Some critics suggest that the reasoning behind the theory is circular: How can we know when a person has experienced an excess of definitions favorable toward criminality? When he or she commits a crime! Why do people commit crime? When they are exposed to an excess of criminal definitions!

NEUTRALIZATION THEORY

Neutralization theory is identified with the writings of Gresham Sykes and his associate David Matza.[60] These criminologists also view the process of becoming a criminal as a learning experience. They theorize that law violators must learn and master techniques that enable them to neutralize conventional values and attitudes, which enables them to drift back and forth between illegitimate and conventional behavior.

Neutralization theory points out that even the most committed criminals and delinquents are not involved in criminality all the time; they also attend schools, family functions, and religious services. Thus, their behavior falls along a continuum between total freedom and total restraint. This process of **drift**, or movement from one extreme to another, produces behavior that is sometimes unconventional or deviant and at other times constrained and sober.[61] Learning **neutralization techniques** equips a person to temporarily drift away from conventional behavior and become involved in antisocial behaviors, including crime and drug abuse.[62]

Neutralization Techniques Sykes and Matza suggest that people develop a distinct set of justifications for their law-violating behavior. Several observations form the basis of their theoretical model.[63]

▶ *Criminals sometimes voice guilt over their illegal acts.* If they truly embraced criminal or antisocial values, criminals would probably not exhibit remorse for their acts, apart from regret at being apprehended.

▶ *Offenders frequently respect and admire honest, law-abiding persons.* Those admired may include entertainers, sports figures, priests and other members of the clergy, parents, teachers, and neighbors.

▶ *Criminals define whom they can victimize.* Members of similar ethnic groups, churches, or neighborhoods are often off-limits. This practice implies that criminals are aware of the wrongfulness of their acts.

▶ *Criminals are not immune to the demands of conformity.* Most criminals frequently participate in the same social functions as law-abiding people—for example, school, church, and family activities.

Sykes and Matza conclude that criminals must first neutralize accepted social values before they are free to commit crimes; they do so by learning a set of techniques that allow them to counteract the moral dilemmas posed by illegal behavior.[64] Through their research, Sykes and Matza have identified the following techniques of neutralization:

▶ *Denial of responsibility.* Young offenders sometimes claim that their unlawful acts are not their fault—that such acts result from forces beyond their control or are accidents.

Differential association theory suggests that people learn the techniques and attitudes necessary to commit crime. Criminal knowledge is gained through experience, and then, after considering the outcomes of their past experiences, potential offenders decide which criminal acts will be profitable and which are dangerous and should be avoided. Here, a young man is shown photographing a drug deal on his cell phone. Is it possible that he is documenting the experience to have available, for future reference, a record of the best techniques of drug dealing?

Fact or Fiction?

Criminals have a unique antisocial lifestyle that takes up all of their time.

Fiction. Most criminals frequently participate in the same social functions as law-abiding people and then drift into crime and back again.

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▶ *Denial of injury.* By denying the injury their acts cause, criminals neutralize illegal behavior. For example, stealing is viewed as borrowing; vandalism is considered mischief that has gotten out of hand. Offenders may find that their parents and friends support their denial of injury. In fact, parents and friends may claim that the behavior was merely a prank, which helps affirm the offender's perception that crime can be socially acceptable.

▶ *Denial of the victim.* Criminals sometimes neutralize wrongdoing by maintaining that the crime victim "had it coming." Vandalism may be directed against a disliked teacher or neighbor, or a gang may beat up homosexuals because they consider homosexual behavior offensive.

▶ *Condemnation of the condemners.* An offender views the world as a corrupt place with a dog-eat-dog code. Because police and judges are on the take, teachers show favoritism, and parents take out their frustrations on their children, offenders claim it is ironic and unfair for these authorities to condemn criminal misconduct. By shifting the blame to others, criminals repress their awareness that their own acts are wrong.

▶ *Appeal to higher loyalties.* Novice criminals often argue that they are caught in the dilemma of being loyal to their peer group while attempting to abide by the rules of society. The needs of the group take precedence because group demands are immediate and localized (see Figure 7.4).

In sum, neutralization theory states that people neutralize conventional norms and values by using excuses that enable them to drift into crime.

