

# Lemert Edwin M Primary And Secondary Deviance

## Lemert Edwin M: Primary and Secondary Deviance – A Deep Dive into Societal Labeling

Edwin Lemert's theory of primary and secondary deviance offers a compelling explanation of how societal reactions to initial deviant acts can lead to a persistent pattern of deviance. Understanding this framework is crucial for analyzing crime, social control, and the process of labeling individuals as "deviant." This article will delve into Lemert's seminal work, exploring the distinctions between primary and secondary deviance, their implications for individuals and society, and the ongoing relevance of his theory in contemporary sociological discussions. We will explore key concepts such as **social control**, **labeling theory**, **deviant behavior**, and **self-concept**.

### Understanding Primary Deviance

Primary deviance, according to Lemert, encompasses the initial acts of deviance. These acts are often relatively minor, infrequent, and may not significantly impact an individual's self-concept. Think of a teenager skipping school once or shoplifting a small item. These actions, while technically violating social norms, are often excused, rationalized, or

simply overlooked. They don't define the person's identity; they are episodic and don't significantly alter their self-perception. The key here is that the individual does not yet identify themselves primarily as a "deviant." This phase is characterized by situational factors rather than a deep-seated commitment to deviant behavior. The consequences of primary deviance are typically minimal; they don't lead to significant societal labeling or stigmatization. This is a critical distinction, as the *reaction* to primary deviance is what often fuels the transition to secondary deviance.

## **The Shift to Secondary Deviance: The Power of Societal Reaction**

Secondary deviance arises when society reacts to primary deviance, leading to a significant shift in the individual's self-perception and behavior. This reaction, often manifested through formal social control mechanisms like arrest and imprisonment or informal mechanisms such as social stigma and ostracism, is crucial. The label of "deviant," once applied, often becomes a master status, overshadowing all other aspects of the individual's identity. Lemert argues that this labeling process fundamentally alters the individual's self-concept. They internalize the label, accepting it as a defining characteristic of themselves. This self-fulfilling prophecy can lead to a cyclical pattern of deviance, as the individual acts in ways consistent with the label they have been assigned.

For example, an individual arrested for petty theft (primary deviance) might subsequently face difficulties finding employment, housing, and social acceptance due to a criminal record. This exclusion can then lead to further criminal activity (secondary deviance) as

the individual feels alienated from conventional society and has limited legitimate opportunities. This is a powerful illustration of how social control mechanisms, intended to reduce deviance, can ironically contribute to its escalation. This process highlights the importance of understanding **social control theory** and its potential unintended consequences.

## **The Role of Social Stigma and Self-Concept in Secondary Deviance**

Lemert emphasizes the importance of societal reactions in the development of secondary deviance. The stigma associated with a deviant label profoundly impacts an individual's self-concept. This process involves a shift in identity, from someone who occasionally engages in deviant acts to someone who defines themselves as a deviant. This self-identification often leads to further deviance, creating a feedback loop. The individual's actions become a means of validating the label assigned to them, reinforcing their new identity, and leading to more significant involvement in deviant behavior.

## **Implications and Criticisms of Lemert's Theory**

Lemert's theory has significantly influenced the field of sociology, particularly within the framework of **deviant behavior** and labeling theory. It highlights the role of social interaction and societal responses in shaping individual behavior. However, it's not without its criticisms. Some argue that the theory overlooks the role of individual agency, suggesting that individuals are simply passive recipients of societal labels. Others criticize its deterministic nature, implying that once an individual is labeled, their path

to further deviance is inevitable. While acknowledging these limitations, Lemert's framework remains valuable for understanding the complex interplay between individual actions and societal responses in the creation and perpetuation of deviance. The theory's focus on the social construction of deviance remains highly relevant.

## **Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of Lemert's Work**

Edwin Lemert's distinction between primary and secondary deviance offers a crucial insight into the process by which individuals become entrenched in deviant lifestyles. By focusing on the role of societal reactions and labeling, the theory sheds light on the powerful influence of social processes in shaping individual identities and behavior. While not without its critiques, Lemert's work remains influential in understanding the complexities of deviance and social control, emphasizing the importance of considering the social context and consequences of labeling individuals as deviant. Future research might explore how this theory intersects with contemporary issues like cybercrime and social media's role in amplifying both primary and secondary deviance.

## **FAQ: Addressing Common Questions About Primary and Secondary Deviance**

**Q1: Is everyone who commits a primary deviant act destined to become a secondary deviant?**

**A1:** No. Primary deviance is often fleeting and inconsequential. Many individuals engage in minor acts of deviance without experiencing the significant societal reaction that leads to

secondary deviance. The crucial element is the societal response and its impact on the individual's self-perception.

**Q2: How does Lemert's theory differ from other theories of deviance?**

A2: Unlike purely individualistic theories, Lemert's focuses on the social process of labeling and its consequences. It highlights the role of society in creating and reinforcing deviance, unlike theories that primarily focus on individual characteristics or social structures.

**Q3: Can secondary deviance ever be reversed?**

A3: Yes, while challenging, the process of secondary deviance is not irreversible. Through rehabilitative programs, supportive social networks, and a shift in self-perception, individuals can break free from the cycle of deviance.

**Q4: What are some practical applications of Lemert's theory in crime prevention?**

A4: Understanding the role of labeling allows for the development of restorative justice programs and diversionary strategies that aim to avoid labeling individuals as criminals, reducing the likelihood of secondary deviance.

