

Call It What It Is: An Ethnographic Analysis of Social Labeling Theory

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PREFACE

As is common with ethnographies, specifically in examination of cultural phenomena, there is a possibility of potential explicit and implicit biases. A majority of this ethnography extrapolates intercultural explanations from observational immersion, which while valuable in examining cultural biases, is distinctly qualitative, not quantitative. As such, taking the conclusions of the ethnography with a grain of *sal/salt* is necessary.

This ethnography was completed during a study abroad experience in Costa Rica I was fortunate to have in Fall 2025. Notes from classes, personal journaling, and experiential learning reflections strongly inform the ethnographic observations of this paper. I've chosen to include some of my notes in Spanish, some of which are simply grammatically incorrect because of my Spanish fluency level, with the translation attached that I believe it to be in English. I hope, if anything, this inability to effectively articulate myself provides insight into the role language plays in complexifying shared understanding of social labeling across cultural lines.

Part of the experience was a homestay at a local Costa Rican/Tico home who offered a cultural compass as well as an invaluable support network. In honor of my *papatico* and *hermanatica*, this paper is dedicated to the kindness and graciousness they offered me. Thank you, Javi and Ysthar.

THE HISTORY OF SOCIAL LABELING

Labeling theory is not a new concept. From the dawn of time to modern, this practice of ascription, positive, negative, and/or neutral, with the intent to categorize behaviors has persisted. Classically, it finds its roots in the looking glass self, popularized in 1892 by American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley, which posed that one's personal identity(ies) are created by evaluating others (Gould & Howson, 2021). The looking glass self, as titularly insinuated, occurs through three introspective stages of evaluating external observation: firstly, imagination of how one appears to others, secondly, imagination of how others judge their perceived appearance, and finally, the feelings about oneself based on those perceptions (Scheff, 2025). Rooted in a "subjective component," the "I," and a "social component," the "me," the looking-glass self merges self-perception with social perception to form a unified sense of identity.

The introspection of the looking glass self theory further solidified into the theory of symbolic interactionism, which emphasizes that ascribed qualities, related to objects, ideas, and identities, are given meaning by social interaction (Jose, 2025). As opposed to the looking-glass self, which is largely formed through introspective reflection, symbolic interactionism emphasizes what happens next: how internal identification is shaped by ongoing social interaction (Carter, 2015). Rather than stopping at self-awareness, this perspective highlights how meaning is continuously formed through language and everyday exchanges with others. Over time, individuals adjust their behavior to align with these shared meanings, illustrating that community identities are

internally constructed through social relativity as a result of repeated consistent intercultural interaction.

These two theories merge into the modern idea of social labeling, which generally “refers to the assignment of identity-based tags to ourselves and others” (Davies, 2025). It’s also occasionally referred to as societal reaction theory. Labeling theory is often used in criminology to explain why people engage in behavior that society sees as deviant. It looks at both social influences and individual factors that shape these actions. While “deviance” usually has a negative meaning, here it simply refers to behavior that differs from what a group considers normal. With influence from norm-setting in sociological practice (e.g. symbolic interactionism) and a self-perceived visualization of ourselves (e.g. looking glass self), we set the social labels that confine yet unify us (Vance, 2024). Social labels are fairly static, but the interpretation of each social label and the behaviors considered normal to each group vary significantly across culture and language.

CLINICAL LABELING (A NOTE)

Interestingly, social labeling was most historically common in clinical settings, specifically in categorizing mental illnesses or disorders (Weinstein, 1983). Psychiatry, or the clinical study and diagnosis of mental illness, has been riddled with contrasting research and practices. To this, experiments by researchers like Jane M. Murphy demonstrate how often clinical diagnoses of mental illnesses can be variable as her study revealed that even when patients demonstrated “textbook” symptoms of a common mental disorder, there was still diagnostic dissent (Townsted et. al, 1979). While that research is outdated, social labeling in the form of medical diagnosis still demonstrates highly contradictive analyses in practice. The modern switch, however, has recentered on the ability of medical professionals to correctly label mental illnesses and disorders, per an overinflated public confidence in their ability to self-identify their illness.

