Understanding the Disparity between Primary and Secondary Deviance in Relation to Deviant and/or Criminal Behaviour

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This article challenges and debunks the disparity and functionality between Lemert's theory of primary and secondary deviance by utilising aspects of labelling theories to convey how deviance is constructed by societal reaction to rule-breaking acts. Acknowledging the distinction between the two ideologies can illustrate that not all deviant behaviours are criminal, and demonstrate that prejudiced conjectures via societal perception towards deviant and criminal acts could lead to wrongful accusations and the social alienation of an innocent person (Valier, 2002). In addition, deviance can also be understood as a form of elitist social controls, such as the formal responses of the Criminal Justice System to the informal responses from those in society who exert power and autonomy over who or what is deemed to be 'deviant', 'criminal', 'normal' or 'abnormal'. Those brandished with spoiled identities and stigmatised as an 'outsider' may face diminished opportunities with regards to employment (Becker 1963). Furthermore, the subjective stigmatisation of deviant behaviour can be exemplified in case studies concerning 'drug use', 'witchcraft' and 'mental health issues'. Ultimately, by acknowledging how deviance can create inequality (primarily through labeling), a true representation of what is meant by deviant or criminal behaviour will be studied in modern societal context.

Deviancy 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

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Deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label (Becker 1963: 9).

Introduction

Although the term ‘deviance’ can be defined from a sociological perspective as behaviour that violates expected rules and norms (Andersen et al 2014), it could also be said that due to its complex and multifaceted meaning across cultures and societies, there can never be a universally approved definition of ‘normal’ or ‘deviant’ behaviour (Becker 1963). Labelling theorists argue that deviance or crime is a social construction of reality; in other words, what is deemed to be deviant for one individual, society or culture may not be categorised as deviant for another, and behaviour characterised as deviant continually endures redefinition relative to location and time period (Adler and Adler 2002). According to John Curra in The Relativity of Deviance, the term ‘deviance’ cannot be interpreted as an “absolute static idiom except by its relativity to social context” (2000: viii). Deviance can therefore be understood in terms of group methods and inference, and not just as individual idiosyncrasies. For example, the World War II code-breaker Alan Turing was convicted for homosexual activity in 1952, a time when homosexual acts were illegal in the UK. By contrast, the Sexual Offences Act (1967) sought to decriminalise homosexuality, although the initial stages of legislative enactment proved counterintuitive. With changing social and cultural behaviours we have witnessed a mirroring of legislative processes. In contemporary society, same gender relationships have come to be markers of identity and lifestyle rather than criminal or deviant acts, and Turing was recently awarded a posthumous royal pardon (Davies 2013). Consequently, by utilising further studies in relation to the stigmatisation of deviance as a paradigm cultivated by cultural norms, this article illustrates that what is deemed deviant in one culture will be defined differently in another.

Distinguishing Forms of Deviance

Deviance as a paradigm conveys the subjugation of cultural norms, rules and enforcement towards deviant or criminal acts over time. Throughout the past era, numerous sociologists and criminologists have advocated a myriad of theories in
order to clarify what deviant or criminal behaviour entails. Particularly, Edwin M. Lemert in *Social Pathology* shaped the tripartite distinction between 'primary deviance' (exploratory behaviour that is situational or occasional), 'societal reaction perspective' (how others respond to the primary deviance), and 'secondary deviance' (how the deviant responds to the social reaction resulting in a deviant identity) (1951: 603). The core focus was based on societal reactions ('them' and 'us') which could range from the informal responses of public views to more formal responses such as those of police and judges (Becker 1963: 93). Arguably, symbolic interaction and labelling theory exemplify how deviance or crime derive from the connotations people associate with various behaviours, and highlights the outcomes of specific individuals who are unfairly tarnished as a result of being labelled (Blumer 1969).

Although Lemert (1967) suggested that primary deviance is the foremost justification for breaking norms and rules of society, the concept was largely disregarded in favour of secondary deviance, in particular, the pivotal point whereby deviant behaviour escalates from societal reaction to rule breaking acts (Norman 2009). On the contrary, Downes and Rock (1995) disputed that the prominence of secondary deviance over primary deviance steers towards a more linear micro-social world of meanings, via institutional responses from social control agents, arrests and court hearings, rather than focusing on the deviant act itself. Consequently, primary deviants endure no transformation psychologically or physically in the way they behave as affiliates of society (Beirne and Messerschmidt 2000). Therefore, when society reacts and labels specific people who participate in primary deviance as 'an addict' or 'insane', this can be profoundly damaging to an individual and may generate secondary deviance (Madden and Marshall 2009). From this, Lemert (1951) argued that the distinctive terms 'primary' and 'secondary' deviance can be interpreted between the original and applicable aetiology (social, cultural, psychological, physical phenomenon) of deviance, which highlights the binary opposition of what deviant or criminal behaviour involves (Goode 2004). Subsequently, acknowledging the differences between the two ideologies can illustrate that not all deviant behaviours are criminal, and how biased conjectures via societal perception towards deviant and criminal acts
could lead to wrongful accusations and the social alienation of innocent persons (Valier 2002).

