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## THE LABELER AS AN INFLUENCE ON LABELING OUTCOMES\*

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### ABSTRACT

Focusing upon labeling processes at the level of interpersonal relations, this paper points out the general inattention to the labeler as an influence on labeling outcomes. In addition, recent empirical findings suggest not only that labeler variables may be associated with outcomes, but that different labelers are influenced in different ways by different factors in their interpersonal labeling. Consequently, an effort is made to incorporate knowledge from social perception theory into the labeling perspective in order to enhance our understanding of interpersonal labeling processes. Several labeler related variables which might be expected to influence labeling outcomes are suggested.

One of the major assumptions made by the labeling perspective is that the deviant label is applied discriminately to rule violators (Becker, 1963; Schur, 1971; Quinney, 1970); that is, while the deviant status may to some extent be earned, it may also be ascribed on the basis of characteristics of the subject other than his or her own deviant behavior.<sup>1</sup> This paper focuses upon labeling processes at the level of interpersonal relations and, specifically, sources of variance in how and upon what bases the deviant label is applied. Particular attention is given to labeler related variables that may affect the labeling outcome.

The existing literature in the area of interpersonal labeling is reviewed briefly, noting a general lack of attention to the labeler as an influence on labeling outcomes. In addition, an implicit assumption of existing labeling theory, that all labelers operate in basically the same way, is called into question on the basis of recent empirical evidence. Accordingly, a revision of the theory of interpersonal labeling is proposed incorporating knowledge from the areas of person perception and cognition. The result, hopefully, will increase the theoretical understanding of labeler related influences in interpersonal labeling, and will also provide a more realistic basis on which to conduct further empirical investigations.

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## THE CURRENT STATUS OF INTERPERSONAL LABELING THEORY

### Investigations of interpersonal labeling

Much of the existing theoretical and empirical literature investigating biases in the labeling of rule breakers focuses upon status characteristics and/or other non-deviant behaviors of the labelee. For example, studies of informal and formal processing of deviants have usually focused upon labelee characteristics such as age, sex, race, social class and prior offense record (Short and Nye, 1958; Piliavin and Briar, 1964; Gould, 1969; Williams and Gold, 1972; and Cohen, 1974). Another group of studies investigating the determinants of police discretion in encounters with deviants included the physical appearance and demeanor of the labelee in addition to status characteristics (Skolnick, 1966; Wethman and Piliavin, 1967; Westley, 1970; Black and Reiss, 1970; and Garrett and Short, 1975). In a somewhat related vein, Dion (1972) examined the relationship of the physical attractiveness of the child to deviance labeling by an adult evaluator, and Shoemaker, South and Lowe (1973) found that the facial expressions of labelees sometimes influence others' judgements of guilt or innocence.

Other studies have taken a more situational perspective and have found that variables such as the presence of witnesses (Reiss, 1971; Black and Reiss, 1970), departmental policy and procedures (Cicourel, 1967; Wilson, 1968) and perceived risk to the community may differentially influence the labeling outcome.

The studies cited thus far have focused primarily upon the status characteristics and other non-deviant behaviors of subjects as potential determinants of labeling. Some writers have suggested, however, that such studies are too static and erroneously assume the labelee is a passive reactor in the labeling process. More specifically, the labelee may behave in such a way as to disavow or otherwise "manage" his public presentation of self (Davis, 1961; Goffman, 1963). Lorber (1967) characterizes the behaviors of the labelee as a "performance" intended to moderate the labeling outcome of the interaction. In an interesting observational study of the behavior of the visibly handicapped, Levitin (1975) illustrates how actors may seek to alter their public identity based upon the actual nature of the disability itself and the social context of the encounter.

### The Influence of the Labeler

Interestingly, although attributes and behaviors of the labelee (e.g., social status, race, prior record, demeanor, performance) and situational factors (e.g., organizational procedures, presence of witnesses) have been considered to be potential influences on

labeling, there has been very little recognition of the importance of the labeler on the outcome of the interpersonal labeling process. One exception is the work of Scott (1970) on the construction of conceptions of stigma by professional experts. In that paper Scott asserts convincingly that both the prevailing cultural values and the professionalization and advanced training of the labeler may influence the labeling outcome. Outside the labeling literature per se, however, studies of person perception and clinical judgement regularly include the labeler as an important determinant of the labeling outcome (Tripodi and Miller, 1966; Moos and Clemes, 1967; Sarbin, et al, 1960).

