

SHOPLIFTING, APPEARANCE, AND THE LABELING PROCESS:  
SOME EXPERIMENTAL FINDINGS

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## Introduction

The reactive conception of deviance has gained increasing theoretical and empirical attention during the past two decades. The basic argument of advocates of this perspective is that deviance is not an inherent property of acts or individuals but, rather, grounded in the imputations of relevant audiences (Hepburn, 1975). Consequently, research focus has been moving from such phenomenon as rates of deviance and characteristics of "offenders" to such concerns as identifying relevant audiences, public regulation of deviance, and the management of deviant identities (Rubington and Weinberg, 1973: 1-10).

A recent field experiment (Steffensmeier and Terry 1973; Terry and Steffensmeier, 1973; Steffensmeier, 1975; Steffensmeier and Steffensmeier, 1975) exemplifies the reactive conception of deviance by focusing on aspects of the actor and the audience as they influence reactions to deviant behavior, in this case shoplifting. These authors varied the appearance and sex of research accomplices who were instructed to shoplift in the presence of store customers. It was hypothesized that actor appearance, operationalized as "hippie" or "straight", and sex (male vs. female) would affect audience responses to the shoplifting behavior (i.e., the rate of reporting the shoplifting behavior). Their findings supported their hypothesis regarding appearance; hippie shoplifters were reported significantly more often than straight shoplifters. Sex did not result in significant differences in reporting behaviors. Steffensmeier and Terrey (1973: 425) concluded that their research supported the interactionist-labeling perspective that "the imputation of deviance resides not only in the fact of deviance per se: it also depends heavily on the meanings that the audience attach to the behavior of the actor."

Although their conclusions are consistent in the context of the labeling perspective, it can be argued that such conclusions are not necessarily derivable from the data available from their research. The linkage between appearances and behaviors of the actors and imputations made by audiences to the actors remains inferential and cannot be verified from the findings of the field experiment. The assertion that appearance "provides the potential reactor with information that enables him to locate an actor on a high-low evaluative continuum" (Steffensmeier and Terry, 1973: 423) is based solely upon observations of reactors' behaviors toward the shoplifter and not on knowledge of the meanings that audience members attach to their appearance.<sup>1</sup> The model of social reaction implicit in their discussion, although admittedly simplified, could be diagrammed as follows:

Appearance  $\longrightarrow$  Identity  $\longrightarrow$  Overt Audience Reactions

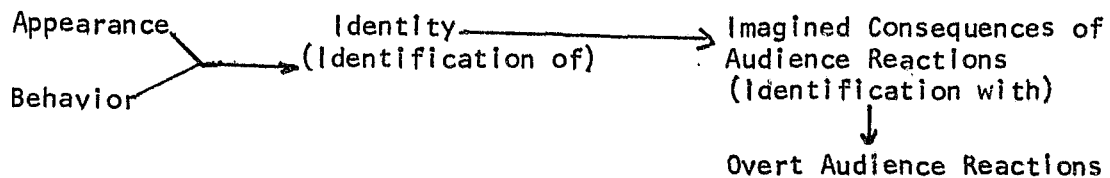
The nature of identity, resulting from a mediating process occurring between observations of shoplifting behaviors and audience reactions, is inferred from the audience reactions but is not empirically substantiated. Our purpose in this paper is to explore in more detail this intervening mediation process. As will become clear, such an exploration gives rise to questions of how appearance, as well as actor behavior,<sup>2</sup> affects audience imputations of identity.

Our approach is grounded in the symbolic interactionist conception of human behavior. As Mead (1938) and Dewey (1930) have argued, problematic situations illicit an imaginative rehearsal of alternative reactions to situations. The meaning of a particular interactive situation is established through a mental mediating process whereby persons imagine outcomes of their own actions prior to consummating an act (Mead, 1938: 16-23). Thus, the "reactions" of audience members must be understood in the context of the social act, where the final outcome, in this case the reporting of shoplifting behavior, is but one aspect of the total

act. In order to understand the meaning of an audience member's reaction, therefore, we must have some idea of the reactor's assessment of alternative outcomes of the potential audience reactions.