For example, Lemert (1951) based his theory on a socio-psychological statistical concept of deviance, whereby deviance could be empirically measured against any characteristic or behaviour that was atypical compared to the perceived norm (Kitsuse 1962). It could be said that the overall meaning of deviance is thus shrouded and misconstrued due to focusing on one aspect rather than the entire aggregate (Downes and Rock 1995). As a result, a variety of behaviours arbitrarily considered to be deviant are submerged under a bracket of marginalisation; for instance, profanity, obscenity, genius, alcoholism, Asperger’s, prostitution, mental illness, addiction, and sexual immorality, and are subject to prejudiced stigma as a result of public attitudes and segregation (Grattet 2011). It could be said that in Lemert’s terms of deviance, all of us are guilty of deviant behaviour in some way considering that almost everyone has broken social rules on occasion. Consequently, individuals who are interpreted as belonging to a ‘deviant’ category are subject to ‘stigma’ and condemnation as a result of public attitudes and social exclusion (Goffman 1963). According to Becker (1963), once an individual is publicly labelled as deviant, a revaluation of the self occurs (‘deviance amplification’) and an individual’s other identities are overlooked to the label of ‘deviant’ (a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’). Charles Horton Cooley (1902) promoted the idea of the ‘looking-glass self’, conceptualising ideas from George Herbert Mead’s Mind, Self and Society (1934) which explains an individual’s ‘self-concept’ (identity factors, e.g. self-esteem or self-image) and how an individual perceives how other people view them though reactions which could affect the individual’s self-concept. Chassin et al., (1981), examined the effects of labelling on institutionalised adolescents, focusing on the development of self-concepts towards labelling theory, and stated that if a self-concept is redefined as deviant (‘master status’), then the probability of further ‘deviant’ behaviour will increase and they may continue into criminal careers.

Becker (1963) applies this theory to his study of marijuana smokers to illustrate how labelling and societal reaction to deviant behaviour can create desistance from
continuing a criminal career. Becker’s theory suggests that when a novice smoker joins a marijuana smoking group they primarily identify with each other; however, the shared identity is condemned via public stigmatisation of the individual as ‘deviant’, and thus the initial goal to join the group becomes terminated (Becker 1963). Concomitantly, Hallstone (2002) argued that when Becker conducted his study in the 1950s, cannabis was not widely available and was considered to be a rare commodity in America and Europe. From this, it could be said that Becker’s thinking may have been influenced by the societal context and the social control of cannabis use (Hallstone 2002; Järvinen and Ravn 2013). However, Frank Tannenbaum concurs with Becker and asserts that the “dramatisation of evil” (1938: 19) from formal responses can result in damaging ramifications for the individual once they have been labelled with new, spoiled identities such as ‘addict’, ‘insane’, ‘criminal’ or ‘delinquent’. This can lead to social segregation and fewer opportunities for the tagged individual regarded as an ‘outsider’ (Becker 1963).

In order to interpret what is meant by ‘deviance’, Becker (1963) presented a typology of four different types of deviant and non-deviant behaviour: ‘conforming behaviour’ (those who obey the rules whereby society perceives that person as obeying the rules), the ‘pure deviant’ (those who disobey the rules and are perceived as doing so), the ‘falsely accused’ (those identified as disobeying the rules, however, they did not violate the rules), and the ‘secret deviant’ (those who violate the rules of society although society does not know of this behaviour). According to Bedau and Radelt (1987) whilst the conformist and the pure deviant are distinguished by society in terms of their behaviours, the falsely accused and secret deviant are often misapprehended and identified as deviants or criminals due to traits regarding their socio-economic status, race or physical appearance (amongst others). Studies have documented the unjust existence of falsely accused individuals on death row (Bedau and Radelt 1987; Death Penalty Information Center 2006). Therefore, whilst labelling theory argues that no act is intrinsically criminal, it raises questions such as, “who applies what label to whom?” (Chambliss 1973: 13), why do they do this and what happens to individuals who are tarnished as a result of being labelled (Bernberg and Krohn 2003).
Moral Entrepreneurship

