

**COMBINING MERTON'S STRAIN THEORY WITH LABELING THEORY AND MORAL ENTREPRENEURS**

Ralph G. O'Sullivan  
Chillicothe, IL

**Abstract**

Ritzer (1974) wrote that sociology is a multi-paradigmatic discipline where each framework can hold several theoretical explanations. Such declarations are often treated individually, but there are often unexplored confluences between them. Merton's goals-means theory of social strain, for example, is here considered as a labeling one heavily laced with implications about moral authority when applied to studies in deviant behavior. The synthesis of dialogues, illustrated with sociological ideas from modern novels, validates the thesis that social complexities deserve integrated explanations.

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"Being a disfigured felon carries weight in certain circles..."  
(novelist Carl Hiaasen 2010)

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"Police had a natural suspicion of teenagers, especially those who already had track records of trouble."  
(novelist Tami Hoag 1991/2006)

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"Not all sexual predators are killers or serial rapists. The most successful of them live well within the boundaries of the law and they're probably more common than we'd like to believe. See ... the problem is identifying the bastards. They're not social anomalies; they are deviants."  
(novelist Randy Wayne White 1998)

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**INTRODUCTION**

I have long believed that literature is a marvelous outlet for social discourse that readers can easily understand. Novelists have always been peripheral social activists (R.G. O'Sullivan<sup>1</sup> 2007) exploring such complex topics as deviance and

conformity, reporting their findings to faithful followers. Sociologists do the same, but in different ways and venues.

Introductory sociology textbooks all contain a chapter on deviant behavior where social deviance is defined as rule- or norm-breaking behavior and conformity is defined as rule-defined as rule- or norm-abiding activity. The texts, conduct codes used as standards for evaluations, a failure noted by O'Sullivan (2007). The texts confer that the rule breakers or deviants will be treated as outsiders resulting from social stigmas, but rule followers or conformists are not usually accorded haloes (O'Sullivan 2007) because quiet choices do not garner notoriety. The chapters include many of the historical and modern masters of the subjects, including Merton's 1967 theory of adaptations that is co-referenced in the social strain and rational choice frames,

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<sup>1</sup>R.G. O'Sullivan is hereafter just called O'Sullivan, except when needed to avoid possible confusion with F.D. O'Sullivan.

telling us that people make studied economic choices rather than spontaneous ones toward cultural and social expectations. The chapters also offer information from Goffman's 1963 study on stigmas and H.S. Becker's<sup>2</sup> discussions on moral entrepreneurs as elements of the interactionist approach, enhancing our understandings about social labeling and a community's moral oversight. Little space is available in the texts to combine these approaches on adaptation, labeling, and moral authority so that task is accomplished by following several steps.

First, some alternative ways to look at definitions for deviance and conformity are offered because traditional ones are simplistic and limiting. Second, the basic premises of Merton, Goffman, Becker, and of O'Sullivan are highlighted, setting the stage for their ultimate synthesis. Third, those thoughts are made available in easy-to-read and side-by-side manners to envision the bonds between them and within them, with discussions following. No numerical data are offered. Instead, existing expressions are mixed with emergent ones, "new wine in an old bottle," as a different way to look at familiar subjects for those who like to explore sociology by going "outside the box" of convention.

### **LOOKING AT DEVIANCE AND CONFORMITY: TRADITIONALLY AND ALTERNATIVELY**

The social sciences are dependent on their key terms as bases for discussions, and sociology is no exception. Sometimes, however, such simplicity is confusing. Sociology, for example, is often considered as the

scientific study of society, making one wonder if there is an unscientific approach, and what, then, are the roles of history, economics, political science, social/cultural anthropology, and social ecology if they are not comprised of empirical explorations?

The same dilemma of absolutism exists with traditional definitions for deviance and conformity. Before leaving academia, I offered my students an alternative perspective because any understandings of deviance evaluations of those codes and social responses to the acts and the actors.

As I see them, deviance and conformity refer to the definitions that exist for inappropriate and appropriate behaviors based upon the local moralities (O'Sullivan 1994) of groups, organizations, communities, and larger social systems. Two examples exist. All states have criminal codes that define illegal acts in "thou shall not" forms, including listings about inappropriate methods of goal acquisitions. The states also have rules for the road handbooks that define proper motor operation as "thou shall" guidelines.

