Labeling and the Homeless

INTRODUCTION

Mankind’s multi-faceted perception of deviance is displayed through various behaviors, beliefs, time periods, and geographical or cultural settings. What is deviant in one context may not be considered deviant in another. Much of what is considered deviant by any given group is determined by the influential, and thus powerful members of that group. Over time, a cumulative paradigm emerges, systematically establishing constructs of what is considered to be normative and non-normative behavior. As time progresses, the complexities involved in development of this paradigm become such that the origins of most aspects are not questioned and are in fact, treated as infallible, systematically enforced, oftentimes with no cognizant recognition of their genesis, nor examination of their validity or lack thereof. Conformity to group standards is established through life-long conditioning; an indoctrination by loved ones and other respected individuals from within one’s circle of influence, i.e., family members, teachers, policemen, politicians, religious figures, employers, etc. These values and beliefs are also built into social systems and enforced via implementation of social controls, i.e., peer pressure, laws, religious doctrine, customs, rituals, ceremonial events, superstitions, media portrayals, etc. In essence, perceptions of deviance are like code embedded into our behavioral software from beginning at birth.

It is important to recognize the significance of the structural elements and mechanisms involved in the creation and imposition of society’s norms, along with the resultant rewards and consequences for compliance or non-compliance with them. Generally speaking, those who comply with the cultural norms will enjoy the acceptance and respect of their peers, along with the status that such behavior frequently begets. Others, who appear or behave in non-normative ways may suffer economic and social detriment, even though their behavior may be harmless to
the rest of society. In fact, the initial deviance may result in a cascade of negative, indeed even punitive events such as social isolation, joblessness, negative self-identity, artificially imposed criminality (laws against homosexuality, use of marijuana, building codes, etc.), and homelessness. With this paper, I will explore the relationship between deviance, labeling theory, and homelessness.

**HOMELESSNESS**

Throughout history, homelessness has been treated as an individual failing. Powerful and influential people, such as politicians, lawmakers, religious figures, etc., have decided that being without a permanent address is a deviant behavior. Subsequently, laws were implemented, effectively institutionalizing this attitude. A segmentation was created; a societal stratification, separating those with homes from those without.

As with most artificial classifications, this invented criteria for determining deviancy allows the conforming group to feel secure in their perceived superiority, mindlessly ignoring those who have fallen victim to systemic pitfalls and structural impediments intentionally designed to perpetuate a class system, thereby ensuring a cheap supply of labor. Yes, our economic system requires that there be a pool of low-wage, “dispensable” workers. Additionally, by creating class consciousness, a mechanism is put in place to keep the masses focused on fighting amongst themselves, so they don’t become aware of the fact that a few elite individuals have skimmed the cream, while the vast majority below them grovel for what’s left, as stated by Thio:

*The “value engaged labelists” express their “class bias” by focusing on the behavior of the powerless and ignoring that of the powerful. In so doing, they avoid examining the workings of the power elite in the drama of deviant behavior, thereby supporting the status quo.*

---

The recent economic downturn in America has begun to open the eyes of the populace, admitting a narrow slice of light, illuminating the fragility of the average citizen’s socio-economic position, and forcing recognition that they too may be vulnerable to the challenges imposed by a classist society, and its catalyst, labeling. Sadly, it is human nature to want to think of oneself as better than others, and labeling is an effective means to delude oneself into believing the lie. Human nature frequently presents itself as ignorance, arrogance, or ambivalence.

To be homeless is to be labeled a criminal. Society’s ruling class (those with power and money) have built barriers to acquisition of shelter into our socio-economic system, and imposed a label of criminality. This tactic not only provides a rationale for, but reinforces the disdain directed at those in need, perpetuating the classism that ensures availability of a low-paid workforce. Of course, a person without food or money still needs to eat. Pilfering a bit of food for one’s self or family members can be a matter of life or death. This act of theft could be seen as altruistic, given the circumstances. In response to the increasing occurrence of homelessness in America, certain church officials have recently proclaimed that theft of items required to sustain life when faced with extraordinary circumstances, is not a sin. Their opinion is based, in part, on the following:

Catechism of the Catholic Church/ II. Respect for Persons and Their Goods
(2408 The seventh commandment forbids theft, that is, usurping another’s property against the reasonable will of the owner. There is no theft if consent can be presumed or if refusal is contrary to reason and the universal destination of goods. This is the case in obvious and urgent necessity when the only way to provide for immediate, essential needs (food, shelter, clothing . . . ) is to put at one’s disposal and use the property of others.)

http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/__P8B.htm
With the recent economic sea change, impacted by the sub-prime lending debacle, and resultant record-setting home foreclosures, economic problems confronting businesses, massive layoffs and fewer employment opportunities, the relationship of the homeless to the economic system has been further proven by the dramatic rise in homelessness. As more people experience the sting of homelessness the impact of the stigma should be weakened as it becomes apparent that it is not an individual failing, but a systemic strategy designed to keep the powerful in power, and the weak, weak.

