Societal Reactions to Deviance

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Abstract
A common complaint about the sociology of deviance, particularly the perspective known as labeling theory or the societal reaction perspective, is that the field is dead. However, considerable evidence suggests that the core themes of societal reaction work live on in several areas of contemporary scholarship. After identifying and describing three key strands of the early societal reaction perspective, I consider how those strands are reflected in more recent work, much of which does not explicitly reference the earlier tradition. I identify the ways that recent scholarship builds upon and yet extends the earlier societal reaction tradition. I close by describing three trajectories emerging in recent work that should focus future inquiry: the contingent effects of labeling, the causes of gaps between social control discourse and practice, and the diffusion of social control practices from deviants to nondeviants.
A CASE OF “OBLITERATION BY INCORPORATION”?

In the late 1960s and 1970s, the societal reaction perspective (also known as labeling theory) was a lively area of American sociology. Several classic monographs on societal reactions to deviance were published during this period (Becker 1963, Erikson 1966, Gusfield 1963, Matza 1969, Scheff 1999 [1966]); influential articles on the subject were published in respected journals, and its core contentions were vigorously debated by influential scholars located in top sociology departments. By the mid-1990s, the societal reaction perspective, along with the entire subfield of the sociology of deviance, was declared dead (Paternoster & Iovanni 1989, Petrunik 1980) and subsequently provided with a book-length obituary (Sumner 1994). Although the perspective has waned in terms of explicit citations and the use of reactionist terms and concepts (Best 2004), the central strands of the perspective live on in cognate areas of inquiry, specifically in law, medical sociology, punishment, social problems, social control, and to a lesser extent, criminology. Invoking Merton’s phrase, Goode (2002, p. 115) argues that deviance scholarship more generally was subjected to “obliteration by incorporation,” which meant that although explicit links to the earlier tradition have been omitted from recent sociological scholarship, it has been carried forward under different auspices. Similarly, Plummer (2001) wrote that the societal reaction approach to deviance is not dead, but rather has become a “quiet orthodoxy” among sociologists.

To date, however, there has been little attempt to identify the links between the older strands of societal reaction perspective and newer work. In this review, I describe three key strands of the societal reaction perspective: historical analyses of the development of deviant labels, studies of the consequences of labeling, and research into the substantive (extradisciplinary) influences on the operation of formal social control organizations. I briefly document these strands in earlier classic works on societal reaction, and I describe how they have been reconsidered and expanded in more recent studies, many of which do not explicitly link to the earlier tradition. I conclude by discussing how more recent scholarship has broadened and qualified some of the contentions of the earlier work and by describing the trajectories contained within more recent work that provide a focus for future scholarship.

THREE STRANDS OF SOCIETAL REACTION RESEARCH

The societal reaction perspective views deviance as a product of the social interaction between individuals and various types of audiences, such as peer groups, anonymous onlookers, and representatives of formal social control organizations. Deviance is a designation—a label—that is attached to some individuals and not to others. Social reaction proponents departed from earlier approaches by placing attention on the psychological and social consequences experienced by individuals labeled deviant. Early proponents did not initially use the terms societal reaction or labeling to describe their perspective (Becker 1973), which makes identifying the precise origins of the perspective difficult. Nonetheless, a major point of departure for subsequent work was Edwin Lemert’s 1951 book, Social Pathology.

1The name “labeling theory” is more frequently used to describe this tradition. However, as I discuss below, labeling (and its causes and consequences) is only one of three strands of societal reaction work. Characterizing the perspective as focused on the “societal reactions” to deviance better encompasses all three strands of work.

2Some have located the interactionist roots of societal reaction theory in George Herbert Mead’s (1918) essay on “The Psychology of Punitive Justice,” which focused on the social significance of community and legal responses to criminals and other kinds of social enemies (see also Schur 1969). Others point to Frank Tannenbaum’s (1938) Crime and the Community, which focused on the role of “tagging” young delinquents in the criminal justice system. According to Tannenbaum, the first imposition of a label—a “dramatization of evil”—sets in motion a psychological process by which the juvenile comes to self-identify as a criminal.
Social Pathology sketches a broad analytical framework on deviance and social control, which Lemert envisioned as a counter to the biological, psychological, psychiatric, social disorganization, and other prevailing etiological approaches to social pathologies. Lemert (1974, p. 458) later wrote that his aim in developing the societal reaction approach was “to show how deviance was shaped and stabilized by efforts to eliminate or ameliorate it.” Lemert (1951, p. 603) regarded deviance as “polygenetic”; in other words, the “original causes and antecedents of deviant behaviors are many and diversified.” In doing so, he set aside the pursuit of further etiological analyses of deviant behavior, arguing that the sociologically significant aspect of deviant behavior lies not in understanding involvement in deviant activities, some portion of which never rises to the attention or concern of others, but in those circumstances in which the reaction of others results in a reorganization of the self. Lemert (1951, p. 640) called the former “primary” deviation, and the latter—the sociologically significant part—he called “secondary” deviation.