The concept of ‘moral entrepreneurs’ (Becker 1963) illustrates how specific individuals (upper-class) who serve as rule creators or rule enforcers, exert power over many to regulate social morals based primarily on construed biases of what constitutes deviant or criminal behaviour. According to Schram and Tibbett (2013), whilst the sanctions used in law enforcement are directed against the individual and not just the criminal act, the penalties for such an act vary according to the characteristics of the offender. Stanley Cohen (1972) concurs with Becker’s (1963) interpretation of moral entrepreneurship, which defines moral panics as occurrences where events, individuals and groups (‘folk devils’) become un-meritoriously defined and demonised as threats to societal values and interests. An example of moral entrepreneurship is provided by the News of the World’s campaign to ‘name and shame’ paedophiles (Cohen 2003). The campaign ran for two successive Sundays (23rd and 30th July 2000) before the discontinuation of the News of the World’s publication in 2011, however, the moral panic created from these events surrounding paedophilia is still in existence today (Cohen 2003). This is illustrated in the case of Joseph McCloskey’s anti-paedophile Facebook campaign titled: ‘Keeping our Kids Safe from Predators’ (Erwin 2014).

John Braithwaite (1989) conglomerates labelling theory with aspects of deviance theories, including control theory, subcultural theory and learning theory, in order to initiate a new theory of reintegration. Although this was dissimilar to most labelling theorists, Braithwaite suggests that labelling or ‘shaming’ is appropriate in order to convert an individual’s behaviour to societal values and gain reintegration into the community. However, Goffman (1963) argues that the process of labelling or ‘shaming’ could lead to amplified vilification and stigmatic attacks on the offender, resulting in limited social support and thus causing further detrimental outcomes. Schur (1965) addressed some of the criticisms of the labelling perspective and identified three key factors: stereotyping (police encounters with the individual), retrospective interpretation (process by which an individual is identified as a deviant and is thereafter viewed differently), and negotiation (alleged delinquents may exploit the relationship between the image they present and the probable outcome of their
case). Schur argues that labelling theory focuses on the reaction to criminal or deviant behaviour whilst avoiding the actual aetiology of the crime. Furthermore, Goode (2004) asserts that labelling should be viewed as a perspective rather than a theory and argues that it does not explore the whole spectrum of deviance but pinpoints specific features.

**Primary and Secondary Deviance Case-Studies**

In order to gain a more meaningful understanding of the disparity between primary and secondary deviance, three brief studies concerning drug use, witchcraft and mental health issues will evaluate what is meant by deviant or criminal behaviour.

**Drug Use**

The current debate surrounding social control and stigma with regards to client experiences with Methadone Maintenance Treatment (MMT) is an example of how specific behaviours may be categorised as deviant or criminal. Harris and McElrath’s ‘Methadone as Social Control’ study (2012) illustrates how those who have power over methadone provision pigeonhole clients with the label ‘addict’ or ‘junkie’ as master status, despite the fact that clients are at the stage of recovery. In addition, the label ‘addict’ creates the interrelationship between the stereotypical views about heroin dependence and assumptions of deviance and crime, thus addiction is denoted as a ‘criminal-menace’ (Harris and McElrath 2012). For example, the ‘clean’ and ‘dirty’ dichotomy associated with heroin addicts reinforces blighted identities and constructs obstacles to limit reintegration (Harris and McElrath 2012). Furthermore, according to Vigilante (2004), MMT provision is a form of social control associated with the ideologies of medicalisation and criminalisation whereby under the medical jurisdiction, labelling acts of deviance as ‘criminal’ or ‘medical’ can have severe debilitating effects on the individual. The example of MMT treatment stresses how those who exert power increase social cohesion via extending medical jurisdictions over deviant or criminal acts which can result in stigmatisation, inequality, discrimination and isolation due to the individual’s participation in a deviant act.
Witchcraft

Another example which depicts how powerful movements such as The Puritans were able to use deviance to their own advantage is provided by the laws passed against witchcraft in New England in the 1600s (Erickson 2005). According to Erickson (2005), the Puritans reinforced social and religious solidarity ("them" and "us") by accusing 'witches' of causing the misfortunes which the community was experiencing at that time. Through the process of labelling and identifying 'witches' as criminal beings, thousands of innocent individuals were wrongfully burned at the stake (Jensen 2007). The 'closed ranks' of the community obeyed their religious leaders, in fear that they too would be accused of witchcraft and executed (Jensen 2007). Witchcraft serves as an example of the social controls regarding what is deemed to be deviant or criminal behaviour; whereas today western societies view witchcraft as a lifestyle choice rather than a crime.

