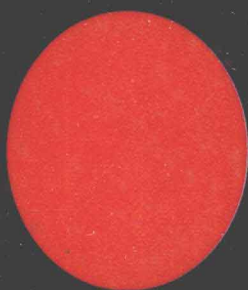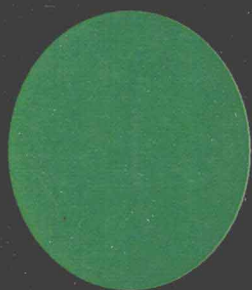# Managing a
Status: deviant

Field Research and the Labeling Perspective

**Edited by
Robert McNamara,
Deanna Ramey,
and Linda Henry**

MANAGING A DEVIANT STATUS:

Field Research and the Labeling Perspective

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To Gene Fappiano: For showing me why the students are so important.

To LW and EW (the two most important women in my life): I can only hope someday to shadow the greatness, serenity, perseverance, and love with which you approach life. You serve as an inspiration to many. And to RP: you've taught me to temper the rose color with reality, yet given me the confidence to still change it all. For your support, friendship, and humor I thank you--but mostly for your unconditional love.

And to LEH & BLH: For always giving me the freedom to choose my way, I am forever grateful.

Preface

The idea for this project was developed from a field research assignment for a course on the sociology of deviant behavior. Students selected one of two projects, both of which involved original sociological research. In an effort to gain a better understanding of the stigmatization of the physically challenged, one project had students spending approximately twenty-four hours in a wheelchair. A number of criteria were established for this project, perhaps the most important of which was to identify the various ways in which society responds to this population.

The second project involved an examination of an organization that helped individuals cope with a deviant label. Students were required to become a part of one of these groups in some way and to learn how they help members cope with the label and the problems their deviant status brings them. In addition to learning as much as they could about the organization (e.g. philosophy, history, evidence of effectiveness), students were encouraged to participate/observe a social activity which involved the members. This was designed to provide them with a better understanding of the problems the members faced. It also provided them with some experience concerning the difficulties of field research in organizations (see Appendix). Because of the outstanding quality and creativity that went into these projects, we feel they extend our understanding of the labeling perspective of deviance. While manuscripts like this one are indeed rare, we feel it makes an important contribution to the literature.

There are many people who deserve our thanks in making this project possible. We are especially grateful to Bill Burke of Cummings and Hathaway for all his help and consideration. This book would not be possible without his willingness to consider new and somewhat unconventional ideas. Similarly, we owe a great debt of thanks to Janet Craig, Paula Morris, Shannon Galloway, and the patients at Roger C. Peace Hospital in Greenville, South Carolina. They were kind enough to not only provide us with wheelchairs and a training session for students, but were always willing to offer their help and advice.

Similarly, Amy Scherer's insights and support deserve recogni-

tion. She helped many contributors conceptualize and understand the implications of their research. Additionally, Valerie Cowan deserves high praise for taking time out of her busy schedule to design the cover for this manuscript. We would also like to extend our thanks to all those individuals who served as key informants. Whether it was providing insight into the organization, legitimating the researchers' presence, or simply providing access to their population, we want to extend our thanks for all their help.

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The essence of the labeling perspective is that deviance does not exist independent of the negative reaction of people who condemn it. Behaviors are never weird, bad, sick, or deviant in themselves. They are deviant only because someone or some group responds to them in this fashion. In his classic text, *The Outsiders*, Howard Becker states,"deviance is not a quality of the act a person commits but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an offender. The deviant is one to whom the label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label" (1963:9).

Thus, labeling theory has a different focus from the variety of theoretical explanations of deviance. Labeling theorists are not interested in the causal factors which lead an individual to commit a deviant or criminal act. Rather, labeling theory has pursued three interrelated concerns: the social historical development of deviant labels; the application of labels to certain types of people in specific times and places; and the symbolic and practical consequences of the labeling process.