Although it was difficult to attain government assistance for families in the past, with the current state of the government’s finances, it has become even harder to qualify for assistance, just when it is needed the most. Means testing for economic aid from the government has historically been punitive or inaccurate when determining appropriate thresholds for need. Some extenuating factors that have exacerbated the plight of the poor, and resulted in more homelessness, are the increasingly high cost of shelter/loss of shelter; rising unemployment/underemployment; low wages; very high cost of medical care; attempts to escape increasing pressure by drug or alcohol abuse; increases in mental health problems; and the likelihood of being labeled with a criminal record. Crime in the name of survival, and as a reflection of frustration and alienation is another detriment to society, given its societal impact, and inherent costs to house convicts. Each of these items has a stigma attached to it, and can become a cascade of stigmatized events; job loss leads to loss of housing; loss of housing leads to marital problems; marital problems lead to substance abuse.... or any combination of events. This obviously makes it more and more difficult to regain footing and rejoin the normal course of life. It is easier for citizens to blame the homeless for their predicament than to accept responsibility as a society for ignoring its most vulnerable members.
Having recently lost my own family home of twelve years, I can testify to how easy it is to slide into instability, especially when trusting in the historical model of integrity that the mortgage industry portrayed, and that I grew up believing. History shows that the rich elite really do rule this country, and recent events like Enron, sub-prime lending with resultant home foreclosures, war industry, bank bailout, etc. illustrate that they can get away with whatever they want, while the poor, and more recently the middle-class suffer. In a typical fascist response to these economic maladies, the rich feed into a dog-eat-dog mentality, that pits one traumatized group against another. Whites blame blacks, blacks blame whites, Democrats vs. Republicans, citizens vs. immigrants, etc., Whether this is human nature or instigated and perpetuated by the illuminati, or collusion amongst those in power, the result is the same: society’s most endangered battle one another rather than unite against the inequalities built into our various systems that keep the status quo social controls going.

It should come as no surprise that a person who experiences a cascade of negative events might tend to internalize the guilt and shame of their experiences. Every new instance of social disdain becomes embedded within the psyche, reinforcing the one that came before. One insult begets another, until finally, like shovels of dirt, the accumulated weight becomes just too much to bear. Gradually, a miserable self-image emerges, described by Charles Horton Cooley as the social self....Cooley defines the social aspects of the self through his central concept of the “looking-glass,” or how our individual identities revolve around the ways we perceive ourselves. In large part, how we view ourselves (as in a mirror or looking-glass) depends upon how we think others see us. Our “self feelings” arise from this process, and understanding this dynamic is crucial to understanding how deviant identities are formed.3 Feelings of failure and inability

to provide for family thrive, decimating self-image and hitting one’s ego hard. This reverse alchemy results in the ironic transformation of a heart of gold into a heart of lead. The exponential growth of our prison population testifies to the end result of this progression. Not only does society blame the victim, but convinces the victim of his own guilt.

As a society, it is shortsighted to not be pro-active about the issues that contribute to homelessness. Particularly, it would be less costly to address homelessness than ignore it. People who are without health care will be more expensive in the long term as emergency rooms are used in lieu of regular health maintenance and used when the health issue is more advanced and thus more expensive to treat; mental health treatment could also be better addressed, saving money as a result.

**BACKGROUND (THE FAMILY PLACE)**

The Family Place leases space from the church to which it is physically attached. Being that I performed my service hours in the winter, and being that Saint Paul, Minnesota received an unusual amount of snow this year, I repeatedly struggled to get to my service site, from week to week. For some reason the church leaders didn’t make sure the sidewalk was shoveled. When I mentioned this to the Family Place staff, they said it is always like that and one elderly lady told me she had two artificial hips and could barely make it to work. This could be seen as an example of the lack of esteem society shows the homeless. Once upon arriving to satisfy my service hours, I slipped and fell very hard on the unshoveled sidewalk. Dusting myself off, I continued trudging through the snow-laden sidewalk, and observed two mothers ahead, with five little kids in tow. They all had to struggle to advance in the three-foot snow, and I thought about the irony of the situation. Here is a homeless shelter, with unemployed, desperate people trying to find some money to improve their situation, and a massive church in need of snow shovellers,
but evidently unwilling to spend a little cash; this beyond their self-proclaimed mission to “help thy neighbor”. Upon departing for the day, I made it a point to talk to the Minister of the church. He was a nice guy, but didn’t seem to grasp the situation. I explained my position that if someone slips and hurts themselves, a photograph would easily prove the church’s negligence. A lawsuit could cost much more than a snow blower. The Minister apologized, and told me that the snow removal company he had hired was not reliable. As I drove away, I saw this poor man in his upper fifties, valiantly shoveling a path with a child’s plastic shovel. He was really working hard and I feared that he might have a heart attack. Unfortunately, every other time that I returned, the sidewalk was once again unshoveled.