When a person begins to employ his deviant behavior or a role based upon it as a means of defense, attack, or adjustment to the overt and problems created by the consequent societal reaction to him, his deviation is secondary. (italics in original)

In the early 1960s, the perspective was elaborated in a series of key papers and books. John Kitsuse (1962) published “Societal Reaction to Deviant Behavior: Problems of Theory and Method,” which raised central theoretical issues and methodological concerns, noting that

[a] sociological theory of deviance must focus specifically upon the interactions which not only define behaviors as deviant but also organize and activate the application of sanctions by individuals, groups, or agencies. For in modern society, the socially significant differentiation of deviants from the nondeviant population is increasingly contingent upon circumstances of situation, place, social and personal biography, and the bureaucratically organized activities of agencies of control. (Kitsuse 1962, p. 256)

Shortly thereafter, Howard Becker (1963, p. 9) published Outsiders, which defined deviance as “not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to the ‘offender.’” He emphasized deviance as a social construction rather than an inherent quality of particular actions. Becker (1963, p. 170) also amplified the attitude of earlier research that deviants were best studied naturalistically—“in their natural habitat”—rather than through surveys or official records, as earlier social pathology research had tended to do. The naturalistic approach linked societal reaction proponents most clearly to the interpretivist tradition in American sociology, with roots in the Chicago School and its West Coast manifestation in the 1950s and 1960s (Lemert 1974). It was a direct challenge to the prevailing scholarship and popular wisdom about crime and other kinds of deviance—that these subjects could be understood through an assessment of psychological precursors or as a result of structural conditions and where the central question was etiological (i.e., what caused someone to be deviant?).

At the same time, Erving Goffman (1963) published Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity, which introduced the influential concept of stigma to describe the ways that occupants of certain social categories—the mentally ill, the disabled, and racial and ethnic minorities—are discredited and isolated in society and social interaction. Thomas Scheff (1999 [1966]) followed soon after with Being Mentally Ill: A Sociological Theory, which expounds a labeling perspective on mental illness. Scheff put forward several hypotheses about “residual rule-breaking,” his term for deviant behavior that does not fit into existing categories like crime, sexual perversion, and poor manners and that includes behavior that has the potential to be labeled mental illness. Among the most controversial were his propositions that
“labeling is the single most important cause of careers of residual deviance” (Scheff 1999 [1966], p. 92) and that residual rule-breaking of persons of low social status is more likely to be labeled than that of persons of high social status.

Many of these early societal reaction proponents trace their perspective to symbolic interactionism (Schur 1969), which gained popularity in the 1950s and 1960s in response to the dominance of structural functionalism during the previous decades (Fine 1993, Pfuhl 1994). However, at least some of the early work adopted a more macrosociological orientation; for example, Kai Erikson’s (1966) *Wayward Puritans* about the Salem witch trials drew heavily from Durkheimian concepts of ritual and social solidarity. Joseph Gusfield’s (1963) *Symbolic Crusade*, a study of the temperance movement in the United States, was strongly influenced by conflict theory. Stanley Cohen’s (1972) study of the mods and the rockers in 1960s Britain, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, focused on mass media and strain theory. John Lofland’s (1969) *Deviance and Identity* merged interactionism with an emphasis on macrostructural conflicts and opportunity theory.

Criticisms of societal reaction research erupted in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The variety and depth of these criticisms, as well as the defense and modification of the perspective by its supporters, could be the subject of a much longer discussion (see Best 2004). A summary of critics’ charges includes the following: The societal reaction perspective was not a theory because most or all of its central arguments did not lead to testable propositions about the causes of deviance (Akers 1968, Becker 1973, Bernstein et al. 1977, Bordua 1967, Gibbs 1966); many of the core concepts were poorly defined (Gibbs 1966, Gove 1970, Manning 1973); the ideas that labeling results in subsequent deviance and that the social attributes of offenders are more important than the actual behavior of the labeled individual are empirically invalid (Gove 1970, Tittle 1975a,b); the perspective was freighted with political and moral undertones—its proponents identified with and sometimes championed the deviants and demonized the social control agents (Liazos 1972); it unreflectively expressed 1960s countercultural attitudes toward minor deviance and greater personal liberty (Hendershott 2002, Sumner 1994), and yet did not go far enough in terms of developing a more radical critique of social control institutions (Gouldner 1968, Sumner 1994); it often advocated a radical constructionism in which an individual’s actual behavior was deemed irrelevant to the labeling process (Akers 1972, Gove 1972); and it produced many facile analyses of deviants and the labeling process (Lemert 1981). 3 These criticisms and the debates that followed them were often bitter in tone, and three decades later it is clear that each side frequently misconstrued, mischaracterized, or narrowly represented the other’s point. Responding to critics, Lemert (1981, p. 285) wrote “in the context of controversial and sometimes polemic discussions, labeling theory often appears to be a creation of its critics bent on destruction of that which never was.”

As Best (2004) documents, the career of the concept of deviance took a downward turn after the criticisms of the 1970s and so did explicit discussions of labeling/societal reaction concepts, especially within mainstream sociological journals. However, themes present in early societal reaction theory and research are nonetheless reflected in scholarship on contemporary topics related to crime, law, mental illness, social control, and many other areas. Specifically, three strands of research provide a sense of the scope of societal reaction scholarship. 4 The first strand includes historical and

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3 Most analyses in the societal reaction perspective did not embrace radical constructionism, denying entirely the role of behavior and objective influences on the labeling process. Moreover, it is not essential to hold out the individuals labeled deviant as heroic figures and the social control agents as evildoers. And if overly simplistic analyses were a serious criticism, then many other perspectives in sociology would be equally problematic.

4 I am not the first to identify this trinity of strands. “There were three pathways set out in Lemert’s work: the one led to an exploration of the structure and process of social

The Development of Labels

The first strand of the societal reaction tradition that survived the criticisms of the 1970s was analysis of the historical development of deviant labels, a research program that flourished during the 1980s and 1990s (Best 2004, Chambliss & Zatz 1993, Galliher & Cross 1983, Hollinger & Lanza-Kaduce 1988). The largest portion of this work has been undertaken as research into the socially constructed nature of “social problems” (Schneider 1985, Spector & Kitsuse 1977). Like societal reaction scholarship before it, social problems work is concerned with the social processes that lead to the definition of some condition as a problem and, often along the way, some persons (i.e., deviants) as the source of that problem. Social constructionism was always an implicit part of the earlier societal reaction theory, but the social problems literature has expanded and clarified the theoretical vocabulary for social constructionism, raised new theoretical challenges, and broadened the focus beyond the consideration of the construction of deviant labels (Cicourel 1976, Kitsuse & Cicourel 1963, Marx 1981, Sudnow 1965).

