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## LABELING THEORY

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### INTRODUCTION

Labeling theory provides a distinctively sociological approach that focuses on the role of social labeling in the development of crime and deviance. The theory assumes that although deviant behavior can initially stem from various causes and conditions, once individuals have been labeled or defined as deviants, they often face new problems that stem from the reactions of self and others to negative stereotypes (stigma) that are attached to the deviant label (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1967). These problems in turn can increase the likelihood of deviant and criminal behavior becoming stable and chronic. In the words of Lemert (1967), deviant behavior can become “means of defense, attack, or adaptation” (p. 17) to the problems created by deviant labeling. Thus, being labeled or defined by others as a criminal offender may trigger processes that reinforce or stabilize deviant behavior, net of the behavioral pattern and the social and psychological conditions that existed prior to labeling.

The scientific status of labeling theory has improved considerably in recent years. Labeling theory became widely accepted during the 1960s as a viable approach to crime and deviance, but a series of critiques that came out during the 1970s undermined its initial popularity. According to critics (e.g. Tittle, 1980), labeling theory was vague, simplistic, and ideological, and empirical tests had failed to provide consistent support for the proposition that labeling reinforces deviant behavior. In the 1980s, however, scholars began to argue that this critique had led to a premature demise of labeling theory (Palarma, Cullen, & Gersten, 1986; Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989). According to these scholars, the critics had overstated and simplified the claims made by labeling theory. Moreover, a large part of the research that had undermined labeling theory was methodologically flawed, and thus did not constitute valid testing of the theory.

In the past few decades the scientific rigor of labeling research has improved significantly. Scholars have clarified and elaborated the processes by which labeling influences deviant behavior, and research has addressed many of the methodological flaws that plagued the early research on labeling theory. Recent years have seen a rapid accumulation of sophisticated research that supports the criminogenic effects of labeling. This

chapter extracts a “current” account of labeling theory, by reviewing a wide selection of prominent work pertaining to the criminogenic effects of labeling.

### **Deviant Labels and Stigma**

While social labels generally constitute a part of the cultural framework that people use to define and categorize the social world, deviant labels are special in that they are stigmatizing markers. This assumption is fundamental to labeling theory. Deviant labels, criminal labels in particular, are associated with *stigma*, which means that the mainstream culture has attached specific, negative images or stereotypes to deviant labels (Link & Phelan, 2001). Negative stereotypes of criminal offenders are manifested in the mainstream culture in various ways, for example in films, books, mass media, and even everyday language (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963; Scheff, 1966). Walt Disney’s *Beagle Boys* provides an example of how criminals are often portrayed as innately immoral, devious, and fundamentally different from other people. Such examples remind us that the learning of criminal stereotypes is a part of childhood socialization.

Individuals labeled as criminals tend to be set aside as fundamentally different from others, and they tend to be associated with stereotypes of undesirable characteristics (Simmons, 1965-6). Becker (1963) has argued that the deviant status may become a master status for the person; that is, the negative images attached to the deviant label may override other attributes a person may have. “To be labeled a criminal”, Becker (1963) writes, “carries a number of connotations specifying auxiliary traits characteristics of anyone bearing the label” (pp. 33-34). The labeled person is seen as unable to “act as a moral being and therefore might break other important rules.” Moreover, any future (or past) misbehavior tends may be seen as an indication of his or her essential criminal nature. Studies indicate that the stigma attached to criminal labeling promotes widespread distrust and distain for people with a criminal label (Travis, 2002). Moreover, some labels, such as sex and violent offender labels, seem to have particularly pronounced effects on such feelings (Denver, Pickett, & Bushway, 2017; Harris and Socia 2016).

### **Formal and Informal Labeling**

Labeling theory is concerned with problems that emerge after the social environment has defined or typified the individual as a deviant, raising the question of how deviant labeling is imposed on individuals. After all, deviant behavior is common and often does not lead to labeling (Lemert, 1967). For instance, juvenile delinquency is often not considered particularly deviant by those who witness such behavior (other juveniles), and thus may not lead to social reactions. Such reactions occur only when there is a social audience that labels the behavior (and the individual) as particularly deviant—or criminal, in the case of criminal labeling (Becker, 1963).

Labeling theory emphasizes that formal labeling, police and criminal justice labeling in particular, is a salient source of labeling. The contemporary state has a formal monopoly over the sanctioning of criminals (Garfinkel, 1956). To be formally processed as a criminal or a delinquent therefore testifies to and brings attention to the person’s immorality and inability to follow important social norms. Tannenbaum (1938) refers to such public reactions as the “dramatization of evil.” Erikson (1963) argues that formal reactions entail ceremonies (“rites of transition”) that mark a change into a deviant status, such as “the criminal trial, with its elaborate formality and exaggerated ritual” (p. 16). Moreover, when punishment has been carried out, there are no analogous official ceremonies in place to cancel the criminal stigma, and thus bring the person back into society. Thus, the stigma of having been formally processed as a criminal offender tends to “stick” to the person.

It may be noted that by highlighting criminal justice intervention as an important source of labeling and stigma, labeling theory contradicts the classic notion of specific deterrence, namely, that punishment ought to deter offenders from committing crime in the future (Gibbs, 1975). Such notions of individual rationality ignore the social reality of stigma and its effects on individual development.

But the notion of informal labeling is still at the heart of labeling theory, which emphasizes that formal labeling influences individual development largely because it triggers stigmatization in informal settings (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989). An arrest may have no impact on a youth's life if it is kept secret from school authorities and members of the local community. But, if school authorities are notified of the event or if it becomes known in the community, it can trigger exclusionary reactions by teachers and community members. Moreover, social audiences may impose deviant labels on actors in the absence of formal labeling (Matsueda, 1992).

