

## THE LABELING PROCESS: REINFORCEMENT AND DETERRENT?

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The labeling theory approach to the analysis of deviance depicts stable patterns of deviant behavior as products or outcomes of the process of being apprehended in a deviant act and publicly branded as a deviant person. The involvement of an individual in this process is viewed as depending much less upon what he does or what he is than upon what others do to him as a consequence of his actions. Deviant persons are regarded as having undergone a degradation ceremony with the result that they have been relegated to membership in a deviant group. In the process, they are thought to have come to acquire an inferior social status and to have developed a deviant view of the world and all the knowledges, skills, and attitudes associated with that status.

Labeling analysts make a basic distinction between primary and secondary deviance. This distinction has been clearly formulated by Lemert (1967: 17; 1951: 75). In his view, primary deviance is simply any behavior which might cause an individual to be labeled as a deviant person, whereas secondary deviance is behavior which is generated when an individual is placed in a deviant social role as a result of having been labeled and processed as a deviant person. Labeling analysts attach much greater significance to secondary deviance than to primary deviance, except insofar as other persons react to an act which might be labeled as deviant. They view deviance as a product or outcome of the interaction between the individual who performs the deviant act and those who respond to it by labeling the individual as a deviant person.

Thus, the labeling theory approach to the analysis of deviant behavior typically stresses the importance of the impact of societal reaction on the deviant person rather than focusing upon his psychological or sociological characteristics. Apropos of

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this, the central issue to which labeling analysts have consistently addressed their inquiries is the consequences of having become the target of a label as a deviant person. The labeling process is depicted as resulting characteristically in the reinforcement and crystallization of deviant behavior as a life style. This *negative* result is attributed to what are considered to be typical sequelae of the labeling process, namely, the isolation of the deviant from nondeviant social relationships and a resultant acceptance of a definition of self as a deviant person.<sup>1</sup>

While readily acknowledging the highly significant contributions that this approach has made to our understanding of deviant behavior, this paper takes special note of the fact that a possibly highly important alternative consequence of the labeling process, namely its *positive* effect on future behavior,<sup>2</sup> has been virtually ignored in the work of labeling analysts. Indeed, the treatment of this issue has been limited almost entirely to a concern for the *negative* effect of the labeling process on future behavior. While labeling analysts have demonstrated that the labeling process appears to reinforce and solidify deviant behavior in many cases, they apparently have not seriously considered the possibility that in other cases it might serve to terminate on-going deviance and to deter future deviant behavior. It is somewhat difficult, at first glance, to understand why labeling analysts have failed to examine, to any appreciable extent, the possibility that the labeling process may have positive or deterrent effects on behavior. It does not appear to be for lack of evidence in the literature or in personal experience. For example, depictions by social scientists of social control techniques often point to labeling as a negative sanction and behavioral deterrent. A good case in point is the Bank Wiring Room experiment in the Western Electric Hawthorne Works studies (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939). In that experiment, deviants were sanctioned by their work group by being labeled "rate busters," "speed kings," and so forth, when their work output exceeded the group norm defining "a fair day's work." This treatment by their fellow group members was, on the whole, quite successful in pressuring the deviants to conform to the group norm. Moreover, one's own everyday experiences and observations and common sense all lend support to the general contention that labeling by friends, peers, colleagues, and other associates often does result in a cessation of deviant behavior and can serve to deter future deviance.

The ultimate reasons for the failure of labeling analysts to attend to this dimension of the problem are probably many and varied. Although the determination of these reasons is not the central concern of this paper, it seems appropriate to note in passing that at least one of the roots of the labeling theory approach to the analysis of deviance would seem to lie in a larger perspective on the phenomenon which was established by earlier analysts of deviant behavior, most of whom were criminologists.<sup>3</sup> These analysts sought to identify the social and cultural, as contrasted to the individual and psychological, sources of deviance, particularly crime. Very importantly, they found that the established societal channels for dealing with criminal deviance yielded, on the whole, essentially negative results. The societal agencies and processes involved in apprehension, adjudication, and rehabilitation of the criminal deviant were shown to be largely ineffective in stopping on-going criminal behavior and deterring future crime. Moreover, these agencies and processes were shown to have characteristics which not only failed to rehabilitate the criminal and to deter new criminal behavior, but which actually helped establish and support criminal careers.

