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Labeling Theory: The New Perspective

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Abstract

This report describes and examines the writings of criminologists from the labeling perspective and focuses on why and how some people come to be defined as deviant and what happens when they are so defined. This paper also addresses the development of labeling theory and the process an individual undergoes to become labeled as deviant. Also examined is the relationship of labeling theory to empirical testing, the value of the theory, and implications for further research.

Introduction

All social groups make rules and attempt, at some times and under some circumstances, to enforce them. Social rules define situations and the kinds of behavior appropriate to them, specifying some actions as right and forbidding others as wrong. When a rule is enforced, the person who is supposed to have broken it may be seen as a special kind of person, one who cannot be trusted to live by the rules agreed upon by the group. He is regarded as an outsider (Becker, 1963).

The definition of deviance as the breaking of social rules is relatively new in sociological and criminological circles. Many older sociological theories of deviance used other terms such as crime, social disorganization, or social problems. All of these theories, however, have focused on social rule breaking (Paul and Rhodes, 1978).

A bold and somewhat oversimplified view of the labeling perspective appeared in 1938 in the writings of Frank Tannenbaum,

who discussed the impact of police intervention in the play of children and suggested that handling neighborhood disturbances by youth through arrest resulted in a "dramatization of the evil," which had a negative effect (Tannenbaum, 1938). Tannenbaum found the following:

The process of making the criminal, therefore, is a process of tagging, defining, identifying, segregating, describing, emphasizing, making conscious and self-conscious; it became a way of stimulating, suggesting, emphasizing, and evoking the very traits complained of. . . . The person becomes the thing he is described as being (Little and Traub, 1975,160).

Labeling theory, sometimes called "the societal reaction perspective," was lauded as a new perspective in criminology in the 1960's (Hagan, 1987). The sixties were a time of considerable disturbance in the United States, and the labeling perspective challenged mainstream criminology and paralleled the attack on predominant social institutions (Sheley, 1991).

Criminologists writing from the labeling perspective focused on how and why some people are defined as deviant and what happens when they are so defined (Reid, 1988). Labeling theorists based their point of view on symbolic interactions, a school of thought that emphasized the subjective and intersectional nature of human experiences (Hagan, 1987).

The emphasis on symbolic interactions is based on the analysis of subjective meanings of social interaction as perceived from the standpoint of the actor. Individuals perceive the meaning of their activity through the reactions of others (Hagan, 1987). The notion of symbolic interactions stems from the writings of George Herbert Mead (Strauss, 1964; Davis, 1972), who is also associated with the notion of the "generalized other" and Charles Cooley (1964,184-185), who is credited with the term "looking glass" self.

Howard Becker (1963) expanded upon Tannenbaum's suggestion that the process of tagging and defining was crucial to the understanding of deviance. Becker's point was that deviance is a social product:

Social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infractions constitute deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an offender. The deviant is one to whom that label has been successfully applied: deviant behavior is behavior that people so label (Becker, 1963, 44).

Becker (1963) is referring to the role of rule creation and reaction in the "generation" of deviance. He is not saying that the rule creation produces the behavior initially, but rather that societal situations (like the definition of rules and the reaction to those who violate the rules) produce a social fact—deviance (Hawkins and Tiedman, 1975).

Some labeling theorists incorporated ideas that were grounded in Durkheim's functionalism: crime or deviance was not necessarily pathological; it might actually help preserve the social order (Erikson, 1962). These theorists also drew from the intellectual traditions of sociological, judicial, and legal realism that challenged the conventional wisdom about law (Melossi, 1985).

The Labeling Perspective

To label someone as deviant—for example, a thief, a sex fiend, a junkie, a nut, a queer, a prostitute, a radical—is to assign one to a kind of master status seen as the essence of the person's personality (Hawkins and Tiedman, 1975). To call a person mad or criminal is to imply that he is different in kind from ordinary people and that all areas of his personality are affected by his problem. From the vantage point of the distance viewer, the unsavory deviant characteristic becomes the basis for interpreting the deviant's total identity.

The social self is a "system of ideas, drawn from the communicative life, that the mind cherishes as its own" (Cooley, 1964, 230). Accordingly, the process by which the self emerges consists

of three principle elements: imagining our appearance to others, imagining another's judgment of that appearance, and developing some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification. The person tends to internalize an interpretation of the responses of others (Farrell and Swiggart, 1988). Cooley (1964) shows that through the attitude of others, each person learns to see and to evaluate his own appearance, attitudes, and behavior. It is in this sense that the self is sometimes defined as "the individual as known to the individual" (Cooley, 1902, 231). Cooley's depiction of the looking-glass self is in close accord with his suggested method for the acquisition of social knowledge (Manis and Meltzer, 1972).

