

Kitsuse J. I. Societal reaction to deviant behavior: problems of theory and method.
Social Probl. 9:247-56, 1962.
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In contrast to conventional approaches to the study of deviant behavior, a shift in the focus of theory and research is proposed from investigations of deviant forms of behavior to the processes by which persons come to be defined as deviant by others. "Homosexual behavior" is used illustratively to document the behavior forms that are interpreted as deviant, and the processes by which persons who manifest such behavior are defined and treated as deviant. The responses of 75 interview subjects are reported, which, contrary to expectations derived from the literature, reflect a wide range of variability with regard to definitions of "homosexual behavior" and the direction and intensity of reactions to behaviors so defined. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI)® indicates that this paper has been cited in over 140 publications.]

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The early 1960s marked the beginning of a lively theoretical development in what has come to be known as the sociology of deviance. The established formulations (particularly the functionalist "social disorganization theory" associated with Robert K. Merton)¹ were subjected to critical examination by the early postwar cohorts of young sociologists. In the context of the socially mobile, highly differentiated, densely urbanized, postindustrial societies, the assumption of a consensus with regard to definitions of particular forms of "deviant behavior" was attacked as highly problematic. This critical stance toward the established literature on deviance stimulated a theoretical view identified by the term "labeling" or "symbolic interactionist" and, more recently, "social constructionist."

The research that formed the basis for "Societal reaction to deviant behavior" was an expression of this view. That this paper has acquired the citation record it has is, I assume, related to the fact that the issue of the definition of "deviant behavior" was so fundamental to the theoretical reformulation of the field, and this research was the first attempt to study the social process of the definition and treatment of behaviors and persons as deviant.

The choice of the label "homosexual" as the illustrative case in point was theoretically strategic in that at the time of the study (1958), more than a decade before the term "gay" became a household word, "everyone knew" that homosexuals were deviant. It was popularly assumed (an assumption reflected in the social-science literature) that "homosexuality" was uniformly defined, identified, and negatively sanctioned. The broad variability recorded among the subjects interviewed with regard to the definition and treatment of "homosexuals" underlined the methodological principle of documenting "the actor's point of view" in the deviance-defining process, calling for a shift in focus of study from the presumed deviant and his/her behavior to those who impute deviance to them.

By the 1980s, the "labeling" perspective on deviance had become an established if not dominant view in the field. It has generated a substantial research literature of investigations, not only of the social differentiation of individuals as deviant, but also the processes by which deviant social categories are produced and institutionalized in systems of control. Further, this theoretical orientation has stimulated a parallel and influential development in the broader field of the sociology of social problems.²

1. Merton R. K. Social structure and anomie. *Amer. Soc. Rev.* 3:672-82, 1938. (Cited 180 times since 1955.)
2. Kitsuse J. I. Coming out all over: deviants and the politics of social problems. *Social Probl.* 28:1-13, 1980.