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The Self-Esteem Sentence: Evidence for Labeling Theory

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Labeling theory proposes that the criminal label produces changes in the self-concept. Lemert (1951) thought that the secondary label was responsible for changes in the self-concept. The evaluative component of the self-concept is self-esteem, which is defined as the positive or negative evaluation of the self (Rosenberg, 1979). Drawing on William James' theory of self-esteem (1890), the present study examined the effects of the criminal label on self-esteem, and the secondary label on self-esteem. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health sample measured self-esteem at two points in time; before (Wave I) and after (Wave III) the criminal labeling period. The OLS regression revealed that the criminal label ($p < .05$) causes negative changes in self-esteem. Furthermore, the secondary label was responsible for the most significant negative changes in self-esteem ($p < .01$). These findings can be generalized to the United States population.

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Introduction

  Labeling theory considers an act to be deviant only if you get caught. Deviance is defined not as the act a person commits, but rather the societal reaction that applies the criminal label (Becker, 1963; Erikson, 1962; Kitsuse, 1962). The criminal label refers to official convictions in an adult courtroom for offenses (Farrington, 1977). Convictions can vary based on the frequency of occurrence, which coincides with the concepts of primary deviance and secondary deviance (Lemert, 1951). Since deviance is defined in terms of criminal labeling, the primary label will refer to the initial criminal label, and the secondary label will refer to multiple criminal labels. Labeling theory further proposed that the criminal label would influence an individual's self-concept (Becker, 1963). Furthermore, the impact of the criminal label on the self-concept was thought to occur in the case of secondary deviance, but not primary deviance (Lemert, 1951). Therefore, the secondary label is expected to be the main effect on the self-concept.

  The self-concept has two main dimensions: they include identities and self-esteem (Gecas, 1982). The deviant identity refers to the internalization and incorporation of the criminal label into the self, which is thought to produce further deviant behavior (Bradley-Engen, 2011). In the criminology literature the deviant identity has been thoroughly examined (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989). Meanwhile, the self-esteem of labeled criminals has received little attention. Self-esteem refers to the positive or negative evaluation of the self (Rosenberg, 1979). Of the few studies that have examined the self-esteem of labeled criminals (Gullone, Jones, & Cummins, 2000; Oser, 2006),

they have been unable to assess changes in self-esteem over time. These studies used a cross-sectional research design that measured self-esteem at one point in time. A correlation was established between the criminal label and self-esteem, but not causation. Therefore, the causal direction and the changes in self-esteem remain unknown.

To address this limitation, the present study will examine two research questions, with data from The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) sample. First, does the criminal label cause negative changes in self-esteem over time? Second, does the secondary label cause negative changes in self-esteem over time? The Add Health sample is a large and nationally representative sample that is generalizable to the United States population. The longitudinal research design examines self-esteem at two points in time over a seven-year period from Wave I (1994-95) to Wave III (2001-02). The measurement of a dependent variable at two points in time allows the ability to draw causal inferences and establish a casual direction (Allison, 1990) from the criminal label and the secondary label to self-esteem. Self-esteem is an important outcome to consider because it is an essential component of resilience in young adults and one of the strongest predictors of life satisfaction (Diener, 1984; Crocker & Quinn, 2000).

The current study begins with a conceptualization section that defines the criminal label, the secondary label, and self-esteem. Next, William James' (1890) theory of self-esteem offers a theoretical explanation for the changes in self-esteem among respondents with the criminal label and the secondary label. Then, a literature review will discuss prior studies that have examined the relationship between criminal labels and self-esteem.

The methodological shortcomings from past studies will be discussed, each of which will be addressed in the current study. Furthermore, the present study will analyze the effects of the criminal label and the secondary label on self-esteem, while addressing the methodological shortcomings in the literature. The statistical analyses will include descriptive statistics, a correlation matrix, and ordinary least square (OLS) regression. The regression models will examine 1) the effects of the criminal label on self-esteem and 2) the influence of the secondary label on self-esteem. To conclude, the discussion section will elaborate on the implications of the findings and provide future research directions.