Such codes and others exist at several levels of social importance in civil, military, and religious settings containing differential distribution of social power to protect people, their properties and rights, as well as group, organizational, and societal preservation. The mere presence of the codes, however, guarantees neither adherence to them nor their effectiveness. People evaluate the norms in terms of efficacy and

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<sup>2</sup>H.S. Becker is hereafter just called Becker to avoid possible confusion with H.P. Becker.

opportunities, responding with a range of options that includes Merton's. Others then respond to the selections by assigning the labels of deviant or conformist to the participant and choices, allowing social and legal definitions for deviance to expand and deviant labels to amplify through systemic processes (Buckley 1976; Lemert 1951; Quinney 1970). Responses to conformity do not grow in similar manners.

Deviants are likely to receive public and sociological attention whereas conformists fly "under the radar" fitting personal ethics with the community's. At times, however, such anonymity goes unrewarded and special notes of good deeds are made. Prominent sailors have ships named after them, and school committees honor distinguished alumni. People are canonized for religious deeds, and monies traditionally bear the images of prominent politicians. Military personnel are awarded with medals and promotions for acts of bravery, whereas post office walls have historically been strewn with posters of less honorable people.

My preferred classroom definition for deviance evolved into "those violations of mores, institutional traditions, and laws that reinforce each other," invoking social indignation against the violators. This outlook contains the triune of definitional, behavioral, and responsive elements, but it is still oppositional to the reciprocal facets of conformity. That weakness was partially addressed by O'Sullivan (2007) as he identified social variance as activities that exist between the dichotomies, thereby easing the problems of a dualist

fallacy creating a sliding scale of deviance-variance-conformity.

### **LOOKING AT SOCIAL LABELING: MERTON, GOFFMAN, BECKER, AND O'SULLIVAN**

Merton, Goffman, and Becker are renowned sociologists, O'Sullivan is less well known. All have made contributions to social labeling theory and studies in deviant behavior so their individual sets of ideas are quickly reviewed.

#### **Merton's Thoughts**

Merton's stylized adaptations to cultural materialism are standard fare in most discussions about deviance and conformity enhancing our ability to discuss both topics simultaneously: They give dualistic capital to the other. He stated that we have a variety of goals worthy of achievement and access to them, but discrepant availability to each causes social strain. The adaptations of conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion are ultimately based in perceived economic outcomes of gains versus losses. Merton's adaptations also show continuity with labeling theories. The act of conformity is made by the conformist and the act of innovation is accomplished by the innovator<sup>3</sup>. The act of ritualism is accomplished by the ritualist, and the act of retreatism is accomplished by the retreatist. The act of rebellion is accomplished by the rebel, so the acts designate the actor. Any act other than

<sup>3</sup>*Not all acts of innovation are negative deviance, but they get more attention than positive deviance as Wolfzorn, Heckert, and Heckert affirm (2006).*

conformity has the potential for being called deviant, depending on its consequences, the actor, and the authorities of observers.

Merton may not have meant for his model to become a general-use device, but it has. O'Sullivan (1995) first employed the device in a study on religious revitalization illustrating that people adjust to a religious congregation's traditions by conforming to them, or by switching places of worship via innovation avoiding internal conflict. Congregants can go along with local habits without internalizing them via ritualism, withdraw from any membership affiliation via retreatism, or try to change tradition-laden gatherings via rebellion.

O'Sullivan used the model again in his 2002 case study in labor economics, illustrating that workers can adapt to hostile work environments by conforming to a company's precepts, or through innovation by quitting, telling the company to "Take this job and shove it!" They can be ritualists by just doing the work without using it to define master statuses, or by the retreatism or withdrawal from the active labor force. The company rebel who questions managerial policies, decisions, or authority runs the risk of being told "You're fired!"

O'Sullivan (2010) revisited that study, making a needed adjustment to innovation's quitting-out-of-anger mode. As companies downsize offering reduced hours and take-home pay, wage-earning employees with stationary cost-of-living and cost-of-work expenses exercise a personal version of asset-liability management. The workers may participate in proffered voluntary layoffs, pursuing other jobs or unemployment and

COBRA insurances that outweigh the reduced benefits of diminished work time. Still an innovator, the act identifies the actor.