Related to this problem is the relationship between appearance and identity. Steffensmeier and Terry's basic premise is that appearance is indicative of identity and subsequently is the basis of observed audience reactions. Indeed, as has been argued, the establishment of the identity of an actor is essential to social interaction. (Glaser and Strauss, 1964; Foote, 1951; Stone, 1962). Actors (reactors) must establish the identity of others in order to accurately assess appropriate behaviors. And appearance is a major informational source for establishing the identity of others, "appearance means identifications of one another" (Stone, 1962: 91).

An important, yet often overlooked, aspect of identification is that the concept subsumes two processes: identification of and identification with (Stone, 1962: 90). That is, prior to being able to take the role of others, we must know the identity of the other. This suggests that reactions may involve at least two levels of imputation. First, the identity of the actor must be specified; he or she must be socially situated. Then, based upon such identity, reactors take the role of the actor in terms of establishing the possible implications reactive behaviors would have for the actor. Returning to our earlier mentioned notions of the imaginative rehearsal, we can argue that the mediating process leading up to audience reactions involves both observed behaviors and predetermining the consequences an action will have through a process of role taking. In short, it can be hypothesized that the reactor's behavior reflects his or her notions of the impact audience reactions may have on the actor as determined through role taking. The following diagram of social reaction summarizes the relationships discussed here:



### Methods

A quasi-experimental design was employed to empirically explore the above problem. Undergraduate students (N=77) from a large Southern University were randomly assigned to four treatment groups, each of which was exposed to separate experimental stimuli. The stimuli were in the form of video tapes depicting scenes of shoplifting and non-shoplifting behaviors.

The study was introduced by the experimenter via a segment of the stimulus tape prior to each treatment. Therefore, each group received identical instructions, controlling for possible variances due to introductory procedures. The experimenter explained on this segment of the video tape that the subjects were to help in a study of perceptions and judgments of behavior. The research was presented as a concern with how human beings, who must monitor television cameras in retail establishments, make decisions about whether or not certain actions of shoppers are "reportable." Subjects were then instructed that a scene would appear to which they were to pay close attention and that they would be asked specific questions about what they had observed. Although subjects were not told that the scenes would be of actual behaviors, follow-up debriefings indicated that tapes were viewed as depictions of "real" situations.

Independent Variables: Appearance and Behavior: The video tapes were of contrived scenes each using the same setting and actress. Two components of the scenes were systematically manipulated: appearance and behavior. Appearance was operationalized to present a "hippie" and a "straight" appearing actress. By using the same actress for each scene, we were able to control the unintended variances in demeanor or style. The

"hippie" look was accomplished by the actress wearing a long denim skirt, sandals, bra-less black sweater, no make-up, and hair styled in a frizzy "natural" or "Afro." "Straight" appearance was created by wearing moderate amounts of make-up; stylish skirt, blouse, and shoes; hair pulled neatly into a bun; and a pair of modern sunglasses worn over the head. Pre-tests using university students indicated that the intended differences in appearance were evident.

Behavior was operationalized in the form of shoplifting and non-shoplifting. The scenes were taped in a local bookstore with a stationary camera. The field of view included an aisle of book displays leading to the cashier and exit. The actress entered the field browsing among the book displays. After approximately two minutes spent leafing through three books, the actress walked past the cashier and out the door.<sup>3</sup> The shoplifting sequences occurred when the actress quickly placed the last book handled into her hand bag before exiting. The actress replaced all of the books before exiting in the non-shoplifting sequence.

The two independent variables thus provide a 2 x 2 factorial design<sup>4</sup> as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1  
Behavior

		Shoplifting	Non-shoplifting
Appearance	Hippie		
	Straight		

#### Dependent Variables

Dependent variables were derived from responses to items on a questionnaire completed immediately after the tapes were shown. Questions ranged from perceptions

of intentions and internal dispositions of the actress to respondent experiences and reactions to shoplifting.

