

Labelling ‘Deviants’: Help or Hindrance?

SCOTT McWHINNEY

This article examines the depiction of drug users in the media. Using the BBC’s ‘Russell Brand: From Addiction to Recovery’, supplemented by print media sources, it considers the methods used to refer to this group of people. Methods such as over-lexicalisation, stereotyping and assuming a shared morality often act to demonise members of this sub-culture. The aim is to consider the effect of labelling such individuals on the rate of recidivism and the possibility that the individual will embrace the perceived identity as ‘other’.

People do [drugs] because they want to. It comes from rich Western kids, selfishly following their pleasures (BBC 2012: 9:22).

Introduction

Opinions like the one above are commonplace in modern society (Silverman 2012: 96-7), highlighting the prevalence of preconception in everyday interaction. Groups and individuals are ascribed characteristics, as Peter Hitchens does above, to ‘selfish’ drug users (BBC 2012: 9:22), based on the perception of them engaging in behaviour which deviates from that of ‘normal’ society. Labelling theory, popularised in the 1960s, serves as a method of understanding behaviour in relation to,

and as a result of, social stigma. This article will evaluate labelling by reference to contemporary media representations of drug use as deviant/criminal behaviour. It will examine the strengths and weaknesses of labelling drug users in three key areas: first it will consider labelling as an aid for understanding deviance; second it will examine methods used to label individuals; third there will be an evaluation of the effect on the individual as a result of a label. There will be consideration throughout of labelling's effect on the criminal justice process.

Labelling: an aid for understanding deviance?

Labelling can be used as a methodology for studying deviance in order to gain a greater understanding of what causes individuals to participate in the behaviour. Becker's 'Becoming a Marihuana User' (1973) considered the deviant behaviour from a functional point of view, investigating "the sequence of changes in attitude and experience which lead to the use of marihuana for pleasure" (ibid: 43). This was an alternative approach to the more often asked question: "what cause[s] a human being to be an inhuman deviant" (Box 1981: 1). It is difficult to relate to the woman who admits to "smoking a bit of crack now and again" (BBC 2012: 28:57) in an open manner, as her attitude subverts societal expectations. However, she claims "I [cannot] sit in the same company I sit in every day...without being drunk" (BBC 2012: 29:35), demonstrating that she is part of a wider 'deviant subculture' (Simmons 1969: 280). This can be seen as a direct effect of labelling: those cast as 'outsiders' (Becker 1973: 1) have to find stable means of support outside of mainstream society (Simmons 1969: 280). Studies such as Becker's (1973) help by 'demystifying deviance' (ibid.: 189) and can begin to explain the attraction to the behaviour which is a strength of labelling.

On the other hand, labelled subcultures are viewed as subversive (Simmons 1969: 280-2) and this may lead to stereotyping which is undesirable. Stereotyping is often a consequence of labelling as "it reflects the

needs of participants in complex interactions to order their expectations so that they can predict the actions of others" (Schur 1971: 41). Traits such as 'selfish', 'impatient', 'egotistical', 'self destructive' and 'demanding' (BBC 2012: 10:57), are attributed to drug users simply because they have been labelled as part of a deviant group. Despite stereotypes being useful "to an extent sufficient for coherent organization" (Schur 1971: 41) and often being based on an element of truth (Simmons 1965: 225), they are too generalised to be of any real use. This is immediately apparent from Simmons' (1965) study, in which over half of the respondents wrote highly stereotyped accounts of all deviants (ibid.: 226), showing the pervasive nature of this effect. Given that most drug taking is "relatively trouble-free and short-lived teenage experimentation" (Seddon 2006: 681) the stereotyped view, derived from the 'drug user' label is unhelpful, as people can be judged incorrectly. This is an inherent risk and weakness of the labelling perspective.

Deviance is not a static concept but "a social construct fashioned by the members of the society in which it exists" (Rock 1973: 19). Concepts of deviance differ for many reasons including geography and temporality. Labelling appears to be a democratic process because only deviance which is brought to the attention of others is punished (Becker 1973: 122). However, this view is deeply flawed. It does not consider the imbalance of power between those creating the rules and those having to live by them (Matveychuk 1986: 11). Deviance, and the labelling of such, can therefore be seen as "conduct that is in violation of rules made largely by the power elite of a given society or group" (Thio 1973: 1) which disenfranchises those who have a limited role in the creation of their society. Again, this must be viewed as a weakness of labelling.