Testing Neutralization Theory Attempts have been made to verify neutralization theory empirically, but the results have been inconclusive.[65] One area of research has been directed at determining whether law violators really need to neutralize moral constraints. The thinking behind this research is that if criminals hold values in opposition to accepted social norms, there is really no need to neutralize. So far, the

Figure 7.4 Techniques of Neutralization

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evidence is mixed. Some studies show that law violators approve of criminal behavior such as theft and violence, whereas other studies yield evidence that even though they may be active participants themselves, criminals voice disapproval of illegal behavior.[66] Some studies indicate that law violators approve of social values such as honesty and fairness; other studies support the opposite conclusion.[67]

Although the existing research findings are ambiguous, the weight of the evidence suggests that most adolescents generally disapprove of deviant behaviors such as violence, and that neutralizations do in fact enable youths to engage in socially disapproved behavior.[68] And, as Matza predicted, people seem to drift into and out of antisocial behavior, rather than being committed solely to a criminal way of life.[69]

Do Criminals Really Neutralize? Not all criminologists accept Matza's vision. Recently, criminologist Volkan Topalli conducted in-depth interviews with active criminals in St. Louis, Missouri, and found that street criminals living in disorganized, gang-ridden neighborhoods "disrespect authority, lionize honor and violence, and place individual needs above those of all others." Rather than having to neutralize conventional values in order to engage in deviant ones, these offenders do not experience guilt that requires neutralizations; they are "guilt free." There is no need for them to "drift" into criminality, Topalli finds, because their allegiance to nonconventional values and their lack of guilt perpetually leave them in a state of openness to crime. Rather than being embarrassed, they take great pride in their criminal activities and abilities. In fact, rather than neutralizing conventional values, these street kids may have to neutralize deviant values: They are expected to be "bad" and have to explain good behavior! Street criminals are also expected to seek vengeance if they themselves are the target of theft or violence. If they don't, their self-image is damaged and they look weak and ineffective. If they decide against vengeance, they must neutralize their decision by convincing themselves that they are being merciful out of respect for their enemies' friends and family.[70]

EVALUATING LEARNING THEORIES

Learning theories contribute significantly to our understanding of the onset of criminal behavior. Nonetheless, the general learning model has been criticized. One complaint is that learning theorists fail to account for the origin of criminal definitions. How did the first criminal learn the necessary techniques and definitions? Who came up with the original neutralization technique?

Learning theories imply that people systematically learn techniques that enable them to be active, successful criminals. However, as Topalli's research indicates, street criminals may be proud of their felonious exploits and have little need to neutralize their guilt. Learning theory also fails to adequately explain spontaneous, wanton acts of violence, damage, and other expressive crimes that appear to have little utility or purpose. Although principles of differential association can easily explain shoplifting, is it possible that a random shooting is caused by excessive deviant definitions? It is estimated that about 70 percent of all arrestees were under the influence of drugs and alcohol when they committed their crime. Do "crackheads" pause to neutralize their moral inhibitions before mugging a victim? Do drug-involved kids stop to consider what they have learned about moral values? Little evidence exists that people learn the techniques that enable them to become criminals before they actually commit criminal acts. It is equally plausible that people who are already deviant seek others with similar lifestyles to learn from. Early onset of deviant behavior is now considered a key determinant of criminal careers. It is difficult to see how very young children have had the opportunity to learn criminal behavior and attitudes within a peer group setting.

Despite these criticisms, learning theories have an important place in the study of delinquent and criminal behavior. They help explain the role that peers, family, and education play in shaping criminal and conventional behaviors. If crime were a matter of personal traits alone, these elements of socialization would not play such an important a role in determining human behavior. And unlike social structure theories, learning theories are not limited to explaining a single facet of antisocial activity;

CONNECTIONS

Denial of the victim may help explain hate crimes, in which people are victimized simply because they belong to the "wrong" race, religion, or ethnic group or because of their sexual orientation. Hate crimes are discussed in Chapter 10.

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they explain criminality across all class structures. Even corporate executives may be exposed to pro-crime definitions and learn to neutralize moral constraints. Learning theories can thus be applied to a wide variety of criminal activity.