### **Labeling and Discrimination**

Disadvantaged groups are more likely than other groups to experience criminal labeling. Aggressive policing of lower-class communities raises the likelihood of lower-class people and minorities experiencing police intervention (Smith, Visher, & Davidson, 1984). Moreover, since stereotypes of minorities and disadvantaged groups often entail images of criminality and dangerousness (Quillian & Pager, 2001), members of such groups are policed, sanctioned, and stigmatized more, net of criminal offending (Warren, Tomaskovic-Devey, Smith, Zingraff, & Mason, 2006). Encounters between police and citizens are more likely to lead to an arrest if the citizen is a minority, net of the nature and seriousness of the offense (Worden & Shepard, 1996). Minorities and individuals of low socioeconomic status tend to receive more severe sentences, net of the seriousness of the offense that they have been charged with and prior criminal record (Bontrager, Bales, & Chiricos, 2005), but not all studies support this finding (Albonetti & Hepburn, 1996).<sup>1</sup> However, minority status and socioeconomic (SES) status shape the risk of labeling in complex ways. Tapia (2010) has reported evidence suggesting that the “out of place” status of minority youths with high SES poses them at an even higher risk of an arrest.

Minorities and impoverished individuals may be more vulnerable to informal labeling as well, due to prevalent stereotypes that associate criminality with such groups. Bernburg and Krohn (2003) have argued that formal labeling may be more likely to trigger stigma for members of such groups. Matsueda (1992) has shown that African-American youths are more likely than white youths to be perceived as rule-breakers by their parents, net of their self-reported delinquency.

### **THE CRIMINOGENIC PROCESSES TRIGGERED BY LABELING**

Different authors have specified different processes by which labeling may influence subsequent deviant behavior. If the early theoretical statements were often vague on this point (Goode 1975), in recent times scholars have clarified these processes. This section discusses the main criminogenic processes posited by contemporary labeling theory, namely, 1) the development of a deviant self-concept, 2) the processes of rejection and withdrawal, and 3) involvement in deviant groups.

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<sup>1</sup> Conflict theory argues that the powerless have restricted access to law-making and criminal justice policy, and hence their interests are often not represented in the laws, policies, and organizations that determine the labeling process (Reiman, 1995). Thus, deviance associated with the powerless tends to be labeled as criminal, whereas deviance associated with the powerful often escapes such stigma.

### **Deviant Self-Concept**

The effect of labeling on self-concept formation is originally elaborated by Lemert (1967). His work was grounded in symbolic interactionism. This school of thought emphasizes the role of self-concept in motivating and controlling behavior, assuming that individuals' concept of self is shaped by their experience of past and present interactions with others. Elaborating on this thought, Matsueda (1992) argues that the individual's image of self is formed in the process of *reflected appraisals*, that is, individuals form their self-concept on the basis of their experience of interacting with other people. People learn how to define themselves (who they are, what they do) on the basis of how they perceive the attitudes of others toward them. Since the attitudes of others toward individuals defined as deviants are shaped by negative stereotypes, these individuals may experience stereotypical expectations toward themselves. Such a perception of oneself from the standpoint of others may lead to a change in self-concept; the person may begin to see him or herself as a deviant person, taking on the role of the deviant. But, Asencio and Burke (2011) have argued, the relation between reflected appraisals and self concept is complex and dynamic; the views of others may shape the self-concept differently depending on the situational importance of the perceived views of others.

### **Processes of Social Exclusion**

The stigma attached to deviant labeling can stir up processes leading to exclusion from relationships with conventional others and from legitimate opportunities. Specifically, labeling may lead to social exclusion through two analytically separate processes (Link, 1982). First, conventional others, including peers, community members, and gate-keepers in the opportunity structure (e.g. teachers and employers), may reject or devalue the labeled person. Stereotypical images of criminality can become defining features of individuals labeled as criminal offenders, thereby bringing on negative reactions by others that are driven by fear, mistrust, self-righteousness, and so on, as well as fear of being associated with stigma.

Second, labeling may lead to social withdrawal due to anticipated rejection or devaluation. Goffman (1963) has argued that the social interaction of "normal" people and stigmatized individuals often entails uneasiness, embarrassment, ambiguity, and intense efforts at impression management. "The very anticipation of such contacts can . . . lead normals and the stigmatized to arrange life so as to avoid them" (Goffman, 1963, p. 13). Link, Cullen, Struening, Shrout, and Dohrenwood (1989) argue that individuals labeled as deviants often expect others to devalue and even reject themselves, resulting in avoiding situations in which they anticipate that their deviant label may stir up stigma. In turn, "withdrawal may lead to constricted social networks and fewer attempts at seeking more satisfying, higher-paying jobs" (Link et al., 1989, p. 403). Also, stigmatized individuals may internalize their perception of their devaluated status, resulting in low self-worth (Kaplan & Johnson, 1991). Individuals labeled as criminal offenders may believe that most people will distrust, devalue, and reject individuals that have been labeled as criminal offenders, and hence they may often avoid social encounters that most people see no reason to avoid, but that are vital for maintaining social bonds to mainstream groups and institutions (Winnick & Bodkin, 2008).