Labelling Devices

Rules on deviance are made by society, however "the rules created and maintained by such labelling are not universally agreed to" (Becker

1973: 18). Societal norms are engineered which raises the problem of perception: “[i]t will matter a great deal if someone is defined as eccentric, erratic, or mad: a drinker, a drunk, or an alcoholic” (Rock 2012: 65) or indeed a drug user, an addict, or a ‘junkie’. The headline “Mum who tied up junkie daughter is jailed” (Storrar 2011) labels the actors involved. The presentation of the daughter as a ‘junkie’ and her mother as a ‘desperate mum’ (ibid.) suggests value judgement: that somehow the mother’s actions were warranted by her daughter’s perceived deviance. The daughter “becomes in the eyes of [her] condemners literally a different and new person. It is not that the new attributes are added to the old “nucleus.” [S]he is not changed, [S]he is reconstituted” (Garfinkel 1956: 421). It is also notable that the mother and ex-boyfriend, who were convicted of an offence, were allowed to have mitigating statements added to the article, whereas the daughter’s view is not represented: the label ‘junkie’ is treated as sufficient explanation of her position. This is a major failing in the balance of the article which is explicable with reference to the labelling process. She is part of a marginalised group by virtue of the label alone, and therefore society treats her differently than they would any other victim of a criminal assault.

The attitude taken towards the daughter in The Daily Mirror’s (2011) article is indicative of labelling’s effect on the criminal justice process. The article subliminally scorns the fact that the ‘junkie’ daughter was not punished for her deviant behaviour as society expects her actions to be punished. Steven Box wrote of the selective manner in which police must operate as the criminal justice system could not cope if every infraction was punished (1981: 171). In the article, the press have taken on the role of ‘guardians of public morality’ which is usually attributed to the police (ibid.). It is this judgement and discretion on the part of the police (ibid.) which can eventually lead to “penalties [varying] according to the characteristics of the offender” (Schrag 1971: 90; White 2009). This is an affront to the rule of law, as it creates a hierarchy of deviance

for identical acts committed by people from different groups (Clinard and Meier 1995: 215).

It is arguable that deviant behaviour is a progressive, positive force in society (Box 1981: 26-7). The current debate over whether drug use and addiction should be treated as a medical or criminal matter (BBC 2012: 53-54) may be the beginning of a paradigm shift in thinking on this issue. If this idea attracts enough support it could entirely change the way in which addiction and drug use are viewed in the United Kingdom. This would not be revolutionary with regards to labelling, as “deviant behavior is behavior that people so label” (Becker 1973: 9) and it is unlikely, in the short term, that public opinion would shift so drastically as to remove pejorative terms like ‘junkie’ from the language. What it does show is that groups of ‘deviants’ can be instrumental in political and social debate in the direction of legal change.

One device used in the media to label individuals is over-lexicalization which creates “an excess of quasi-synonymous terms for entities and ideas that are a particular preoccupation or problem in the culture’s discourse” (Fowler 2009: 85). This is a prominent feature of labelling drug users as can be seen from the multiple terms used in the media to describe the group as: ‘toxic individuals’ (BBC 2012: 1:55), ‘users’ (ibid.: 2:06), ‘drug addict’ (ibid.: 2:28), ‘junkie’ (ibid.: 5:23), ‘parasitic’ (Parker 2011) and ‘drugged up hangers-on’ (ibid.) to name a few. In their coverage of the late singer Amy Winehouse’s addiction The Sun (2011) presented an individual ‘blitzed out of her skull’ in a ‘spiral of self destruction’. This can be helpful to a society which is intent on maintaining the status quo as “we can behave barbarically toward a group of people best if we can call them barbarians and thus appear only to be defending our more civilized norm” (Gerbner 1978: 14).