Social Control Theory

Social control theorists maintain that all people have the potential to violate the law and that modern society presents many opportunities for illegal activity. Criminal activities, such as drug abuse and car theft, are often exciting pastimes that hold the promise of immediate reward and gratification.

Considering the attractions of crime, social control theorists question why people obey the rules of society. They argue that people obey the law because behavior and passions are controlled by internal and external forces. Some individuals have **self-control**—a strong moral sense that renders them incapable of hurting others and violating social norms.

Other people have been socialized to have a **commitment to conformity**. They have developed a real, present, and logical reason to obey the rules of society, and they instinctively avoid behavior that will jeopardize their reputation and achievements.[71] The stronger people's commitment to conventional institutions, individuals, and processes, the less likely they are to commit crime. If that commitment is absent, there is little to lose, and people are free to violate the law.[72]

SELF-CONCEPT AND CRIME

Early versions of control theory speculated that criminality was a product of weak self-concept and poor self-esteem. Youths who are socialized to feel good about themselves and who maintain a positive attitude are able to control their own behavior and resist the temptations of the streets.

More than 50 years ago, sociologist Albert Reiss described delinquents as having weak egos and lacking the self-control to produce conforming behavior.[73] Scott Briar and Irving Piliavin noted that youths who believe criminal activity will damage their self-image and their relationships with others are likely to conform to social rules; in contrast, those less concerned about their social standing are free to violate the law.[74] Pioneering control theorist Walter Reckless argued that a strong self-image insulates a youth from the pressures of criminogenic influences in the environment.[75] In studies conducted within the school setting, Reckless and his colleagues found that students who were able to maintain a positive self-image were insulated from delinquency.[76]

These early works suggested that people who have a weak self-image and a damaged ego are crime-prone. They are immune from efforts to apply social control: Why obey the rules of society when you have no stake in the future and little to lose?

HIRSCHI'S SOCIAL CONTROL THEORY

The version of control theory articulated by Travis Hirschi in his influential 1969 book *Causes of Delinquency* is today the dominant version of control theory.[77] Hirschi links the onset of criminality to weakening of the ties that bind people to society. He assumes that all individuals are potential law violators, but most are kept under control because they fear that illegal behavior will damage their relationships with friends, family, neighbors, teachers, and employers. Without these **social bonds**, or ties, a person is free to commit criminal acts. Across all ethnic, religious, racial, and social groups, people whose bond to society is weak may fall prey to criminogenic behavior patterns.

Hirschi argues that the social bond a person maintains with society is divided into four main elements: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief (see Figure 7.5).

▶ Attachment consists of a person's sensitivity to and interest in others.[78] Hirschi views parents, peers, and schools as the important social institutions with which a person should maintain ties. Attachment to parents is the most important. Even if

CONNECTIONS

The association of self-control and crime will be discussed more fully in Chapter 9 in the context of human development.

self-control
A strong moral sense that renders a person incapable of hurting others or violating social norms.
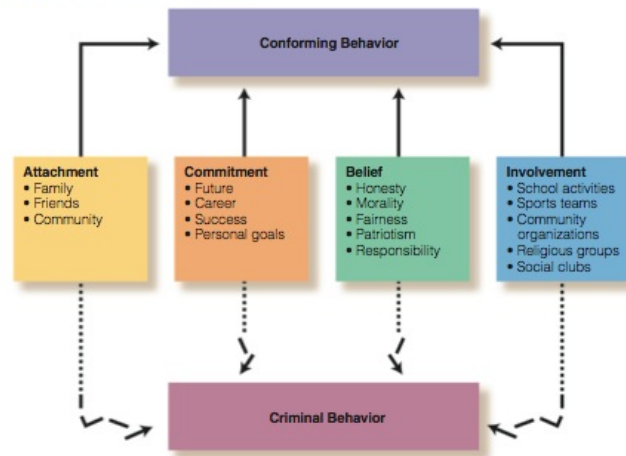
commitment to conformity
A strong personal investment in conventional institutions, individuals, and processes that prevents people from engaging in behavior that might jeopardize their reputation and achievements.

social bonds
The ties that bind people to society, including relationships with friends, family, neighbors, teachers, and employers. The elements of the social bond include commitment, attachment, involvement, and belief.