At roughly the same time, research on medicalization also expanded with studies of the invention of medical labels for deviants including alcoholics (Schneider 1978), opiate addicts (Conrad & Schneider 1980), veterans suffering post-traumatic stress disorder (Scott 1990), compulsive gamblers (Rosecrance 1985, Rossol 2003), and transsexuals (Billings & Urban 1982, King 1987). Conrad (1992) summarized the major accomplishments of this literature in an *Annual Review of Sociology* article in which he delineated between the medicalization of deviant behavior and the medicalization of “natural life processes,” such as sexual dysfunction, childbirth, child development, premenstrual syndrome, menopause, and aging. In doing so, Conrad shows how many of the same principles and techniques used to control deviants spread into the management of the problems of nondeviants as well. Medical knowledge operates interinstitutionally, across different social control settings, from correctional systems to work places to sports and schools, in what Conrad (1979) refers to as medical “collaboration.” The examination of medical labeling in different institutional settings was an important shift because it redirected attention to the broader systems of medical knowledge that give rise to categories and designations of illness. In effect, it situated the rise (and, sometimes, the fall) of medical labels within broader changes in the ideology, technologies, and social organization of medicine in society (Conrad 2007, Starr 1982).

A small body of literature on moral panics also accumulated over the past two decades. The term moral panic originated in Stanley Cohen’s (1972) study of the societal reaction...
to the mods and the rockers in Britain during the 1960s. A moral panic describes a situation in which a particular group of individuals—often individuals who are already socially marginal (e.g., young people, women, racial and ethnic minorities, the poor)—become seen as a threat to collective, or at least widely held, values (Cohen 1972, 2002). Moral panics occur during periods of social change, revealing a social and moral order in crisis (Young 2009). What defines a societal reaction as a moral panic is that the panic response is demonstrably disproportionate to the threat posed by the deviants. Moral panics are also defined by volatility; they emerge and spread rapidly, but are short-lived and fade quickly from public memory. Moral panics are constructed around the actions of “folk devils” by the media, social movements, experts, elites, and other moral entrepreneurs. “Folk devils are created, deviant stereotypes identifying the enemy, the source of the threat, selfish, evil wrongdoers who are responsible for the trouble” (Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1994). “Folk devils” is a sociological construct, rather than a label used by the exponents of a given moral panic—a kind of metabelabel that captures a type of societal reaction to deviance. The concepts of moral panics and folk devils have been applied to societal reactions to Chicano gangs (Zatz 1987), the early modern witch craze (Ben-Yehuda 1985), drug use (Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1994), sex offenders (Jenkins 1998), school shootings (Burns & Crawford 1999), satanic ritual abuse (Jenkins 1992, Victor 1998), and white collar crime (Levi 2009). As David Garland (2008, p. 9) wrote,

The concept of “moral panic” has had an enormous impact, not just on sociology—where it has spawned a small subdiscipline of moral panic studies—but also on the language of cultural debate and on the practice of journalists and politicians. The claim that a social reaction is, in fact, merely a moral panic, has become a familiar move in any public conversation about social problems or societal risks.

Apart from its impact in public settings (Altheide 2009), the study of moral panics places the development of deviant labels in a broader societal context, focusing on the symbolic universes and moral boundaries that are invoked to render certain groups folk devils and threatening enemies of society.

As research on medicalization and moral panics expanded, so too did work on criminalization. In her Annual Review of Sociology essay, Valerie Jenness (2004, p. 164) summarized these developments, concluding that sociologists interested in criminalization now study an increasingly wide array of domains of social life, including empirical topics as diverse as the criminalization of computer abuse in the modern era, the willful termination of pregnancy prior to quickening in the second half of the nineteenth century, stalking strangers and lovers in the 1980s and 1990s, routine and rare expressions of bigotry in the United States and abroad, practices falling under the rubric of “female genital cutting” in the United States, and sexualized interactions in the workplace in both the United States and France.

As opposed to more general work on the construction of social problems, moral panics, and medicalization, research on criminalization has been more firmly institutionally centered on law, specifically crime legislation and court rulings. To account for criminalization, older ideas about moral entrepreneurs (Becker 1963, Hollinger & Lanza-Kaduce 1988), status politics (Dichiara & Galliher 1994, Gusfield 1963), and changes in economic structures (Chambless 1964, Jenness & Grattet 1996) have been blended with social movements theory (Jenness & Broad 1997), law and society perspectives

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5 Some ambiguity has dogged research on moral panics, which Cohen acknowledged in the recent reprint of his classic work on the mods and the rockers (Cohen 2002). Among other things, critics have questioned “what counts as a disproportionate reaction to a threatening group?” (see Garland 2008) and “what level of consensus is required for a particular episode to be considered a panic response?” (see McRobbie & Thornton 1995).
(Chambliss 1979, Chambliss & Zatz 1993, Hagan 1980), and institutionalist theory in the sociology of organizations (Frank et al. 2009, Grattet et al. 1998). Jenness & Grattet’s (2001) *Making Hate a Crime* relies on these latter perspectives, by focusing on the creation, diffusion, and institutionalization of the legal concept of hate crime, as well as how the concept of hate crime took on different meanings within the antigay crime movement, state legislatures, courts, and ultimately, law enforcement.