As with many issues, to a great extent, society turns away and ignores the problem. Although many politicians and citizens talk about how terrible it is to have children living on the street, the way in which our tax revenues are spent does not reflect these values. This philosophy of double-speak is apparent in the lack of government funding allocated to run The Family Place. It is easy to pretend that we don’t see these families and individuals, especially because it is usually not immediately apparent that one is homeless. They look just like you or I.

A major part of my service hours has been to attend group meetings referred to as “Conversation Circles”. These meetings are facilitated by a trained counselor, who presents a main theme such as “Don’t Give Away Your Power”, “How I Got to Where I Am”, “Self-Defeating Behaviors”, etc. This gives those in attendance a main theme to speak about as we go around the room, from person to person. This theme is only meant to be a guide, and a person can actually speak about anything that is germane to their plight, particularly homelessness.

The homeless families I have encountered have really been just like anyone else I have met. Perhaps the caliber of homeless has changed recently, with the massive increase in home
foreclosures and new inclusion of the middle class into this group. But regardless of how normal they may look, it would be unimaginable that they haven’t fallen victim to the stigma of labeling. In fact, I myself have had to consciously fight against pre-conceived ideas that I had going into this assignment. I haven’t observed any different characteristics of this population than the so-called “normal” people I encounter throughout an average day. The occasional rude behaviors are not something all that unusual. For instance, it is true that cell phones are constantly ringing throughout the meetings, but this happens at meetings within my workplace too. There may be good reason for the clientele of The Family Place to answer the phone during these “Conversation Circles”, as it could be someone calling about a potential job or housing opportunity. Allowing the children to run wild is also something that isn’t all that uncommon amongst the homeless, nor those with homes. Honestly, I can see no apparent difference at all between the homeless and those with homes. Going into this experience, I must admit, I had preconceptions, expecting laziness, chemical dependency, irresponsible behavior, sloth, lack of manners, etc. This has just not proven to be true. The reason could be that these are families without homes, not single men, who may be more prone to the above negative characteristics. While listening to the stories told during the Conversation Circles, I have seen nothing that makes them different than anyone else, other than being homeless.

**Analysis**

The truth of Labeling theory is evident in the success of its propagation. There is currently a large group of people who have internalized the stigma endemic to our system(s). This internalization, whereby the individual actually becomes convinced of their inferiority perpetuates their on-going inclusion at the lower socio-economic strata of society. Because of this dubious success, there is an abundant class of low-wage labor. The majority of society buys
into the myths associated with the stigmas distributed so freely. Most don't doubt the truth of the labels, and absolutely believe that the travails of the homeless are self-imposed. The degree of prejudice produced by labeling has been clearly illustrated by the insightful experiment by D.L. Rosenhan where “pseudo-patients” were inserted into a mental institution and whose diagnoses were influenced by the unquestioning bias induced by the setting.\(^4\)

**LABELING THEORY**

Labeling theory is somewhat different than the other major theories, in that it is seen as a reactive view, rather than an explanation for deviancy, however: “Labeling theory provides an intellectual framework to understand deviance. It enables us to understand that deviance is not necessarily about the act itself, but rather how society or groups within, react to it”.\(^5\)

**My Definition of Labeling**

An immature and unenlightened impulse to judge others based on erroneous and harmful beliefs, frequently nurtured throughout childhood, and reinforced by our culture, sometimes done on an unconscious level, allowing the perpetrator to experience a feeling of superiority. This dysfunctional thought process is also rampant in racism. It can take a life-changing event to see the truth of our indoctrination, and come to an unwelcome awareness that “I am no better than they”. Labeling is also part of a strategy implemented by our governing class, designed to perpetuate a readily available, low-paid workforce. Additionally, labeling pits the sub-categories within the working class against one another, thereby erecting a barrier to any focus on the ruling elite.

---


\(^5\) Ronda Copher, 2011. Metro State University
CONCLUSIONS

Three things are abundantly clear in regard to labeling theory and the clientele of The Family Place:

1. Labeling is common, wide-spread and harmful.
2. Labeling is an effective means of ensuring that a class of people remain available to serve society as low-wage workers for menial jobs that don’t appeal to the educated elite.
3. The homeless provide members of society with a class of people who allow the majority of society to despise and to feel that they are successful in comparison, however inaccurate this delusion may be.