This criminological tradition seems to have focused attention almost exclusively on deviance and the labeling process as they take place in an urban, secondary-group-dominated setting where opportunities for personalized observations about behavior are vastly outnumbered by (and thus take second place to) those which are based upon typifications. As a result, it would seem that contemporary labeling analysts, as heirs of this tradition in the study of deviance, have come to center their attention almost exclusively upon the negative outcomes of the labeling process as they typically occur in a mass society setting. Thus, the perspective of contemporary labeling analysts appears to be a carry-over from work within this larger criminological tradition which has been directed at the negative outcomes of the inept and ineffective social control measures characteristic of an urban society.

This approach to deviance and the analytical and empirical results it has produced are highly significant as far as they go. However, it is important to call attention to the fact that it has failed to take into consideration the possibility that the impact of the labeling process may not be uniform in all social settings and across all forms of deviant behavior. For example, there is reason to believe that the effect of the labeling process in a

primary group situation may be quite different from that found in a mass society setting. Primary group settings characteristically provide the labeled person much greater exposure to personalized observations by others which may help neutralize the negative stereotypic aspects of the label. Further, as illustrated in the Western Electric Bank Wiring Room research, the effect of labeling in a primary group setting seems to be just the opposite of that observed by labeling analysts in secondary group settings. That is, the labeling process seems to work, for the most part, as a deterrent in the former in sharp contrast to its apparent reinforcing effect upon deviant behavior in the latter. In sum, there is evidence to suggest that the labeling process apparently can function either as a negative, socially disintegrative force or as a positive, socially integrative force, depending upon the social setting and the interpersonal circumstances.

The validity of the currently accepted hypothesis concerning the outcome of the labeling process, therefore, has not to date been completely established. The empirical evidence which lends support to the contention that the labeling process typically results in negative outcomes for future behavior, while significant, is actually very selective in nature and, therefore, satisfies only part of the requirement for the establishment of the validity of this hypothesis. While the data for crime, for example, tend, on the whole, to support the current formulation, it has not been demonstrated that comparably significant data could not be marshalled in support of the converse of the hypothesis with regard to other types of deviant behavior and alternative social settings. Thus, while few, if any, social scientists would contest the idea that the labeling process does in many cases result in negative consequences, it is important to realize that positive outcomes may also be part of the social reality of this phenomenon. The issue is not simply whether the labeling process reinforces or deters future deviance. Rather it is that an examination of the current state of the art in labeling theory forces an increased recognition that both reinforcement *and* deterrence may be outcomes of the labeling process.

At this time, there is no indication that there has been a systematic effort on the part of labeling analysts to evaluate these issues. Moreover, there have been few efforts to undertake the empirical exploration of the implications of labeling theory. In view of this, it seems fair to say that, at this time,

the validity of the currently accepted hypothesis that the labeling process typically reinforces deviant behavior seems to rest more upon its repeated assertion by labeling analysts than upon a substantial body of empirical evidence and carefully reasoned conclusions. If this is the case, it seems incumbent upon labeling analysts to entertain the possibility of a systematic empirical exploration of all the possible outcomes of the labeling process.

It is the contention of this paper that the determination of whether the labeling process will result in positive or negative outcomes for future behavior turns upon several conditions of the labeling process which, to date, have received little or no attention from labeling analysts. Several observations regarding these conditions will be examined with the intention of suggesting directions which future research in this area might take.

**Observation No. 1: The labeling process seems to have different effects at various stages in a deviant career.** Given Lemert's distinction between primary and secondary deviance (1951; 1967), it seems likely that labeling will have fewer effects, positive or negative, after the person has moved into the stage of secondary deviance. The primary deviant seems to be more vulnerable to the direct influence of the labeling process inasmuch as he is still "corruptible." At this stage, the label will either tend to end his deviance or it will serve to push him closer to secondary deviance. Tannenbaum (1938) has emphasized how the youthful troublemaker may be propelled into a delinquent career by being so labeled. On the other hand, Cameron (1964: 165) found that the labeling of the novice pilferer as "shoplifter" usually terminated this activity in her subjects. She points out that the novice pilferer does not think of himself before his arrest as a thief and has no peer group support for such a role. Therefore, being apprehended and labeled as such results in his rejection of that role. In this case, the labeling process serves to terminate the on-going deviant behavior and apparently deters further deviance of this type.

In a recent study (Klemke, 1971) of students who had been officially labeled academic failures by having been dropped for poor scholarship from a large state university, it was found that those attending a local community college did not seem to be caught in a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure. Instead, those who had been stigmatized as failures were found to be earning better grades and to have more favorable attitudes toward their academic work than did the non-failure students. This finding runs counter to the labeling analyst's expectation of a negative

outcome in this case and indicates again that there is a need to examine all possible outcomes of the labeling process. Thus, while the primary deviant is still "corruptible," he is also still susceptible to the sanctions of the larger society.