**Q5: How does Lemert's theory relate to the concept of self-fulfilling prophecy?**

A5: Lemert's theory directly incorporates the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy. The label of "deviant," once internalized, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading the

individual to act in ways consistent with that label.

**Q6: Does Lemert's theory apply to all forms of deviance?**

A6: While applicable to a wide range of deviant acts, the theory may be more relevant to certain types of deviance than others. Acts that are immediately and severely stigmatized may bypass the primary deviance stage, going directly to secondary deviance.

**Q7: What are some limitations of Lemert's theory?**

A7: Criticisms include the potential overemphasis on the power of societal labeling, neglecting individual agency and the possibility of resistance to labeling. It's also argued the theory doesn't fully account for the initial causes of primary deviance.

**Q8: How can Lemert's theory inform social policy?**

A8: By highlighting the role of labeling in perpetuating deviance, the theory suggests a shift toward restorative justice approaches that emphasize rehabilitation and reintegration rather than solely punitive measures. It calls for a more nuanced understanding of how societal responses shape individual trajectories.

## **Understanding Edwin M. Lemert's Primary and Secondary Deviance: A Deeper Dive**

Edwin M. Lemert's theory of primary and secondary deviance offers a compelling angle on the

evolution of deviant behavior. Unlike earlier theories that focused solely on the action of deviance itself, Lemert presents a shifting process where initial deviant acts can result in a persistent pattern of deviance. This article will examine Lemert's groundbreaking notions, providing lucid explanations and applicable examples.

### ### Primary Deviance: The Seed of Deviance

Lemert defines primary deviance as the initial act of deviance. These acts are often sporadic, impulsive, and typically have negligible impact on the individual's self-concept. Basically, the individual doesn't see themselves as a "deviant." This is crucial because the societal reaction to primary deviance plays a critical role in whether it progresses into secondary deviance.

Envision a teenager who shoplifts a candy bar from a convenience store. This act, while technically deviant, is unlikely to materially alter their self-image. They may feel a brief sense of guilt or remorse, but this is commonly suppressed by other emotions. The act remains unique, and the teenager proceeds to exist a relatively normal life. This is primary deviance in its purest form.

The core of primary deviance lies in its absence of societal labeling. If the act goes undetected, or if the outcomes are insignificant, the behavior is unapt to become a defining aspect of the individual's identity.

### ### Secondary Deviance: The Deviance Amplification Spiral

The transition from primary to secondary deviance is triggered by society's reaction to the

initial deviant act. This is where Lemert's theory truly stands out. When a person's deviant act is uncovered, it often leads in tagging by influential others – family, peers, authorities, etc. This tagging can profoundly impact the individual's self-concept, reinforcing the deviant behavior.

Lemert maintains that consistent labeling can produce a self-fulfilling prophecy. The individual, assimilating the derogatory label, commences to act in methods that align with the label. This is secondary deviance. The act of deviance is no longer occasional; it becomes a core element of their identity.

Referencing to the example of the teenager who shoplifted a candy bar, imagine the scenario shifts. If the teenager is apprehended, tagged as a "thief," and penalized, this could significantly impact their self-perception. They may assimilate the label, concluding they are indeed a thief. This conviction can lead to further deviant acts, reinforcing the label and creating a cycle of deviance.

This procedure can be viewed as a deviance amplification spiral, where each incident of deviance and subsequent stigmatization magnifies the deviant behavior. It's a destructive feedback loop that can be extremely difficult to break.

### ### Practical Implications and Societal Significance

Lemert's theory has substantial implications for justice systems, social services and pedagogical practices. Understanding the impact of labeling allows for the development of more effective approaches for deterring deviance and reintegrating individuals who have engaged in deviant behavior. For instance, restorative justice practices which stress

restoration rather than simply penalization can be more effective in preventing the transition to secondary deviance.

Furthermore, educational initiatives that encourage positive self-images and social inclusion can help deter the development of deviant behavior in the first place.

### ### Conclusion

Lemert's differentiation between primary and secondary deviance provides a strong framework for understanding the evolution of deviant behavior. By emphasizing the role of social feedback and labeling, the theory offers valuable insights for creating approaches to address deviant behavior and encourage social change. The grasp of this process is crucial for the development of more humane and efficient systems of social control and rehabilitation.

### ### Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

**Q1: Is everyone who commits a primary deviant act destined to become a secondary deviant?**

A1: No. Whether primary deviance escalates to secondary deviance hinges on a number of factors, including the nature of the deviant act, the societal response, and the individual's personality and public backing.

**Q2: How can we minimize the influence of labeling in preventing secondary deviance?**

A2: Strategies that highlight restorative justice, community-based assistance, and

rehabilitation, rather than solely punishment, can lessen the effect of labeling.

**Q3: Can secondary deviance ever be reversed?**

A3: While arduous, reversing secondary deviance is feasible. It requires important self transformation, public support, and the possibility to reintegrate into society.

**Q4: How does Lemert's theory contrast with other theories of deviance?**

A4: Unlike earlier theories that concentrated on the act itself, Lemert's theory emphasizes the interactive connection between the individual and society, highlighting how social reactions can shape deviant careers. It provides a more nuanced and intricate understanding of the deviance process.

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