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Figure 7.5 Elements of the Social Bond

a family is shattered by divorce or separation, a child must retain a strong attachment to one or both parents. Without this attachment, it is unlikely that respect for other authorities will develop.

► Commitment involves the time, energy, and effort expended in conventional actions such as getting an education and saving money for the future. If people build a strong commitment to conventional society, they will be less likely to engage in acts that jeopardize their hard-won position. Conversely, the lack of commitment to conventional values may foreshadow a condition in which risk-taking behavior, such as crime, becomes a reasonable behavior alternative.

► People who live in the same social setting often share common moral beliefs; they may adhere to such values as sharing, sensitivity to the rights of others, and admiration for the legal code. If these beliefs are absent or weakened, individuals are more likely to participate in antisocial or illegal acts.

► Involvement in conventional activities such as sports, clubs, and school leaves little time for illegal behavior. Hirschi believes that involvement in school, recreation, and family insulates people from the lure of criminal behavior. Idleness, on the other hand, enhances that lure.

Hirschi further suggests that the interrelationship among the elements of the social bond controls subsequent behavior. For example, people who feel kinship and sensitivity to parents and friends should be more likely to adopt and work toward legitimate goals. A person who rejects such social relationships is more likely to lack commitment to conventional goals. Similarly, people who are highly committed to conventional acts and beliefs are more likely to be involved in conventional activities.

TESTING SOCIAL CONTROL THEORY: SUPPORTIVE RESEARCH

One of Hirschi's most significant contributions to criminology was his attempt to test the principal hypotheses of social control theory. He administered a detailed self-report survey to a sample of more than 4,000 junior and senior high school students in Contra Costa County, California.[79] In a detailed analysis of the data, Hirschi found

CONNECTIONS

Travis Hirschi, along with Michael Gottfredson, has restructured his concept of control by focusing on self-control and has woven his vision into a general theory of crime. Because this new theory is essentially developmental, it will be discussed more fully in Chapter 9.

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According to Travis Hirschi, kids who are involved in productive activities are less likely to get involved in deviant activities. At La France Elementary School, fifth-graders Taylor Davis (left) and Blake Duncan complete worksheets about how to be kind to animals and people, while Tracy Grate (right) holds Abby, an SCDogs Therapy Group dog. The "Fix It Fido" program, which aims to curb bullying, finished its pilot year during the 2005–2006 school year. The program may enhance children's bonds to society and promote prosocial behaviors.

considerable evidence to support the control theory model. Among Hirschi's more important findings are the following:

► Youths who were strongly attached to their parents were less likely to commit criminal acts.
► Youths involved in conventional activity, such as homework, were less likely to engage in criminal behavior.
► Youths involved in unconventional behavior, such as smoking and drinking, were more prone to delinquency.
► Youths who maintained weak, distant relationships with people tended toward delinquency.
► Those who shunned unconventional acts were attached to their peers.
► Delinquents and nondelinquents shared similar beliefs about society.

Even when the statistical significance of Hirschi's findings was less than he expected, the direction of his research data was notably consistent. Only rarely did his findings contradict the theory's most critical assumptions. Hirschi's version of social control theory has been corroborated by numerous research studies showing that delinquent youths often feel detached from society.[80] What are some of the most important findings?

Attachment Kids who are attached to their families, friends, and school are less likely to get involved in a deviant peer group and consequently are less likely to engage in criminal activities.[81] Teens who are attached to their parents are also able to develop the social skills that equip them both to maintain harmonious social ties and to escape

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life stresses such as school failure.[82] In contrast, family detachment, including intra-family conflict, abuse of children, and lack of affection, supervision, and family pride, are predictive of delinquent conduct.