Generally speaking, most empirical investigations also have ignored the influence of the labeler on labeling outcomes. Several studies are notable, however, by their explicit attention to the labeler. Steffensmeier (1974), for example, found that high-dogmatic adult subjects expressed more favorable attitudes toward law and order (e.g., "the courts have gone too far in making rules which protect the rights of people who get into trouble with the law") than did low-dogmatic subjects. Mitchell and Byrne (1973) found that under certain conditions high authoritarian jurors felt more certain of the guilt of the defendant and recommended more severe punishment. Case and Lingerfelt (1974), in a study of the effect of professional training on diagnostic judgements, concluded that increased training and experience were positively associated with the tendency to apply negative labels. Thus, preliminary evidence suggests that certain personality characteristics and the training and experience of the labeler may systematically affect the labeling outcome.

Several recent studies have been undertaken to assess the extent to which labeler related variables aid in the explanation of labeling discrepancies with respect to the anti-social behavior of children. The original hypotheses in these studies asserted that labeler variables such as authoritarianism, Machiavellianism, cognitive complexity, professional training, and general expectancies would be systematically related to labeling discrepancies. The findings supported the hypotheses in several instances. Specifically, it appears that professional training (Gingerich, et al, 1976), specific training in the labeling task, and labeler expectancies (Gingerich, et al, 1977; Gingerich, 1975) are related to the accuracy of behavioral labeling. Further, the authoritarianism of the labeler also seems to be associated with labeling discrepancies (Gingerich, 1975). Thus, there is some additional evidence to suggest that variables related to the labeler, as well as the labelee and the labeling situation, contribute to our understanding of the labeling process in interpersonal relations.

Along with the labeler variables mentioned above, some of the more standard variables such as the race, social status, and prior

record of the labelee were included. Although these variables were expected to be moderately associated with labeling discrepancies, such was not the case. While these findings were not inconsistent with some of the prior research which showed little or no relationship between status characteristics and official labeling when offense is held constant (Reiss, 1971; Black and Reiss, 1970; Black, 1970), additional analysis was undertaken to determine if any alternative explanations might emerge.<sup>2</sup>

### The Nomothetic Assumption in Labeling

The original design and analysis of the research set out to predict labeling discrepancies for all labelers as a group. (Gingerich, 1975) That is, it was assumed that the same variables (e.g., social status, race, prior labeling) would be useful in explaining discrepancies for all labelers and that the direction and magnitude of their influence would be essentially similar across all labelers. In the course of the post hoc analyses, however, it became clear that this assumption was not warranted. To the contrary, the data suggested that different labelers were influenced by different variables in different ways in their interpersonal labeling. Thus, it appeared that several (but not all) labelers were influenced by subjects' race, but whereas one labeler saw blacks as more anti-social than they were, another saw whites as more anti-social than they were. The grouped analyses, which examined the effect of subjects' race for all labelers together, failed to show this relationship apparently because the opposite effects of race for the two labelers cancelled each other out. A similar situation obtained with subjects' social status and prior labeling; both variables were influential for some labelers, but in different ways. Thus, the post hoc empirical analyses suggested that, although some variables are not significantly related to interpersonal labeling when averaged across a group of labelers, they may have significant relationships for individual labelers taken separately. This research provided additional support, then, for the possibility that labeling outcomes are influenced in part by labeler related variables. Perhaps more importantly, it also suggested that the effects of labeler related variables were somewhat unique or idiographic to each labeler. Although existing labeling theory could accommodate the earlier finding rather easily, it seemed to make no provision for the possibility that different labelers functioned differently. Consequently, it seemed important to try to develop a more adequate theoretical formulation of interpersonal labeling, focusing more on the labeler and his or her internal cognitive structure. Fortunately, this topic has received considerable attention within psychology. What follows, then, is largely an effort to apply existing person perception theory to labeling theory, hopefully with the result of enhancing our understanding of labeling processes at the level of interpersonal relations.

## A THEORY OF INTERPERSONAL LABELING

### The Cognitive Structure

The discussion which follows takes the view that interpersonal labeling is one form of perception in general, and person perception in particular. In addition, interpersonal labeling is viewed largely as an internal process; thus, the focus is primarily on what goes on inside the labeler as contrasted with variables in the external world.