Chapter 1 : *Conceptualization*

The criminal label refers to official convictions in an adult courtroom for criminal offenses (Farrington, 1977), which result from a guilty verdict or plea. Convictions vary in terms of the frequency and severity of offenses (MacDonald & Lattimore, 2010). On the one hand, the severity of a conviction is based on the violent or non-violent nature involved in the crime. A violent label results from force or the threat of possible force, with examples of aggravated assault, manslaughter, murder, rape, and robbery (Uniform Crime Report, 2015). Meanwhile, the non-violent label is considered less severe in comparison. On the other hand, the frequency of convictions coincides with the primary label and the secondary label. The primary label refers to a single official conviction in an adult courtroom for one criminal offense (referred to as *primary deviance* by Lemert, 1951 and *desistance* by Laub & Sampson, 2003). The secondary label refers to multiple

official convictions in an adult courtroom for two or more criminal offenses (referred to as *secondary deviance* by Lemert, 1951 and *persistence* by Laub & Sampson, 2003).

Self-esteem and the self-concept have been used somewhat interchangeably in previous research (Heatherton & Wyland, 2003; Mier & Ladny, 2018). Nonetheless, there is an important distinction between these two terms. The self-concept refers to "the totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object" (Rosenberg, 1979, p. 7). Of the many components that make up the self-concept, the evaluative component has been the focus in past research (Wells & Marwell, 1976). The evaluation of the self-concept is commonly known as self-esteem (Gecas, 1982). Self-esteem is defined as an individual's attitude toward the self, which can be either positive or negative (Rosenberg et al., 1978). A negative or unfavorable evaluation of the self indicates low self-esteem, whereas a positive or favorable evaluation of the self indicates high self-esteem (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003).

Theoretical Framework

The concept of self-esteem was first introduced by William James in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890). James proposed that self-esteem is the result of "one's actual success or failure, and the good or bad actual position one holds in the world" (p. 306). The theory states that success and holding a good position within society produces positive self-esteem. However, failure and holding a bad position within society results in negative self-esteem. When this theory is applied to labeling theory, it offers a theoretical explanation for the negative changes or decreases in self-esteem among criminal offenders with the criminal label and secondary label.

Howard Becker (1963) proposed that the process of being labeled as a criminal would have significant consequences on an individual's self-concept. James' (1890) theory of self-esteem provides an explanation for changes in the self-concept, which is based on the labeled criminal's failure and the bad position that they occupy within society. The failure experienced by the labeled criminal offender occurs in three separate domains. First, the criminal label indicates that failure has occurred in pretension (or goal) of crime, given that most crimes are committed with the intention of not getting caught. However, the labeled criminal offender was caught, as their deviant act has been noticed by society (Becker, 1963). Second, the criminal label signifies a failing in that it is considered a stigmatized status. Goffman (1963) referred to this stigma as a blemish of character, whereby the labeled criminal has failed to live up to what someone should be or what is considered normal within society. Third, the criminal label will lead to failure when it comes to achieving cultural goals that are common within society. Merton (1938) discussed cultural goals in terms of the American Dream, which focuses on employment and monetary success. Furthermore, labeled criminals often lack the means to achieve these goals, as they experience discrimination in the employment sector (Pager, 2003).

The bad position that labeled criminals hold within society is the result of failure and the status degradation ceremony (Garfinkel, 1956). This ceremony is monopolized by the court systems, which transforms an individual downward by means of the criminal label. In doing so, the social status and public identity are lowered within society as well. Goffman (1963) referred to this as the spoiled identity or a stigmatized status, whereby someone's public image becomes discredited within society. Drawing on James' (1890)

theory of self-esteem, it is anticipated that the criminal label will cause negative changes in self-esteem over time (Hypothesis 1).

