

## Labeling Theory and USAREC

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Aug. 29, 2017



*Staff Sgt. Roger L. Whaley speaks with Phillip McDonald about the possibility of enlisting in the Army at the U.S. Army Recruiting Station in Radcliff, Ky. (U.S. Army Photo by Sgt. Carl N. Hudson)*

In the 1930's, sociologist Frank Tannenbaum developed a theory about social interactions being directly related to criminal activity. This theory is known as the Labeling Theory. I believe there are some guiding principles that can be learned from this theory and how it can improve the transition from Soldier to successful Army recruiter. Some may consider a theory on the development of criminals to be contrary to the development of recruiters, however, the social

connections are incredibly similar and a proper response can provide leadership the opportunity to improve the recruiting environment.

Labeling theory is a sociological theory that states that a strong, societal reaction to an individual's wrongdoing can lead the individual to become more deviant, based largely on the principles of symbolic interactionism.<sup>1</sup> Symbolic interactionism is when persons define the meaning of situations in which they find themselves and then act toward those situations in ways that make sense within the context of those self-defined meanings.<sup>2</sup> Such meanings are mostly derived from how a person views their self-image. Each person's self-image is constructed from the environment and from social interactions. So, essentially, persons become whatever they are described as being.

This information is important when considering a recruiter's ability to effectively engage people and relay the Army message. A recruiter's development begins during childhood; if individuals are bashful, then their parents describe them as shy to friends and family. These people begin to conform to what society says they are and will most likely mature with personality traits associating them with being shy and quiet. These individuals may find themselves at the Army Recruiting Course where they are asked to break their accustomed anti-social behavior and effectively engage as many people as possible. While attending this course, these Soldiers complete the Attentional and Interpersonal Style Test. This test assesses for multiple strengths and weaknesses, including, introvert or extrovert traits. If a Soldier struggles with shyness, something they were labeled their whole life, this test is viewed as a scientific way of affirming what the Soldier already believes to be true.

Recruiters report to their centers identifying themselves as introverted, exactly like society and recruiting school has labeled them. This stigma follows them during their first few

months on recruiting duty, severely hurting their confidence and creating a negative social reaction within the center. The introverted categorization can have a direct impact on job performance and expectations. Introverted recruiters will struggle with production, justifying their inability to be effective by rationalizing their behavior as merely, “this is not something I’m good at,” or, “I’ll never be able to do this.” In order for these recruiters to maintain a positive self-image, they need to affirm and legitimize their actions by maintaining that their productivity is out of their control.

The recruiting center, the center leader, and other recruiters can have both positive and negative effects on how long these “shy” recruiters continue to accept their label. The number of societal contributors that define these persons as introverts will ultimately affect how long they will struggle with social interactions at their job. Their mental stress will increase as a result of external expectations versus their reality. An opposite effect could change these recruiters’ self-image and allow them the opportunity to reinvent themselves. This can only occur when the center’s operational environment forces the recruiter to change because he or she can no longer avoid it. Recruiters can overcome their own introverted self-image when the fear that they will let down the team is higher than their personal fear.

Recruiting Command leaders face many challenges, one of which is grooming and developing recruiters who struggle with social interaction. They need to break through the stigma of recruiters being introverts and create an environment conducive to strengthening weaknesses, not just identifying them. Everyone, from the recruiters to the instructors at the Army Recruiting Course, has a responsibility to create an environment that promotes an opportunity for all Soldiers to reinvent their self-images and overcome personal social phobias.

## Notes

1 “Labeling Theory,” *CourseHero*, last modified Spring, 2016,  
<https://www.coursehero.com/file/14228280/Labeling-Theory-Research-Paper-Starter-eNotes/>

2 Thomas J. Bernard, Jeffrey B. Snipes, and Alexander L. Gerould, eds., *Vold's Theoretical Criminology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).