Attachment to education is equally important. Youths who are detached from the educational experience are at risk of criminality; those who are committed to school are less likely to engage in delinquent acts.[83] Detachment and alienation from school may be even more predictive of delinquency than school failure and/or educational underachievement.[84]

Belief Research efforts have shown that holding positive beliefs is inversely related to criminality. Children who are involved in religious activities and hold conventional religious beliefs are less likely to become involved in substance abuse.[85] Kids who live in areas marked by strong religious values and who hold strong religious beliefs themselves are less likely to engage in delinquent activities than adolescents who do not hold such beliefs or who live in less devout communities.[86]

Commitment As predicted by Hirschi, kids who are committed to school and educational achievement are less likely to become involved in delinquent behaviors than those who lack such commitment.[87] The association may be reciprocal: Kids who drink and engage in deviant behavior are more likely to fail in school; kids who fail in school are more likely to later drink and engage in deviant behavior.[88]

Involvement Research shows that youths who are involved in conventional leisure activities, such as supervised social activities and noncompetitive sports, are less likely to engage in delinquency than those who are involved in unconventional leisure activities and unsupervised, peer-oriented social pursuits.[89] Although there are gender differences in involvement, members of both sexes are less likely to commit crime if they are engaged in conventional activities.[90]

The accompanying Profiles in Crime feature describes a case that may rest on a frayed and tattered social bond.

CRITIQUING SOCIAL CONTROL THEORY

Few theoretical models in criminology have garnered as much attention as Hirschi's social control theory. And although there is a great deal of supportive research, a number of questions have been raised about the validity of his work.

The Influence of Friendship One significant concern is Hirschi's contention that delinquents are detached loners whose bond to friends has been broken. A number of researchers have argued that delinquents seem not to be "lone wolves" whose only personal relationships are exploitive; rather, their friendship patterns seem quite close to those of conventional youths.[91] Some types of offenders, such as drug abusers, have been found to maintain even more intimate relations with their peers than nonabusers do.[92] Hirschi would counter that what appears to be a close friendship is really a relationship of convenience and that "birds of a feather flock together" only when it suits their criminal activities. His view is supported by recent research conducted by criminologists Lisa Stolzenberg and Stewart D'Alessio, who found that most juvenile offenses are committed by individuals acting alone and that group offending, when it does occur, is incidental and of little importance to explaining the onset of delinquency.[93]

Failure to Achieve Hirschi argues that commitment to career and economic advancement reduces criminal involvement. But he does not deal with the issue of failure: What about kids who are committed to the future but fail in school and perceive few avenues for advancement? Some research indicates that people who are committed to success but fail to achieve it may be crime-prone.[94]

Fact or Fiction?

"Idle hands are the devil's workshop" is merely an old saying. Kids who work outside the home are the ones most likely to get into trouble.

Fiction. Old sayings are sometimes accurate. Kids who are involved in conventional leisure activities, such as supervised social activities and noncompetitive sports, are less likely to engage in delinquency.

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Profiles in Crime Alpha Dog

Twenty-five-year-old Jesse James Hollywood (that is his real name) was enjoying a comfortable life in Brazil, teaching English and living in a fashionable neighborhood, when he was arrested in November 2005 and sent back to California, where he faces charges of kidnapping and killing a 15-year-old boy.

Even though Hollywood had never held a job, he was able, by age 19, to purchase a $200,000 house in West Hills, California, and a Mercedes. His place became a favorite hangout for local kids who came and went at all hours of the day. Jesse was a popular guy, an outgoing kid who, despite being short in stature, was an excellent athlete. How was Jesse able to do all this? Unknown to many, he was a large-scale marijuana dealer.

Jesse's world began to unravel when he came up with a scheme to get money owed to him by Benjamin Markowitz, 22, who was one of his customers. Hollywood and some friends headed for Markowitz's family home on August 6, 2000, planning to kidnap him and hold him for ransom. According to authorities, on the way there, Jesse and his friends spotted Markowitz's 15-year-old stepbrother, Nicholas, whom they forced into a van and transported to the home of another accomplice. After being held captive for a few days, Nick Markowitz was made to walk a mile into Los Padres National Forest before being shot nine times with a high-powered assault rifle and buried in a shallow grave. His body was discovered four days later by hikers.

Four other kids were tried and convicted in the case, but Hollywood escaped and became the subject of an international manhunt, his mug shot plastered on the FBI's website. He wound up in Brazil, where he used fake papers that identified him as Michael Costa Giroux, a native of Rio de Janeiro. Cooperating with the FBI, Brazilian authorities deported him as an illegal alien. Nine years after the killing, he was tried on murder charges. On July 8, 2009, a jury found him guilty of kidnapping and first-degree murder with special circumstances; afterward, Hollywood was sentenced to life in prison.