Edwin Lemert (1951) proposed that the secondary label would cause major changes in the self-concept, while the primary label will result in no long-term effects on the criminal offender (Cullen & Wilcox, 2010). James' (1890) theory of self-esteem provides an explanation for changes in the self-concept, which is based on the failure experienced by the criminal offender with the secondary label, as well as bad position that they occupy within society. Much like labeled criminal offenders, those with the secondary label encounter failure in three areas. First, the secondary label indicates multiple failures in the pretension (or goal) of crime, while the primary label indicates only a single failure. Second, the societal reaction to deviance is based on the frequency of offenses. Society can only tolerate a certain amount of deviance by its members, as is indicated by the tolerance quotient (Lemert, 1951). On the one hand, society tolerates the initial deviant act and perceives it to be normal and common in everyday life, a process referred to as normalization. On the other hand, society perceives multiple acts of deviance as an overload in the tolerance quotient, which ultimately produces stigmatization. Therefore, the only criminal offenders that will suffer from stigmatization are those with the secondary label, as they have failed to live up to the normal standard within society (Goffman, 1963). Third, criminal offenders with the secondary label have a greater likelihood of experiencing failure when it comes to achieving cultural goals and turning points. Turning points are described as epiphanies or identity transformations that result in changes in lifestyle and routine activities (Laub & Sampson, 2003). Many

different types of turning points exist, with the main three being marriage, military, and employment. Criminal offenders with the primary label often experience turning points, as they desist from crime. On the contrary, those with the secondary label persist in crime and fail to experience turning points. Since criminal offenders with the secondary label often fail to experience the turning point of employment, they are further expected to encounter failure in achieving cultural goals – such as the American Dream and achieving monetary success (Merton, 1938).

The criminal offender with the secondary label resides in a bad position within society. The status degradation ceremony (Garfinkel, 1956) is responsible for lowering the social status and public identity of criminal offender with the secondary label. In terms of social status, those with the secondary label have endured the status degradation ceremony on multiple occasions, unlike those with the primary label. Therefore, the status of those with the secondary label is lowered farther down than those with the primary label, which marks an all-time low status in society. Furthermore, the secondary label is a stigmatized status unlike the primary label (Lemert, 1951), as criminal offenders have chosen secondary deviance over second chances. In terms of public identity, those with the secondary label are deprived of identity transformations or turning points, unlike those with the primary label (Laub & Sampson, 2003). Turning points provide a transformation in identity from criminal offender to spouse, employee, and/or military member. Criminal offenders with the primary label commonly experience these transformations. Based on James' (1890) theory of self-esteem, it is expected that the secondary label will cause negative changes in self-esteem over time (Hypothesis 2).

Past Research

Labeling theory has been a central part of criminology since the 1960s. The main premise of labeling theory proposes that the criminal label will negatively influence the self-concept (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1961). Many studies have attempted to find empirical support for this premise of labeling theory, but the majority of studies have suffered from an "absence of significant of findings" (Scheff, Retzinger, & Ryan, 1989, p. 176).

Howard Becker (1963) is often linked to labeling theory, as one of the earliest theorists to propose that the criminal label would have significant consequences on the self-concept. Around the same time, Wheeler (1961) theorized that criminal offenders would suffer social rejection that would serve as a reminder of their social status and lead to negative changes in self-esteem. As for the empirical studies, they have been few and far between. A literature review by Paternoster & Iovanni (1989) confirms the lack of empirical studies, as only one study had established a relationship between criminal offenders that have been incarcerated and negative self-esteem (see Tittle, 1972). Since then, two studies have established a relationship between the criminal label and low self-esteem. Gullone et al. (2000) found a correlation between prisoners and low self-esteem in comparison to college students in Australia. Similarly, Oser (2006) observed an association between crime and low self-esteem among convicts in the United States.

Edwin Lemert (1951) is another theorist connected to labeling theory, with the concepts of primary deviance and secondary deviance. In terms of criminal labels, the secondary label was proposed to have a major influence on the self-concept, whereas the

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primary label would have a minor impact on the self-concept. To date, one study has empirically examined the relationship between the secondary label and self-esteem. Oser (2006) discovered an association between multiple convictions and lower self-esteem in comparison to other criminal convictions.

Past Limitations

A recent review of the literature on the relationship between criminality and self-esteem revealed some common methodological shortcomings. According to Mier & Ladny (2018) the main issues in past research are specific to the samples, the study designs, and/or the forms of measurement. To date, every study has suffered from at least one of these limitations.