Lemur (1951) developed this idea into a systematic explanation of deviance. He maintained that, if deviant acts are severely sanctioned, they may be incorporated as part of the "me" of the individual. That is, if labels are successfully applied, the integration of existing legitimate roles may be disrupted, and reorganization based on deviant roles may occur. He refers to these latter roles as secondary deviation and suggests that they develop as a means of adjustment to the problems created by the societal reaction to the original or specific (primary) deviation. A crucial element in developing a secondary deviation is thus the reorganization of identity around the deviation and its associated roles.

Becker (1963) elaborated on the concept of secondary deviance by suggesting that the person who is labeled as a deviant is ascribed a new status with an associated set of role expectations. Regardless of the other positions this individual may occupy, the status of deviant often remains the master status; one who has it will be identified as deviant before other identifications are made. Becker (1963) argues that treating a person as though he or she were generally rather than specifically deviant produces a self-fulfilling prophecy. Labeling isolates an individual from full participation in conventional activities. This action exerts pressure on the deviant to identify with the one status that is available, the deviant status.

Goffman (1963) suggests that stigma is an attribute that deeply discredits its bearer. These attributes may be abominations

of the body, blemishes of the individual character, or tribal stigma. All obtrude upon social interaction. In explaining his view of the self, he draws on drama, literature, and observation. His perspective is dramaturgical—interpreting the individual as an actor in a theatrical performance (Manis and Meltzer, 1972).

People with stigmas are often avoided, punished, ridiculed, or otherwise singled out for special treatment. Stigma theories justify the negative response by explaining the difference as an undesirable one and emphasizing the dangerousness of the individual who is different. For one who is marked, stigma is a problem of shame—that is, a problem of seeing that others view him or her as not quite human and acknowledging that perhaps this evaluation is warranted. Society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complements of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories. The category and attributes could in fact be proved to possess what we could call a person's actual social identity (Goffman, 1963).

Scheff (1966) uses the concept of the stereotype to explain mental illness. In essence, stereotypes summarize the characteristics assumed to be relevant to a particular deviation. Like other stereotypical definitions, popular conceptions of insanity are learned in childhood and continually reaffirmed in everyday interaction. People who perceive that they are being defined and reacted to as mentally ill are, therefore, likely to be very much aware of the stereotypical role expectations accompanying their new status. Those responding to the deviant may be equally confused by their inability to understand or deal with the behavior. In this crisis, the stereotype of insanity becomes a powerful guide both for the deviant and for others. Subsequently, if stereotypical performance is rewarded and claims of normality are punished, the individual may accept the preferred role of the insane as the only alternative.

Of special interest to labeling theorists are the categories of falsely accused and secret deviant (Hawkins and Tiedman, 1975). If societal reaction is as potentially powerful as Tannenbaum suggests, then we would predict that the falsely accused may take up the activity for which they are being punished. For example, take

a teenage boy who is of slight build, with effeminate mannerisms including a rather high-pitched voice. As a result of these characteristics, others see him as "swish," and consequently he may be excluded from many heterosexual situations. Other boys will not ask him to double-date with them because they fear he does not like girls. Girls will avoid him because of his reputation and the potential gossip which might ensue after a date. These reactions, based on an erroneous perception of the facts, may close off virtually all heterosexual outlets, and the boy's sexual release may be restricted only to that with other males who have been drawn to him by his reputation. Since experimentation is restricted to homosexual contacts, he may learn to enjoy them and continue to engage in them (Hawkins and Tiedman, 1975).

This situation provides a classic example for W. I. Thomas's dictum: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Hawkins and Tiedman, 1975, 45). The self-fulfilling prophecy is central to labeling theory. In the case of the falsely accused, deviance may be initiated because of the self-fulfilling aspects of the perceptions and reactions of others. Thus, secondary deviance may result from reactions to the initial behavior (Hawkins and Tiedman, 1975).

The secret deviant presents a greater challenge to labeling theory. If reactions are so crucial to patterns of rule breaking, how does one reconcile repetition of behavior in the absence of public recognition and reaction? It is not clear from Becker's (1963) discussion whether the secret deviant is simply someone who has never been officially detected or someone whose rule breaking is so totally hidden that no such reactions occurs. If so, there may be two reasons for the continued deviance by the secret deviant. First, the deviance may be maintained by the informal reactions of friends and acquaintances. A second possibility is that the individual takes the role of others, anticipates what the reactions might be, and thus may self-label activities as deviant (Becker, 1963).