### **Goffman's Contributions**

Goffman's analyses of stigmas and other labels are important discussions on social deviance and conformity. They were not the first, however, having had many major and minor precursors. F.D. O'Sullivan's little known 1928 *Crime Detection* presents a list of environmental factors contributing to a *culture for urban deviance* (R.G. O'Sullivan forthcoming) and one variable is incarceration that opens revolving doors for continued juvenile deviance. Marked youths may adopt the label of spoiled identity as their own and act on it, contributing to the self-fulfilling prophecy of deviance that Tannenbaum (1938) called the "dramatization of evil." That idea was later reinforced in Lemert's (1951) discussions about the shift from primary deviance to secondary deviance, and modern novelist Hoag (1992/2006) used this train of thought to her literary advantage.

Transitions from tainted identities to saintly ones can be slow and uncertain, but movements in the reverse direction can be swift and sure as novelist White depicted. Witness, for example, how quickly public opinions can change toward the following illustrations: Priests who exploit acolytes, politicians who exploit interns or who transfer campaign contributions to private "offshore" accounts, teachers who sexually exploit students, the business mogul who uses a ponzi scheme to fleece megabucks from unsuspecting

investors, the marquee athlete who wagers against the home team or is held accountable for the death of a family member, the good cop who goes "rogue," or father and son presidents who are vilified as being slow when responding to natural disasters (Bush 2010). So, who does the labeling and why? Becker offered answers to these questions.

**Becker's Ideas**

His *moral entrepreneurs* are a community's guardians of morality. They want the unit preserved, and such stability is dependent on the presence of community-wide ethics, visions for the future, and behavioral norms. Notable aberrations from them are threatening. His *rule creators/makers* define the behavioral guidelines, and his *rule enforcers* are agents of social control whose duty is ensuring social conformity. Both categories entail legitimate authority which is the main reasons that folkways were excluded from my definition for deviance: These codes of etiquette are unofficial, casual, and regional, whereas many mores and institutional traditions have greater social value accounting for inclusions in my perspective. Since rule creators/makers and rule enforcers are differentially empowered and enabled to formally label/stigmatize, is Becker's list complete? O'Sullivan does not think so.

**O'Sullivan's Thoughts**

He expanded Becker's list several times enhancing scholars' perceptions of moral entrepreneur status-role sets. The social legitimacy and proper applications of laws are determined on case-by-case bases when legal panels such as juries, or arbiters such as

judges, have such responsibility after hearing arguments from opposing counsel. O'Sullivan (1995) named the decision makers *rule interpreters*, and the advocates of differing juridical outcomes are *rule users* (O'Sullivan 2007). Police or other rule enforcers who side-step permitted investigatory methods are called *rule abusers* (O'Sullivan 2006), and he identified legitimately-labeled deviants as *rule breakers* (O'Sullivan 2007) whose individual moralities violate those of a collective.

The extended list of moral stewards is still incomplete. *Rule influences* try to shape the directions that laws or regulations should take, and there are others that further reflect Merton's categories. *Rule pretenders*, like ritualists, feign allegiance to a maxim as a means to an end, not an end in itself. *Rule avoiders*, like retreatists, believe that socially-approved goals and avenues of achievement are restrictive or unnatural so they drop out, becoming seekers of alternative meanings (Lofland 1966). *Rule changers*, like rebels, see inherent discrepancies in goals-means properties and want to modify them by creating alternative expectations and opportunities. Finally, *rule abiders*, like conformists, internalize and follow the rules as their own.

**COMBINING MERTON WITH LABELING THEORISTS**

Merton's theory of action identified five forms of behavior and their attendant actors. Merton, then, is a labeling theorist by virtue of connecting personal activities with identifiers, but social labeling is more than simple tagging. Labels are

consequential for the labeled as they open some door of opportunity and close others. The moral entrepreneurs identified by Becker and by O'Sullivan play the roles of official observers, becoming enablers or gatekeepers. Anyone can make casual and informal judgments about others, but similar opinions from people vested with social power are accordant. Several sets of related ideas have been presented in these pages, and they are better seen with visual reminders

of the interplay between them. (See Figure 1 and 2).