The first shortcoming is that the samples have been small in size, are often without a comparison group, and lack generalizability to the United States population. The sample sizes have been small because labeled criminal offenders are a vulnerable and hard-to-reach population (Bonevski et al., 2014). In addition, the samples in past studies have consisted solely of labeled criminal offenders, often with no reference or comparison group of non-labeled citizens (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989). Finally, the samples have been representative of prisons in specific states (Oser, 2006) and countries abroad (Gullone et al., 2000). Nonetheless, the samples have not been nationally representative of the United States population.

The second shortcoming is that the research designs have regularly been cross-sectional, which takes place at a single point in time (Scheff et al., 1989). Thus, the ability to observe changes over time and determine the causal direction between variables

is impossible. Oser (2006) encountered this issue, whereby the relationship between convictions and self-esteem was a correlation, and not causation. The final shortcoming is that the measurement of crime and self-esteem have been unreliable and inconsistent. While the conventional measure of self-esteem is the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), studies have used other self-esteem scales. Also, the recommended measure of crime is the frequency measure, whereby crimes are discussed one at a time. Nevertheless, studies have used the count measure, which requires that respondents remember all crimes at one time. Retrospectively some crimes may be overlooked.

Chapter 2 : *Present Study*

The present study will empirically test labeling theory, the relationship between criminal labels and self-esteem, through the reinterpretation of the self-concept in terms of self-esteem. This will be accomplished using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health sample [Public Use], which improves on past research design limitations (Mier & Ladny, 2018). The Add Health sample is nationally representative and generalizable to the United States population. The longitudinal research design allows the ability to draw causal inferences, as self-esteem is measured at two points in time (Allison, 1990). The outcome of self-esteem is measured before (Wave I) and after (Wave III) the criminal label has been applied to the offender. The measures of the criminal label and self-esteem coincide with the recommended measures in the literature. The criminal label is measured by the frequency of crime method, where each crime is asked one by one (Baumeister et al., 2003). Self-esteem is measured with the Rosenberg

Self-Esteem Scale ($\alpha = .79$). Lastly, the sample provides a reference group of non-labeled respondents to compare changes in self-esteem over time with labeled respondents.

The present study focused on two research questions. First, what impact does the criminal label have on changes in self-esteem? Second, what influence does the secondary label have on changes in self-esteem? Drawing on labeling theory, I hypothesize that the criminal label will cause negative changes in self-esteem. Similarly, I hypothesize that the secondary label would cause negative changes in self-esteem. The findings will contribute to the literature, as they provide empirical support for labeling theory (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1951) based on one of the oldest theories of self-esteem (James, 1890). Also, the results will expand on the correlations between crime and low self-esteem (Gullone et al., 2000; Oser, 2006) by establishing a causal direction from criminal labeling to changes in self-esteem.

Data and Analysis

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) is a nationally representative sample of adolescents living in the United States from 1994 to 1995.

The Add Health sample [Public Use] used a longitudinal research design, which interviewed respondents in their homes at five different waves over a twenty-four-year period. The first interview was at Wave I (1994-1995) and the most recent interview was at Wave V (2016-2018). The present study analyzed a sample of 4,209 respondents over an eight-year period from Wave I (1994-1995) to Wave III (2001-2002). These waves were chosen for analysis based on when the independent and the dependent variables

were measured. Both of the criminal labels were measured at Wave III. Self-esteem was measured first at Wave I and most recently at Wave III.

The analysis in the current study is presented in three separate tables. Each of the tables present results that are considered nationally representative through the inclusion of the sample weights, which compensates for oversampling. In Table 1.1, the demographic characteristics of the Add Health sample are presented. Also, the results of the t-tests were included, which examined the means of self-esteem between respondents with the criminal label and no label, as well as the primary label and the secondary label. In Table 1.2, a correlation matrix is displayed that examined the relationships between two variables. This analysis provided early evidence as to the direction of the relationship between the criminal labels and self-esteem, as reciprocal relationships were considered. In Table 1.3, the ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model demonstrated the standardized estimates of changes in self-esteem over time. This analysis examined each of the hypotheses in two separate models. In Model 1, it was expected that the criminal label causes negative changes in self-esteem (Hypotheses 1). In Model 2, it was anticipated that the secondary label causes negative changes in self-esteem (Hypothesis 2).