To this, research conducted by a Taiwan-based team provided a survey to random participants, examining public perception of mental illness diagnoses, as well as the ability of participants to self-gauge on medical diagnoses. Although the sample was limited to 14 participants, the conclusion of the survey was that participants, more than not, strongly disagreed with diagnoses made by professionals. Furthermore, participants overwhelmingly believed they were equipped with sufficient knowledge of proactive and reactionary behaviors to self-diagnosed mental disorders or afflictions (Chao et. al, 2022). This research illustrates the downward trend in the authority of medical professionals in shaping social labeling conversations, driven by public disengagement and disagreement on the basis of self-research.

This change is emphasized by the increase in self-assignment of labels. This switch is perpetuated by technological development, specifically in the development of search engines like Google, creating the idea of “self-diagnosis” (Cleveland Clinic, 2025), otherwise referred to as “self-labeling” (Rüsch et. al, 2014). As Rüsch’s research proves, increased levels of self-labeling

are strongly correlated with elevated stigma stress. This is tied to the psychology theory of classical conditioning in which individuals develop heightened, persistent reactions to perceived stigma, ultimately reinforcing chronic stigmatization. In this case, the perceived stigma, whether it's external or internal, can reinforce a continuous cycle of self-labeling. In many cases, according to the Cleveland Clinic, this leads individuals to self-label again, reinforcing the behavior after the initial stigma and conditioned response.

Medical professionals emphasize the potential danger of self-labeling, specifically on the impacts it can have on the psyche long-term. With a special focus on children and their proximity to technology, influencers, and mental health, medical professionals are increasingly encountering adolescents with self-diagnosed afflictions. When a child (or their parent) disagrees with a doctor's diagnosis, recent trends have demonstrated that children are two times more likely to trust their own diagnosis and seek out the related treatment for their self-identified mental illness (McVay, 2023).

Transferable to subsequent sections, the concept of social labeling through clinical lens illustrates the general public's perceived sense of expertise on social labeling. This illusion of expertise is particularly dangerous because it masks the inherently unstable nature of "social labeling," a concept that, by definition, is continually reinterpreted as societies evolve.

RACE AND SEXUALITY

The transition from clinical usage to socially implicative labels is an interesting phenomenon to dig one's teeth into. Specifically, in modern perspectives, social labeling, in practice, is most often observed through the lens of race and sexuality.

In a similar vein, the dangers of social labeling become clear in acts of violence that are justified, enabled, or reinforced through those labels. Often tied to a sense of perceived "otherness," many forms of hostilities, whether physical conflict or social oppression, can be traced back to the perpetrators' categorization of their target group, using dissonance of identity to rationalize their actions. While there is power or community in categorization, the danger lies in the capability of social labeling to perpetuate discrimination.

RACE

Race, as one such author seeks to define, is the "categories of people who share certain inherited physical characteristics, such as skin color, facial features, and stature" (Stone & Lurquin, 2007). While this definition is static, experts often struggle to attach a concrete definition to race, specifically subcategorization of races, largely due to topic polarization and definitional disagreement. A small minority of experts believe race is purely biological; a concept coined by historic advocates as biological race realism (Andreasen, 2000). This perspective sprouted

ideological branches including eugenics, the idea of “superior” hereditary traits which resulted in a perceived need to maintain the “purity” of a “preferred” race ((History Channel, 2025).

Modernly, most natural and social scientists believe in social constructionism as the premier magnifying glass for evaluating race, referred to as SCR. SCR accounts race and the subdivision of racial groups as the “products of social factors such as human institutions, norms, and socio-historical processes” (Neto, 2025). SCR is often contrasted with its antithesis, extreme race anti-realism, which posits that nothing in the world can legitimately be referred to as “race” (Hardimon, 2017).