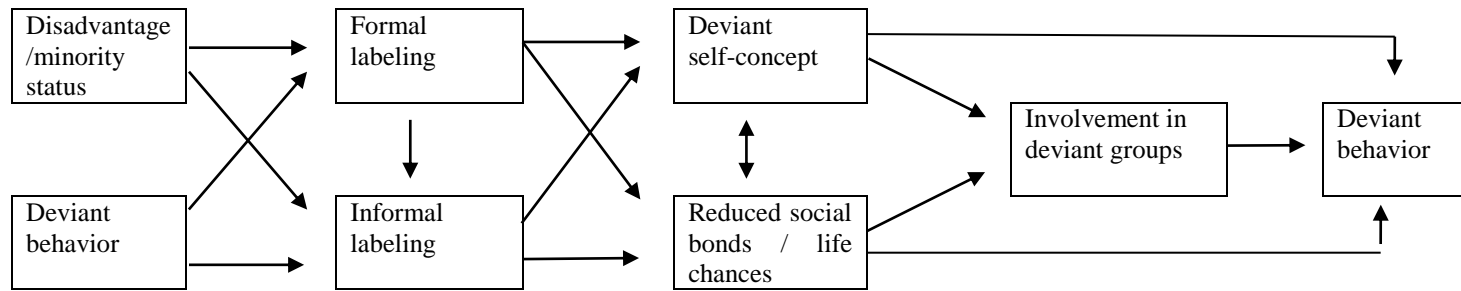
Criminologists have discussed how labeling may undermine conventional social bonds. Sampson and Laub (1993) incorporate labeling theory into a lifecourse framework, highlighting the detrimental effects of labeling on the subsequent development of social bonding and future life chances. These authors argue that by undermining social ties to conventional others, as well as educational attainment and employment chances, criminal labeling may have a long term impact on crime and deviant behavior. In this sense labeling may directly impact individual development temporarily, but this impact may produce a

“snowball effect” that can last much longer than the actual experience of labeling and stigmatization. Thus, stigma may only have to “stick” to the person for a short period to have a long-term effect on the lifecourse, and thereby on the development of crime and delinquency. Similarly, scholars (Kavish et al. 2016; Lee et al. 2014) have situated labeling theory within interactional theory, focusing on how labeling undermines social bonds over time.

### **Involvement in Deviant Groups**

Deviant labeling may lead to involvement in deviant groups, which is by itself an important risk factor for crime and deviance (Becker, 1963; Braithwaite, 1989). Elaborating on this point, Bernburg, Krohn, and Rivera (2006) argue that deviant groups represent a source of social support in which deviant labels are accepted, while at the same time providing collective rationalizations, attitudes, and opportunities that encourage and facilitate deviant behavior. Bernburg et al. suggest that labeling may increase juvenile involvement in deviant peer groups due to three main processes. First, labeling can bring on rejection from conventional peers and from other community members who may fear and mistrust them. For example, parents may prevent their children from associating with known delinquents. By associating with deviant groups, known delinquents can receive a more positive image of themselves from the standpoint of significant others. Second, labeling may result in withdrawal from encounters with conventional peers, because such encounters may entail shame, embarrassment, and uneasiness. Finally, youths tend to make friends with those who are similar to themselves. Youths that have a deviant self-concept may seek the friendship of individuals that share the deviant self-concept.

The path diagram shown in Figure 1 summarizes the intermediate processes. Criminal labels are imposed more on racial minorities and the disadvantaged. Formal labeling may shape a deviant self-concept as well as undermining social bonds and life chances. This may occur through informal labeling and rejection as well as through withdrawal. Research on mental illness labeling indicates that anticipated rejection may hurt individual outcomes independently from the experience of rejection (Markowitz, 1998). Furthermore, weak bonds to mainstream society and blocked opportunities may impact deviant behavior directly, due to weaker informal social control and reduced life chances, but also indirectly through involvement in deviant groups. A deviant self-concept may influence deviant behavior directly, as the labeled person internalizes a deviant role, but also indirectly through involvement in deviant groups. There may be a reciprocal relationship between self-concept changes and changes in social bonds. A deviant self-concept is made “more plausible when actor’s access to conventional (normal) roles and opportunities becomes problematic” (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989, p. 380). In this vein, the formation of a deviant identity may lead to weaker bonds to the conventional order. (Note that plausible, non-recursive processes are not depicted in the diagram. In particular, involvement in deviant groups may reduce both social bonds and life chances, and it may shape the self-concept. Moreover, as Rocheleau and Chavez (2015) have argued, involvement in deviant groups may in itself be stigmatizing.



**Figure 1.** Intermediate processes

## **RESEARCH ON THE CRIMINOGENIC EFFECTS OF LABELING**

In a critical review published in 1989, Paternoster and Iovanni (1989) discussed several methodological issues that are particularly important for labeling research. It is useful to review these issues before turning our attention to the research.

### **Methodological Issues**

First of all, when research studies the effect of formal sanctions on subsequent deviance by using samples of individuals drawn from police records and similar non-random sources, it contains limited comparison between formally labeled individuals and individuals that have no formal labeling. Such research examines the relative (severity of formal reaction), rather than the absolute (formal reaction vs. no formal reaction) effects of formal labeling, which therefore may underestimate the impact of labeling. The risk is: “When one takes for study a group which appears at the end of a long series of discretionary decisions, it is reasonable that the labeling process has run its course by that time” (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989, p. 385).

Second, labeling research often fails to study intermediate processes. Labeling theory argues that specific processes—changes in the self-concept, processes of social exclusion, and involvement in deviant groups—mediate the effect of labeling on deviant behavior. That labeling triggers such processes constitutes the distinct contribution of labeling theory and, hence, the intermediate processes need to be examined. For example, incarceration can undermine social bonds and life chances because individuals are often unable to participate in social routines and to work toward conventional goals during the time of incarceration. Also, incarceration places the person in the company of offenders, and may thus create ties with deviant others. Such processes may be criminogenic, but they are not directly driven by the intermediate (criminogenic) processes posited by labeling theory.

Relatedly, labeling research often fails to examine informal labeling, as well as processes of stigmatization (i.e. rejection and withdrawal). But informal labeling and stigmatization processes comprise the core focus of labeling theory. Formal labeling is thought to influence subsequent deviance in large part because it leads to informal labeling and stigmatization. The role of informal labeling and stigmatization ultimately cannot be demonstrated without measuring these concepts.