Personal Disposition: Attributions of dispositional qualities of the actress were obtained from a set of fifteen semantic differential items. Subjects were asked to rate the actress for each item on a 9-point scale where the extremities of the scale represented the maximum positive or negative evaluation for each item, i.e., trustworthy/untrustworthy; honest/dishonest, etc. The responses were subjected to factor analysis using the unimax rotation procedure to determine identifiable factors. One of the four resulting factor patterns contained five items which loaded at .5000 or higher, each of which represent dispositions related to moral attributes (trustworthy, moral, responsible, reliable, and honest). Mean scores for responses to these items, weighted by their factor loadings, were thus treated as indicators of judgments of personal moral qualities of the actress.<sup>5</sup>

Perceived Impact of Being Convicted of Shoplifting: Central to our research is question of the imagined consequences of alternative reactions to deviant behavior. In order to operationalize this imaginative process, we asked, "If she/he were convicted of shoplifting, how would the subject be affected personally, in your opinion (answer these questions even if you thought the subject did not shoplift)." Five statements followed, each of which could be answered on a 9-point scale from "Definitely No" to "Definitely Yes:" The subject would (1) be extremely upset emotionally, (2) be concerned that her/his family would think poorly of her/him, (3) be concerned that her/his friends would think poorly of her/him, (4) be more concerned with the inconvenience or costs involved than with reactions of family or friends, and (5) consider it a "fact-of-life" and not be upset one way or another. The composite mean score for these five items was treated as an index of the respondent's imagined impact being convicted of

shoplifting would have on the actress.

## Results

Attribution of Moral Qualities: The effect of behavior on the imputation of moral qualities is evident (Table 1). As expected, the shoplifting stimulus illicited much more negative reactions than the non-shoplifting stimulus ( $F=75.611$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Appearance, on the other hand, tended to have notably less effect on moral attributions, although the difference in moral dispositional scores remains statistically significant ( $F=5.685$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

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Table 1 About Here

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This finding is further explored in Table 2 where T-tests of differences between mean scores for straight and hippie stimuli are examined within each behavioral type. Here we find that the effect of appearance remains for the non-shoplifting situations but that in the shoplifting situation the effect disappears. This suggests that while appearance may be informative to observers about the internal moral qualities of actors in normal situations, when a deviant act is observed (i.e., shoplifting), appearance is not as important as the act itself. In other words, it would appear that certain salient behaviors tend to override the perceptual field in terms of imputational reactions.

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Table 2 About Here

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These data bring into question the assumption that "hippie appearance constitutes a negative identity that results in a greater willingness on the



part of the subject to report the hippie over the straight shoplifter" (Steffensmeier and Terry, 1973:423). As our data plainly show, appearance has little impact on the imputation of negative qualities to the actress. But the observation that hippies were reported more frequently than straight actors requires further examination. It is our contention that the imagined impact of reactions to deviance plays an important role in the labeling process and may provide some explanation for the observed results in the field experiment.

Imagined Severity of Impact: Table 3 reports the findings for the effect of appearance and behavior on the imagined impact that being convicted of shoplifting would have on the actress. Both appearance and behavior results in statistically significant differences in mean impact scores, but the effect of appearance is more extreme ( $F=10.089$ ,  $p<.01$ ) than the effect of behavior ( $F=5.683$ ,  $p<.05$ ). The more conservatively dressed the actress, the more severe was the imagined impact. Interestingly, results for the effects of behavior within each appearance category (Table 4) reveal no statistically significant differences, while the effects of appearance within each behavioral category (Table 4) are statistically significant. As with the imputation of moral dispositions, there is no interaction effect between appearance and behavior.

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Tables 3 and 4 About Here

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These findings suggest that reactions to deviant behaviors reflect more than negative labels that are applied to actors. Beyond the ascription of negative identities to actors, audiences reflect on the possible consequences reactions may have for deviant actors. It is at this level of concern that appearance evidently becomes important. When the actress was dressed as a hippie

the audience felt that she would much less likely be impacted by being convicted than when she was dressed straight. It would follow, we argue, that observers would much more likely report those for whom they thought the consequences would not be as severe.

