One of the most promising approaches to develop in deviance has been the labelling approach. Coming into prominence in the 1960s it produced a great deal of research and inspired an incredible amount of debate. It has lost in recent years much of its early luster but so much of what it has given to theoretical criminology remains as truisms.

Becker’s statement provides the nucleus of what has come to be tagged the labelling or societal reaction perspective. I will first give an overview of the labelling approach. Second, I will look at the notion of career deviance, and finally I will look at some of the evidence, which empirically attempts to test this theory.

The intellectual heritage of labelling is directly traceable to the symbolic interactionist school of thought as expressed by W. I. Thomas, G.H. Mead, Dewey, etc. The more immediate intellectual antecedents who, at least in part, formulated an approach based on labelling were Frank Tannenbaum’s use of tagging in his analysis of Juvenile Delinquency in 1938 (same year as Merton’s Anomie Theory comes to light). Juveniles held one conception of their behavior and the community held another. The community brought social control measures to bear on the youngsters as the idea of wrong shifted from the act to the actor. The young person may come to see him/herself as delinquent. The young person begins to act even more delinquent and the community reacts reinforcing that identity even more.

Second, Lindesmith’s study of opiate use demonstrated how persons became aware of their addiction. In essence it is not the drug that makes the person an addict, rather addiction is a social definition. When a significant other (another user) labels him/herself as an addict, the person comes to define him/herself as an addict.
The labelling perspective had a large number of followers in the 1960s and early 1970s. Some of the more notable members who came to define and outline most of the major tenants of this approach were Edwin M. Lemert, Howard S. Becker, Kai Erikson, and John Kitsuse.

Labelling theory as those scholars elaborated it was sociology of the underdog. As Becker expressed it in his presidential address to the Society for the Study of Social Problems, we have to proclaim whose side we are on. The persons who are considered deviant are actually victims ‘more sinned against than sinning.’ Persons are not inherently deviant nor is deviance inherent in any particular behavior as noted by Erikson in his “notes on deviance” and again the introduction to *Wayward Puritans*, stressing the point that the social audience confers the label deviance on behavior. This social audience could be the community in general or particular agents of social control, e.g. the police (or teachers). In other words behavior is not inherently deviant or normal but is defined and labeled that way by people in charge of defining and labelling. The key component of the process is the social audience, regardless of how social audience comes to be defined.

There are two aspects of becoming deviant we can see in Erikson and which are clearly stated by Becker. The social group creates deviance. The group makes the rule and then applies it to the person labelling that person and ‘outsider.’ Even though there is a connection between norm violation and being labeled deviant, it need not be a direct one. For example, in order for someone to be labeled a shoplifter there must be a norm prohibiting shoplifting. If private property did not exist, shoplifting would not exist and neither could the deviant label of shoplifter. Just because a norm does exist does not mean everybody labeled shoplifter has actually violated the norm. There is a basic difference between rule breakers/rule breaking behavior and deviants/deviant behavior. The term deviant is reserved for those who have had the label successfully applied to him and deviant
behavior is that behavior so labeled regardless of whether or not any norms had actually been violated. An example of this might be people who have been placed in mental institutions and labeled mentally ill when they were really only hard of hearing, a case of the 'bum rap.' (Becker by 1970 scraps the use of the terminology rule-breaking, instead relying on the term commission.)

If the social rules are made in an interaction process as Lemert maintains, it is one of unequal interaction. Becker clearly states that in order for ones views to be enforced they must have economic or political power. There is not one particular power elite forcing their will on others. There are many imperatively coordinated associations. In looking at the Marihuana Tax Act of 1937, Becker analyzes how political power works. The Bureau of narcotics, then part of the Treasury Department saw marihuana as coming under their jurisdiction and by working with others who saw it in their interests to have laws regulating the weed, e.g. legitimate hemp growers, marihuana use as a deviant label, was created. The powerful as Becker talks about them are moral entrepreneurs. These guardians of moral order are found in two types, those who create or destroy laws and those who apply the laws. The two groups may not have the same outlook on the rules. One may be dedicated to the morality of the rules while the other, e.g. a police person, may be more concerned with having a job.