Finally, research often ignores that the criminogenic processes triggered by labeling may be contingent on social context. Researchers may often need to specify the conditions that enhance or moderate labeling effects, including the situational context of labeling (e.g. whether or not a person is able to hide the fact of his or her arrest), the social status of the labelee (and perhaps also of the labeler), and the broader national or societal context (Braithwaite, 1989).

These methodological issues guide the following discussion of the empirical research. In what follows, I discuss the research on 1) the effect of labeling on subsequent deviance, 2) intermediate processes, and 3) contingent effects.

### **The Effect of Labeling on Subsequent Deviance**

Again, the study’s sampling method determines the sample variation in labeling. Studies based on longitudinal surveys of samples from general populations (usually adolescents or young adults) unambiguously contain a comparison between individuals who have been formally labeled and individuals who have not. Such research tends to support a positive effect of adolescent or youth formal labeling (arrest and formal sanctions) on subsequent delinquency, net of initial delinquency and other controls, as late as in adulthood (e.g. Bernburg & Krohn, 2003; Farrington, Osborn, & West, 1978; Johnson, 2004; Lopes et al., 2012). Recent studies that have employed propensity score matching to better control for

confounding factors tend to find such effects as well (e.g. Liberman, Kirk, & Kim, 2014; Wiley & Esbensen, 2016).

By contrast, more inclusive reviews of studies on the effect of formal labeling on subsequent behavior, that is, reviews that do not categorize the research based on the sampling method used, yield more mixed results (Barrick, 2013). But, as Barrick (2013) has argued, the most consistent support for labeling theory tends to come from the most sophisticated research (that is, with respect to sample size and measurement).

There are situations in which samples drawn from official or non-random sources can provide meaningful tests of labeling effects. Chiricos, Barrick, Bales, and Bontrager (2007) studied the effect of formal adjudication on recidivism in a sample of men and women found guilty of a felony and sentenced to probation in Florida between 2000 and 2002. The research setting provided an opportunity to examine labeling effects, because Florida judges have the option to withhold formal adjudication of guilt for convicted felons who are sentenced to probation. “For those offenders who have adjudication withheld . . . no civil rights are lost and such individuals can legitimately say on employment applications and elsewhere that a felony conviction did not occur” (p. 548). Chiricos et al. found that formal adjudication increased the likelihood of recidivism, net of prior record, type and seriousness of the offense, and social demographic factors (another, recent example includes Shlosberg, Mandery, West, & Callaghan, 2014).

Nonexperimental research on any social topic is subject to the threat of omitted variable bias. Carefully selecting control variables based on current theory and prior research (e.g. controlling for initial deviance) reduces the problem, but does not eliminate the threat of bias (Smith & Paternoster, 1990). In this respect, field experiments that randomize formal reaction to apprehended offenders are particularly important. Although experiments that provide a meaningful test of labeling effects have been rare, such work lends some support for labeling theory. Klein (1986) conducted a field experiment that randomized whether apprehended youths were counseled and released or whether further action was taken (referral to social service system, referral with purchase of service, or petition toward juvenile court). Klein found that youths who were counseled and released had a lower probability of recidivism after 27 months than youths referred to community agencies or petitioned toward juvenile court (the last group was most likely to recidivate).<sup>2</sup>

Berk, Campbell, Klap, and Western (1992) and Sherman and Smith (1992) examined the effect of arrest for domestic violence on subsequent violence in field experiments that were conducted in four US cities. The studies found that arrest for domestic violence increased the likelihood of subsequent violence, but only if the perpetrator was unemployed. Some evidence indicated that arrest decreased subsequent violence for employed subjects, consistent with deterrence theory. These studies indicate that formal labeling amplifies deviance only under certain conditions.

There is some, albeit limited, research support for the effect of informal labeling on subsequent offending. In an influential study, Matsueda (1992) used longitudinal data from the National Youth Survey (NYS) to examine the effect of informal labeling on subsequent delinquency among adolescent males. Matsueda found parental labeling (that is, parents' self-reported perception of whether they see their son as someone who gets into trouble/breaks rules) and subjective labeling (respondents' perception of whether friends, parents, teachers see them as someone who gets into trouble/breaks rules) to influence subsequent delinquency,

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<sup>2</sup> Klein (1986) reports that the treatment condition had no effect on self-reported delinquency in a follow-up survey that was conducted about nine months later on a subsample of the initial sample of offenders. However, the subsample consisted of only those subjects that participated in the follow-up survey, about 60 percent of the initial sample. These findings are suspect. The null-findings may be due to sampling bias in which the more serious offenders tend not to be included in the follow-up survey.



net of initial delinquency. In addition to several analyses of the NYS data (Bartusch & Matsueda, 1996; Heimer & Matsueda, 1994; Lee et al, Menard & Bouffard, 2013; Tripplett & Jarjoura, 1994; Zhang, 1997), two recent studies support the external validity of Matsueda's original findings, showing an effect of subjective labeling in adolescence on adult offending (Lee, Tajima, Herrenkohl, and Hong, 2017; Walters, 2016).

Research is needed on the potential long-term impact of deviant labeling in childhood. Informal labeling, by parents, teachers, peers, or community members, may trigger exclusionary reactions toward children and adolescents and impact their self-concept before formal agencies come into the picture (Lee et al., 2014; Tripplett & Jarjoura, 1994). Moreover, labeling in childhood can undermine family, school and peer attachments, undermining social bonds and increase subsequent deviant behavior (Kavish, Mullins, & Soto, 2016; Sampson & Laub, 1997). In this regard, the implications of the medicalization of childhood deviance (Conrad, 2007) need to be addressed from the perspective of labeling theory. As Prosser (2015) has pointed out, the social impact of the *attention deficit hyperactivity diagnosis* (ADHD) label, which in many places has become a standard reaction to child deviance (and can be seen as a type of formal labeling), has rarely been studied. Whether or not such labels are stigmatizing and criminogenic is a vital topic for future labeling research.

