we focused on negative labels and the behaviors that resulted from them. To study labeling theory, everyone in the 100 person class was responsible for scheduling interviews with 2 people aged 18-22. One of the subjects was to be enrolled in a 4 year university and the other subject was not. Each of the interview subjects had to have committed a crime from a list that we were provided. They did not have to tell us what they did and they did not have to be formally charged. The things we were looking for was an illegal behavior being committed. The following is what I found from my interview subjects.

## Questions

How did the reactions to the illegal behaviors committed by the subjects differ?

Why were the reactions of others different?

Are the main tenants of labeling theory applicable to this scenario (was the college student treated better than the non-college student)?

Are there any potential pitfalls of labeling theory and if so how can they be avoided?

## Method

As stated before I used interviews to address these questions. Each of the subjects interviewed had to have committed a crime when they were under the age of 18. Both subjects had to be aged 18-22 with the difference being their college enrollment. The interview subjects were not supposed to know the interviewees beforehand in order to ensure that the subject did not feel forced to participate. I was introduced to my subjects through a colleague at work and a friend from my church.

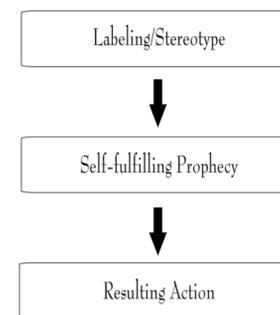
## Subject 1 Interview

Subject 1 attended college. She was a roommate of on of my friends and we had not previously met before. From the interview I learned a few things about her. Her family situation was very complicated. Her family history was a jumble of divorces, remarriages and constantly changing family dynamics. She said that her crime was a repeat offense and from the way she described it, it sounded like she frequently engaged in underage drinking. She was never caught by authorities and never discovered by her parents which came to me as a surprise given that it seemed like something she did quite regularly. When asked how things might have been different for her if she had been caught she assumed that she would have gone to jail and not been able to get her current job as a youth minister. She said that juvenile offenders should be getting the support that they need rather than heavy punishments. Despite the fact that she was a chronic offender, she managed to be doing well in school and had a pretty steady job as well. This was not exactly what I expected from my college subject, which suggests that I might have been guilty of labeling her.

## Subject 2

My second subject was introduced to me by someone at my job. She was working full-time at a bakery, but I got the sense that this was not a permanent thing for her. She seemed to have been caught in the transition between high school and college and this seemed a simple gap year. She said she planned to go to college in the future. She was not a repeat offender. She said that she had shoplifted from a store once and the only person that saw her was her sister. Her sister did not tell anyone, and she was not punished by her parents or authorities. For the most part, this interviewee seemed like a straight shooter. When asked what would have happened if people found out she said her parents would have been livid and if the police found out she might have been arrested and unable to go to college in her future. Again, not what I expected from an 18-22 year old not attending college when most people her age were.

## Labeling Theory Visual Depiction



## Analysis

When analyzing these girls in light of labeling theory, a lot of hypothetical instance were involved. Since none of them were caught by police, authorities or parents, there were no concrete consequences per se. Both of these girls assumed that they would go to jail if they were caught, showing that when it comes to juvenile justice in the United States, it is an area that is fairly ambiguous, none of these girls really knew the consequences, besides recognizing that these consequences did exist. I was guilty of labeling these subjects before meeting them. The information on these girls didn't seem to match. The subject with the volatile family situation and almost chronic offending is the one that is enrolled in college while working as a youth minister. The subject with an isolated incident of criminal behavior, stable family situation and no hardships in her life to speak of was not going to college. According to social cues and indicators that we have become accustomed to, scenarios should be flipped. My initial perception of these subjects were off and I think that is one of the pitfalls of labeling theory. Labeling someone as a criminal automatically makes an assumption about them and their life circumstances. That label has the potential to stick with them for the rest of their life and it isn't always fair. This is not unlike the label I assigned to my interviewees. There is more to a person than what is perceived by someone else. Unfortunately, if a person is labeled a criminal, people aren't inclined to look past that.

## Implications

We have to be careful about how we label others. As my interviews proved we simply can't look at a small set of information about a person and make assumptions about them and their lives. The college girl turned out to be more deviant than the one who was not in college. Authority figures assign a criminal label to juveniles that sticks with them throughout their lifetimes. Despite what they may say publicly, certain people are given the benefit of the doubt. Labeling theory can make people think they are nothing more than a deviant and then they proceed to live their life that way, it can truly alter their life course. Sometimes, as my interviews proved, labeling someone without knowing them can be utterly off the mark. If that type of labeling is applied to something that follows a person around for the rest of their life, we have to exercise extreme caution.

## References

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