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ABSTRACT

The labeling perspective is analyzed in terms of its contribution to the development of a general theory of deviant behavior. The implicit model of social organization framing the labeling process is described, and the limiting conditions for its application explored. Special attention is accorded to the interplay between social organizational and social psychological levels of analysis, and areas of interpenetration between the labeling model and the more traditional interpretations of deviance. Three images of the deviant suggested by the labeling approach are examined: the deviant as outsider, the oversocialized deviant, and the deviant as convert. Each of these images is discussed in terms of its consequences for the elaboration and refinement of a theory of deviance. Several aspects of deviant socialization are outlined as a basis for modifying and extending the labeling approach. (Author)

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LABELING THE DEVIANT ACT:
TOWARD A GENERAL THEORY OF DEVIANT BEHAVIOR*

by

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In an article entitled "The Sociology of the Deviant Act: Anomie Theory and Beyond", Albert Cohen (1965) presented what has become a well-known critique of anomie theory. In describing directions for theoretical refinement he suggested that greater attention be paid to the nature of the interaction and feedback processes surrounding the deviant act, and the role of social identity in the actor's commitment to a deviant career. Whether Cohen's contribution is viewed as a culmination of existing trends or a distinctive impetus for theoretical development, it is clear that it signaled a turning point in the study of deviant behavior. The theoretical framework which proved to be most consistent with this reorientation is commonly referred to as the "labeling approach" (Tannenbaum, 1938; Lemert, 1951, 1967; Becker, 1964; Kitsuse, 1962; Erikson, 1962).

For the most part, those embracing the labeling perspective have applied it rather uncritically as a general model for the interpretation of a wide range of deviant behaviors. Although a number of problems with the approach have been noted, most attempts at critical evaluation have been more concerned with the internal problems of the approach than with the specific possibilities for its elaboration and integration with more traditional explanatory models (cf. Gibbs, 1966; Reiss, 1966; Lorber, 1967; Roman and Trice, 1969; Schur, 1969). The position taken in this paper is that the labeling model can be most fruitfully criticized by viewing it as a complement to, rather than a substitute for, alternative explanations. Toward this end, the analysis will assess the approach as it offers a basis for developing a general theory of deviant behavior.

SOME PROPOSITIONS OF THE LABELING APPROACH

In order to investigate the adequacy of the labeling explanation some of the basic propositions derivable from the literature will be discussed.

The purpose of this formalization is to outline the fundamental elements of the labeling model and provide a framework for interpreting the implicit theory of social organization upon which that model is based.

Proposition 1: The more intensive and extensive the definitions of self as deviant, the greater the likelihood of label internalization. Since labeling explanations uniformly stress the importance of official labeling as a prepotent factor in the social organization of reactions to the actor (Garfinkel, 1956; Scheff, 1966; Lemert, 1951, 1967), the implications of this proposition are relatively straightforward. Official labeling will have consequences for the redefinition of self to the extent that it enforces a shift in (1) definitions of the actor held by most members of the social audience (extensiveness), and (2) definitions of the actor held by those others who are most significant to him (intensity). Several additional assumptions appear to be implicit in this hypothesis.

Implicit Assumption 1a: The social audience agrees on the meaning of the act. When there is less than perfect agreement about the negative quality of the act the consistency of the labeling experience would appear to be problematic.

Implicit Assumption 1b: The social audience agrees on the appropriateness of the label designation. Even if there is high consensus about the meaning of the act, the fit between the behavioral event and the role category may be uncertain. In those cases where it is not readily apparent that the behavior is indicative of a deviant character or commitment to a deviant role, the consequences of official labeling are far from clear.

Implicit Assumption 1c: The evaluations of the social audience are accepted by the actor as relevant to evaluations of self. In those cases where the defining others are not significant others, it is unlikely that labeling will have its predicted effects. Although labeling explanations emphasize the role of significant others in the communication of deviant

definitions, the relationship between official (public) and informal (private) responses is not taken as especially problematic (cf. Freidson, 1965:91-92).

Proposition 2: The more intensive and extensive the definitions of self as deviant, the greater the likelihood of (1) decreased evaluations of self and (2) increased evaluations of the deviant role. Since the labeling experience is interpreted as threatening to conforming commitments, it follows that conceptions of self which are anchored in conformity will undergo a significant degree of devaluation. Furthermore, in seeking an alternative basis for defining the self the restrictive nature of social response makes the selection of a deviant career an almost automatic, if not predetermined choice. This proposition identifies the dynamics of the "self-fulfilling prophecy" through which the actor comes to take as central to attitude and behavior those qualities which the label originally imputed (Merton, 1957)

Implicit Assumption 2: Actors are committed to conformity and are motivated to preserve or strengthen those commitments at the time of labeling. The transforming quality of the labeling experience implies a portrait of the rule-breaker as someone who has a present and future stake in conventional statuses and activities. Normal development is construed "as a series of progressively increasing commitments to conventional norms and institutions" (Becker, 1964:27-28). Inasmuch as socialization includes the development of deviant as well as conforming commitments, the view of labeling as a process enforcing a dramatic redefinition of self may be called into question.