The effects of being labeled are numerous but of primary concern for many theorists in this tradition, for example Lemert, are the effect being labeled has on the sense of self or identity. Primary deviance happens for a number of reasons and has very little effect on self. Secondary deviance comes about as a response to societal reaction to primary deviance. The self-concept is change from normal to deviant. The person takes on a new identity or acquires a stigma, in Goffman’s terms; the person becomes a shoplifter first and foremost even in his or her own mind.
This portrayal of labelling is essentially the theoretical implications of the second part of Becker’s quote. The brief discussion of primary and secondary deviance provides an entrance point for stating the implications of the first part of Becker’s quote. For here he begins to carry the implications of secondary deviance to the next logical step, that is, career deviance. Becker is not concerned with primary deviance. He like Lemert sees primary deviance occurring for many reasons. It is much more important to look at career deviance. Becker’s own study of marihuana users is an example of this process. One of the most important steps of becoming deviant is being publicly labeled as deviant. For being such a key component of labelling theory it is also one of the hardest to pin down. A person does not really have to be publicly labeled but may label him/herself. The labelling process becomes hard to disprove as the process moves from public to self-application. It is even harder to disprove as the conception of subconscious desire (in terms of being caught and labeled) is added in. In any case being caught ad labeled deviant leads to a change in identity. The deviant acquires a new master status such as homosexual (perhaps touching someone’s foot with your own). The master status carries with it a number of secondary statuses, which seem to always be associated with it. It creates problems for people when the status doesn’t match up. For example, when the homosexual turns out to be a big, strong husky voiced football player, or a long time husband or wife. The problem is that master status characterizes one’s life rather completely rather than merely being part of one’s identity. The process of a self-fulfilling prophecy begins as it becomes harder and harder for the person to act contrary to or associate with, other people than the social reaction expects. The last step in the making of a career deviant comes about when the deviants are organized into a group. A deviant subculture is produced. Once the person becomes a member his/her deviant identity becomes solidified, one prime example is becoming being part of a juvenile gang.
Although it often seems as if there is never enough empirical testing of theories, there has actually been quite a bit done on labelling theory in comparison to many others. Some of the empirical findings are supportive while others are not.

Labelling theory states that there are a multitude of factors that affect who gets labeled and treated as deviant. There appears to be a great deal of support for this contention. It ranges from characteristics of the actor, see Pivliavin and briar, “Police encounters with Juveniles” to characteristics of the audience, Defleur’s work on biasing influences on the records of those arrested for drugs, to characteristics of the victim, see Cohen, *Deviance and Control*.

The importance of the label for career deviance can be seen in the work of Goffman when he looks at how stigmas like ‘crippled’ or ‘blind’ effects social behavior. Much of the research done has been in terms of criminal labels. Schwartz and Skolnick in two studies of legal stigmas found that being legally accused will most likely affect a persons chances of finding employment, result in a loss of social status, and consequently bring on further contact with law enforcement personnel. Similarly Chiricos, Jackson, and Waldo, found that persons with previous criminal records are treated differently supplying more of an opportunity for those persons to transform their identities and become career deviants. So there does seem to be support in the contention that being labeled does lead to career deviance at least in terms of criminal labels.

However there are those studies that bring into question the idea that the label is a key aspect of becoming a career deviant. Oddly enough, work done by two major proponents of labelling, Lemert and Becker (although it appears that Lemert has given up on this approach) raise doubts about this labelling contention. Lemerts study of check forgers show that often they take part in systematic and habitual behavior long before they are caught and labeled as deviant or criminal. In other words, their career was established before the labelling process.
took place. Becker’s example of marihuana users seems to indicate that it is not the creation of a new identity, which results in career smoking. Rather in the process of finding pleasure in smoking, as Mankoff points out, one becomes a career deviant. There are other studies, which indicate that labelling has little effect. Robins, Deviant Children Grow Up, shows that the impact of being labeled mentally ill or having some sort of psychiatric diagnoses when young had very little connection (16%) with being labeled after becoming an adult. Cameron points out how being caught shoplifting and labeled a thief resulted in people easing that behavior rather then the labeled person becoming a career deviant.

Evidence does not conclusively support labelling theories contentions. It appears as if the effect of a label on self identity applies more to specific situations in the labelling process, all else is still highly questionable.