### **Research on Intermediate Processes**

Tests of intermediate processes are critically important for the development of labeling theory. While intermediate processes were usually missing in early labeling research, studies of mediated effects have become more frequent in recent years. I now review such work in some detail.

***Deviant Self-Concept.*** Limited longitudinal research exists on the intermediate role of self-concept formation. A few studies have tested whether deviant self-concept mediates the effect of informal labeling on subsequent delinquency. In a study discussed above, Matsueda (1992) found that subjective labeling mediated the effect of parental labeling on son's subsequent delinquency. Several re-analyses of the NYS data support these findings (Bartusch & Matsueda, 1996; Heimer & Matsueda, 1994; Tripplett & Jarjoura, 1994; Zhang, 1997). More recently, using a retrospective survey on young adults, Walters (2016) found delinquent self-view in adolescence to mediate the effect of subjective parental labeling on adult offending.

Very limited research has addressed whether the formation of a deviant self-concept mediates the effect of formal labeling on subsequent delinquency. However, providing indirect evidence for such process, recent work shows that low self-worth (Restivo & Lanier, 2013) and neutralization attitudes (Wiley, Slocum, & Esbensen, 2013) mediate a part of the effect of formal labeling on delinquency.

***Social Exclusion—Weak Social Ties, Reduced Life Chances, and Involvement in Deviant Groups.*** Research supports the notion that labeling undermines mainstream social ties. Studies have found informal labeling to be associated with social isolation from family, friends, and school (Zhang, 1997), and reduced school attachment (Tripplett & Jarjoura, 1994). Moreover, research indicates that formal labeling undermines mainstream social ties through both short-term and long-term process. In the short term, formal labeling has been associated with worse parent-child relations (Stewart et al. 2002), lower school grades (Wiley et al., 2013), and peers' rejection from nonlabeled youths (Zhang, 1994). In the long term, formal labeling may undermine conventional social ties through reduced life chances. Schmidt et al. (2015) find financial hardship in young adulthood to mediate a negative effect of police intervention in adolescence on the odds of entering into a stable marriage in adulthood, as well as on the quality of adult romantic relationships.

Many studies support the detrimental effect of formal labeling on life chances. Formal labeling has been found to negatively impact educational attainment, net of initial delinquency and controls (e.g. Bernburg & Krohn, 2003; De Li, 1999; Hjalmarsson, 2008; Kirk & Sampson, 2013). Ethnographic research has illustrated how school-officials routinely define students as troublemakers, and once the troublemaker label has been designated, the student's misbehavior brings on harsher disciplinary procedures than normally would be used, including suspension, transfer to another school, or even expulsion (Bowditch, 1993).

Extensive research indicates that formal labeling undermines employment. Many jobs have restrictions on hiring people that have a criminal record (Irwing, 2005), and criminal background checks in hiring decisions are widespread (Harris & Keller, 2005). Field experiments and vignette studies indicate how employers are less likely to hire applicants that have been convicted or incarcerated, even those convicted for minor offenses (Pager, 2003; Schwartz & Skolnick, 1962). Survey research shows that, net of initial delinquency, having a conviction, or having been charged or apprehended by police, as early as adolescence, has a long-term effect on adulthood unemployment (e.g. Bernburg & Krohn, 2003; Makarios, Cullen, & Piquero, 2017; Lopes et al., 2012), socioeconomic disadvantage and premature transitions to adulthood (Lanctot, Cernkovich, & Giordano, 2007), and welfare reciprocity (Lopes et al., 2012).

In spite of all the research that supports the negative effect of formal labeling on life chances, especially employment, only a handful of studies have examined whether reduced life chances mediate the effect of formal labeling on subsequent crime and deviance. Such questions require data that span long term individual development. Bernburg and Krohn (2003) examined the effect of formal labeling during adolescence on adult criminal behavior, using data on urban males from the Rochester Youth Developmental Study (RYDS). Bernburg and Krohn examined both police records (arrest/police contact) and self-report data on juvenile justice intervention (probation, correctional center, community service, detention, brought to court, treatment program). The study found that formal labeling during adolescence had a positive effect on self-reported crime in late adolescence and early adulthood (age 21-22), net of serious adolescent delinquency, academic aptitude, and social background. Educational attainment and early adult employment mediated these effects in part. In a follow-up study, Lopes et al. (2012) incorporated adulthood (age 29-31) measures from the RYDS data and found that both adolescent and young adult formal labeling were associated with adulthood unemployment, welfare reciprocity, and criminal behavior. But, this study did not find evidence of mediated effects. A few other studies have found educational attainment and unemployment to mediate the long-term effect of formal labeling on criminal behavior (De Li, 1999; Lee, Courtney, Harachi, & Tajima, 2015; Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Research has examined whether involvement in deviant groups mediates the effect of labeling on subsequent deviance. The previously mentioned analyses of the NYS data have found that the effect of subjective labeling on subsequent delinquency is mediated in part by association with delinquent peers (Heimer & Matsueda, 1994; Tripplett & Jarjoura, 1994). Several studies have examined whether involvement in deviant groups mediates the effect of formal labeling on subsequent delinquency. Most of these studies provide support for this intermediate process (Bernburg et al., 2006; Kaplan & Johnson, 1991; Restivo and Lanier, 2015; Wiley et al., 2013), but a minority provides mixed support (Johnson, Simons, & Conger, 2004), or no support (Farrington, 1977). For example, Bernburg et al. (2006) found that, net of initial delinquency, drug use, involvement in deviant groups, and other controls, juvenile justice intervention had a positive effect on the odds of serious delinquency one year later. Furthermore, a large part of this effect was mediated by increased likelihood of involvement in gangs and association with delinquent peers at an intermediate period.