Proposition 3: The more intensive and extensive the definitions of self as deviant, the greater the likelihood of behavioral consequences consistent with and likely to validate that conception of self. Systematic deviance is more likely to follow than precede labeling, and externally supplied social cues are more important in the redefinition of self than behaviorally generated cues. This focus has the effect of directing attention toward the "symbolic

and interactional environment to which the person responds" (Lemert, 1967:40) and away from those sources of self perception and definition which are independent of the actual social response to the deviant act.

Implicit Assumption 3: Anticipatory learning about the meaning and implications of the deviant act is either (1) inconsequential in the actor's interpretation of and reaction to the labeling experience or (2) tends to support the self-defining implications of the labeling process. Although anticipatory learning may be seen as strengthening the impact of the labeling experience, it is not in itself a sufficient condition for identity change. Hence, any conceptualization of the deviant role which develops in advance of labeling takes on meaning for interpreting the behavior of others, but not one's own behavior. Only through the process of societal reaction do the expectations associated with the deviant role become significant for the identity and subsequent behavior of the rule-breaker.

Proposition 4: The more intensive and extensive the definitions of self as deviant, the greater the structural pressures for secondary deviance. Among the most important of the structural pressures is that exerted by the deviant subculture. Socialization into a deviant subculture is often depicted as the principal consequence of the labeling experience, and the attraction of the actor to the deviant group is frequently explained in terms of its ability to assuage the anxieties surrounding the imputation of a "spoiled" identity (Becker, 1964; Leznoff and Westley, 1956; Wallace, 1965). From this point of view, the functional significance of deviant groups resided in their ability to "defend" the actor against threatening imputations.

Implicit Assumption 4: The "secondary social audience" not only agrees on the meaning of the act and the appropriateness of the label designation, but also creates objective opportunities for role performance consistent with the symbolic processes instigated by the official labelers.¹ When the

¹ The secondary social audience includes those groups and individuals with whom the rulebreaker interacts following the application of the official label.

symbolic status of the rule-breaker is not associated with a parallel shift in types of experiences and opportunities available to him this assumption appears dubious at best.

SOME STRUCTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE LABELING MODEL

Through an examination of the implicit assumptions framing the labeling approach it is possible to identify the implicit model of social organization upon which it is based. The model may only be inferred inasmuch as the labelists have largely taken for granted the nature of organized social activity surrounding the labeling process.²

The Deviant as Outsider

The labeling model is premised on a view of society within which deviant and conforming roles (including both behavioral and evaluational components) are organized into highly autonomous and incompatible units. This perspective forces us to view society as composed of two exhaustive categories: "insiders" and "outsiders".

The dichotomy between definitions of conformity and deviance would seem to limit the development of a general theory of deviance in several respects. First, in order to conceive of the relationship between deviant and conforming commitments as uniformly incompatible it is necessary to assume a consensual basis for the interpretation of questionable acts. The image of the deviant status as a "master status" (Becker, 1964:32) suggests a type of "domino effect" wherein the discrediting features of the label become a bases for redefining the actor in progressively broader spheres of social interaction. This interpretation is likely to be especially suspect when "conformers" fail to agree on the social meaning of "deviant acts" (Gusfield, 1967; Horowitz

² The view that social organization represents a given in the interpretation of labeling effects is consistent with the symbolic interactionist view that social structure only affects action "to the extent to which it shapes situations in which people act, and to which it supplies fixed sets of symbols which people use in interpreting their situations" (Blumer, 1962:190).

and Leibowitz, 1968). Without acknowledging the limits of agreement on the "badness" and "goodness" of any particular act the labeling explanation is likely to overestimate the influence of societal reaction in the ontogenesis of deviant careers.

A second problem created by the binary model of society is its failure to consider the complementarity of deviant and conforming roles in the development of deviant commitments. The conception of deviant and conforming involvements as mutually exclusive tends to ignore those cases in which the deviance has integrative, rather than disruptive, consequences for conforming commitments. In certain circumstances systematic deviance may help reinforce and preserve major values of the social system (cf. Zola, 1964; Davis, 1966; Cohen, 1966; Walshok, 1971); not just for conformers, but for deviants as well.