The 2006 film *Alpha Dog*, starring Bruce Willis, Justin Timberlake, and Sharon Stone, is based on the case.

CRITICAL THINKING

Jesse James Hollywood grew up in an affluent family and seemed to be popular and successful. How could he have become involved in a heinous, violent crime? How would a control theorist explain his actions?

SOURCE: Jeremiah Marquez, "Longtime Fugitive Jesse James Hollywood Captured in Brazil," March 11, 2005, http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/news/archive/2005/03/10/state/n085203S47.DTL; FBI Press Release, "Jesse James Hollywood, Fugitive in August 2000 Kidnap-Murder of Teenager, Arrested in Brazil," March 10, 2005, http://losangeles.fbi.gov/pressrel/2005/la031005.htm; Amy Silverstein, "Jesse James Hollywood Sentenced to Life," *Santa Barbara Independent*, July 14, 2009, www.independent.com/news/2009/jul/15/jesse-james-hollywood-sentenced-life/.

Deviant Involvement Adolescents who report high levels of involvement, which Hirschi suggests should reduce delinquency, actually report high levels of criminal behavior. Typically, these are kids who are involved in activities outside the home without parental supervision.[95] Kids who spend a lot of time hanging out with their friends, unsupervised by parents and/or other authority figures, and who own cars that give them the mobility to get into even more trouble, are the ones most likely to get involved in antisocial acts such as drinking and taking drugs.[96] This is especially true of dating relationships: Kids who date, especially if they have multiple partners,

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are the ones who are likely to get into trouble and engage in delinquent acts.[97] It is possible that although involvement is important, it depends on the behavior in which a person is involved!

Deviant Peers and Parents Perhaps the most controversial of Hirschi's conclusions is that any form of social attachment is beneficial, even attachment to deviant peers and parents. Despite Hirschi's claims, there is evidence that rather than deterring youths from delinquency, attachment to deviant peers and parents may support and nurture antisocial behavior.[98] A number of research efforts have found that youths attached to drug-abusing parents are more likely to use drugs themselves.[99] Attachment to deviant family members, peers, and associates may help motivate youths to commit crime and facilitate their antisocial acts.[100]

Mistaken Causal Order Hirschi's theory proposes that a weakened bond leads to delinquency, but Robert Agnew suggests that the chain of events may flow in the opposite direction: Perhaps youngsters who break the law find that their bonds to parents, schools, and society eventually become weak. Other studies have also found that criminal behavior weakens social bonds, and not vice versa.[101]

These criticisms are important, but Hirschi's views still constitute one of the preeminent theories in criminology.[102] Many criminologists consider social control theory the primary way of understanding the onset of youthful misbehavior. ▶ **Checkpoints**

Checkpoints

▶ Social control theories maintain that behavior is a function of the attachment that people feel toward society. People who have a weak commitment to conformity are "free" to commit crime.

▶ A strong self-image may insulate people from crime.

▶ According to Travis Hirschi, social control is measured by a person's attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief.

▶ Significant research supports Hirschi's theory, but a number of criminologists question its validity.

Social Reaction (Labeling) Theory

The third type of social process theory, social reaction theory, also called labeling theory (the two terms are used interchangeably), explains criminal careers in terms of stigma-producing encounters. Social reaction theory has a number of key points:

▶ *Behaviors that are considered criminal are highly subjective.* Even such crimes as murder, rape, and assault are bad or evil only because people label them as such. The difference between a forcible rape and a consensual sexual encounter often rests on whom the members of a jury believe and how they interpret the events that took place. The difference between an excusable act and a criminal one is often subject to change and modification. Remember Genarlow Wilson: Was he a sex offender or a kid who partied too much? It depends on your viewpoint and the view of those in power. Acts such as performing an abortion, using marijuana, possessing a handgun, and gambling have been legal at some times and places and illegal at others.

▶ *Crime is defined by those in power.* The content and shape of criminal law is defined by the values of those who rule and is not an objective standard of moral conduct. Howard Becker refers to people who create rules as **moral entrepreneurs**. An example of a moral entrepreneur is someone who campaigns against violence in the media and wants laws passed to restrict the content of television shows.