Although explicit reference to earlier work on societal reaction is increasingly rare, scholarship on the development of deviant labels has grown enormously over the past three decades. Societal reaction concepts have been incorporated into empirical studies of the construction of social problems, medicalization, and criminalization. Much of this work takes place in subfields such as social problems, law and society, medical sociology, and criminology. Even the research that remains most squarely within the sociology of deviance—moral panics—has become intertwined with research on subcultures and mass media.

Explanatory models of why labels develop were never particularly sophisticated in early societal reaction work, which focused on the role of moral entrepreneurs, status politics, and, somewhat vaguely conceived, social changes. Influenced by cultural theorists, particularly Foucault, social movement theory, constructionism, and neo-institutionalism have broadened the understanding of the possible sources of new labels for deviants as well as the processes involved in their development, diffusion, and change. In other words, the migration of this research program into other subfields beyond the sociology of deviance—moral panics—has become intertwined with research on subcultures and mass media.

The Consequences of Labeling

Whereas the first strand of the societal reaction perspective is concerned with why labels emerge and take the form they do, the second strand focuses on the consequences for individuals of having a label applied to them. The largest portion of this strand has been devoted to research on the concept of “stigma” (Pescosolido & Martin 2007). In their *Annual Review of Sociology* essay on “Conceptualizing Stigma,” Link & Phelan (2001, p. 363) note that “research since Goffman’s seminal essay has been incredibly productive, leading to elaborations, conceptual refinements, and repeated demonstrations of the negative impact of stigma on the lives of the stigmatized” (see also Major & O’Brien 2005, Pescosolido et al. 2008).

In recent years, analyses of the dynamics and consequences of stigma have proliferated in medical and mental health (Quinn & Chaudoin 2009), epidemiology and public health (particularly on AIDS) (Phelan et al. 2008, Scambler 2009), management (Clair et al. 2005, Devers et al. 2009), gender and sexuality (Hallgrimsdottir et al. 2008, Herek 2007, Wright et al. 2007), and disability and the body (Croesoe et al. 2008, Green et al. 2005), as well as research into how stigma is manifest in non-Western sociocultural contexts in relation to medical and mental illness (Betancourt et al. 2010, Nahm 2009). Research has focused on how being labeled mentally ill activates stereotypes and prejudices, which in turn lead to an eroding of the labeled person’s sense of self and to discrimination and social exclusion (Hinshaw & Stier 2008, Rosenfield 1997). Work has also focused on how sexual orientation, gender, and race can amplify stigma as well as how stigma is shaped by interactional, organizational, and broader cultural contexts (Pescosolido et al. 2008). Other work examines how labeled individuals resist stigma (Thoits 2011b).

In response to criticisms that labeling does not appear to consistently predict further deviance and that the consequences of labeling are not always negative (see Gove 1970), a series of papers by Thoits (1985, 2011a) and Link (Link 1987; Link et al. 1988, 1989) introduced a more nuanced theorization of labeling processes in relation to mental illness. Thoits (1985) argued that earlier work, particularly by Scheff (1999 [1966]), overemphasized the role of social
control agents and institutions in the labeling process. Most people seeking mental health services do so voluntarily, not because they are labeled by a social control agent. As individuals experience emotional distress, they rely upon widely held understandings of mental illness to interpret their own behavior. Thoits argued that this “self-labeling” is more consequential for the emergence of a deviant identity than is labeling by others. Continuing this line of inquiry, recent work by Thoits (2011a) shows that self-labeling is contingent upon an individual’s social supports and the seriousness of his or her mental health issues. Specifically, individuals are more likely to seek mental health services when their condition is serious and when they perceive themselves to be surrounded by a supportive social network.

Similarly, Link and colleagues (1989) put forward a modified labeling theory of mental illness. This model rejects the simplistic formulation that labeling causes mental illness. In doing so, it focuses on the kinds of intervening processes and factors that increase or decrease the negative consequences of labeling. Link and colleagues showed that the negative effects of labeling were contingent upon the beliefs that labeled persons hold about mental illness and its social status, based upon their own socialization, as well as whether they believe they are likely to be rejected, excluded, and marginalized when their mental condition is exposed. If individuals fear that they will be discredited and devalued because of being labeled, then they may try to keep secret their mental illness and withdraw from social interactions that risk revealing it. If they withdraw from social interaction, hold secret their mental status, and subscribe to the belief that their mental illness makes them “less socially fit,” then they are at greater risk for recurrence of the baseline mental issues that lay behind their decision to seek treatment in the first place. Thus, the negative consequences of labeling are mediated by how the labeled individual responds to being labeled (Link et al. 1989). The negative effects of labeling, including social exclusion and rejection by others as well as feelings of shame, low self-esteem, and depression, are contingent upon prior socialization and beliefs about mental illness, as well as the expectations of members of the labeled individual’s social networks and the wider society (Link 1987).

Whereas sociological and interdisciplinary work on medical and mental illness has grown rapidly in the past 20 years, the elaboration of the analysis of stigma in relation to crime has not. Instead, a considerably smaller amount of attention has been paid to alternative ways of conceiving the consequences of labeling. Paternoster & Iovanni (1989) offered a review and synthesis of criminological research on the effects of status characteristics on labeling—which they refer to as the “status characteristics hypothesis” in labeling theory—and the effects of labeling on subsequent involvement in deviance, which, following Lemert (1951), they call the “secondary deviation hypothesis.”

They argue that, despite the critical responses of the 1970s, most of the theoretical nuances of societal reaction arguments remain untested. Paralleling the modifications to labeling theory in the context of mental illness, they reformulate both the status characteristics and secondary deviation hypotheses, building in more contingency, such that how status characteristics, like race, social class, and gender, affect labeling and how labeling affects subsequent involvement in deviance is dependent upon attributes of offenders, their offending backgrounds, and environmental and organizational conditions. They conclude that the potential of labeling remains yet untapped, arguing that “work conducted thus far says more about its critics than about labeling theory itself” (Paternoster & Iovanni 1989, p. 389).