While scientists have clashed on the ambiguity of SCR (Hochman, 2022), the vagueness of the phrase has proven to be a benefit in illuminating contextual factors that assist in racialization. As SCR isn’t tied down to observing a rigid set of rules denoting racial categorization, it encourages meaningful interpretation on how the interpretation of race or racialized groups have adapted over history, as well as the flexibility to separate races on distinct historical or social events (Neto, 2025). In this way, sects of different racial groups have emerged to acknowledge a culture distinguished by unique characteristics. However, as SCR advocates are aware of and acknowledge, it does not have a finite limit to the subdividable components of race, which greatly lowers the chance of agreement on “universal races” (Lujan, 2024).

Race, by nature of linguistics, is a man-made concept. Social labeling is the key to this man-made puzzle, taking the theoretical influences of symbolic interactionism and looking glass self to create the group denomination by racialization as well as the way that each racial group is perceived, practiced and celebrated in society (Asta, 2018).

Social labels resulting from racial observation, whether perceived or known, are often connected to discrimination¹. For instance, milestone cases like *Brown v. Board of Education*, which set a precedent for racial segregation in schools, strongly emphasized how discrimination on the basis of race often manifests in social separation (Hunt & Megyesi, 2008). SCR, through the lens of race, also acknowledges how it is connected to other spheres of society, affecting “laws (e.g. Jim Crow), ideologies (e.g. white supremacy), power relationships (e.g. racial inequality), and historical events (e.g. slavery)” (Neto, 2025).

Across history, numerous examples of discrimination, ranging from slur usage to genocides and ethnic cleansing, can be connected to the social labels and the way “others,” to recall to the otherness visualization, view other racial groups. Whether it’s related to racial prejudice or indifference, social labels are consistently cited as the motivator or condoner for inter- and intra-group attacks, physically, emotionally, or systemically (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

SEXUALITY

¹ An important distinction is that discriminative efforts based on racial observation is not objective, but instead, a perceived one where the perpetrator’s interpretation of race drives their actions.

Sexuality, while less ambiguous in definition than race historically, is equally connected to social constructionism and labeling. It also serves as a strong reinforcer of the power self-ascribed social labeling can have, specifically in perpetuating internalized discrimination like homophobia (Lee, 2025).

One of the most prevalent scholars on sexuality, Jeffrey Weeks, weighs in on sexuality and how it's equally socially constructed. Weeks believes that there's three key beliefs and ideologies that construct sexuality in theory: "sexology, marriage, and The Law." Sexology, otherwise known as the study of sexuality, creates the categories that those defining their sexual or gender orientation will place themselves into. Marriage provides context on social norms of sexuality in relation to prolonging a "healthy and stable society," while "The Law" provides the regulations of sexuality by deciding who can do what, both in normative and actual practice (Thompson K., 2024).

These central ideas of sexuality, while not widely acknowledged or celebrated, have rooted themselves into political conversations. Expectantly, the preferred interpretations of sexuality in this theoretical triad sit on extreme opposites of the scale when viewed across political party lines. Conservative perspectives believe that this conceptualization illustrates that sexual orientation is inherently a "chosen construct, not a natural condition," proven by sexology's assertion of self-identification (Egan, 2014). Liberal perspectives rebuke this idea, re-emphasizing that sexuality and gender labels are biologically affirmable, and are intended for intergroup unity, not as a point for contention in the heavily polarized idea of "choice wars" (Egan, 2014).

Historically, the social labeling of sexuality has been polarized from even within the community. Some view the ability to attach a social label to themselves liberating while others felt it confined their interpretation of themselves. At times, social labeling has functioned as a mechanism of control, transforming personal identifiers into categories that carry moral weight and social consequence (Casey et. al, 2019).

Sexuality is not without discrimination, however, as it's recently become a battle waged in political and judicial arenas, whether in the creation or resurgence of anti-LGBTQIA laws, employment lawsuits, or gendered violence (Library of Congress, 2023). By embedding these labels and their respective perception within cultural, religious, and legal frameworks, societies have perpetuated sexuality & gender labels as sites of judgment rather than solely identity, allowing prejudice to masquerade as order (Mays & Cochran, 2001).