Dependent Variable

Self-esteem was measured by averaging 4-items from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale at Wave III (2001-2002). Respondents were asked if they agreed or disagreed that they have a lot of good qualities, they have a lot to be proud of, they liked themself just the way they are, and they felt they were doing everything just about right ($\alpha = .79$). The

4-item scale indicated good reliability. The responses included strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, to strongly agree. The self-esteem scale was reverse coded and ranged from a minimum score of 1 or low self-esteem to a maximum of 5 or high self-esteem.

Independent Variables

The criminal label was measured at Wave III (2001-2002). Respondents were asked whether they had ever been convicted of or pled guilty to a crime in adult court. This was a retrospective question, as the criminal labeling period occurred between 1995 and 2002. The responses included yes and no, which separated respondents into the labeled criminals (N = 215) and non-labeled citizens (N = 3,994). The criminal history of respondents included: drug-related offense (22%), major traffic offense (21%), other misdemeanor (19%), theft (11%), assault (9%), other felony (5%), destroying property (5%), robbery (3%), domestic violence (2%), receiving, possessing, or selling stolen property (2%), and possessing or selling an illegal firearm (1%).

The secondary label and primary label were measured at Wave III (2001-2002) by asking respondents how many times they had been convicted of or pled guilty to a crime in adult court. The responses ranged from a minimum of 1 conviction to a maximum of 10 convictions. The secondary label included respondents with two or more convictions (N = 68). The primary label included respondents with one conviction (N = 147). The remaining respondents were in the reference group, which included those without a criminal label (N = 3.994).

Control Variables

The control variables were from Wave I and Wave III of the Adult Health data set. The variables from Wave I included gender, race/ethnicity, parental socioeconomic status (SES), and prior self-esteem. Gender was measured based on the responses of male and female (reference group: male). Race/ethnicity was separated into six categories: White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Other Race (reference group: white). Parental socioeconomic status (SES) was measured based on a single indicator, which was parental educational attainment (see Kaplan, 1980). The responses for Parental SES included less than high school, high school, some college, college degree, and some graduate school (range 1 to 5). Prior self-esteem was measured using the same procedure as the dependent variable, which showed high reliability ($\alpha = 0.81$). The self-esteem scale was reverse coded and ranged from low self-esteem to high self-esteem (range 1 to 5).

The variables from Wave III included age, marital status, military status, employment status, educational attainment, delinquent label, and violent label. Age was a continuous measure in years (range 18 to 28). Marital status included the responses of single and married. Military status was divided into two categories: served and not served. Employment status was divided into two categories: unemployed and employed. Educational attainment was separated into five categories: less than high school, high school, some college, college degree, and some graduate school. The delinquent label was based on whether respondents had ever been convicted of or pled guilty to a crime, or been found delinquent, in juvenile court. The responses included: delinquent label and non-delinquent label. The violent label was measured based on the Uniform Crime Report's indexes of violent crime, which includes aggravated assault, manslaughter,

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murder, rape, and robbery. The violent label was divided into two categories: violent label and non-violent label.

Chapter 3 : *Results*

Table 1.1 presents the descriptive statistics for variables used in the analysis. The means are presented for prior self-esteem at Wave I and self-esteem at Wave III for the full sample, labeled criminal sample, and non-labeled criminal. A t-test revealed a significant difference between the self-esteem means of two groups. The respondents with the criminal label (mean = 4.13) reported significantly lower levels of self-esteem in Wave III when compared to respondents without the criminal label (mean = 4.23; p < .05). In addition, the respondents with the secondary label (mean = 3.91) reported significantly lower levels of self-esteem in Wave III when compared to respondents without the primary label (mean = 4.26; p < .001). Overall, the Add Health sample experienced positive changes in self-esteem. However, the criminal sample and the secondary sample experienced negative changes in self-esteem.