In summary, Table 1 provides an overview of longitudinal studies that have examined intermediate processes in the effect of labeling on subsequent deviance. In line with the methodological discussion above, the table includes only studies using population-based samples. While the research supports many of the intermediate processes implied by labeling theory, there are limitations. Research has rarely tested whether deviant self-concept formation mediates the effect of formal labeling on delinquency (instead, studies have used delinquent attitudes/neutralizations as proxies; e.g. Wiley et al. 2013). Also, the evidence tends to be fragmented, as studies usually focus on only one major intermediate process at a time. But, recent attempts to provide more comprehensive testing of mediated effects have found simultaneous support for all of the processes tested (Restivo and Lanier, 2015; Wiley et al. 2013).

But if recent years have seen an accumulation of research support for the negative impact of formal labeling on social ties and life chances, and for the impact of labeling on involvement in deviant groups, limited research exists on the processes that are held to drive these exclusionary effects, namely, situational devaluation (stigmatization), rejection, and withdrawal. In a rare study, Winnick and Bodkin (2008) surveyed convicts about their perception of stigmatization of being an ex-convict and how they intended to manage stigma upon their release from prison. The study found that many convicts believed that most people will distrust and reject ex-convicts, and that this belief was positively associated with an intention to withdraw from social participation upon release from prison. Moreover, while unable to test general hypotheses, qualitative research illustrates how offender labels can impact everyday situations (e.g. Bowditch, 1993; Bernburg, 2006; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004;). Bernburg (2006) conducted open-ended interviews with individuals that had been convicted for crimes. The study provided accounts from juvenile delinquents describing how their peers were awkwardly “polite” and “not-themselves” around them, and how they anticipated feelings of shame when confronted with their peers’ parents. Moreover, ex-offenders often dreaded the thought of experiencing situations in which stigma becomes a part of others’ definition of them. Such encounters entail shame, embarrassment, and an inability to present themselves in a favorable light (“I could just as well be naked”), a notion that was sometimes based on experience and sometimes based on anticipation. Individuals provided accounts of how they tried to avoid situations that, in their minds, could entail such encounters, including “meeting new people”.

In short, labeling research needs to include measures of devaluation, rejection and withdrawal. This effort can be aided by qualitative research illustrating how labeling and stigma impact everyday situations. The work can also build on measures that have been developed to measure anticipated and experienced rejection in research on mental illness labeling (Markowitz, 1998). Importantly, however, the research may need to go beyond the subjective experience of labeled individuals. Rejection and devaluation by others may hurt social ties and life chances without the labeled person being aware of it. As Matsueda (1992) found, objective parental labeling (based on interviews with parents) influenced youth delinquency, net of the effect of the youth’s subjective or perceived labeling. Future research should attempt to measure objective labeling and even rejection on the part of those individuals that comprise the person’s relevant social environment, including perhaps school peers, teachers, and selected community members.

**Table 1.** Tests of mediated effects

Study	Target population / study's timeframe	Type of labeling examined (type of data)	Support for a criminogenic effect of labeling?	Intervening variables / support for a mediated effect?
<b>Informal labeling</b>				
Adams and Evans (1996)	US adolescent males, 2-year follow-up <sup>a</sup>	Subjective labeling (self-reports)	Yes	Peer delinquency / yes
Matsueda (1992) and Heimer and Matsueda (1992)	US adolescent males, 3-year follow-up <sup>a</sup>	Objective parental labeling (parent-reports)	Yes	Subjective labeling / yes
		Subjective labeling (self-reports)	Yes	Peer delinquency / yes
Triplett and Jarjoura (1994)	US adolescent males, 4-year follow-up <sup>a</sup>	Objective parental labeling (parent-reports)	Yes	Subjective labeling / yes
		Subjective labeling (self-reports)	Yes	Parental attachment / no School attachment / yes Delinquent peers / yes
Walters (2016)	Young adults, retrospective	Subjective parental labeling (retrospective self-reports)	Yes	Delinquent self-view / yes
Zhang (1997)	US adolescent males, 2-year follow-up <sup>a</sup>	Objective parental labeling (parent-reports)	Yes	Subjective labeling / yes
		Subjective labeling (self-reports)	Yes	Social isolation / mixed *
<b>Formal labeling</b>				
Bernburg and Krohn (2003)	Early adolescence to early adulthood, urban US males <sup>b</sup>	Juvenile Justice Intervention (self-reports)	Yes	Educational attainment / yes Nonemployment / yes
		Police Intervention (police records)	Yes	Educational attainment / yes Nonemployment / yes
Bernburg et al. (2006)	Early to middle adolescence, urban US males <sup>b</sup>	Juvenile Justice Intervention (self-reports)	Yes	Gang Membership / yes Peer delinquency / yes