Labeling theorists postulate that one does not become a deviant by rule breaking. One must be labeled a deviant before the social expectations that define the deviant role are activated

Labeling theorists are particularly interested in the formation of deviant identities and find that they are formed in the same manner as non-deviant identities. In both cases, individuals conform to the expectations of others. The deviant role is conferred upon a rule breaker by the audience that directly or indirectly witnesses the rule breaking. The role usually has a specific name like "prostitute," "thief," "drug addict," or "problem child." Since the role is functional for the social system as a whole, there are social pressures on the individual to play it fully.

Some individuals are not labeled merely because their rule breaking is not discovered. There are a number of factors that influence whether or not deviance will be attributed to the rule breaker. These factors include the extent to which the system needs to have a deviant role filled, the frequency and visibility of the rule breaking, the tolerance level for the rule breaking, the social distance between the rule breaker and the agents of social control, the relative power of the rule breaker in the system, the amount of conflict between the rule breakers, agents of social control, and possible special interests in enforcing penalties against the rule breaker (Paul and Rhodes, 1978).

Labeling theory stresses the role of agents of social control charged with the responsibility of enforcing social rules. They include the police, the court system, psychiatrists, teachers, and parents. It is the agents of control who invoke the labeling process. They are responsible for selecting, from among a number of rule breakers, those who will play deviant roles. Paul and Rhodes (1978) suggests that this process is often carried out under the rubric of treatment and rehabilitation.

Since social reactions to violations are seen as a potential contribution to patterns of violations, the labeling perspective recommends a shift of focus from the condemned to the condemners: "the critical variable in the study of deviance is the social audience rather than individual person, since it is the audience which eventually decides whether or not any given action or actions will become a visible case of deviation" (Hawkins and Tiedman, 1975, 46-47).

Becker (1963) found that the social definition of marijuana followed a path similar to that of the opiates. In each case, the social definition of the drug—the way people perceived it in terms of what it was, how it worked, and how it was dealt with—changed dramatically over time. We can see the power of social definitions when we recognize that presumably the actual physical characteristics of the drugs have remained constant.

Marijuana use was legal in the United States until the passage of the Federal Marijuana Stamp Tax Act of 1937, when it became subject to the same form of federal regulation as the opiates (Douglas and Waksler, 1982). In both cases, people who had previously been quite legitimate citizens were socially redefined as criminal if they continued doing what they had been doing for years. This social creation of deviance was an outcome of conflicts between groups in the United States, with some supporting the drugs and their users and others opposing them.

The fact that marijuana is far weaker in its physiological effects than the opiates makes the question of why it was outlawed all the more interesting. Street heroin users sometimes died from overdoses, and these deaths were used by officials and the media as examples of the terrible dangers of heroin. Marijuana, however, could not kill people in this way, and there was no popular conception, as there was with heroin, that using it would create lifetime addiction. How then did marijuana become the object of political stigmatization? Why did politicians create a new law defining marijuana use as a crime and its users as criminals? These were basic questions Becker (1963) tried to answer.

He began by arguing that the creation of any new social rule was a creative act by certain members of society. Getting some form of behavior stigmatized as deviant or as criminal requires an entrepreneur, someone who actively undertakes, organizes, manages, and carries out a project. Although we generally speak of business entrepreneurs, Becker (1963) spoke of moral entrepreneurs, those who create new social categories, complete with rules and procedures, and those who enforce those rules. Becker (1963)

was interested in learning the identity of the moral entrepreneurs who got marijuana criminalized.

Before the new federal felony law was passed, a widespread mass media campaign had depicted marijuana as a grave danger to society, inspiring people to commit violent acts almost indiscriminately. The film *Reefer Madness* (1937) is a product of this period (Douglas and Waksler, 1982). The same news stories appeared almost simultaneously all over the country, all drawing on the same few cases of supposed marijuana-crazed attacks.

Becker (1963) traced the stories back to the Federal Bureau of Narcotics and argued that the Bureau had launched this campaign in order to get new laws that would increase its own social power. He saw the bureaucrats of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics as moral entrepreneurs operating behind the campaign to create new rules that would be to their own advantage. Once this bureaucracy had been created, it looked for areas in which it could become involved, and marijuana appeared a likely candidate. This recognition of the factors involved in the creation of rules and the choice of those to whom the rules are applied distinguishes labeling theory from the earlier interactionist perspective (Douglas and Waksler, 1982).

