A Qualitative Study of Peer Labeling

Kristina Durham
McNair Scholar, Wichita State University

Michael Birzer, Ph.D.
Community Affairs, Wichita State University

Summary of Research

Abstract
Labeling theory proposes the idea that labeling a person as deviant leads to engagement in unacceptable behavior. Such labeling by authority figures (parents, teachers, and law enforcement) has long served as a prominent factor in the behavior of juveniles. This proposed research looks to explore and provide a broader view of an overlooked aspect that can also influence juvenile behavior — peer labeling. In order to investigate the influence of peer labeling on juvenile delinquency, and the development of the juvenile self-identity, researchers conducted a qualitative study of a small group of counselors and staff involved with the local Boys & Girls Club. The purpose of this was to examine if a relationship exists between peer labeling and engagement in delinquent acts, and the impact of peer labeling on self-concept and identity.

Introduction

Juveniles and Labeling
Labeling theory serves as the basis in understanding the evolution of maturity within adolescents. Labeling can often result in the exclusion of a person from social groups, and his adoption of a deviant status based on failure to comply with social norms. Many studies have examined the influence of parental and teacher approval on juvenile delinquency. These studies focus on interactions between juveniles and common authority figures. The influence of peer approval has been included in several studies, but received little attention due to the small statistical significance of past quantitative research. Considering the amount of time adolescents spend with peers in their approximate age groups, it is plausible to suggest that peers would have a strong influence on the development of social rules and self-perception, which would also influence the likelihood of deviance.

Labeling and Self-Conceptions
In relation to juveniles, the theory states, “that perceived negative societal reactions lead to the development of negative self-conceptions and greater delinquent involvement” (Adams, et al., 2003, p. 171). Rules can be formal or informal. Formal labeling involves social control agencies such as courts and police; informal labeling occurs among social and peer groups. Formal labeling is suggested to increase an individual’s degree of deviance because there are often legal consequences. Informal labels can be based on appearances, associations, and behaviors. These factors are qualified through social norms that are established based on behavioral rules.
Acceptance and Adoption

Studies have found that the more negative labels juveniles are given, the more likely they are to engage in deviant behavior. The general reactions of social groups are factored into the development and acquisition of deviant status. For most juveniles choosing to participate in delinquent activity, a label must be applied, understood, and eventually accepted. Self-labeling perpetuates the transition to deviance (Hayes, 2012, p. 297). Once the label is accepted, the one labeled begins to display characteristics of the label. As a result, labeled adolescents will quickly become attached to social groups similar to themselves; these groups provide acceptance not offered by most of society (Bernburg, Krohn, & Rivera, 2006, p. 70).

Methodology

This research aimed to explore the following overarching question: How does peer pressure influence juvenile behavior? Along with this question, other secondary questions were raised: What makes peer pressure such an influential factor compared to other social interactions, and why? How does peer labeling influence adolescents’ views of themselves and others? How do juveniles determine and establish social norms within peer groups?

To explore the issue of peer labeling and its relation to juvenile delinquency, interviews were conducted. Qualitative methods were deemed the best approach to providing a clearer view of the effects of peer labeling and providing possible answers to the proposed questions. A small set of interview questions was developed based on the main research question. In this study, between four to six interviews were conducted with staff members at the local Boys & Girls Club. Information on issues relating to deviant behavior was gathered based on the staff-members’ perceptions of the adolescents they interact with on a regular basis. After each interview, an interview memorandum was completed. The transcriptions and memoranda then became the raw data for analysis; common recurring themes and patterns were identified among interviews.

Results

An important objective of this research is to provide in-depth descriptions of peer labeling and its influence on adolescents’ decisions. By providing a study that focuses solely on peer-to-peer interaction, a more concise view will be given on the influence of peer pressure and its significance to the choices they make. The findings suggested that the relationship between peers and deviant behavior is just as important as the influence of parents and teachers. This influence may be due to the amount of time spent with peers in comparison to time spent with authority figures.

Discussion

Through the interviews conducted, several recurring themes were identified. The main theme identified was acceptance, with several supporting subthemes. The first is the impact of peer labeling. Here we see the initial struggle with peer pressure, where the juvenile decides whether they should abide by the rules of their peers or those of society. The second was the acquisition of a deviant identity. During acquisition the juvenile labeled may begin to self-label and eventually accept their new identity. In turn, they begin to act out in accordance with this new identity. The next theme identified was neutralization, where those who misbehaved would blame their peers and society for their choices and behaviors to engage in certain activities rather than taking responsibility themselves. The last theme identified was maintenance of a deviant identity. The juveniles often struggled, again, with the issue of whether to abide by society’s rules or those of the group of which they had become a part. While there may still be a desire to abide by society’s rules, if the status they have achieved, negative or positive, is more in line with their own ideas, then they may continue to follow their peers’ rules, defining these as the new social norms and society’s as deviant. In conclusion, it is noted that peer influence is a strong factor in juveniles’ decisions.

Conclusion

This research set has looked more in depth at the impact of peer labeling on juvenile delinquency. Qualitative methods were used to gain a better perspective on juveniles’ decisions to engage in deviant behavior. The interviews conducted with the counselors served as raw data on the behavior of the juveniles whom they interact with daily. These results suggest that peers do impact each other’s decisions when they begin to define their own social rules in
line with their own ideas, and as result, may not always find their behavior unacceptable. They will also participate in certain acts to receive acceptance from others, or to preserve their status within their peer groups, even if it means engaging in risky behavior. With these results, it is clear that in order to help prevent deviant behavior, the impact of peer pressure must be counteracted in some way. This research is somewhat limited due to the fact that counselors were interviewed rather than the juveniles themselves. The study can always be expanded through, conducting interviews with juveniles, focusing on specific age groups, as well as looking at other possible influences. Research like this can help continue to refine theories on deviance and shed more light on how juveniles interact and influence each other as they become adults.

References