Of the respondents with the criminal label, the majority had the primary label (N = 147) in comparison to the secondary label (N = 68). The frequency of criminal labels among the criminal subsample was between one and two crimes (Mean = 1.56). Only a minor percentage of the respondents had the delinquent label (3%) and violent label (1%). The respondent's gender was about evenly divided (males 51%, females 49%). The racial categories included Whites (71%), Blacks (14%), Hispanics (11%), Asians (2%), and Other Race (2%). The average age of the respondents was 22 years old (Range = 18-28). The parental socioeconomic status (Mean = 2.72) and the respondent's education

(Mean = 2.57) were similar, as the average was between high school and some college. Most of the participants were employed (75%) in comparison to those that were unemployed (25%). A small percentage of respondents were married (16%) in comparison to those that were single (84%). An even small percentage served in the military (5%) in comparison to those that had no previous military service (95%).

Bivariate Analysis

Table 1.2 presents the correlation matrix of the variables. The main variables of interest include the criminal label, the secondary label, and self-esteem at Wave III. Labeling theory proposes that the direction of the relationship is from criminal labeling to self-esteem at Wave III. Nonetheless, Rosenberg, Schooler, & Schoenbach (1989) warn about reciprocal relationships or when two variables are associated, but the causal direction remains unknown. Therefore, the correlation matrix will be used to determine the direction of the relationship between the criminal labels and self-esteem at Wave III, and prior self-esteem at Wave I and the criminal labels.

The correlation matrix indicated that the criminal label ($r = -.04$; $p < .05$) and the secondary label ($r = -.08$; $p < .05$) were negatively correlated with self-esteem. Also, the primary label was not significantly correlated with self-esteem ($r = .01$; n.s.). The findings suggest that the direction of the relationship is from criminal labeling to self-esteem. However, the opposite direction must still be examined for reciprocal relationships. The results indicated that prior self-esteem was not significantly correlated with the criminal label ($r = .03$; n.s.) or the secondary label ($r = -.01$; n.s.). Though, prior self-esteem was positively correlated with the primary label ($r = .03$; $p < .05$). The

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correlation matrix suggests that the criminal label and the secondary label cause changes in self-esteem, while the prior self-esteem leads to the primary label.

Additional correlates with self-esteem literature are discussed. Being male was positively correlated with self-esteem ($r = .05$; $p < .05$). While being black was positively correlated with self-esteem ($r = .07$; $p < .05$), being white was negatively correlated with self-esteem ($r = -.06$; $p < .05$). Also, employment ($r = .07$; $p < .05$) and education ($r = .04$; $p < .05$) were positively correlated with self-esteem. Finally, prior self-esteem at Wave I was positively correlated with present self-esteem at Wave III ($r = .31$; $p < .05$).

Multivariate Analysis

Table 1.3 presents the standardized regression estimates of changes in self-esteem from Wave I (1994-95) to Wave III (2001-02). The main predictors are the criminal label and the secondary label. The table includes two models that address my hypotheses. Model 1 examines Hypothesis 1: the criminal label causes negative changes in self-esteem. Model 2 examines Hypothesis 2: the secondary label causes negative changes in self-esteem.

In Model 1, the results revealed that the criminal label causes negative changes in self-esteem over time ($\beta = -.04$; $p < .05$), which offered support for Hypothesis 1. Overall, the effect size or the difference in the self-esteem means between respondents with the criminal label and those without the criminal label is small ($d = .18$). Therefore, further analysis is required within the criminal subsample. In Model 2, the respondents with the criminal label are separated into the primary label and the secondary label. The results showed that the primary label causes no changes in self-esteem over time ($\beta = .00$;

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n.s.). They also indicated that the secondary label causes negative changes in self-esteem

over time ($\beta = -.07$; $p < .01$), which found support for Hypothesis 2. Furthermore, the

effect size or the difference in the self-esteem means between respondents with the

secondary label and those without the secondary label is medium ($d = .49$). A medium

effect size is so noticeable that it is "visible to the naked eye" (Cohen, 1992, p. 157).