At the same time, there is a measurable risk associated with publicly, or even privately, self-identifying as LGBTQ+, as one in three individuals who identified as gay or bisexual reported elevated stress levels in social interactions following self-classification, regardless of whether they disclosed that identity in those settings. (Lea & Reynolds, 2014). In those cases, ambiguity of label creates oxymoronic comfort.

Equally dangerous is the impact social labels have when they're internalized, incentivizing forms of self-discrimination that are often less visible but no less damaging (Hong et. al, 2023). Through processes akin to psychological conditioning, individuals exposed to persistent homophobic messaging may begin to adopt those same beliefs about themselves, leading to internalized homophobia, a self-loathing or self-disgust related to one's sexual orientation (Meyer, 2003). This can manifest as shame, identity suppression, or even outward hostility toward others within the same marginalized group as individuals attempt to distance themselves from the stigmatized label (Skerven & de St. Aubin, 2015). As a resultant, gender or sexuality-based violence, both physically and socioemotionally, can often stem from intergroup interactions, strongly destabilizing the unity of the LGBTQ+ community (Mohr, 2025).

The power of social labeling, as seen in the context of sexuality, is marked by a tension between its capacity to foster community and belonging, and the perceptions that can generate both internal and external disdain.

ETHNOGRAPHY PREFACE

While race and sexuality can be understood as socially constructed categories shaped by historical, cultural, and institutional forces, their significance becomes most tangible in lived experience. Moving beyond theory, these constructs are continuously negotiated, reinforced, and sometimes challenged through everyday interactions and intercultural exchange. An ethnographic lens offers the opportunity to examine how these social labels are not only understood but actively lived and interpreted across cultural contexts. Drawing from my long-term immersion in Costa Rica, the following section explores how these constructs manifested in practice, revealing both points of misalignment and opportunities for deeper cultural understanding.

ETHNOGRAPHY

13 de Septiembre: Hoy, tuve una experiencia interesante. Cuando caminaba a la tienda de gasolina, se llama Súper Yummy, oye una cosa que me oye horrible. Una pareja asiática opera la tienda y cuándo estuve en el desfile, un Tico se gritó, “Chino, ¿tienes latas de Cuba Libre? / Today, I had an interesting experience. When I was walking to the gas station, called Super Yummy, I heard a thing that sounded horrible to me. An Asian couple operates the store and when I was in line, a Tico yelled, “China-man, do you have cans of Cuba Libre?”

Without context of the relationship this Tico had with the owners of the gas station, I didn't dwell on it too long, but I resolved to ask my *familiatica* about the interaction in the morning. The next morning, when I brought up the conversation to my *papatico*, he simply waved away my questions, explaining that he would talk about in length after class.

As I sat through my classes, I tried to pay attention to the cultural contexts that are available only to the speakers of a language (or dialect). Anecdotally, my Spanish professor shared with our class that she believed the mark of someone who truly spoke the language was humor: the ability to twist words and phrases into comedy, and then, slightly cruelly, declared that none of us were close to this level. While I agree with this sentiment, it just reiterated how a society is constructed and supplies cultural “inside jokes” by linguistic and cultural recurrences: some of which become humor and some of which are simply shared experiences.

This introspection challenged me to think about the elements of my upbringing had constructed a cultural script, accessible only to the community I had grown up in. By reflecting on my childhood, I quickly identified moments where being in the “cultural know” were necessary to fully comprehend the moment. While any English speaker would understand the words/phrases, they wouldn’t have the context. This context, as defined in social labeling theory, refers to culturally specific scripts. Scripts are not unique to my culture: it varies by culture yet simultaneously by each person. It also made me painfully aware of how often I appropriate language from others’ cultural scripts: specifically, from sources like AAVE.²

