

Labelling Theory

Sociology

The sequence by which a label becomes an identity and then a career.

The response, not the act, is the object of study.

1 Primary deviance

An act breaks a rule, unnoticed or unlabelled, with no identity attached.

2 A label is applied

An agency with the power to define names the person, not just the act.

3 The label becomes master

It overrides other statuses and reorganises how others read the person.

4 Secondary deviance

Conduct adjusts to the identity now assigned and expected.

5 A deviant career

Exclusion narrows options; the subculture that accepts the label is left.

Educational reference. Criticised for saying little about why the first act happened and for underplaying serious harm.