De Li (1999)	Early adolescence to early adulthood / English working class males <sup>c</sup>	Conviction (official records)	Yes	Unemployment / yes
Farrington (1977)	Early to middle adolescence, English working class males <sup>c</sup>	Conviction (official records)	Yes	Peer delinquency / no
Johnson, et al. (2004)	Early adolescence to early adulthood, rural US males	Criminal/Juvenile Justice Involvement (self-reports)	Yes	Peer delinquency / mixed**
Kaplan and Johnson (1991)	US adolescents, three year follow-up	Index for negative social sanctions (self-reports)	Yes	Dispositions to deviance / yes Deviant peer association / yes
Lee et al. (2015)	Adolescence to early adulthood / US foster youth	Juvenile legal system involvement (self-reports)	Mixed***	Educational attainment / yes Unemployment / yes
Lopes et al. (2012)	Adolescence through adulthood, urban US <sup>b</sup>	Police intervention age 14-18 (official records)	Yes	Educational attainment / No**** Unemployment / No****
		Police intervention age 21-23 (official records)	Yes	Unemployment / No**** Welfare reciprocity / No****
Restivo and Lanier (2015)	US adolescents in high risk contexts, 3-year follow up	Arrest (self-reports)	Yes	Self-worth / Yes Delinquent peers / Yes Perceived life-chances / Yes Poor parenting practices / Yes
Stewart et al. (2002)	US adolescents / Early to mid-adolescence	Police and juvenile justice intervention index (self-reports)	Yes	
Wiley et al. (2013)	US adolescents, 3-year follow up	Police contact and arrest (self-reports)	Yes	School commitment / no Poor grades / yes Prosocial activities / no Exclusion from prosocial peers /nNo Less anticipated guilt / yes Neutralizations / yes Peer delinquency / yes Negative peer commitment / yes

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Note: The table reports on longitudinal studies that examine mediated effects in population based samples.

a National Youth Survey (NYS).

b Rochester Youth Developmental Study (RYDS).

c Longitudinal data on British working class males (Farrington, 1977).

\* Subjective labeling was found to impact social isolation, but social isolation did not impact subsequent delinquency.

\*\* Formal labeling was found to impact deviant peer association, but deviant peer association did not impact subsequent delinquency.

\*\*\* Juvenile legal intervention was associated with later criminal behavior at age 21 but not age 23-24.

\*\*\*\* Police intervention negatively impacted life chances and adult crime and drug use, but life chances (educational attainment, unemployment, welfare reciprocity) had no significant effect on adult crime and drug use.

### **Contingencies in Labeling Effects**

Various conditions may shape the impact of labeling on individual development and subsequent deviance. First of all, formal labeling should be more criminogenic when it triggers informal labeling (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989). Formal labeling should have a larger, detrimental impact on individual development, and hence a more pronounced effect on subsequent deviance, when information about the formal label is brought to the attention of community members, significant others, or gate-keepers in the opportunity structure (e.g. teachers, employers). But tests of such hypotheses are limited. Bernburg (2003) found that when the school is notified by the authorities that there has been a juvenile justice intervention, the odds of dropping out of high school increase significantly. In a rare study, Hjalmarsson (2008) compared the effect of formal labeling (arrest and incarceration) on high-school drop-out in two different contexts, that is, 1) in states that mandate school notification of arrest and 2) in states that do not mandate notification. Hjalmarsson found that the observed effects of both arrest and incarceration on high-school drop-out were much larger in states that mandate notification, but these interaction effects were statistically insignificant, and thus the large differences found were not beyond chance.

But even if formal labeling is known to others, it may not necessarily lead to informal labeling and stigmatization (Convington, 1984). “Rather than accepting the deviant label as indicative of actor’s essential character, others [may] . . . neutralize the consequences of negative character attribution” (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989: 276). Other actors may bring the person’s behavior into conformity with the group without excluding the person from it (Braithwaite, 1989). Moreover, individuals can be differently active in negotiating the meanings that emerge in social interaction, and hence they may resist when others try to typify them as deviants (Davis, 1961).

Whether labeling is resisted or neutralized in social situations may thus be contingent on the characteristics of the actors involved. Although the research on this point is fragmented, several major factors have been studied, that is, family labeling, minority status and social disadvantage, gender, family bonds, and prior delinquency.

**Family Labeling.** Formal labeling may be more likely to trigger stigmatization and subsequent deviance if the person’s family is already associated with criminal stigma, which therefore may help to explain the intergenerational transmission of criminal behavior (Hagan & Palloni, 1990; see Murray, Loeber, & Pardini, 2012). Research has found that not only are children of formally labeled parents more likely to be formally labeled themselves (Besemer, Farrington, & Bijleveld, 2013), but formal labels seem to be more criminogenic when the labeled person’s family has previously been labeled deviant (Hagan & Palloni, 1990).

**Minority Status, Social Disadvantage.** There are two opposite hypotheses regarding the conditional effects of minority status and disadvantage (Sherman & Smith, 1992). On the one hand, labeling may have a larger criminogenic effect for minorities and the impoverished. Sampson and Laub (1997) have argued that since disadvantaged groups tend to have weaker social bonds and constrained life chances, they are more vulnerable to the negative effects of labeling. In a sense, they cannot “afford” to miss out on any more opportunities and social bonds. Bernburg and Krohn (2003) suggest that since racial minorities and the impoverished tend to be associated with stigma to begin with, formal labels are more likely to trigger stigma for members of such groups. Finally, powerlessness can undermine the ability to resist labeling. In an ethnographic study of student discipline in an inner-city high school, Bowditch (1993) observed that “a student’s vulnerability to suspension, and to identification as a ‘troublemaker,’ may . . . depend upon his or her parents’ ability to influence the actions of school personnel” (p. 501). “The relatively disadvantaged parents of most parents vis-à-vis

school workers meant that many parents often received disrespectful and dismissive treatment. Parents had few, if any, social or political resources with which to challenge a disciplinarian's actions" (p. 502).

On the other hand, social disadvantage may weaken the impact of labeling, since disadvantaged individuals have reduced stakes in maintaining a respectable identity to begin with (Ageton & Elliott, 1974; Harris, 1976). The identity of such individuals is already compromised by the stigma that is attached to their group membership, and hence labeling may have a weaker effect on the self-concept of members of such groups, which implies that labeling should have a weaker effect on subsequent deviance among racial minorities and the disadvantaged.