*15 de Septiembre: Me encantaría creer que yo ponga más atención a la manera de que yo tenga conversaciones con personas alrededor de mi. Aunque una persona me se río, mi pregunta es: ¿ellos creen que estoy cómico o piensan que es necesario para reír porque es una expectativa grabada en nuestra propina idioma cultural? No solamente se aplique a las ideas de humor, lo se aplique con todos. **Una idioma cultural es una llave a la comunidad; es la cuerda desaparecida que se conecta personas.** / I would like to believe that I pay more attention to the manner in which I have conversations with people around me. Although a person laughs, my question is: do they believe that I’m funny or do they think it’s necessary to laugh because it’s an embedded expectation in our own cultural language. It doesn’t solely apply to humor; it applies with everything. **A cultural script is a key to the community; but it’s also the invisible string that connects people.***

Although I struggled to articulate myself in Spanish, I was starting to get at topics that are heavily contemplated in humanity-centered studies: learned behavior and social labeling. While the conversation with my *papatico* didn’t occur until a few nights later, my perspective switch made me more aware of conversations in both English and Spanish that relied on prior knowledge of language, cues, or ideas to make sense. This perspective also heightened my sensitivity to instances of script misalignment, whether the situation was a cultural script that was incorrectly decoded by someone or a language barrier that ruptured an easy exchange of meaning. In each case, I noticed a discomfort with the dissonance of understanding, as each

² African American Vernacular English. Formerly referred to as Ebonics which was coined by movements like Oakland, California’s amendment “to designate Ebonics as the main language of its predominantly African-American student base” (Chandler, 2020).

person in the situation sought to remedy the misalignment through overexplaining, stepping around it, or entirely switching the subject.

17 de Septiembre: *Will y yo tuvimos una conversación con Javi esta noche. Yo le había preguntado sobre la tendencia costarricense para referir a las personas de sus apariencias físicas y me dijo que él podría explicarlo a mi después. Cuando tuvimos la conversación en la mesa de cena, él nos explicó que había tenido una conversación similar con muchos de los estudiantes que él había alojado en el pasado. Sus palabras para explicar sus acciones normales para etiquetar: “No creemos en la idea para ser sensible. Aunque nos referimos a las personas por nombres que la gente estadounidense considera insensibles, para nosotros, es simplemente la realidad de quien es esa persona porque podemos verlo. Un chino es un chino, un negro es un negro, un italiano es un italiano. Creemos que deberíamos llamarlo como es.” / Will (my roommate) and I had a conversation with Javi tonight. I had asked him about the Costa Rican tendency to refer to people by their physical appearances and he told me that he would explain it to me later. When we had the conversation at the dinner table, he explained to us that he had had a similar conversation with lots of the students that he had hosted in the past. His words to explain their labeling norms: “We don’t believe in being sensitive. Although we refer to people by names that people from the United States consider insensitive/crude, for us, it’s simply the reality of who that person is because we can see it. A China-man is a China-man, a negro is a negro, an Italian is an Italian. We believe that we should call it what it is.”*

The explanation simply didn’t make sense to me, at first. Intuitively, I believe(d) it was unrealistic for a culture to assign labels as extreme as *chino* without cultural bias or prejudice. However, as I sat with his perspective, I realized the extent to which my “cultural sensitivity” was a product of my cultural upbringing. While a generalization, it made me realize just how liable my generation is to assume that social labels as always being emotionally charged, never neutral. However, as I thought on my *papatico*’s words, I realized a fault in my thought process. Perhaps it was my cultural environment or the people who reinforced the social label, but I realized the choice to interpret words, specifically labels, was entirely of my own (culture’s) choosing, which simply wasn’t the way of life for Costa Rican culture. I still rival with their cultural casualness, but in hindsight, it made me appreciate the beauty in recognizing that complete alignment between cultures isn’t possible if the cultural differences are acknowledged and/or appreciated.

The time I spent in Costa Rica was punctuated by experiences similar to this one, where Ticos’ casual usage of words that, translated literally, would be perceived as slurs or pejoratives in the United States. Each time, despite the conversations being centered in the Tico cultural script, I found myself instinctively wanting to interject. However, as I reflected back to the perspective my *papatico* shared, I increasingly kept silent. It also put into perspective my perception of a tendency, whether mine or others, to take offense on behalf of a third party for a perceived insult. In these situations when I remained quiet, the responder often responded back in a unperturbed way that insinuated the word or phrase was comfortable in their vocabulary and daily life.