A useful model of the perceptual process, called the "lens model", has been developed by Egon Brunswik (1952, 1956) and is shown graphically in Figure 1. The distal stimulus refers to the labelee, his characteristics and behaviors. The second component is the cognitive structure of the labeler. The cognitive structure contains the concepts or hypotheses which, according to rules of

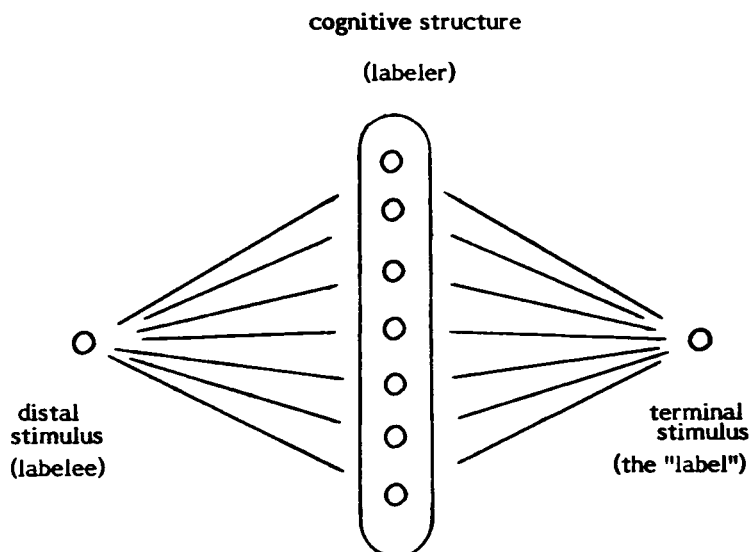


Figure 1. The lens model of the labeling process. Adapted from Brunswik (1952).

combination, are used to classify or categorize the cues given off by the labelee. The final component of the lens model refers to the outcome of the labeling process, the label itself. To summarize, the cues given off by the initial stimulus (the labelee) are attended to and processed according to the cognitive structure of the labeler, with the outcome that the stimulus is or is not labeled as an instance of the category.

The lens model of interpersonal labeling places primary emphasis on the labeler and his or her cognitive structure. This is in marked contrast to the usual emphasis in interpersonal labeling theory on the status characteristics of the labelee. But while the lens model is a useful heuristic of the labeling process, it leaves unspecified the nature of the cognitive structure, the concepts or categories it contains, and the rules of combination employed.

The Category System. One aspect of the cognitive structure which is of primary importance for understanding interpersonal labeling is the category system of the labeler (Lofland, 1969). A category consists of a class or group of people or things which are similar in one or more ways. Categories are defined by their criteria or bases for membership. Specifically, categories of people may be formed on the basis of one or more of three kinds of criteria: the attributes (e.g., race, sex, age) or behavior (e.g., demeanor, dress) of the labelee or the behavior of others toward the labelee (e.g., arrest, commitment, scapegoating).

Categories vary according to the number and configuration of the criteria which define them. This is sometimes loosely referred to as the objectivity or subjectivity of the category or the degree to which it is directly observable. Theoretically, categories defined by relatively few and directly observable cues (e.g., height, sex) should be subject to less labeling error than more complex categories which require more inferences on the part of the labeler (e.g., aggression, psychosis). Thus, the characteristics of the category itself will to some extent determine the accuracy or reliability with which it can be applied.

Each perceiver or labeler has his or her own system of categories. Some of these categories may be largely personal and unique to the labeler, whereas other categories are socially defined and thus are shared to some extent by other labelers. Further, the criteria for a given category may be more or less unique to the individual labeler. For example, while there is some commonality among labelers on the criteria that define the category "delinquent," each individual labeler nevertheless may retain some uniqueness in his criteria. Theoretically, then, one source of variation in the labeling process has to do with the particular set of categories the labeler

employs and the criteria for each category. Both of these factors may be more or less unique to each individual labeler.

Rules of combination. At some point in the perceptual process, the labeler combines the cues given off by the labelee to form a judgement about the labelee, e.g., the labelee is "delinquent". What is not clear, however, is the way in which labelers combine cues. It appears that sometimes a linear model (e.g., additive or averaging) best explains the decision process, but in other cases a configural (e.g., patterned or Gestalt) model is more explanatory (Warr and Knapper, 1968). These differences are reflected in alternative definitions of deviance: the behavioral definition of delinquency uses a linear additive model whereas the syndrome definition appears to use a configural model (Hirschi, 1969).

The relevance of combinational rules for understanding interpersonal labeling is that different labelers may use different rules of combination. For example, one labeler may define delinquency behaviorally and combine cues in an additive fashion while another may employ a pattern model as in a syndrome definition of delinquency. Further, labelers who use a summative model may use different weights for the various cues, resulting in differences in the degree of delinquency ascribed to the individual.