Chiricos et al. (2007) summarizes recent research that continues Paternoster & Iovanni’s (1989) emphasis on the contingent effects of labeling (see also Bernburg & Krohn 2003). Chiricos et al. (2007) argue that in the traditional labeling perspective there are two underlying processes that can affect a deviant’s response to being labeled: identity transformation and structural impediments. The first is that the labeling process produces a transformation in
identity, as the deviant begins to see him or herself as an offender and acts accordingly—an idea that derives from Lemert’s (1951) discussion of secondary deviation. For example, Matsueda’s (1992) study of delinquents highlighted the role of parents (as opposed to official social control agents) as crucial in the process of identity change. He showed that “reflected appraisals,” judgments by significant others regarding a juvenile’s behavior, affect the juvenile’s self-conception and, in turn, the juvenile’s involvement in delinquency. “Those who see themselves (from the standpoint of others) as persons who engage in delinquent behavior in certain situations are more likely to engage in delinquency” (Matsueda 1992, p. 1582).

While labeling can produce a transformation of identity, it can also introduce structural impediments to a conventional life. Recent work in criminology from a life course perspective has emphasized structural impediments. For example, Sampson & Laub (1997, p. 6) contend that there is only “one theoretical perspective in criminology that is inherently developmental in nature—labeling theory.” They put forward the notion of “cumulative disadvantage,” which refers to the consequences of iterative involvement in criminal sanctioning over the life course.

Cumulative disadvantage is generated most explicitly by the negative structural consequences of criminal offending and official sanctions for life chances. The theory specifically suggests a “snowball” effect—that adolescent delinquency and its negative consequences (e.g., arrest, official labeling, incarceration) increasingly “mortgage” one’s future, especially later life chances molded by school and employment. (Sampson & Laub 1997, p. 15)

The structural consequences they refer to represent products of labeling that, in turn, make desistance more difficult. The obstacles faced by convicted felons in reintegrating is a central theme of recent research on mass incarceration (Clear 2007, Petersilia 2003). For example, Manza & Uggen (2006) focus on the consequences of felon disenfranchisement for both the felons themselves and for the larger political process. Western (2006) examines the effects of incarceration on work, marriage, and family outcomes, all potential turning points in the process of desistence and all of which are made more challenging by incarceration. Foster & Hagan (2007) show how the stigma and social exclusion of incarcerated parents limit the life chances of their children. Perhaps most powerfully, Pager’s (2007) book Marked, which makes no explicit links to the societal reaction tradition, examines the effect of a criminal record on employment outcomes. She uses the concept of a “negative credential” to describe these effects. “Negative credentials are those official markers that restrict access and opportunity rather than enabling them” (Pager 2007, p. 32). She finds that negative credentialing is particularly consequential for blacks—that black offenders have “two strikes” against them when it comes to securing a job by virtue of their race and their criminal histories. Pager’s work is also useful for countering the simplistic treatments of the secondary deviation hypothesis: that labeling leads directly to further involvement in deviance. She details the way criminal labeling affects employment opportunities, which leads to greater likelihood of reinvolvement in crime (see also Uggen 2000). The lesson, which resonates with the research on mental illness on the contingency of labeling effects, is that labeling produces intervening processes that themselves may generate further involvement or, in some cases, desistance.

The Operation of Social Control Organizations

Whereas research on the consequences of labeling focuses on the aftermath of labeling, a third strand of societal reaction theory focuses on how agents of social control organizations label particular individuals and thereby seek to manage deviance. Almost all this work has focused on criminal justice organizations rather than on medical institutions or other
institutions of social control. A key point of origin for this work is Kitsuse & Cicourel’s (1963) article “A Note on the Uses of Official Statistics,” which criticized the various preexisting approaches to deviance—roughly structural, learning, and subcultural—for failing to differentiate between “behavior producing processes” (p. 132) and the organizational responses to such behavior. The result of this failure was that preexisting work ignored the organizational processes that generated official statistics, essentially assuming that official rates of deviance represent the rate of a particular conduct. “What such statistics do reflect, however, are specifically organizational contingencies which condition the application of specific statutes to actual conduct through the interpretations, decisions and actions of law enforcement personnel” (Kitsuse & Cicourel 1963, p. 137). This study inspired work that examines how the labeling and punishing of deviants by social control institutions is influenced by organizational imperatives, alternative agendas, and informal relations between officials within social control organizations.

A second foundational study is David Sudnow’s (1965) work on “normal crimes,” which shows how prosecutors and public defenders operate as a “work group,” collaborating to match an offender’s conduct to a specific legal category, based upon emergent folk understandings about which kind of offender and behavior goes with which kind of category. Such strategies arise in the course of long-term organizational arrangements in which public defenders and prosecutors have a common interest in routinizing work. Emphasizing the ambiguity of definitions of deviance, the discretion of officials in assigning labels to behavior, and the organizational contexts of enforcement, work by Cicourel, Kitsuse, and Sudnow has stimulated a sizeable research literature, so much so that this strand of societal reaction theory might be more aptly named “organizational reaction” perspective.

Richard McCleary’s (1977, 1992) study of parole agents shows that they mostly overlook the deviant behavior of parolees, only invoking an official sanction when the agent sees some benefit to doing so in terms of enhancing the agent’s ability to control the parolee or to satisfy an informal bureaucratic demand. Focusing on how probation officers construct accounts of the decisions they make, Drass and Spencer (Drass & Spencer 1987, Spencer 1983) found that officers blend the legalistic/social control and casework/counseling approaches and that the strategies they use in particular cases emerge from the structure and culture of the organization in which they are situated. A key concept here is the “theory of office” which is the working ideology of social control agents.