In Model 1 and Model 2, each of the control variables had similar beta

coefficients. Prior self-esteem was correlated with positive changes in self-esteem over

time ($\beta = .31$; $p > .001$). Additionally, Blacks had greater positive changes in self-esteem

over time than Whites ($\beta = .06$; $p > .001$). Also, married respondents had greater positive

changes in self-esteem over time than single respondents ($\beta = .04$; $p > .05$). Finally,

employed respondents had greater positive changes in self-esteem over time than

unemployed respondents ($\beta = .07$; $p > .001$).

Conclusion

Labeling theory has been heavily criticized since its inception in sociology. A

previous review once described labeling theory as "theoretically unimportant and

empirically invalid" (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989, p. 388). The main proponent of

labeling theory that has received the most skepticism is the secondary deviance

hypothesis. The theory states that the criminal labeling process will influence the self-

concept, a deviant identity will develop, and produce further participation in crime

(Lemert, 1951). Over the years, the lack of empirical support for labeling theory has led

to revisions and modifications (see Link et al., 1989). Similarly, the present study

reinterpreted the outcome of the self-concept. While the traditional emphasis of labeling

theory was on the deviant identity or the content component of the self-concept, the present study focused on self-esteem or the evaluative component of the self-concept.

The hypotheses of early labeling theorists were supported with the reinterpretation of the self-concept. Becker (1963) proposed that the process of being labeled as a criminal offender would have significant consequences on the self-concept. In support of this theory, the criminal label was found to influence the self-concept, as was indicated by the negative changes in self-esteem over time. Upon further examination within the criminal label sample, Lemert (1951) proposed that the primary label would produce no long-term effects on the self-concept (Cullen & Wilcox, 2010). Meanwhile, the secondary label was thought to have a major effect that would alter the self-concept. On the one hand, the primary label was thought to produce little to no changes in the self-concept, so it was not included in the hypotheses section. Though it is worth noting that those with the primary label exhibited no significant changes in self-esteem when compared to those without the criminal label. On the other hand, the secondary label was found to influence the self-concept, which was demonstrated by the negative changes in self-esteem. The secondary label represents the main effect within the criminal label sample that is responsible for the most significant negative changes in self-esteem when compared to those without the criminal label. The results can be generalized to the United States population, given that the Add Health sample [Public Use] is nationally representative.

Another proponent of labeling theory is the status characteristics hypothesis, which proposes that those that occupy a low status are more likely to be labeled as

criminal offenders (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989). The low status at-risk groups include the lower class, Blacks, and females. Since status is such an important indicator of self-esteem (James, 1890), the expectation would be that these groups will have smaller positive changes in self-esteem when compared to their counterparts. As expected, this is the case for those from the lower class and females, but not for Blacks, who displayed greater positive changes in self-esteem in comparison to Whites. Upon first glance this finding is somewhat unexpected, given that Blacks occupy a low status and are considered a stigmatized group (referred to as the *tribal stigma* by Goffman, 1963). Many assume that stigmatized groups suffer from low self-esteem, but an exception exists in the case of Blacks, who have displayed high levels of self-esteem (Crocker, 1999). An explanation could be that Blacks are ascribed this stigma at birth, which socializes this group to anticipate stigmatization in society, and ultimately lessens the psychological consequences.

Finally, William James' (1890) theory of self-esteem explained the negative changes in self-esteem among those with the criminal label and secondary label. Since self-esteem is based on one's success or failure and the good or bad position held within society, the present study addressed only part of this theory. Future research should consider the self-esteem of those that have been successful in the pretension of crime, which has led to a good position within society. The theory predicts that success in crime would lead to positive changes in self-esteem.

TABLE 1.1 Descriptive Statistics of Variables.