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE LABELING PERSPECTIVE

Although it was not until the 1960s that this perspective of deviance emerged as a major theoretical tradition, its intellectual origins can be traced to a 1928 essay by George Herbert Mead in "The Psychology of Punitive Justice." In it he says that the labeling process sets boundaries between those who are acceptable and those who are condemned, between conventional people and deviants. This essay describes the interactional ritual through which labels are applied. In a similar vein, in 1938 Frank Tannenbaum used the term "tagging" to describe a similar process in his book *Communities and Crime*. He says,

> The process of making the criminal is a process of
> tagging, defining, identifying, segregating, describing,
> emphasizing, making conscious and self-conscious;

> it becomes a way of stimulating, suggesting, empha-
> sizing, and evoking the very traits that are complained
> of. The person becomes the thing he is described as
> being. Nor does it seem to matter whether the valua-
> tion is made by those who would punish or by those
> who would reform. In either case, the emphasis is upon
> the conduct that is disapproved of. The parents or the
> policeman, the older brother or the court, the proba-
> tion officer or the juvenile institution, insofar as they
> rest on the thing complained of, rest upon a false
> ground. Their very enthusiasm defeats their aim. The
> harder they work to reform the evil, the greater the
> evil grows under their hands. The persistent sugges-
> tion, with whatever good intentions, works mischief,
> because it leads to bring out the bad behavior it would
> suppress. The way out is through a refusal to drama-
> tize evil. The less said about it the better (p.19-20).

Thus, according to Tannenbaum, the stigma accompanying the devi-
ant label may drive people deeply into the realm of nonconformity.

The early ideas of Mead and Tannenbaum were elaborated by
Edwin Lemert in his 1951 classic *Social Pathology*. Lemert took is-
sue with the way that deviance was defined by other theorists (patho-
logical, disorganization, functionalist, etc.). He said these perspec-
tives mistakenly took the existence of deviance for granted. His main
questions centered around how deviance came to be defined in the
first place. Moreover, Lemert argued that the other perspectives failed
to examine the implications of being labeled. He argued that devi-
ance should be seen "as behavior which is effectively disapproved of
in social interaction" (p.17). Perhaps most important, Lemert is re-
sponsible for the development of one of the most fundamental dis-
tinctions made by the labeling perspective: primary and secondary
deviance. He states,

> Primary deviation is assumed to arise in a wide vari-
> ety of social, cultural, and psychological contexts, and
> at best has only marginal implication for the psychic
> structure of the individual; it does not lead to sym-

bolic reorganization at the level of self-regarding attitudes and social roles. Secondary deviation is deviant behavior or social roles based upon it, which becomes a means of defense, attack or adaptation to the overt and covert problems created by the societal reaction to primary deviation (p.17).

For Lemert, primary deviance is the type of deviant behavior that is trivial, explained away, or otherwise dealt with as part of a socially acceptable role. Should this change the person may step into a deviant role. This role and the definition of oneself are affected by several factors: how much deviance the person engages in, how visible such acts are to the community, and how aware the deviant is of their reaction. If all the answers to these questions are positive, then the person will see himself or herself very differently and will have difficulty holding onto his or her past self-image.

The person will have to choose new roles which may be more deviant. This is what is referred to as patterned or *secondary deviance*. Lemert sees this as an outgrowth of a long process, a dynamic relationship between the person's deviation and the society's reaction to it. Thus, while people may initially deviate for any number of reasons, once one is caught and labeled, the reaction to deviance may itself cause further transgressions. Consequently, labeling may *amplify* deviance.

The Role of the Turbulent 1960s

During the 1960s the perspective the writings of Howard Becker (1963; 1970), John Kitsuse (1962), Erving Goffman (1961; 1963), Kai Erikson (1966) and others set the stage for the development of this perspective. Moreover, the rise in popularity of the labeling theory and the emerging social climate was not accidental. Like many sociological contributions, the labeling perspective grew out of the massive changes that were taking place in American society. There were massive social and political struggles whose rumblings could be heard nationwide, especially on college campuses. The various protests and anti-war activists brought the label of deviance closer to home. Sociologists soon found their friends, colleagues, and students

being arrested and treated like common criminals. Additionally, riots in the ghettos, incarceration for draft dodgers and conscientious objectors, all had a profound effect on understanding the ways in which deviance comes to be defined in society.