Although accounts of decisions are separate from the actual decisions they document, both are products of the organizational typologies shared by members of rate-producing agencies as part of their theory of office. These typologies themselves are influenced by factors related to the structure of the rate-producing agencies as well as factors related to the training backgrounds of social control agents. This suggests that typologies may actually mediate the influence of macrolevel variables on social control decision-making and accounts of those decisions. (Drass & Spencer 1987, p. 291)

Cavender & Knepper (1992, p. 398) found similar processes in their study of juvenile parole revocation decision making: “We see a theory of office, its organizational context, and accompanying accounts as integrated features of the decision-making gestalt.” This work makes clear that how social control agencies operate requires explication of both the cognitive frameworks social control decision makers use and the organizational constraints they face.

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6One exception is recent work by Thoits (2005, Thoits & Evenson 2008), who explores the effects of social status on the likelihood of labeling and hospitalization of the mentally ill. Disconfirming the “differential labeling hypothesis,” she found that lower-status individuals are not more likely to be hospitalized than high-status individuals (Thoits & Evenson 2008).
Along these lines, another important development in research on social control organizations comes from sentencing research on “court communities.” This work is most associated with Darrell Steffensmeier, Jeffrey Ulmer, and their colleagues (Kramer & Ulmer 2002, Steffensmeier et al. 1998, Ulmer & Bradley 2006) on the “focal concerns” of social control decision makers, which contends that sanctioning decisions are made with respect to three general criteria: estimations of the blameworthiness of the deviant, assessments of the deviant’s dangerousness and risk to participate in further deviant behavior, and bureaucratic constraints. For example, Ulmer & Bradley (2006, p. 658) found that differences in the “perceived group threats and in practical political constraints and incentives between court community contexts—are key reasons behind the patterns in jury trial penalties we have found among serious violent offenses.” Confirming Emerson’s (1983) emphasis on caseload management as a key factor in understanding social control decision making, Ulmer & Bradley also found evidence that bureaucratic constraints stemming from caseload pressures affect sanctioning.

The notion that social control decisions are shaped by officials’ constructions of deviants has received quite a bit of attention. The basic idea is that net of the actual deviant behavior involved, individual offender attributes such as age, race, and gender can shape social control agents’ perceptions of offender threat and culpability and thereby influence how those agents wield their discretion. Differential enforcement along these dimensions can result from stereotypes, for example, that black offenders pose inherently greater risks to reoffend, that women pose less of a risk than men, or that younger offenders are more dangerous than older offenders. A significant amount of research has examined the effects of these status characteristics on sanctioning (see Triplett 1993). Although the evidence for effects of age, race, and gender is somewhat mixed (Daly & Tonry 1997, Hagan & Bumiller 1983, Klein et al. 1990, Steffensmeier & Demuth 2001, Steffensmeier et al. 1998, Tittle & Curran 1988), recent work has identified race effects on a variety of sanctioning decisions—with offenders of color being treated more harshly (Bontrager et al. 2005, Bridges & Steen 1998, Demuth & Steffensmeier 2004, Kubrin & Stewart 2006, Steen et al. 2005). Gender effects, specifically more harshness toward male offenders, have also been consistently observed in recent work (Daly & Borda 1995, Demuth & Steffensmeier 2004). The relationship between age and sanctioning appears to be complex and nonlinear, but in general, older offenders seem to be treated more leniently than younger offenders (Steffensmeier et al. 1998).

In addition, some offenders are understood to be particularly risky or blameworthy because of the nature of their past behavior or because of other stereotypes related to their socio-legal statuses. For example, Steen et al. (2005) examined the stigmatizing effect of being categorized as a “dangerous drug offender” on sentencing decisions. Lofland (1969) referred to these classifications as “pivotal categories.” Pivotal categories can operate directly on sanctioning decisions—lowering or raising the harshness of treatment—but they can also condition the effects of other factors. Steen et al. (2005) found that the effect of race was dependent upon whether or not the offender was included in the pivotal category of “dangerous drug offender.” Whereas so-called dangerous drug offenders were treated more harshly than other offenders, black offenders who were not so labeled were treated more harshly than similar white offenders. This is consistent with Kramer & Ulmer’s (2002) research on downward departures from state sentencing guidelines that showed that “low-level” black offenders were less likely to be provided with more lenient sentences than “low-level” white offenders. Lin et al. (2010) found that the pivotal categories of being a “second striker” or a “registered sex offender” in California increased the likelihood
a parolee would have their parole revoked and be returned to prison, holding constant the seriousness and number of parole violations the offender committed as well as other factors associated with risk to reoffend.

Other work has pushed the emphasis on the context of social control decision making toward broader historical analyses of major shifts in social control ideology and practices. Simon’s (1993) study of the transformation of parole in the contemporary era argues that shifts in law, policy, and official conceptions of parolee deviance have meant that how parole agents do their work has been powerfully shaped by the emergence and spread of actuarial principles within the criminal justice system. Feeley & Simon (1992) put forward the concept of a “new penology” consisting of new discourses, such as the emphasis on probability and risk minimization, new objectives, such as the prioritization of efficiency and recidivism reduction as the ultimate goals of punishment, and new techniques, such as risk classification instruments, drug testing, and surveillance technologies. They argue that earlier paradigms of control focusing on rehabilitation, deterrence, or just deserts are being replaced by a new penology that rejects rehabilitation and promotes the managerial goals of cost effective minimization of aggregate risk.