**Observation No. 2: When a label is assigned confidentially, and the person so labeled is a non-professional deviant, there appears to be a greater chance that future deviance will be avoided.** There is a vast difference between the impact of labeling which is carried out in a limited, confidential manner, as for example, behind the closed doors of a department store manager's office, and that which takes place before a public audience, such as in a court of law. If labeling is done publicly, the processes of alienation and differential treatment, as discussed by Tannenbaum (1938), tend to be set in motion. This outcome would seem to be even more likely if opportunities for acceptance by a deviant subculture were also available. Such acceptance would certainly enhance the probability that the labeled person might move into secondary deviance. However, it must be noted that even when labeling is carried out publicly, it is not inevitable that the labeled person continues or intensifies his deviant behavior. Indeed, most persons so labeled probably do not. Thus, the majority of young males repeatedly labeled in the manner discussed by Tannenbaum do not turn out to be professional criminals. Moreover, in contemporary mass society such public labeling "ceremonies" are increasingly easier to keep secret, and thereby additional negative reactions from others are avoided.

**Observation No. 3: When the deviant person has some commitment to and is, therefore, sensitive to the evaluation of the labeler, the effect of the labeling process appears more likely to be positive than negative.** Cameron's research, noted earlier, points out that the labeling techniques utilized in handling shoplifting cases worked well to discourage the amateur pilferer but had little success with experienced shoplifters. This points up the importance of subcultural supports which encourage renunciation of the legitimacy of conventional morality. The "techniques of neutralization" provided by the subculture to nullify conventional morality seem to abrogate any effect, positive or negative, that the labeling process might have on the labeled person. This, in turn, suggests that when the labeler is not a member of the "target's" in-group, his evaluation may not carry the same effect as if he were a member. This observation is borne out empirically in the Western Electric Bank

Wiring Room experiment noted earlier (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939). In that study, labels applied by members of one's own work group were more effective in controlling deviation from group norms than was labeling carried out by management representatives with respect to formal orders contradicting the group norms concerning daily output. Similarly, it has become an increasingly common observation in treatment and correctional settings, such as Synanon and Alcoholics Anonymous, that labeling by one's peers or significant others seems to be more successful in stopping deviant behavior and rehabilitating the deviant than that carried out by non-peers, such as counselors, psychiatrists, or prison guards applying the same labels.

**Observation No. 4: If a label can be easily removed, then the probability that the stigmatized person is likely to move toward conforming behavior is greater.** In their research on occupational opportunities, Schwartz and Skolnick (1962) found that the revelation of an arrest record, irrespective of conviction or acquittal, markedly reduces the number of job opportunities for the individual, particularly for the lower-class person. In an effort to cope with this problem, some legal authorities for some time have pressed for the expungement of the records of persons placed on probation or parole. In the U.S., this has been limited, for the most part, to juvenile records in cases where the community views the young person as deserving of a "second chance." In Sweden, however, the present policy in this regard is so advanced that it is a cardinal principle of Swedish penal policy to protect and maintain the anonymity of released offenders, especially released murderers (Playfair and Sington, 1957). The released offender is advised to change his name and to take up residence in a community or part of the country different from the one in which his crime was committed. A job and, if necessary, living accommodations are found for him there. The only member of his new community aware of his true identity is his employer who is sworn to secrecy. In short, the released offender has the opportunity to embark on a new life completely free of any evidence from the past that might stigmatize him. Swedish penal officials report that for decades there have been no cases of homicide offenders who have been released under this program repeating their crimes. These results suggest that by making the realistic removal of such labels feasible, it is possible, in many cases, to initiate and to sustain movement away from deviant behavior.

**Observation No. 5: The nature of the societal reaction which follows or accompanies the application of a label is of central importance in determining whether the outcome of the process will be positive or negative.** In the area of mental illness, the difficulties of the person who has been labeled as "sick" once again becoming perceived as "normal" or "well," has been of interest to labeling analysts.<sup>4</sup> An examination of the ways in which the Hutterites deal with persons exhibiting abnormal behavior was carried out by Eaton and Weil (1953). They found that persons so identified became the objects of extensive efforts on the part of friends and the community in general to aid and support the labeled person in becoming reintegrated into the community. This contrasts sharply with the larger societal reaction to the mentally "sick" person in the United States. In American society, the person so labeled characteristically is regarded as someone to be avoided, rejected, and isolated. Viewed from this perspective, the labeling process is essentially a stimulus which can set off a wide range of societal reactions varying from negative, isolative, and socially disintegrative responses to highly positive, supportive, and socially integrative actions. Where societal reactions are positive, supportive, and socially integrative, the labeling process seems to generate a positive atmosphere in which the effect on future behavior is to move it in the direction of greater conformity.