Mental Health

The notion that powerful social controls can construct and apply the labels of 'deviant' or 'criminal' to individuals is also evident concerning mental health issues (Norman 2009). According to Thomas Scheff, the idea of mental illness can be viewed as a 'social role', rather than a 'psychiatric absolute' — and he asserts how "labelling is the single most important cause of careers of residual deviance" (1966: 450). However, Bowers (1998) argues that residual rule-breaking can transgress to a master status stage if society responds to it as a mental illness. For example, Goffman (1967) claims that when individuals enter a mental hospital for the first time they implement a self-concept and identify themselves as deviant. This is emphasised when they collaborate with people who they had previously differed from (behaviour that does not fit with socially constructed norms e.g. 'crazy', 'weird' 'manic'), which results in others labelling them as deviant due to their idiosyncrasies (Goffman 1963). Furthermore, David Rosenhan, in On Being Sane in Insane Places (1973), analysed how the label of 'insanity' can manipulate the mentality and behaviour of hospital staff. Rosenhan used eight typically 'sane' individuals from several environments to apply for admission to different mental hospitals. As each individual arrived at the hospital they feigned hearing voices (a symptom associated with schizophrenia).
When the hospital staff questioned their background histories, all eight subjects gave honest and accurate responses. As a result, all but one individual was labelled ‘schizophrenic’, illustrating how deviant behaviour can be easily misconstrued by social controls into something more malignant. Cesare Beccaria (1767: 6) states that “every act of authority of one man over another for which there is not an absolute necessity, is tyrannical”, which is applicable to defining how Rosenhan’s study demonstrated how power over random behaviour can be construed as deviant. According to Walter Gove (1980), whilst not all deviants are considered to be mentally ill, almost all mentally ill persons are considered deviant. To further understand the notion of power over deviance or crime, Herschel Prins (1980) also considers the relationship between mental disorders and crime by analysing mental health care methods and criminal justice systems. Prins’ (1980) case studies exemplify the challenges involved in identifying the solid boundaries between what is deemed as ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal’, and ‘madness’ or ‘badness’, and distinguishes between those who are targeted by social controls as ‘normal’ or ‘deviant’ beings.

Overall, the three studies (MMT, witchcraft and mental health) serve to expose how social controls decide who or what is deemed to be ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal’, ‘mad or bad’, ‘clean’ or ‘dirty’, ‘deviant’ or ‘criminal’ by distinguishing between ‘them’ and ‘us’ - reinforcing inequalities and violating basic human rights.

Conclusion
Having reviewed aspects of primary and secondary deviance, it is evident that a disparity exists between the dual concepts, whereby the former is regarded as behaviour that is situational or occasional, whereas the latter illustrates the social reaction resulting in a deviant identity. Lemert (1951) argued that the distinctive terms ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ deviance can be interpreted between the original and applicable aetiology, which further highlights the differences between deviant or criminal behaviour (Goode 2004).

Subsequently, the importance of acknowledging the differences between the two ideologies can illustrate that not all deviant behaviours are criminal and that biased
conjectures via societal perceptions of deviant and criminal acts could lead to wrongful accusations and the social alienation of innocent persons (Valier 2002). Although Lemert (1967) suggested that primary deviance is the foremost justification for breaking norms and rules of society, the concept was largely overlooked in favour of secondary deviance and how societal reactions can transgress primary behaviour to rule-breaking acts. It could be said that by focusing on one facet of deviance, rather than the entire aggregate, the overall meaning of deviance is misinterpreted (Downes and Rock 1995). From this, Goode (2004) argues that labelling should be viewed as a perspective rather than a theory as it does not explore the whole spectrum of deviance. For example, Lemert used a socio-psychological statistical concept of deviance and measured deviance against any behaviour or trait that was atypical compared to the average or norm (Kitsuse 1962). As a result, nearly all atypical behaviours such as ‘Asperger’s’, ‘insanity’ and ‘addict’, are marginalised as deviant and subjected to unfair stigma as a result of public attitudes and segregation. Subsequently, this can produce spoiled identities which could limit opportunities (e.g. unemployment) for the individual regarded as an ‘outsider’ (Becker 1963).

The distinction between the meaning of ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ deviance is further accentuated in studies concerning drug use, witchcraft and mental health issues, illustrating how social controls (e.g. doctors and pharmaceutical companies) exert power over people by applying labels such as ‘addict’, ‘junkie’, ‘witch’, ‘insane’ and ‘schizophrenic’. All three studies expose how social controls decide who or what is deemed to be ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal’, ‘deviant’ or ‘criminal’, and show that every act of authority over an individual is not an absolute necessity, yet the label infers tyrannical branding by denying the realistic origins of the human condition (Beccaria 1767).

**Bibliography**