24 de Octubre: *Estoy luchando con unos sentimientos inconclusivos. Fui a una fiesta de unos amigos y cuando hablábamos, un hombre al lado de mí dijo a un amigo acerca de la mesa, “¡Aye, playo³, cálmate!” cual fue seguido de una risa del amigo. Sabiendo que la translación de “playo” literalmente es la “palabra de f,” me sentí incómodo, porque esta palabra tenía una historia agresiva y carga muy intensiva, especialmente porque la palabra ha sido utilizado como una palabra para bromar cual la se burla identidades de personas queeres. / I am fighting with some inconclusive feelings. I went to a party hosted by some Tico friends y when we were speaking, a guy to the side of me said to a friend across the table, “Aye, f*****, calm down!” which was followed by a laugh of the friend. Knowing that the translation of playo literally is the f-slur, I felt uncomfortable, because that word has an aggressive history⁴ and is very intensely charged, especially because the word has been used as a joking word while mocking the identities of queer people.*

Demonstrated by cultural instances like this one, social labels can take on unique meanings, specifically when its meaning differs even amongst intercultural groups. It also demonstrated how even language barriers cannot hide, often instead, exacerbating, the sting of a label that one attaches negative stigma to.

Frustrated by the slight I thought I was perceiving, I did choose to speak up in this conversation, challenging why the word “playo” was used in casual conversation. Partly surprised by my insertion and partly amused, they explained the context behind the word, “playo,” specifically in how its meaning varied based on the age of conversationalists. For youth, ranging from 5-30, the word had taken on a meaning synonymous to “bro.” For older generations, they asserted that it did directly translate to the meaning that I attached to it.

I didn’t necessarily blindly believe their explanation, opting instead to reference it against the perspective of my *papatico*. Despite an initial shock at hearing me bring up the word in casual conversation, he the explanation that our Tico friends had provided us with. As a 55-year-old man, he personally saw the word as a pejorative but explained that its meaning had significantly switched in generational transition.

Referencing the conversation we had the previous month, he explained how changes in language were common, spanning generations, specifically in variations of Spanish. He talked about geographic diversity, specifically in how derogatory words in one Latin American country could have an inverted meaning in the next one. He also reiterated just how powerful media, consumption habits, and possibly most importantly, personal values were in impacting the meaning of language, and therefore, the labels we attach. His conclusion, however, was a powerful statement: ***Pero, no puedo saber todo / But, I cannot know everything.*** His statement

³ While this word translates to the U.S.’ usage of the *f-slur* in the Costa Rican dialect of Spanish, there are alternative directly translatable words across other Latin American countries.

⁴ The stance of an “aggressive history” was largely driven by my personal experiences with the word as well as the history of it in a U.S. context.

provided a succinct bow on the faultiness of our collective ability to discern social labels and their meanings across language and culture, creating misalignment and dissonance.

CONCLUSION

Transitionally, the intercultural misconceptions and dissonance I experienced on this micro level resonate across the world. In situations where sociological participants are able to use a sounding board, whether it's a local, an intercultural guide, or another tool, the experience can often be reframed in a growth-oriented mindset. In contrast, when an intercultural compass is neither provided nor actively sought, actions rooted in ignorance, particularly in the interpretation of social labels such as race or sexuality, can reinforce and perpetuate harmful outcomes.

Ultimately, social labeling, shaped by culture and carried through language, sits at the core of how human rights are either undermined or advanced. When meanings attached to labels are misaligned across cultural or linguistic contexts, they can distort identities, justify exclusion, and quietly institutionalize discrimination. Yet, when these labels are respectfully acknowledged, building intercultural alliance, the resultant social norms and meanings become tools for solidarity and reform.

The difference between current practice and the idealistic future lies not in destroying labels, but in conscientiously shaping how they are constructed and shared. Bridging these gaps demands ongoing intercultural dialogue and reflexivity, but the outcome is transformative: a shift from division to dignity, where language no longer reinforces inequality, but instead affirms the universality of human rights.

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