Similarly, if we view participation in systematic deviance as thoroughly removed from conforming commitments, we are likely to overlook sources of self-definition and motivation common to both (Bell, 1953; Matza and Sykes, 1961; Lewis, 1970). The labeling perspective discourages consideration of the overlap between deviant and conforming patterns of socialization insofar as it requires a conversion of perspectives, activities and goals.

The Oversocialized Deviant

The assumptions and propositions of labeling theory describe the actor's commitment to deviance as built upon the framework of attitudes, expectations and opportunities supplied by those evaluating and reacting to his behavior. To the extent that this explanation implies a conception of man as an acceptance-seeker who is "responding eagerly or anxiously to the expectations of other role-players in the multiple group settings in which he finds himself", it suggests a resurrection of Wrong's (1961:190) "oversocialized man". The cycle of socialization into conformity, desocialization through the labeling process and resocialization into the deviant group depicts the actor as an

almost entirely passive agent being manipulated by powerful external forces (Ray, 1964; McHugh, 1966).

The view that systematic deviance can be explained as a function of the socializing power of societal reaction would seem to limit a general theory of deviance in two ways. First, since internalization of the deviant label is taken as sufficient to explain a pattern of deviant behavior, the relationship between role expectations and role performance remains unexplored. This relationship is especially questionable if structural contingencies (1) fail to provide the context within which the deviance may be successfully sustained; or (2) determine the availability of specific types of deviant response patterns.

Perhaps the greatest barrier to the exploration of the structural conditions surrounding the labeling process has been the depiction of the deviant subculture favored by the labelists. The "instrumental" value of deviant subcultures is denied; in its place is substituted the portrait of an actor driven to escape the moral judgments of a hostile social world. When deviant groups are organized primarily for "instrumental" rather than "defensive" purposes, the labeling approach is likely to underestimate the importance of concrete payoffs as an independent incentive for deviant commitment (Schur, 1966).

A second problem created by the concept of the "oversocialized deviant" involves the failure of the labeling model to distinguish "informational" from other types of social influence (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955; Thibaut and Kelley, 1959). Even if the labeling situation places the actor in a condition of high information dependence, there may be no incentives to conform with the positive expectations of the labeling others (normative social influence), or to conform because of the labeling others to reward or punish the actor (effect control). Consequently, information about the type of person that he is considered to be may not (in itself) induce a process of identity change in the labeled actor.

The Converted Deviant

The labeling model, because of its concern with the transforming qualities of the reaction process, interprets deviant socialization as tantamount to conversion into the deviant role. The most obvious liability of this emphasis is reflected in the narrowing of attention to those contexts of social definition which induce a rapid and abrupt redefinition of self (Schein, 1961; Lofland and Stark, 1965). Overlooked by this perspective are socialization patterns involving a "regularized" status passage (Strauss, 1962) and some form of "alternation", rather than "conversion" (Travisano, 1970).

In its insistence on the incompatibility of structural supports for conventional and deviant socialization, the binary model rules out a consideration of the "relatively easily accomplished changes of life which . . . are a part of or grow out of existing programs of behavior" (Travisano, 1970:601). If the deviant identity grows out of a socially organized "identity sequence" and the link between deviant and conforming roles is firmly established, the acquisition of a deviant identity may merely add to, rather than replace, established identities.

REORIENTING THE LABELING PERSPECTIVE

Three processes may be identified as relevant to the refinement and extension of the labeling model. First, deviance may grow out of a role-making process, initiated by expectations but developing through a subtle probing interchange among actors in a given situation (Turner, 1962; Stryker, 1968). Deviant commitment may be studied as the product of an expedient "role-bargain", rather than a prefigured and externally imposed labeling experience (Goode, 1960). A second point of inquiry suggested by the criticisms of the labeling approach is the process by which an actor chooses roles that allow him to behave in a manner compatible with his existing definitions of self--role selection (Backman and Secord, 1968). A final process, role

portrayal (Backman and Secord, 1968), is possible when a number of forms or styles of role performance are congruent with the expectations framing a single role. In these instances, the development of a deviant role-career will reflect an ongoing interplay between the range of appropriate role portrayals and the proclivities of actors choosing to enact those roles. By focusing on these dimensions, the labeling model can be interpreted in relation to the organizational processes underlying the formation, differentiation and allocation of deviant roles. When this task is initiated the labeling approach will contribute more meaningfully and systematically to the denouement of a general theory of deviant behavior.

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