There is some research that supports both viewpoints, although the former hypothesis has received more substantial support. Bernburg and Krohn (2003) found that the effects of formal labeling during adolescence on late adolescence and early adult crime were more pronounced among African Americans and among those that had impoverished backgrounds. But, the effects of official labeling on educational attainment and employment instability were not contingent on race or poverty status. As discussed earlier, field experiments (Berk et al., 1992; Sherman & Smith, 1992) have found that arrest for domestic violence has a larger positive effect on later violence when the perpetrator is unemployed. Finally, Adams, Johnson, and Evans (1998) found that the effect of subjective labeling on delinquency was larger among blacks than among whites.

By contrast, there is research that indicates that disadvantage may sometimes reduce the effect of formal labeling on subsequent offending. Chiricos et al. (2007) found that the effect of adjudication on recidivism was significantly larger among whites. This study also examined whether neighborhood concentrated disadvantage interacted with the effect of adjudication on recidivism, but found no evidence of such effects. Klein (1986) found that the effect of formal processing on recidivism were larger among whites and high SES youths. Ageton and Elliott (1974) found formal labeling to influence delinquent orientations only among white youths. However, both Klein (1986) and Ageton and Elliott (1974) failed to report significance tests to demonstrate statistical interaction, and hence these findings should not be generalized.

**Gender.** Research on the conditional impact of gender has produced mixed results. Some studies indicate a stronger criminogenic effect of labeling among males. For example, Ray and Downs (1986) found an effect of formal labeling on subsequent drug use only among males, and Bartusch and Matsueda (1996) found that informal labeling had a larger impact on delinquency among males than among females. By contrast, Chiricos et al. (2007) has found the effect of adjudication on recidivism to be larger among females than among males, and McGrath (2014) has found that females experienced stronger feelings of stigmatization during their sentencing than males.

**Family Bonds.** Family attachment may moderate the criminogenic effect of labeling. Drawing on Braithwaite (1989; see below), Jackson and Hay (2013) have argued that strong family attachment may provide a context for reintegration, whereby the labeled person experiences shame but then experiences forgiveness and acceptance. Using a sample of high-risk youths, Jackson and Hay found that arrest had a significantly less pronounced effect on subsequent delinquency among youths who reported more warmth and attachment within their families.

**Prior Delinquency.** Individuals who are already involved in delinquency may not be affected by labeling as much as those who are less involved in delinquency prior to labeling. The reason is that the processes discussed above—identity change, social exclusion, involvement in deviant groups—may already have occurred in the past (due to various reasons, including prior labeling). Thus, "hard-core" offenders may be "immune to additional



labeling effects” (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989:385). Several studies have provided support this notion, although disagreement exists. Jensen (1980) found that formal labeling has a more pronounced effect on the delinquent self-concept of youths with low delinquent involvement. Chiricos et al. (2007) found the effect of adjudication on recidivism among adult offenders to be stronger among those who did not have a prior criminal record before the age of 30. Wiley, Carson, and Esbensen (2017) found arrest to amplify delinquent behavior only among nongang youth but among gang youth. Also, Ward, Krohn, and Gibson (2013) found police contact to have a more pronounced effect on future violent offending of youths who were on a low violent-offending trajectory. However, by contrast, Morris and Piquero (2013) found a more pronounced effect of arrest on the subsequent delinquency of youths on a high-offending trajectory.

To conclude, we may expect various contingencies in the effects of labeling. But, it is important to keep in mind that social context not only shapes the likelihood that stigma will be resisted or escaped, but it also influences various other factors, including the availability of criminal opportunities and roles. Again, the lack of research that includes measures of informal labeling and stigmatization prevents us from drawing firm conclusions about the conditions under which formal labeling is most likely to lead to informal labeling and stigmatization, under what conditions stigmatization is most likely to reinforce subsequent delinquency, and so on.

### **The Broader Societal Context**

Braithwaite (1989) has drawn attention to the role of the broader societal context in specifying the impact of formal criminal labeling. Braithwaite argues that in communitarian societies, that is, societies that are characterized by high levels of social cohesion, trust, and group loyalty, moral condemnation (“shaming”) is often followed by informal and even formal efforts to reintegrate offenders back into the community through forgiveness, efforts to maintain social bonds, and even ceremonies that symbolize that the offender is no longer a deviant. By contrast, highly individualistic societies have fewer procedures that reintegrate offenders, resulting in frequent stigmatization. Thus, formal labeling should be more criminogenic in individualistic societies than in communitarian societies. There is some research that has examined aspects of this theory (Hay, 2001), but societal-level tests have been rare. Baumer et al. (2002) have examined whether recidivism rates are lower in communitarian countries, relative to countries characterized by individualism, but found no support for this hypothesis. Cross-national research is needed.

### **CONCLUSION**

Schur (1980) has pointed out that the critics of labeling theory have often assumed that labeling theory and alternative approaches are “mutually exclusive,” which has caused critics to ignore the theory’s “most valuable features” (pp. 278-279). Contemporary work on labeling theory underscores that the theory not only fits well with other theories of crime and deviance, but that its primary focus on social exclusion complements other sociological theories arguing that weak social bonds, blocked opportunities, and association with deviant groups are important factors explaining criminal and delinquent behavior. The scientific rigour of labeling research has improved in recent years thanks to increased availability of measurement rich, longitudinal data. But there are still important gaps in the research. Since available survey data rarely includes measures that specifically target labeling and stigma, crucial variables are often missing in the research. Accordingly, major hypotheses have not been properly tested. Above I have highlighted the frequent absence of measures of informal labeling and deviant self-concept and experienced and anticipated stigmatization. Developing

such measures and including them in longitudinal survey projects that span long term individual development continues to be a pressing issue in this area.

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