Lynch (1998) has questioned the completeness of this transformation, finding evidence that parole agents on the ground did not embrace all of the innovations associated with the new penology. She emphasizes local organization autonomy as key to allowing agents and supervisors to often ignore the new policies and agendas formulated at the top of the organizational chart. Instead, the parole agents she observed clung to the role orientation of “the cop” and found support for doing so within the local community, which prioritized public safety over rehabilitation or actuarial “waste management.”

Feeley & Simon’s (1992) new penology fits alongside other work inspired by Michel Foucault’s writings about governmentality, which is also relevant to understanding how contemporary social control organizations operate (Foucault et al. 1991). Among the key insights of governmentality studies is that the technologies and strategies employed by social control institutions reflect much broader discourses about government and the moral order of society. Moreover, those strategies and technologies, in a given historical period, are more or less united in a common logic that stretches across different social control settings (Rose 2000). In other words, “at particular historical moments, programs often had a family resemblance in that they operated to a greater or lesser extent with shared problematizations, or modes of problem formation, and were formulated within shared rationalities or styles of thinking” (Rose et al. 2006, p. 88). These broader rationalities unite policies and practices across a wide variety of social control settings. Simon’s (2007) book Governing Through Crime powerfully illustrates how public fears about managing and minimizing the risks of criminality are reflected in the governance of educational institutions, the workplace, and urban and suburban spaces (see also Donzelot 1979, Merry 2001).

An important implication of the governmentality perspective is that, despite its attention to social control practices and technologies, it decenters the societal reaction perspective’s traditional focus on social control organizations, specifically criminal justice agencies. In moving beyond the concern about how social control operates within official institutions, some have characterized the contemporary operation of social control as “postdisciplinary” or “government-at-a-distance” (Rose 2000); in other words, social control operations in advanced liberal societies do not reside within a given discipline, a recognized authority, or a formal institution. Instead, social control is increasingly “rhizomatic,” reliant on horizontal exchanges between individuals empowered to act on the basis of their own free will, rather than the hierarchical systems of government.
assistance of experts and must actively engage in partnerships with expertise to maintain order and combat threats to individual and collective security. (Rose 2000, p. 327)

This decenters social control organizations—the entry point of societal reaction research on social control—because it recasts those organizations as mere channels for the broader discursive frameworks and rationalities, sites where technologies and strategies are put into practice. However, like Lynch’s challenge to the new penology thesis described above, some scholars have qualified this theoretical imagery; and, also like Lynch, such challenges have come out of research that seeks to discern the operation of governmentality on the ground in ethnographic studies of local criminal justice agencies of the sort pioneered by societal reaction work of the 1960s and 1970s. One study coined the term “governmentality gap” to capture the “interstices between governmental rationalities and technologies and ‘the actual practices and discourses that make up the field’” (McNeill et al. 2009, p. 421).

To be fair, theorists of governmentality have long recognized the gap, the “corruption in practice” (Garland 1997, p. 199) or the “incoherence and volatility” of social control practices (O’Malley 1999), and called for more situated analyses of how social control is manifest as an “assemblage of control” (Rose 2000). Moreover, the focus of governmentality studies is really on the broad historical shift in rationalities and technologies, which is a legitimate subject for analysis in and of itself. Unsurprisingly, more locally situated analyses have been neglected. And yet, this reveals an important opportunity for the older societal reaction tradition, with its emphasis on local social control agencies, the “theories of office” that produce gaps and “corruption in practice,” as well as the bureaucratic constraints that pattern discretion, to contribute to the analysis of governmentality.

Combined, some of the key lessons of this more recent work on social control organizations is that sanctioning and the activation of the labeling process involves the translation of abstract social control ideologies to local situations, which, in turn, is a process that is contingent upon local practical knowledge and traditions, competing discourses and models available within the environment, and organizational and environmental factors and constraints. These conceptualizations continue to highlight the importance of focusing on the operation of local social control organizations to expose the gaps between theory and practice and to suggest organizational and ideological reasons for those gaps.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Despite declarations of its demise, inquiry into societal reactions to deviance has continued in various subfields within sociology. Those investigations have been pursued along the three strands identified in earlier work and described above. Recent scholarship sometimes explicitly references the earlier tradition, such as work on stigma and moral panics, but new concepts have been added as well, such as cumulative disadvantage to describe the structural impediments faced by labeled persons and focal concerns and theory of office to characterize the interpretive frameworks applied to deviants by social control agents. Often newer work, such as Pager’s study of the differential effects of the negative credential of incarceration for black and white males, continues an important theme of societal reaction work and yet makes no reference to labeling or stigma.

Moreover, the newer work reviewed here goes beyond the older tradition, for example, by using a much richer theoretical vocabulary for describing the development of deviant labels. Researchers now conceive of the development of deviant labels as being part of the broader process of the social construction of social problems as well as being shaped by changes in medical knowledge, rationalities of governance, and the rise of new discourses of deviance (e.g., the new penology). Those knowledges, discourses, and rationalities—characterized differently in different subfields—operate
interinstitutionally, spreading across medicine, mental health, and criminal justice and even beyond the disciplines into the workplace, neighborhood, and ultimately, the governance of self.

Taking stock of this new wave of scholarship, one can identify three lines of analysis that should provide a focus for future work. The first is continued development of studies of the contingent nature of labeling across a wider variety of social control contexts. The negative consequences of labeling are by no means deterministic or uniform, but are instead dependent upon a handful of factors revealed in research described above. Negative consequences of labeling can be contingent upon characteristics of the individual, his or her immediate social networks, and broader societal views of their condition as well as upon the visibility of the individual’s deviance to others. These conclusions have been drawn primarily from research on medical illness, mental health, and crime. Research must explore how these and potentially other factors modify the effects of labeling of other forms of deviance beyond illness and crime.