Rules of Inference. The rules of inference determine which, if any, additional categories will be attributed to the labelee (Weldon, et al, 1975). Lofland (1969) refers to this phenomenon as a clustering of categories. That labelers do infer additional properties to labelees is readily seen. For example, if we observe a male youth who is disrespectful of authority, unruly, and of lower social status or ethnic minority, we might categorize him as delinquent. If so, the label is inferred from the presence of other presumable categories, not from directly observed delinquent acts. It is still unknown whether these rules of inference follow a logical model or a probabilistic model or some other less systematic model, or whether individual labelers have their own unique rules of inference.

The importance of the concept of rules of inference is that it provides a theoretical explanation for certain kinds of errors in labeling. For example, the over-representation of the poor and minorities in social control institutions may reflect rules of inference that such individuals are more likely to be deviant, or in the past have been found to be deviant, rather than the fact that these individuals are deviant now. Thus, interpersonal mislabeling may reflect incorrect rules of inference or too much reliance upon inferences from related categories rather than direct observation of criteria relative to the category of interest.



The foregoing has outlined in highly schematic form the rudiments of the cognitive structure of the labeler.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the cognitive structure itself, however, a variety of other factors may influence interpersonal labeling. Some of these factors influence the cognitive structure directly whereas others have to do with the amount and kind of cues emitted by the labelee in the situational context.

#### Sources of Variance in Interpersonal Labeling

Experience. No doubt one of the most important influences on interpersonal labeling is the experience of the labeler, particularly in the form of training or education. One effect of such experience is to increase and further specify the category system within the cognitive structure of the labeler (i.e., the dimensions and degree of discrimination) and perhaps to specify the rules of combination and the rules of inference. This is particularly true in professional clinical training where considerable emphasis is placed upon classification systems and the indicants or criteria for diagnoses. Thus, for example, the clinical psychologist has a highly developed cognitive structure regarding categories within the referential domain "psychopathologies" whereas the lay person does not. This is not to say, however, that there is high agreement between psychologists as to the criteria or rules of combination for categories such as schizophrenia or character disorder (Stuart, 1970). Nevertheless, theoretically it should be possible to train for a high level of agreement and, consequently, relatively high reliability in the application of the category.

Personality Traits. Another potential source of variability in the labeling process is the relatively stable personality traits of the labeler. Three such traits which might be expected to influence labeling are authoritarianism, dogmatism and cognitive complexity. Authoritarian or dogmatic labelers may make less accurate judgements because their need for clarity and certainty may lead to premature closure in the labeling process (Adorno, et al, 1950; Jones, 1954; Steffensmeier, 1974). Authoritarianism or dogmatism would be expected to influence labeling only to the extent that not all relevant data are immediately present and easily combined to reach a judgement. Cognitively complex labelers have more dimensions in their cognitive structure and the ability to make finer discriminations along those dimensions, thus they would be expected to be more accurate in their labeling (Bieri, et al, 1966; Bieri, 1961). The influence of cognitive complexity would be moderated to the extent that training develops or further delineates the cognitive structure of the labeler. One additional labeler related variable which may be associated with labeling outcomes is threshold, defined as the

propensity to attribute behaviors to subjects based upon limited information (Reed and Jackson, 1975).

Motivational Factors. Different categories within the cognitive structure may have different salience for the labeler. These differences may in turn affect the outcome of the labeling process. The hypothesis-testing theory of perception advanced by Bruner (1951, 1957) and Postman (1951) provides a model for incorporating motivational effects on the labeling outcome. According to this theory, perception is a three-phase process. It begins with a hypothesis (in the cognitive structure of the labeler) that influences not only what the labeler sees but also what he looks for. Next, the labeler takes in and processes cues from the distal stimulus relevant to the perceptual hypothesis. Finally, the labeler seeks to determine whether the distal stimulus confirms the hypothesis, that is, whether it is an instance of deviance. If so, the perceptual process is concluded. If not, the hypothesis is revised according to the learning that took place in the "trial-and-check" phase, and the entire process is repeated until a stable percept or label is formed.

Perceptual hypotheses might be thought of as labeling hypotheses of the labeler which "serve to select, organize and transform the stimulus information that comes from the environment" (Postman, 1951: 250). They develop from past experience and their strength is a function of several determinants: (1) the frequency of past confirmation, (2) monopoly — the fewer competing hypotheses, the stronger the present one will be, (3) cognitive consequences — the more consistent with theory, the stronger it will be, (4) personal consequences — the extent to which the hypothesis reflects the goals of the labeler, and (5) social consequences — the extent to which a given hypothesis is in agreement with the hypotheses of other labelers. According to Bruner, the stronger the perceptual hypothesis, the greater the likelihood that it will become aroused and therefore influence the labeling process. Further, less congruent information will be required to confirm it and more contradictory information will be necessary to refute it.