### Discussion

Thus, reactions to deviant acts are not necessarily undimensional imputations of identity. As suggested by our findings, the attribution of internal qualities to an actor may be separate from imputations of social location. Reactions to deviant acts, like reactions to problematic situations in general, involve not only assessments of the current situation, but imaginations about future states which are made sensible in a context of knowledge of past situations. As John Dewey has stated, the deliberative process is a mental "experimentation" of imagining various lines of possible action "to see what the resultant action would be like if it were entered upon" (Dewey, 1930:190). Reactions to a behavior which is known to be associated with serious sanctions inevitably involves considerations about the effect that reactions may have on an actor. And this effect can only be understood by some idea of the social circumstances of the actor, i.e., his or her social identity. This social identity includes, among other things, notions of significant others such as family and friends to whom the actor is personally accountable. Appearance, in the absence of other sources of information, provides a basis for establishing the identity of the actor and consequently provides grounding for assessing through role taking the personal consequences of reactions.

Although there has been considerable discussion of the nature of role taking in the labeling process (i.e., Becker, 1963; Kitsuse, 1962; Ball, 1970), such discussions have generally concerned the self imputation of deviance by the actor taking the role of others (Hepburn, 1975). However, if, as suggested by Douglas

(1971), the emergence of deviance involves a negotiation process between labelers and the labeled, it seems plausible that relevant audience members engage in some form of role taking themselves. To reiterate, in order for audiences to make sense of an actor and his or her behavior, they must come to some understanding of the actor's point of view relative to the particular behavior at hand.

This conceptualization of the audience in the labeling process has implications for interpreting findings in the currently active research area dealing with jury reactions to defendants. Following the findings of Dion et al, (1972) that "what is beautiful ~~is~~<sup>s</sup> good," studies of simulated juries support the hypothesis that unattractive defendants would be judged more harshly than attractive defendants (Shaw, 1972; Nesdale, et al, 1975; Rule, et al, 1975; Efran, 1974; Kaplan and Kemmerick, 1974; Seligman et al, 1974). One study (White, 1975; White and McCarthy, 1976) that found no effect of the offender's social status on judgments about the severity of punishment points out that status was operationalized by one-or-two-word occupational descriptions and that

"Most decisions regarding punishment made by law enforcement agents involve face-to-face interaction with the offender. Here status differences are indicated by a wide range of stimuli such as speech pattern, dress style, residential neighborhood, etc." (White, 1975:417).<sup>6</sup>

These findings, it could be argued, reflect the jury's (audience's) imaginative rehearsal of the impact particular sanctions would have on defendants. And, information contributing to knowledge of the social identity of the defendant, quite separate from the nature of the deviant act itself, plays a significant role in jury reactions. As Landy and Aronson (1969:151) have speculated

"One reason that the subjects were more lenient on the neutral and attractive defendants is that subjects in the neutral defendant and attractive defendant conditions may have found it easier to identify with the defendant than could subjects in the unattractive defendant condition.

That is, the subjects may have found it easier to imagine themselves involved in a similar situation when the defendant was attractive or neutral simply because the subject had potentially more in common with the defendant in those conditions" (emphasis added).

Although this research has raised questions which demand further empirical attention, we have offered what we feel to be some useful additions to existing approaches to the labeling or reactance theories of deviance. Our most central suggestion is that audience reactions to deviance are more complex than is often assumed. Basic tenants of the symbolic interactionist perspective, however, provide a useful framework for continuing the empirical exploration of the reactance process. In particular, the imaginative rehearsal as suggested by Dewey and Mead, offers a basis for articulating and specifying the nature of reactions to deviance and the meaning of deviance itself. In short, humans do not react to deviance, they create its meaning by actively participating in imagined future scenarios of potential lines of reaction. Hopefully, future research efforts will address this conceptualization in more detail.

END NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Steffensmeier and Steffenmeier (1975) reported that social distance was predictive of reporting behaviors for the hippie shoplifters. However, their research did not explore the different levels of social distance which may exist between hippie and straight appearing actors. Hence, they offer no evidence of direct linkages between appearance and the ascription of identities.
- <sup>2</sup>An advantage of this research design over the field experiment reported by Steffensmeier and Terry (1973) is the inclusion of behavior as a major experimental manipulation. By varying the behavior of an actress we are able to assess the relative impact of the act itself upon audience reactions. Therefore, relationships between deviant behavior and audience reactions can be empirically examined and not left to inference.
- <sup>3</sup>Each scene was carefully rehearsed and timed to insure replication across treatments.
- <sup>4</sup>This experimental design allows control flexibility for the major independent variables. The main effects of appearance and behavior as well as their interaction effects can be directly assessed.
- <sup>5</sup>Items which loaded on other factors patterns include (1) considerate, open-minded, and faithful; (2) conforming and conservative, and (3) friendly, polite, and attractive. As can be seen, these items tend to be indicative of interpersonal styles of behavior as opposed to the internal moral qualities suggested by the items selected for the dependent variable. Although not reported here, appearance had a greater effect on those qualities than on the internal moral qualities.
- <sup>6</sup>Cameron (1965) supports this observation in her extensive study of shoplifting. She argues that decisions by store protection staff concerning which apprehended shoplifters should be released with an admonition and which should be formerly charged with larceny reflect the apparent social status of the offenders and the biases and prejudices of the staff members (Cameron, 1965:136).

Table 1. Analysis of Variance, Regression, and Statistics of Fit for Dependent Variable Personal Disposition Score

Treatments	Mean Dispositional Score	Source	DF	SS	MS
Hippie Shoplifter (A)	5.198	Regression	3	34.705	11.568
Straight Shoplifter (B)	4.965				
Hippie Non-Shoplifter (C)	3.425	Error	69	83.462	1.210
Straight Non-Shoplifter (D)	2.494	Correct Total	72	118.167	F=28.361**

Main Effects of Appearance and Behavior and Interaction Effects

Source	DF	Partial SS	F Value
Appearance (A+C-B-D)	1	6.073	5.685*
Behavior (A+B-C-D)	1	80.770	75.611**
Interaction (A+D-B-C)	1	2.184	2.045

\*p<.05  
\*\*p<.0001

Table 2. T-Tests for the Effects of Appearance on Moral Dispositional Scores and Imagined Impact Scores Controlling for Behavior.

		Shoplifting			Non-Shoplifting		
		Hippie (n=22)	Straight (N=20)	T	Hippie (N=17)	Straight (N=18)	T
		x SD	x SD	Value	x SD	x SD	Value
Moral Dispositional Score		5.16 .9434	4.97 .6727	.7716	3.45 1.206	2.75 1.2312	2.148*
Imagined Impact Score		5.05 1.610	6.17 1.358	-2.414*	5.88 1.609	7.03 1.625	-2.087*

\*p<.05

Table 3. Analysis of Variance, Regression Coefficients, and Statistics of Fit for Dependent Variable "Severity of Impact."

Treatments	Mean Impact Score	Source	DF	SS	MS
Hippie Shoplifter (A)	5.055	Regression	3	39.3783	13.1261
Straight Shoplifter (B)	6.170	Error	73	175.8325	2.4087
Hippie Non-Shoplifter (C)	5.882	Correct Total	76	215.2108	F=5.450**
Straight Non-Shoplifter (D)	7.025				

Main Effects of Appearance and Behavior and Interaction Effects

Source	DF	Partial SS	F Value
Appearance (A + C - B - D)	1	24.330	10.089**
Behavior (A + B - C - D)	1	13.496	5.603*
Interaction (A + D - B - C)	1	0.004	.002

\*p<.05

\*\*p<.01



Table 4. T-Tests for the Effects of Behavior on Moral Dispositional Scores and Imagined Impact Scores Controlling for Appearance.

	Hippie				T Value	Straight				
	Shoplifting (N=22)		Non-shoplifting			Shoplifting		Non-shoplifting		
	$\bar{x}$	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD		$\bar{x}$	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD	
Moral Dispositional Score	5.16	.9434	3.45	1.206	4.965*	4.97	.6727	2.57	1.231	7.33*
Imagined Impact Score	5.05	1.610	5.88	1.610	-1.593	6.17	1.358	7.03	1.625	-1.766

\*p<.0001

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