	Full Sample		No Label		Criminal Label		Primary Label		Secondary Label	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Dependent Variable										
Self-Esteem	4.23	.01	4.23*	.01	4.13*	.04	4.26***	.05	3.91***	.09
Control Variables										
Prior Self-Esteem	4.09	.01	4.09	.01	4.16	.04	4.22	.05	4.07	.09
Gender										
Male	.51	—	.49	—	.83	—	.81	—	.86	—
Race/Ethnicity										
White	.71	—	.71	—	.76	—	.77	—	.75	—
Black	.14	—	.14	—	.11	—	.12	—	.09	—
Hispanic	.11	—	.11	—	.10	—	.09	—	.10	—
Asian	.02	—	.02	—	.01	—	.01	—	.02	—
Other Race	.02	—	.02	—	.02	—	.01	—	.04	—
Parent SES	2.72	.02	2.72	.02	2.60	.08	2.75	.10	2.34	.13
Delinquent Label	.03	—	.02	—	.19	—	.17	—	.23	—
Violent Label	.01	—	—	—	.13	—	.09	—	.20	—
Age	21.58	.03	21.57	.04	21.71	.14	21.50	.16	22.08	.27
Marital Status										
Married	.16	—	.17	—	.11	—	.10	—	.13	—
Employment Status										
Employed	.75	—	.75	—	.76	—	.82	—	.66	—
Military Status										
Served	.05	—	.05	—	.04	—	.04	—	.04	—
Education	2.57	.02	2.58	.02	2.26	.08	2.39	.09	2.03	.13
N	4,209		3,994		215		147		68	

Statistically significant difference in means of self-esteem.
*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.
Source: Add Health.

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TABLE 1.2 Correlation of Variables.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1. Self-Esteem	–															
2. Prior Self-Esteem	.31*	–														
3. Criminal Label	-.04*	.03	–													
4. Delinquent Label	-.03	.00	.25*	–												
5. Secondary Label	-.08*	.00	.59*	.18*	–											
6. Primary Label	-.01	.04*	.79*	.17*	-.03*	–										
7. Violent Label	-.04	.00	.35*	.21*	.32*	.19*	–									
8. Male	.05*	.16*	.15*	.12*	.10*	.12*	.07*	–								
9. White	-.06*	-.05*	.03	-.02	.01	.03	-.01	.00	–							
10. Black	.07*	.09*	-.02	.00	-.02	-.01	.01	-.01	-.64*	–						
11. Parent SES	.02	.03	-.02	-.02	-.05*	.01	-.03	-.01	.19*	-.08*	–					
12. Age	.01	-.05*	.02	-.04*	.04	-.01	-.01	.06*	-.03	.04*	-.02	–				
13. Married	.02	-.06*	-.03*	-.01	-.02	-.03*	.01	-.10*	.06*	-.07*	-.11*	.22*	–			
14. Employed	.07*	.01	.00	-.03	-.03	.03	-.02	.04*	.09*	-.10*	-.01	.12*	.04*	–		
15. Military	.03	.04*	-.01	.01	-.01	-.01	.01	.14*	.00	.02	.01	.04	.05*	.05*	–	
16. Education	.04*	.06*	-.08*	-.10*	-.08*	-.04	-.07*	-.11*	.12*	-.08*	.42*	.17*	-.09*	.09*	-.06*	–

*p < .05.
Source: Add Health.

TABLE 1.3 Standardized OLS Estimates of Self-Esteem.

Variable	Model 1 B	(SE)	Model 2 B	(SE)
Criminal Labeling				
Criminal Label	−.04*	(.05)		
Delinquent Label	−.02	(.08)		
Secondary Label			−.07**	(.11)
Primary Label			.00	(.05)
Violent Label			−.01	(.13)
Prior Self-Esteem	.31***	(.02)	.31***	(.02)
Gender				
Male	.01	(.02)	.01	(.02)
Race/Ethnicity				
Black	.06***	(.03)	.06***	(.03)
Hispanic	.03	(.03)	.03	(.03)
Asian	.01	(.06)	.01	(.06)
Other Race	.01	(.07)	.01	(.07)
Parent SES	.02	(.01)	.02	(.01)
Age	.00	(.06)	.01	(.01)
Marital Status				
Married	.04*	(.03)	.04*	(.03)
Employment Status				
Employed	.07***	(.02)	.06***	(.02)
Military Status				
Served	.01	(.05)	.01	(.05)
Education	.01	(.01)	.01	(.01)
N	4,209		4,209	

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.
Source: Add Health.

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