▶ *Not only acts are labeled, but also people.* Labels define not just an act but also the actor. Valued labels, such as "smart," "honest," and "hardworking," suggest overall competence. Sometimes labels are highly symbolic, such as being named "most likely to succeed" or class valedictorian. People who hold these titles are automatically assumed to be leaders who are well on their way to success. Without meeting them, we know that they are hardworking, industrious, and bright. These positive labels can improve self-image and social standing. Research shows that people who are labeled with one positive trait, such as being physically attractive, are assumed to have other positive traits, such as being intelligent and competent.[103] In contrast, people who run afoul of the law or other authorities, such as school officials, are given negative labels, including "troublemaker," "mentally ill," and "stupid," that **stigmatize** them and reduce their self-image. Negative labels also define the whole person. People labeled "insane" are also assumed to be dangerous, dishonest, unstable, violent, strange, and otherwise unsound.

moral entrepreneur
A person who creates moral rules that reflect the values of those in power rather than any objective, universal standards of right and wrong.

stigmatize
To apply negative labeling with enduring effects on a person's self-image and social interactions.

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▶ *Both positive and negative labels involve subjective interpretation of behavior.* A "trouble-maker" is merely someone whom people label as "troublesome."

In a famous statement, Howard Becker sums up the importance of the audience's reaction:

> Social groups create deviance by making rules whose infractions constitute deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. From this point of view, 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.[104]

Even if some acts are labeled as bad or evil, those who participate in them can be spared a negative label. It is possible to take another person's life but not be considered a "murderer," because the killing was considered self-defense or even an accident. Acts have negative consequences only when they are labeled by others as being wrong or evil.

CONSEQUENCES OF LABELING

Although a label may be a function of rumor, innuendo, or unfounded suspicion, its adverse impact can be immense. If a devalued status is conferred by a significant other—a teacher, police officer, parent, or valued peer—the negative label may permanently harm the target. The degree to which a person is perceived as a social deviant may affect his or her treatment at home, at work, at school, and in other social situations. Children may find that their parents consider them a bad influence on younger brothers and sisters. School officials may limit them to classes reserved for people with behavioral problems. Likewise, when adults are labeled as "criminal," "ex-con," or "drug addict," they may find their eligibility for employment severely restricted. If the label is bestowed as the result of conviction for a criminal offense, the labeled person may also be subjected to official sanctions ranging from a mild reprimand to incarceration. The simultaneous effects of labels and sanctions reinforce feelings of isolation and detachment.

Public denunciation plays an important part in the labeling process. Condemnation is often carried out in "ceremonies" in which the individual's identity is officially transformed. One example of such a reidentification ceremony is a competency hearing in which a person is declared "mentally ill"; another is a public trial in which a person is found to be a "rapist" or "child molester." During the process, a permanent record is produced, such as an arrest or conviction record, so that the denounced person is ritually separated from a place in the legitimate order and set outside the world occupied by citizens of good standing. Harold Garfinkle has called transactions that produce irreversible, permanent labels **successful degradation ceremonies**.[105]

Self-Labeling According to labeling theory, depending on the visibility of the label and the manner and severity with which it is applied, negatively labeled individuals will become increasingly committed to a deviant career. Labeled persons may find themselves turning, for support and companionship, to others who have been similarly stigmatized.

Isolated from conventional society, labeled people may identify themselves as members of an outcast group and become locked into deviance. Kids who view themselves as delinquents after being labeled as such are giving an inner voice to their perceptions of how parents, teachers, peers, and neighbors view them. When they believe that others view them as antisocial or as troublemakers, they take on attitudes and roles that reflect this assumption; they expect to become suspects and then to be rejected.[106]

successful degradation ceremony
A course of action or ritual in which someone's identity is publicly redefined and destroyed and he or she is thereafter viewed as socially unacceptable.

Joining Deviant Cliques People labeled as deviant may join with similarly outcast peers who facilitate their behavior. Eventually, antisocial behavior becomes habitual and automatic.[107] The desire to join deviant cliques and groups may stem from

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