

## **Week 9 Precis for Societal Reaction theory /Labeling Theory**

### **Introduction**

First developed in the early 1960s and 1970 Becker (1963) and Lemert (1967) labeling theory postulates that deviant behavior is the outcome of interaction between actors and reactors. The theory is a departure from the theories that take for granted the structural interventions and has evolved over time with recent theorists focusing on its identified points of weakness. The good points of the theory remain its emphasis on structure, provision for process over time. Since its original presentation, two major areas of focus have emerged with the self-concept highlighting the role of the self and the dynamics of symbolic interaction – in a belief that deviance amplification occurs when the labeled person conforms to the stereotypic expectations of others

Bernburg and Krohn (2003) focus on the moral tangible (social structure) aspects of social exclusion- deviance is stabilized due to blocked access to structures opportunities and conventional others.

An additional development is the inclusion of structural location with Bernburg examining whether the relationship between labeling and both structural mediators and subsequent delinquency is contingent on structural location particularly race and social class.

Attacks on the theory mainly challenge its testability and failure to take into account the other social processes that lead labeled deviants into more crime. In the days' readings Bernburg and Krohn (2003) –Labeling, Life Chances and Adult Crime are attempts to improve the methodological approaches from cross tabulations, matching procedures to the use of Poisson models and OLS regressions in longitudinal data sets that provide “temporal possibilities that provide for modeling labeling experience and behavioral controls that are necessary to effectively identify the existence and scope of labeling effects”.

### **Beinberg and Krohn (2003) “Labeling, Life Chances and Adult Crime: The Direct and Indirect Effects of Official Intervention in Adolescence and Earl Adulthood”**

Using data from a multi-variate panel study of the development of delinquent behavior among adolescents and young adults, base don an initial sample of 1000 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders of public school 1987 and 1988. The initial wave conducted over a period of 4 ½ years over intervals of 6months. After a 21/2 yrs gap adolescents and parents were interviewed over a year for the next 3years.

Data on all subjects was also collected from schools, police, courts and social service organizations. Used a modified Poisson Regression to analyze the data.The findings proved consistent support for the hypothesis – official intervention in adolescence has positive indirect effects on adult crime through reduced educational attainment and non-employment across alternate measures of interaction and adult crime. High school

graduation is indirectly related to the measures of adult crime through non-employment whereas non-employment is directly related to these other measures

### **Hagan and Palloni (2003) The Social Reproduction of a Criminal Class in Working class London”**

Hagan and Palloni extend the scope of the theory to the intergenerational reproduction of crime an using longitudinal data sets find evidence that official labeling of parents and sons interacts to produce greater self reported delinquency. They conclude that labeling leads to intergenerational reproduction of a criminal class which supports the ideas of Lemert’s contention that part of the crime problem involves the criminal punishment.

Hagan and Palloni define a criminal class as the concentration of crime within groups and across generations. The distinguish between cultural/characterological processes by which parents, through child raising conditions and practices reproduce in their children the characteristics that lead to crime and the structural process in which criminal behavior is reproduced through the official treatment of children of criminal parents.

### **Kai T Erikson: Notes on the Sociology of Deviance**

Kai’s line of thought emphasizes the functional necessity of deviance for promoting group solidarity, differentiating what is moral or goal worthy and for keeping society’s defense mechanisms a standby readiness. Kai argues that “ deviance cannot be dismissed as behavior which disrupts stability in society, but itself, in controlled qualities an important condition for preserving stability.

Kai suggests a shift in emphasis of study from the etiology of crime to its continuing social history. Once crime occurs, societal reaction provides direction and momentum that should constitute the focus of study by sociologists. Emphasis on the societal screen shall lead sociologist to consider the role of societal reaction and selection process in crime,

### **Chapter 1,2 and 8 Becker in Outsiders**

Becker views deviance as the product of a transaction that takes place between some social group and one who is viewed by that group as a rule breakers. Becker argues that deviance theory should be concerned with dynamic interactional processes rather than cause and effect relationships between static variables (1963,23) “all causes do not operate at the same time and we need a model which takes into account the fact that patterns of behavior develop in an orderly sequence”. He suggests the concept of “career” as a useful model for labeling theory which concept he applies in an analysis of the steps and contingencies involved in the development of a deviant career – a stable pattern of deviant behavior which is an outcome of labeling processes.