The Effect of a Label on a Deviant Individual

The result of portraying Amy Winehouse as “lank-haired...dazed and confused” and living a “squalid lifestyle” (Parker 2011) is that she is presented as a ‘folk devil’ (Jupp 2006: 171): a “vivid [image] of horror that would be visited upon us if we [do] not keep “them” under control” (Gerbner 1978: 14). However, the perception of deviance in this hyperbolic manner may not discourage others from the behaviour as it makes the deviant seem so detached from them. The value of a label as a negative sanction “will vary in its effectiveness as a deterrent, depending upon the extent to which potential offenders perceive themselves as similar to the sanctionee” (Schwartz and Skolnick 1960: 104). There is a risk that in the minds of some individuals the person demonised by labels, intended as negative sanctions, will in fact be rendered so different and ‘other’ that they become folk heroes rather than ‘folk devils’ (Jupp 2006: 171). For some individuals/groups negative labelling by a majority group or by mainstream media carries the risk of generating an unintended model of an alternative lifestyle, evolved and espoused by the marginalised fringe. This is apparent in the phenomena of ‘criminal families’ (Travis 2010) for whom the lifestyle and attendant risks are entirely normal. From the perspective of the ‘power elite’ (Thio 1973: 1), this is another negative effect of labelling.

A further concern about labelling individuals is that it may affect their future behaviour and become “a way of stimulating, suggesting, emphasizing, and evoking the very traits that are complained of” (Tannenbaum 1938: 20). Labelled individuals may feel impelled to ‘live up to’ the label attached to them and use it to justify, reaffirm and repeat the behaviour that attracted the label in the first place. In this way, labelling may favour recidivism. The Guardian (Travis 2010) reported that “re-conviction rates were higher for prisoners who had at one time been excluded from school or taken into care, were homeless or jobless before being sent to prison, or had witnessed violence in their childhood home” (see also Ministry of Justice 2012). This suggests that prisoners who had already

been labelled (possibly at a young age) are more likely to be subject to the ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ (Clinard and Meier 1995: 124) of their deviant status. When people identify with their label, or a subculture borne from it, they “may feel [their] judges are outsiders” (Becker 1973: 2) and therefore be less concerned by sanctions placed upon them.

It is not universally accepted that a label will lead to further deviance. Foster, Dinitz and Reckless (1972), in their study of perceived consequence of public intervention on delinquent boys, noted that “only a small proportion of the boys studied felt that they were seriously handicapped by having a record with the police or court” (ibid.: 208) and Andrew McGrath’s study showed “feeling stigmatized after the hearing was a significant predictor of reoffending for the young women in the study but not the young men” (2010: 15). Further research into this area is required to ascertain the true level of influence, but given the possibility that labelling leads to further deviance, it must be tentatively considered a further drawback of labelling.

Conclusion

Labelling has been described as “contrary to common sense and empirical evidence” (Schrag 1971: 90) as it does not take account of the fact that “everyone conforms and deviates” (Wellford 1975: 333). In many ways it can be viewed as a positive, possibly even necessary, force in society. It gives people the necessary devices to engage in complex interactions by allowing them to anticipate a person or group’s actions to a certain extent. It also gives a theoretical framework, in the form of Labelling Theory, to study and better understand behaviour which is deviant from the norm. Finally, labels are socially constructed and the cultural consensus required for them to be created and sustained gives the process some semblance of democratic legitimacy. However the possible negative impacts outweigh the positives by a large measure. Stereotyping has the potential to be a deeply destructive and misleading

force which may lead to the formation of 'deviant subcultures' (Simmons 1969: 280). As yet there is no conclusive or dispositive evidence with regards to the 'self fulfilling prophecy' (Clinard and Meier 1995: 124) concept. If this approach is proven, the potential consequences are far reaching and must therefore be treated as a weakness. The overall effect on the criminal justice system is negative as value judgements lead to "lower strata suspects [being] more frequently arrested" (Box 1981: 171). A label does not tell of a person's character but of the societal perception of that individual and for this reason it is an inaccurate measure of deviance and conformity.