With this new perspective came what has been referred to as an "unconventional sentimentality." By challenging conventional stereotypes about deviance, labeling theorists participated in the rebellious attitude of that era.

THE APPLICATION OF LABELS

According to the labeling perspective, the most crucial step in the development of a stable pattern of deviant behavior is usually the experience of being caught and publically labeled deviant. Whether or not this happens to a person depends not so much on what the person does but on what other people do. Erikson (1962) expands on this a bit. He states:

> The community's decision to bring deviant sanctions against the individual... is a sharp rite of transition at once moving him out of his normal position in society and transferring him into a distinctive deviant role. The ceremonies which accomplish this change of status, ordinarily, have three related phases. They provide a formal confrontation between the deviant suspect and representatives of his community (as in the criminal trial or psychiatric case conference); they announce some judgment about the nature of his deviancy (a verdict or diagnosis for example), and they perform an act of social placement, assigning him to a special role (like that of a prisoner or patient) which redefines his position in society.

Once a person is stigmatized by being labeled a deviant, a self-fulfilling prophecy is initiated with others perceiving and responding to the person as a deviant. Further, once people are publicly processed as deviants, they are typically forced into a deviant group. And, as Lemert (1951) contends, once this happens the deviant will

face an audience that anticipates the worst and will take steps to protect itself which will make it difficult for the person to reintegrate him or herself into society.

Formal and Informal Social Control

As was mentioned, concerns with the labeling process are pitched at three levels: the concrete interaction between labelers and potential targets for labeling, the historical construction of labels themselves, and the consequences of being labeled. The first level concerns what goes on between social control agents and others such that deviant labels are applied, withheld, or avoided. Becker's (1963) work questions the adequacy of the official definition of deviance. Some people act in a manner which is defined as deviant: they get caught and are labeled. Still others may do it and get away with it unlabeled. These are referred to as "secret deviants."

Moreover, there are a host of factors that determine whether or not an individual is labeled beyond the nature of the act. For instance, imagine a police officer late at night on a darkened street. He has just received word that a robbery has occurred nearby. He then sees a figure who seems to fit the description of the suspect. Will he apprehend the person? Will a formal deviant label be applied? There are a litany of factors which might affect the officer's actions: the person's appearance, demeanor, even their way of walking. Also of importance might be pressures from the department to make more arrests or whether the suspect is perceived as the type of person who would normally be found in such a place. The interaction of all these factors is important to an analysis of the formal labeling process.

Similar factors are applicable to informal labeling. This is illustrated in a study in which John Kituse (1962) examined how college students label others as homosexual. Kituse discovered that people who acted similarly were reacted to differently by labelers when imputations of homosexuality were offered. In other words, labeling occurred independent of actual speech, interests, dating patterns, or sexual relations of those categorized as homosexual.

Where in history do deviant labels come from? This is the second set of questions raised by Becker. He suggests that deviant labels arise as the result of the efforts of powerful "moral entrepreneurs."

These are persons or groups who lobby for the deviantization of certain types of behavior. They believe that behavior is either good or evil and if it is evil it should be eliminated or "stamped out" through legislation. Once the new version of morality has been passed, moral entrepreneur leave the enforcement of the new laws to others and usually move on to another type of "crusade." A classic study of moral entrepreneurs is found in Joseph Gusfield's (1963) *Symbolic Crusade*, which examined the role of the Women Christian Temperance Union and the prohibition of the sale, consumption, and manufacture of alcoholic beverages in the early 1900s.

Master Status and Labeling

Labeling theory also describes how deviance becomes a person's master status. While people have many statuses, the master status is the one that dominates and plays an important part in a person's social identity. In our society, one's occupation usually serves as the master status. However, once people are labeled, this changes and the stigma becomes their dominant status and they may encounter severe interactional troubles in dealing with other people.