It is important to distinguish between official, institutionalized reactions to deviant acts and the informal reactions of one's significant others. In the study of academic failures mentioned earlier (Klemke, 1971: 16), it was found that official expulsion from the university was countered by positive, supportive reactions from the student's significant others. These positive reactions were instrumental in encouraging the students to reenter college and try again to succeed academically. They also were significant in maximizing the chances for academic success once the student decided to enter the community college for another try. This finding adds still another dimension to the labeling process and its outcomes which has not been adequately examined by labeling analysts.

**Observation No. 6: A liberal assignment of positive labels, within realistic limits, seems to stimulate and increase the prevalence of desirable behavior.** In their apparent preoccupation with the negative effects of the labeling process, labeling analysts have paid little attention to the possibility that an in-



crease in desirable behavior might result from the application of positive labels. That positive labeling can function as a stimulus to desirable behavior is shown in the work of Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968). In their study, teachers in an elementary school were led to believe at the beginning of the school year that certain pupils could be expected to show considerable academic improvement during the coming year. The teachers were told that these predictions were based upon intelligence tests which had been administered at the end of the preceding academic year. The children so designated were labeled "spurters" by the investigators in their conversations with the teachers. In reality, the children designated as "spurters" were chosen at random from the roster of students enrolled at the school by using a table of random numbers. After the school year was in progress, standard intelligence tests were given to all pupils during the year at predetermined intervals. The results indicated clearly that the randomly chosen children labeled as "spurters" improved scholastically considerably more than the rest of the children who were not so designated. Moreover, in addition to depicting the "spurters" as intellectually more alive and autonomous than the other children, their teachers described them as being happier, more interesting, more appealing, and more affectionate, as well as being better adjusted and less in need of social approval. In this case, the application of a positive label clearly generated socially desirable behavior both as perceived by others and as measured by standardized psychological tests.

On the basis of these six observations, it is possible to construct six hypotheses that seem to be amenable to systematic empirical evaluation by the labeling analyst. While there seems to be little doubt that continued observation and reflection could yield additional hypotheses, those suggested here seem sufficient to point the way to a systematic investigation of the converse of the currently accepted hypothesis concerning the outcome of the labeling process. This is the primary purpose of this paper. In order to express the hypotheses as formal statements, it seems to be most convenient to summarize them as follows.

**The labeling process is more likely to terminate existing deviant behavior and to deter future deviance:**

1. If the labeled person is a primary rather than a secondary deviant.

2. If the labeling is carried out in a confidential setting with the understanding that future deviance will result in public exposure.
3. If the labeling has been carried out by an in-group member or significant other.
4. The more easily the label is removable when the deviant behavior has ceased.
5. The more the labeling results in efforts to reintegrate the deviant into the community.
6. If the label is favorable rather than derogatory.

Empirical evaluation of these hypotheses will do much to expand our knowledge concerning the possible positive effects of the labeling process on both on-going deviance and future conduct. Hopefully, in time it will be possible to amass sufficient empirical evidence so that an objective evaluation of the converse of the currently accepted labeling hypothesis will be possible. All of this will do a great deal to enhance our understanding of the labeling process itself as well as its consequences for future behavior. Moreover, research such as this can begin to provide an objective basis for a systematic evaluation of labeling theory as a general theory of deviant behavior.

#### FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, Becker (1963), Erickson (1962), Kitsuse (1962), Lemert (1951); also Lemert (1967), Scheff (1966).
- <sup>2</sup> The terms "positive" and "negative," as used in this context, are utilized only to indicate that deviant behavior is usually regarded negatively by the larger society, whereas a reduction in its frequency or its termination is normally regarded positively. There is no intention of implying that conformity to the norms of the larger society is necessarily better or more desirable than deviance from them. The question as to whether deviance should be discouraged or promoted, while a legitimate and interesting issue, is not at stake here.
- <sup>3</sup> The work of pioneering analysts, such as Clemmer, Lemert, Reckless, Sutherland, Taft, Tannenbaum, and others whose work falls within the framework of this general tradition comes to mind here.
- <sup>4</sup> See, for example, Scheff (1966).

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