Once the guiding principles behind cultural materialism, social labeling, and moral standards are set and vocabularies are refined, the paradigmatic and theoretical coalitions between them are evident, and for good reason. No single explanation for deviance or for conformity has domain over all others. Multi-dimensional topics are worthy of dedicated explanations.

**Figure 1. Old and New Sets of Moral Entrepreneurs\***

From Becker	From R.G. O'Sullivan	The New Ones
Rule Creators/Makers	Rule Interpreters	Rule Abiders
Rule Enforcers	Rule Users	Rule Influencers
	Rule Abusers	Rule Pretenders
	Rule Breakers	Rule Avoiders
		Rule Changers

\*Figure 1 identifies the parallel sets of moral entrepreneurs.

**Figure 2. Integration of More Entrepreneurs and Merton's Adaptation\*\***

Moral Entrepreneurs Means	Adaptation	Goals	Means
Rule Abiders	Conformity/Conformists	+	+
Rule Breakers	Innovation/Innovators	+	-
Rule Pretenders	Ritualism/Ritualists	-	+
Rule Avoiders	Retreatism/Retreatists	-	-
Rule Changers	Rebellion/Rebels	+	+
Rule Creators/Makers			
Rule Influencers			
Rule Abusers			
Rule Enforcers			
Rule Interpreters			
Rule Users			

\*\*Figure 2 presents them against Merton's adaptations and each other.

## DISCUSSION

A question was raised earlier asking whether or not there is an unscientific, casual, or informal sociology? The question is likely answered in the negative within the discipline, but that response may not be so self-aggrandizing outside it. The novels of Hiaasen (2010), for example, usually address the serious issues of exile- and eco-politics in Florida couched in humor to entice appreciative audiences, and each standalone tale commonly has two characters attracting such interest. Please bear in mind, however, that his storylines are less important for this study than his understanding of social deviance and deviants.

One person is the returning "Skink" as a decorated army captain and sniper turned governor of the state turned survivalist recluse swamp rat—the one-eyed innovator/retreatist/rebel and rule breaker/avoider/changer who exacts creative justice on those who defile his state. The other varies from story to story, but in *Star Island* he is "Chemo." Stigmatized because of his criminal record and disfiguration, his convoluted sense of right and wrong emerges in his role as a bodyguard for tragic others. After making hedged choices against the law and imprisonment, Chemo was arrested by rule enforcers, and trial lawyers, as rule users, argued for his guilt or acquittal. Jurors and a judge, as rule interpreters, determined that the charges against him were justified, so he was sentenced to Raiford Prison as a rule breaker, but the handle remained with him as an ex-convict. Casual stigmas were also attached to him because of his marred body, but stigmas are not always

damning, and may even have the reverse effect as sociologists and storytellers have noticed. Chemo's prosthetic arm, a battery-driven weed whacker, is abhorred and admired. As the housing market of Florida improved, he took a job in an occupation that he had studied while doing time – real estate finance. Skink remains at-large.

Sometimes sociologists are slow or reluctant to address possible bridges existing between their ideas; they may be reticent to admit that others outside academia notice those connections; and simple definitions as ideal types cannot be absolute. The quotes from Hiaasen (2010), from Hoag (1992/2006) and from White (1998), for example, highlight many sociological truths. Moral entrepreneurship addresses several responses to cultural expectations. Social labeling is not always official. Stigmas and haloes are sometimes justified, sometimes not. Stigmas can have the latent function of enhancing social reputations rather than demeaning them. The assigned labels from Merton, Goffman, and from other labelers can overlap. Sometimes deviance is seen as less bad, conformity is less good, resulting in the anti-hero and social variant statuses of Skink and Chemo, for example.

I agree with the combined beliefs of Ogburn (1930) and O'Sullivan (2006, 2007) that it is appropriate to look beyond sociology at alternative or non-traditional sources of information to ground research. Ritzer (1974) is correct when he states that sociology is a multiple paradigm endeavor of integrated theories to be pursued vigorously, but we must go beyond formulaic traditions because outsiders,

including the three novelists borrowed for this study, already know to do so far beyond their quoted snippets. They "get" Ritzer.

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