The significance of the hypothesis-testing theory of perception is clear. When one is trained to see deviance, is paid to identify and treat it, has seen it often, and is reinforced personally or by colleagues for identifying it, the likelihood increases that one might "see" or label deviance that has little or no objective basis.

The Situational Context. The social ecology of the labeling interaction can also influence the outcome. The most obvious effect has to do with the availability of cues. For example, to what extent does the context restrict access to the relevant cues. Within certain

limits, the more information the more accurate the judgement can be. A positive kind of situational influence comes from the demand characteristics present in the environment (Orne, 1969). Factors such as organizational or policy constraints may require the labeler to use certain categories or apply them according to predefined ways. This may be particularly true in social control processing agencies such as the courts where operating procedures may have a major impact on labeling. In fact, the presumed over-riding effect of organizations' operating procedures may in part account for the disregard of the individual labeler in labeling outcomes. The influence of others present in the environment may also bring pressure on the labeler to make an inaccurate judgement, as in Asch's (1952) well-known studies of impression formation. The effect of the environmental context in conjunction with the behavior of the labelee is explicitly taken into account in attribution theory (Jones, et al, 1972; Kelley, 1973). Here the emphasis is upon the person-situation pattern of cues and its effect on perception, particularly the attribution of causality for the actor's behavior.

The Emergent Interaction. One additional and potentially significant source of variation in interpersonal labeling relates to the emergent aspects of the labelee-labeler interaction itself. The labeling process is a situational, dynamic and highly interactive process (Prus, 1975). In actual interactions, labelees are also labelers, and labelers are labelees. Thus, each influences the symbolic and labeling processes of the other, over and above the cognitive structures that had pre-existed, in ways that no doubt are real but are essentially unpredictable. The implication of this is that while it may be possible to improve considerably our understanding of interpersonal labeling processes, it will never be possible to predict a priori the specific outcomes with complete accuracy.

## CONCLUSION

In contrast to the usual emphasis on labelee characteristics and organizational processing, the present paper has focused on the labeler as an equally important influence on labeling outcomes. Specifically, attention has focused upon the cognitive structure and processes within the labeler that may affect interpersonal labeling. While much of the theory and research on labeler influences originated in social psychology, there seems to be no inherent problem in incorporating it into labeling theory. Rather, it appears that the labeler, and particularly the internal processes occurring within the labeler, was simply overlooked in most labeling theory.

In addition to the importance of the labeler generally in predicting outcomes, there is growing evidence that individual labelers differ in how and on what bases they label others. Some of the dimensions along which labelers might be expected to be unique are suggested, but the specific ways in which labelers differ is still largely a matter of speculation.

The implications of the above are several. First, investigations of labeling, particularly at the level of interpersonal relations, must attend to the sources of variance related to the labeler. Thus, while it may be important to consider status characteristics of the labeler and other situational factors, it is likely that the effects of such external variables will in turn be moderated or influenced in some way by each labeler. Although these suggestions recall the long-standing idiographic versus nomothetic controversy (Allport, 1962), there is already some precedent for incorporating individual differences in predicting labeling outcomes and, indeed, such an approach gives promise of enhancing considerably our understanding of labeling processes.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The approach taken in this paper assumes the positivist view that deviance and labeling are two independent but related processes; that is, an act can be categorized as deviant on the basis of predetermined, agreed-upon criteria which are independent of immediate social reactions. Thus, Lemert (1951) talks about the warranted portion of the social reaction, and Scheff (1974) refers to the magnitude of societal reactions that are independent of the patient's psychiatric condition. While this view of deviance and labeling is counter to the subjective or phenomenological view taken by other labeling theorists (Quinney, 1970; Lofland, 1969), the investigation of the differential application of deviant labels necessarily presupposes some objective standard of deviant or potentially deviant behavior. For a more thorough discussion of the issue of warrant in labeling theory, see the recent article by Rains (1975).

<sup>2</sup>Arthur D. Shulman was instrumental in suggesting alternative hypotheses and methods of statistical analysis of the data.

<sup>3</sup>Space limitations permit only a highly selective and simplified presentation of the relevant theory and research in the area of person perception. For a more thorough review which is more cognizant of the subtleties and complexities of the perceptual aspects in interpersonal labeling, the reader is referred to Weldon, et al. (1975). General sources on person perception include Bruner and Tagiuri (1954), Hastorf, et al (1970), Jones, et al (1972), and Tagiuri (1969).

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