Bibliography

- BBC (2012). 'Russell Brand: From Addiction to Recovery'. Available at: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/tv-season/russell-brand-from-addiction/id566285692> (Accessed: September 2012).
- Becker, H. S. (1973) *Outsiders studies in the sociology of deviance*. New York: The Free Press.
- Box, S. (1981) *Deviance, Reality and Society* (2nd ed.). East Sussex: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Ltd.
- Clinard, M. B. and Meier, R. F. (1995) *Sociology of Deviant Behaviour*. Fort Worth; London: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.
- Foster, J. D., Dinitz, S and Reckless, W. C. (1972) 'Perceptions of Stigma following public intervention for delinquent behavior' *Social Problems*. Vol. 20(2): 202-09.
- Fowler, R. (1991) *Language in the News*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Garfinkel, H. (1956) 'Conditions of Successful Degradation Ceremonies' *American Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 61(5): 420-24.
- Gerbner, G. (1978) 'Deviance and Power symbolic functions of "drug abuse"', in Winick, C. *Deviance and Mass Media*. London: Sage Publications. P. 13-30.
- Jupp, V. (2006) 'Folk Devil', in E. McLaughlin and J. Muncie (eds) *The Sage Dictionary of Criminology*. London: Sage Publications. P. 171-73.
- Matveychuk, W. (1986) 'The Social construction of drug definitions and drug experience' in P. Park and W. Matveychuk (eds.) *Culture and politics of drugs*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt. P. 7-12.
- Ministry of Justice (2012) *2012 Compendium of Re-offending Statistics and Analysis*. London: MoJ.
- McGrath, A. (2010) 'The subjective impact of contact with the criminal justice

system: The role of gender and stigmatization' *Crime & Delinquency*. Epub ahead of print, DOI:10.1177/0011128710389589. Available at: <http://cad.sagepub.com/content/early/2010/11/26/0011128710389589.full.pdf+html>. (Accessed 18 November 2012).

Parker, N. (2011) 'Amy Winehouse on Crack' *The Sun*. Available at: <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/showbiz/bizarre/710911/Amy-Winehouse-Caught-on-film-Smoking-crack-pipe.html>. (Accessed 13 November 2012).

Rock, P. (2012) 'Sociological Theories of Crime', in M. Maguire, R. Morgan and R. Reiner (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology* (5th ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press. P. 39-80.

Rock, P. (1973) *Deviant Behaviour*. London: Hutchinson & Co (Publishers) Ltd.

Schrag, C. (1971) *Crime and Justice: American Style*. Washington, D.C.: G.P.O.

Schur, E. M. (1971) *Labeling Deviant Behavior*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers.

Schwartz, R. D. and Skolnick, J. H. (1960) 'Two studies of Legal Stigma', in H. Becker (ed) (1967) *The Other Side*. London: Collier-MacMillan Limited.

Seddon, T. (2006) 'Drugs, Crime and Social Exclusion' *The British Journal of Criminology*. Vol. 46(4): 680-703.

Silverman, J. (2012) *Crime, Policy and the Media the shaping of criminal justice, 1989-2010*. London: Routledge.

Simmons, J. L. (1965) 'Public Stereotypes of Deviants' *Social Problems*. Vol. 13(2): 223-32.

Simmons, J. L. (1969) 'The Nature of Deviant Subcultures', in Rubington, E. and Weinberg, M. S. (1973) *Deviance: the interactionist perspective* (3rd ed.). New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. P. 280-2.

Storrar, K. (2011) 'Mum Who Tied Up Junkie Daughter is Jailed' *The Mirror*. Available at: <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/mum-who-tied-up-junkie-105634>. (Accessed 10 November 2012).

Tannenbaum, F. (1938) *Crime and Community*. Boston: Ginn.

Thio, A. (1973) 'Class Bias in the Sociology of Deviance' *The American Sociologist*. Vol. 8(1): 1-12.

Travis, A. (2010) 'Reoffending Rates Top 70% in Some Prisons, Figures Reveal', *The Guardian*. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/nov/04/jail-less-effective-community-service>. (Accessed 13 November 2012).

Wellford, C. (1975) 'Labelling Theory and Criminology and Assessment' *Social Problems*. Vol. 22(3): 332-45.

White, D.C. (2009) *The Impact of Demographic Characteristics, Personality Variables, Beliefs about the Causes of Crime and Fear of Crime on Attitudes Toward Sentencing Goals*. Swinburne: Swinburne University of Technology.