Criticisms

Labeling theory is criticized for the lack of systemization and formalization (which if strictly applied in general, would remove many so-called theories from sociology and criminology). Many criminologists (Davis, 1972; Tittle, 1975; Hirschi, 1975) condemned the labeling perspective because it offered no testable hypotheses and no empirical generalizations. However, labeling theory can be generated from, and grounded in, much of the empirical work of ethnomethodology and symbolic interaction (Douglas and Waksler, 1982). Some empirical research has been done in support of labeling theory, but its relative youth has precluded extensive work. Also, those interpreting and testing labeling theo-

ry have focused primarily on the impact of official reactions. Part of the task is to bring these secondary studies to light and revise the theory when the evidence is not supportive (Hawkins and Tiedman, 1975).

The way the labeling perspective addressed the conception of power also came under attack. First, the critics claimed that the labeling position not only overlooked the importance of informal social reactions, but also oversimplified the complex relationships and hierarchies that characterized most social control organizations (Mankoff, 1971; Davis, 1980).

Specific criticisms of the labeling theory conclude that it is not at all clear whether Becker (1963) is pursuing a theory about deviant behavior or a theory about reactions to deviance. If it is the latter, then his focus on deviance rather than reactors is puzzling. From the viewpoint of Becker (1963), Erikson (1966), and Kitsuse (1980), deviant behavior is defined in terms of reactions to it. The labeling theory is also criticized for failing to address the etiology question. The process of developing deviance seems to come from a societal response and not from a deviant stimulus, and some state that the feature of deviance is external to the actor. The labeling perspective locates the fate of the deviant, indeed his very development, in the acts of the reactors (Hawkins and Tiedman, 1975). Further, the labeling theory does not account for positive aspects of societal reactions.

The labeling perspective conceptualized power in pluralistic terms in the sense that no one group or class has the power to define deviance on its own (Lemert, 1974). Some critics claimed that power was not shared equally by competing interest groups; rather, it could only be understood in terms of the larger institutional structures that characterized contemporary society (Mankoff, 1971; Davis, 1972). Gouldner (1968:110) delivered another insult and called the labeling perspective "establish sociology."

Response/Revisions to Criticisms

Labeling theorists saw some of the criticism as unfair because it was based on misinterpretations of the perspective (Kitsuse, 1975). Theorists were annoyed that they were being criticized for not offering causal explanations when a central theme of their perspective was to enlarge the scope of deviance theory beyond the etiological issue (Becker, 1974). The labeling perspective was never offered as a full-blown theory of deviance; instead, it was offered as a perspective, a way of looking at deviance (Becker, 1974).

Theorists argued that they were being held to a view of science that was limited to the empiricist branch of positivism. There was no interest in predictive statements about deviance or in hypothesis testing. The perspective stressed field research and participant observation (Schur, 1971). The goal of such methodology was to produce "sensitizing observations" and to "deal with" deviance and to consider the perspective of those who were so labeled (Becker, 1967; Scheff, 1974).

Labeling theorists claimed that much of the empirical research was simply not true to the labeling perspective. The evaluations were based either on traditional criminological conceptualizations or on overly simplistic statements of labeling theory (Kitsuse, 1975; Schur, 1975). In response to structural critiques, Becker (1967) claimed nothing in the perspective prevented a more macro-level or structural analysis or broadening the labeling perspective to include a consideration of the larger social structure.

Empirical Literature

Empirical investigations of the labeling perspective have been carried out in many disciplines by using a variety of methodologies. For example, a group of eight sane volunteers applied for admission to mental hospitals. The subjects claimed to be hearing voices, a symptom of schizophrenia. Once admitted to the hospital, they began to behave normally.

Hospital personnel continued to treat the patients as schizophrenic and interpreted the normal everyday behavior of the patients as manifestations of illness. Rosenhan (1973) found that an early arrival at the lunchroom was seen as an exhibition of oral aggressive behavior; a patient seen writing something was referred to as a compulsive note-taker. When the subjects were discharged from the hospital, it was as schizophrenics in remission.

The findings thus support criminological labeling theory. Once the sane individuals were labeled schizophrenic, they were unable to eliminate the label by acting normally. Even when they supposedly had recovered, the label of schizophrenic stayed with them (Adler, 1998; Mueller, 1998; and Laufer, 1998).

Researchers have also looked at how labels affect people and groups with unconventional lifestyles, whether prohibited by law or not—"gays," "public drunks," "junkies," "strippers," "streetwalkers" (Warren and Johnson, 1973, 77). The results of research, no matter what the group, were largely in conformity: "Once a ____ always a ____" (Schwartz and Skolnick, 1962, 133). Labeling by adjudication may have lifelong consequences. Schwartz and Skolnick (1962) found that employers were reluctant to hire anyone with a court record even though the person had been found not guilty.