Becker also challenges claims of homogeneity of the deviant class suggesting that the process of labeling is not “infallible” thus may draw in the falsely accused and also the fact that most people remain “secret deviants” having not “been caught and publicly labeled as deviant” a key factor in one’s transition into deviancy. Its in this sequential order that the deviant then “tends to be cut off .... from participation in more conventional groups” and thus destined to “drift into unconventional marginal occupations where it does not make so much difference” to be deviant. The cyclical process is complete with the persons’ increasing involvement with others who have been similarly labeled in organized deviant groups where a deviant subculture is operational “a set of perspectives and understandings about what the world is like and how to deal with it” (1963:38). At this stage the deviant “is more likely than ever before to continue in his ways”(1963:39)

In Chapter 8, Becker introduces the rule creators referred to as “moral entrepreneurs”- a group of fervent and righteous persons eager to reform laws not solely driven by self interest but by the need to correct social ills. Their preoccupation with ends as opposed to means draws in the experts at rule making and rule enforcers. The process of rule making and enforcement creates classes of outsiders through scope of application, mechanisms and means of enforcement including the selection criteria of what infractions come to the attention of the enforcers and their role in attaching labels as a mechanism of gaining/coercing respect from the people they deal with.

### **Lemert, Edwin 1967. Human Deviance, Social Problems and Social Control**

Lemert explores secondary deviance as an ongoing process that varies over time and can change. Secondary deviance flows from the experience of labeling and exclusion from conventional group relationships and is the hardened product of the interaction of deviant behavior on the part of the actor and the labeling response of reactors. Lemert defines secondary deviation as “a special class of socially defined responses which people make to problems created by the societal reaction to their deviance.....Persons become secondary deviant because they manage to find more satisfactory solutions to their problems through deviance than through non deviance; the nature of their problem solving differs because degradation and newly perceived contingencies change their conceptions of what is satisfying” (1967, 40). The process starts with stigmatization-carried out through degradation rituals, disseminated throughout society that radically changes ones’ self concept and social identity.

### **Matsueda, Ross L. 1992 L. Reflected appraisals, Parental Labeling and Delinquency: Specifying a Symbolic Interaction Theory**

Using an integrated approach to both symbolic interaction and labeling theory, Ross’ analysis concerns itself with informal labels made by parents of adolescents and whether those appraisals affected delinquency by affecting the adolescents’ reflected appraisals.

The study examined the hypothesis that parental appraisals vary by social-structural variables; examined joint relationships between parental appraisals, reflected appraisal

and delinquency. The final hypothesis examined simultaneously the reciprocal effects of delinquency on parental and reflected appraisals. In the finding and consistent with labeling theory, parental labels of youths as rule violators are more likely among delinquent non whites and urban dwellers. Previous delinquent behavior also influences reflected appraisals of the self which is consistent with the predictions of labeling theory.

Ross considers only one aspect of the self-reflected appraisals as a rule violator and that has strong effects on delinquency.

## **Questions**

1. How can one reconcile the labeling theory belief in the irreversibility of the label and the trend that delinquency decreases with maturation?
2. It is not clear whether the theory requires a consideration of the label as an independent /dependent variable- Kai portrays labeling as arising out of power/status differentials whereas to Lemert it is an independent variable – a self fulfilling prophecy.
3. Whereas Lemert dissuades us from the inclusion of primary deviance into the equation, is it possible that there is no interactive effect between primary and secondary labels? Also formal and informal labels?
4. To what extent does the labeling theory without premising itself in structural location, access to conventional others, socialization / self concept explain crime causation?