Labeling Physical Characteristics as Deviant

The writings of Erving Goffman liken social interaction to the performance of theatrical roles. Like actors on a stage, people are said to carefully manage social cues which enable them to create and sustain an impression of who they are and what they are up to. Some people however, are cast into roles which constrain their abilities to manage positive impressions of themselves. Such persons are stigmatized, the bearers of what Goffman (1969) describes as a "spoiled identity."

Goffman parallels the stigmatized problems of labeled deviants to the plight of physically or mentally handicapped persons. He extends the scope of the labeling perspective to people who are negatively labeled for how they appear in addition to how they may act. The threat of stigmatization does not however, eliminate a person's capacity for "impression management." Stigmatized persons who are

savvy may restrict the flow of information about themselves to others whom they can trust.

Goffman's work raises an interesting point: that whether or not they are successful in managing stigma, labeled deviants are confronted with social problems not faced by the "straight" world. This underscores a central theme of the labeling perspective: that a full sociological understanding of deviance requires attention to the interactive dynamics between people who condemn nonconformity and those who are condemned. We take for granted that appearances represent something deeper, that they tell us about who the person is and why the person is doing what he or she is doing. This allows us to neatly package an individual into a stereotype that is reflective of their current label. Moreover, we are then able to assess the individual's past, present and future behavior in light of this new label. This is something Edwin Schur (1971) refers to as *retrospective interpretation.*

In summary, the labeling perspective has focused its attention on the societal attributes of those who react and those who are reacted against in order to explain why certain persons and not others are labeled as deviant. They argue that once a person has been labeled a deviant, and particularly if that person has passed through a degradation ceremony (Garfinkel 1958) and forced to become a member of a deviant group, the person experiences a profound and often irreversible change. He or she has not only acquired an inferior status, but has also developed a deviant world view and the knowledge and skills that go with it. And perhaps equally important, he or she has developed a deviant self-image based upon the evaluations of him or herself received through the action of others.

CONSEQUENCES OF LABELING

One of the more interesting questions regarding the labeling perspective is whether or not a deviant label can be removed. Theoretically, once individuals have paid their debt to society, the label is removed. However, in practice, these individuals are still presented with a host of obstacles that limit their ability to navigate the social landscape. While removal of the label depends to some extent on the seriousness of the offense, the long term consequences cannot be

minimized. In fact, some sociologists argue that the label can never be removed, at best it can be transformed or minimized.

For instance, some people might contend that the deviant can relocate and begin a new life with a new identity. This argument fails to appreciate the fact that the label can reassert itself if the deviant is recognized in his or her new environment. It is at this point that the consequences and problems return. Others contend that a label can be removed based on what the individual does after being labeled. This has sometimes been referred to "legitimating the ex-status." In other words, the individual uses the label to help others (as in the case of a drug addict who gives lectures to elementary school children about the evils of drug use, or who becomes a rehabilitation counselor at a drug treatment facility).

Still others contend that if society changes its view on the particular behavior, then the label is removed. For instance, if a certain type of behavior is viewed as a medical problem or disease, such as alcoholism, then the person's responsibility for committing those acts is diminished. This is often referred to as the *medicalization of deviance* (Conrad 1980). Another example occurs when society alters its moral compass and no longer looks upon the behavior as deviant. However, in each of these three examples the label is not removed, it is merely transformed. Additionally, a change in morality is highly unlikely and even in those instances in which it has occurred, (e.g. Prohibition) individuals who were considered criminal are still viewed in that way.

Some sociologists contend that while removal may not be possible, recovery from the label can occur. The following factors are said to be most important in determining whether an individual can recover from the label: the seriousness of the act, the more serious the less likely they are able to recover; temporal factors, how much time has passed between committing the act and the current situation; and behavioral factors, (e.g. what the individual has done since committing the act). However, even this strategy has its limitations. In short, it seems unlikely that a deviant label can be removed once it is affixed.

Thus, the labeling process has profound consequences for individuals. Our society tends to be rather unforgiving in its treatment of