The criminologist Anthony Platt (1969) has investigated how certain individuals are singled out to receive labels. Focusing on the label "juvenile delinquent," he showed how the social reformers of the late nineteenth century helped create delinquency by establishing a special institution, the juvenile court, for the processing of troubled youths. The Chicago society women who lobbied for the establishment of juvenile courts may have had the best motives in trying to help immigrant children who, by their standards, were out of control. By getting the juvenile court established, they simply widened the net of state agencies empowered to label some children as deviant. Through its labeling effect, the court contributed to its own growth.

Support of the Theory

Tittle (1975) believes that on the basis of the evidence only the weakest implications of the perspective can be sustained. However, he believes the theory cannot be totally dismissed because its research data have been very poor and unscientific. Tittle has suggested that there may be something to the effects of labeling, but currently the theory is so roughly formulated that it is impossible to test it empirically.

Paternoster and Lovanni (1989), however, take the opposite view on the labeling theory. They see the problem as lying with the critics, not the theory: "Empirical tests of the labeling perspective have been conducted with rather inelegant formulations of a complex theory" (360). They believe that for the most part "empirical tests of labeling propositions have been conducted with grossly misrepresented hypotheses that are more caricature than characteristic of the theory" (360). They further suggest two additional areas for conducting more research. One area would examine the social context in which the labeling occurs and the second would examine the cumulative effects created by the social characteristics of the offender when being processed in the justice system.

Tittle (1975) and later Paternoster and Lovanni (1989) in their critiques and literature reviews take contradictory viewpoints concerning the results of "empirical" studies of labeling. At present it seems that, depending on whose viewpoint one chooses to endorse, labeling might have support in the empirical literature, and then again it might not. The value of the theory might not lie in its testability but in other issues it has raised.

Value of the Theory

Labeling theory affected social policy by providing theoretical support for decriminalization, diversion, and deinstitutionalization movements. It supports the view that we should decriminalize "victimless crimes" since defining them as crimes and then reacting to them as crimes initiate the labeling process with its adverse

consequences (Schur, 1965). The labeling perspective has sensitized scholars to the importance of social, political, and economic power in the formulation of the rules that regulate our lives.

Labeling theory made a significant impact in scientific theorizing because of its stress upon a point to which science had not paid much attention; namely, that societal reactions, perhaps more than behavior, should become the object of study. The labeling perspective is useful in directing our attention to a social process that may, under some circumstances and for some kinds of people, reinforce tendencies to violate the law, but it is not yet a fully developed and empirically tested theory of crime and delinquency (Conklin, 1989).

Labeling theory challenged the deterministic views of positivistic science by questioning the idea that there are universal laws by which delinquency can be explained (Schur, 1971). Delinquency is a social construct that is relative both to time and place (Mankoff, 1971). At best, therefore, we can only hope to understand how our own society operates since it is impossible to derive theories that locate causes for delinquent behavior that are both inherent within the individual and transcend both time and culture (Sheley, 1979).

Conclusion

From the contemporary perspective of people who are "coming out all over," the labeled person is concerned with the social affirmation of self. A person who has lived in shame and embarrassment with a disfiguring facial scar, a woman who has silently suffered demeaning treatment at the hands of an overbearing male colleague, or a black who has been socially and psychologically imprisoned by racial stereotypes may struggle with the issues surrounding the process of coming out no less than those who bear the less visible "blemishes of individual character" such as mental disorders, drug addiction, unemployment, or illegitimate birth (Kitsuse, 1980). As a succession of deviant populations are awakened to a realization of their common condition, we may

expect them to move into the politics of social problems, vigorously pressing the social order to negotiate new conceptions of reasonable accommodations.

One of William Faulkner's characters inadvertently summed the situation up in simple terms when he said:

Sometimes I ain't so sure who's got a right to say when a man is crazy and when he ain't. Sometimes I think it ain't none of us pure crazy and ain't none of us pure sane until the balance of us talks him that-a-way. It's like it ain't so much what a fellow does, but it's the way the majority of folks is looking at him when he does it (quoted in Becker, 1963, 1).

Labeling theory, however, is now considered an extremely complex yet inadequate way to explain deviance. Although labeling theory cannot explain all deviance, it does provide us with a framework for understanding fundamental processes involved in some deviance. Work on the theory continues, and we may expect continued refinements.

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