A second emerging area of theoretical development is the causes of gaps between social control discourse and practice. Like the work that came before it, recent research on the operation of social control organizations shows a consistent gap between theory and practice, as well as incoherence and volatility in how broader shifts in thinking about deviance are translated into action by professionals and officials. As in law and society studies, much research has been content to identify gaps between law in books and law in action or to document the purpose served by a gap in a particular empirical setting. Attention must shift to understanding why such gaps exist and what accounts for variation in the degree of disjuncture between theory and action across settings. As yet, little theoretical development seeks to identify the range of local, organizational, and other factors that shape how social control diverges from theory (however, see Grattet & Jenness 2005, Jenness & Grattet 2005).

A third trajectory emerges from studies of the diffusion of social control practices from deviants to nondeviants. Research reviewed here has begun to show how techniques and practices developed in relation to deviants and have diffused into other aspects of social life, governing nondeviant activities and persons, to regulate natural life processes with the full participation of subjects being regulated. These same knowledges, discourses, and rationalities are invoked by the labeled persons themselves to account for, justify, or neutralize their deviance. In doing so, and as Lemert (1951) anticipated, labeling sometimes sets in motion identity transformation—the process of secondary deviance, when the labeled person tries to adjust to a new role. However, how and when diffusion of social control strategies occur and how new technologies aid the process remain largely unexplored.

As should be clear from the newer research reviewed above, as well as my summary of the potential future trajectories of scholarship, lost in the waning of the societal reaction perspective is a more general vocabulary for describing processes and outcomes across a wide variety of topical areas. The inexorable march of specialization in sociology has meant that fragments of societal reaction perspective are now scattered across isolated subfields and forgotten in others. Missing is what, for a brief moment, the societal reaction perspective provided: a language and a set of concepts that gave coherence to a wide variety of empirical investigations. Whether such a project proceeds under the banner of the societal reaction perspective or not, that common theoretical language is what needs resurrecting.

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## Contents

### Prefatory Chapters

Reflections on a Sociological Career that Integrates Social Science with Social Policy  
*William Julius Wilson* ................................................................. 1  

Emotional Life on the Market Frontier  
*Arlie Hochschild* ............................................................................. 21

### Theory and Methods

Foucault and Sociology  
*Micahel Power* .................................................................................. 35  

How to Conduct a Mixed Methods Study: Recent Trends in a Rapidly Growing Literature  
*Mario Luis Small* ................................................................................... 57  

Social Theory and Public Opinion  
*Andrew J. Perrin and Katherine McFarland* .................................................. 87  

The Sociology of Storytelling  
*Francesca Polletta, Pang Ching Bobby Chen, Beth Gbarrity Gardner, and Alice Motes* ................................................................. 109  

Statistical Models for Social Networks  
*Tom A.B. Snijders* .................................................................................. 131  

The Neo-Marxist Legacy in American Sociology  
*Jeff Manza and Michael A. McCarthy* ......................................................... 155

### Social Processes

Societal Reactions to Deviance  
*Ryken Grattet* ....................................................................................... 185
Formal Organizations

U.S. Health-Care Organizations: Complexity, Turbulence, and Multilevel Change
Mary L. Fennell and Crystal M. Adams .......................................................... 205

Political and Economic Sociology

Political Economy of the Environment
Thomas K. Rudel, J. Timmons Roberts, and JoAnn Carmin ............................. 221

The Sociology of Finance
Bruce G. Carruthers and Jeong-Chul Kim ...................................................... 239

Political Repression: Iron Fists, Velvet Gloves, and Diffuse Control
Jennifer Earl ...................................................................................................... 261

Emotions and Social Movements: Twenty Years of Theory and Research
James M. Jasper ............................................................................................... 285

Employment Stability in the U.S. Labor Market: Rhetoric versus Reality
Matissa Hollister ............................................................................................... 305

The Contemporary American Conservative Movement
Neil Gross, Thomas Medvetz, and Rupert Russell ........................................ 325

Differentiation and Stratification

A World of Difference: International Trends in Women’s Economic Status
Maria Charles ..................................................................................................... 355

The Evolution of the New Black Middle Class
Bart Landry and Kris Marsh ........................................................................... 373

The Integration Imperative: The Children of Low-Status Immigrants in the Schools of Wealthy Societies
Richard Alba, Jennifer Sloan, and Jessica Sperling ........................................ 395

Gender in the Middle East: Islam, State, Agency
Mounira M. Charrad .......................................................................................... 417

Individual and Society

Research on Adolescence in the Twenty-First Century
Robert Crosnoe and Monica Kirkpatrick Johnson ............................................ 439
Diversity, Social Capital, and Cohesion
Alejandro Portes and Erik Vickstrom ........................................ 461

Transition to Adulthood in Europe
Marlis C. Buchmann and Irene Kriesi ........................................ 481

The Sociology of Suicide
Matt Wray, Cynthia Coen, and Bernice Pescosolido ........................................ 505

Demography
What We Know About Unauthorized Migration
Katbarine M. Donato and Amada Armenta ........................................ 529

Relations Between the Generations in Immigrant Families
Nancy Foner and Joanna Dreby ........................................ 545

Urban and Rural Community Sociology
Rural America in an Urban Society: Changing Spatial and Social Boundaries
Daniel T. Lichter and David L. Brown ........................................ 565

Policy
Family Changes and Public Policies in Latin America [Translation]
Brígida García and Orlandina de Oliveira ........................................ 593

Brígida García and Orlandina de Oliveira ........................................ 613

Indexes
Cumulative Index of Contributing Authors, Volumes 28–37 ........................................ 635
Cumulative Index of Chapter Titles, Volumes 28–37 ........................................ 639

Errata
An online log of corrections to Annual Review of Sociology articles may be found at http://soc.annualreviews.org/errata.shtml