Counseling Faculty Scholarship   Counseling

Fall 1997

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Abstract

Labelling theory has been a useful analytic tool for examining the self-fulfilling prophecy in schools. While many studies have explicated the process of labelling from teacher to student—much less scholarly attention has been focused on peer-labelling. This article introduces this perspective as a useful analytic tool for understanding peer-rejection and the enormous consequences of ignoring the problem of peer-labelling. Discussion will conclude with some general suggestions of ways in which educators can help prevent and remedy peer-rejection.

Peer-Rejection

A peer-rejected child is one who is actively disliked by most of his or her peers (Bierman, 1989; Boivin & Begin, 1989; Hymel & Rubin, 1985). Peer-rejection is considered a serious threat to future social-emotional development. Poor peer relationships are central features in major child and adolescent disorders including under-socialized conduct disorders, attention deficit disorder, anxiety disorders, even schizoid disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 1980). Research has underscored the power of poor peer relations in childhood to predict later school adjustment and learning prob-

lems, juvenile delinquency, and mental health problems (Bierman, 1989). Certainly, there is a strong rationale, supported by research and scholarship, for attending to the importance of healthy peer relationships. But perhaps the strongest rationale comes from our everyday experiences as teachers and counselors that will stir the emotions of the most detached and analytical of observers.

What makes a child reduced in the minds of peers from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one? When children are labelled by their peers as "losers," "nerds," or "geeks" for example, the need to have friends becomes paramount. When that need becomes a desperate one, the loss of being accepted into a group weighs heavily on the child and promotes behaviors that range from timidity (often misinterpreted as snobbery) to bravado and boastful acting-out behaviors. Often, these behaviors make the situation worse, rejection occurs, and the need to belong becomes more desperate—all the while becoming more insatiable. Often these children do not reveal how much it hurts, unless they are pressed. Hymel and Rubin (1985) relate the sadness that many of these children carry with them secretly. For example, one child appeared uncooperative during a social skills training session because he continued to answer "I don't know" to every "How do you feel?" question. Finally, when he was asked a question about how he felt when he was playing with a friend, he answered with tears in his eyes: "I don't know, I don't have any friends." There are other shameful examples that are probably familiar to many teachers. There are notes passed around in class that read, "Everyone who hates Jane please sign here." Maybe the teacher is lucky enough to intercept the note before it reaches Jane, but it will be disheartening to see that all the students in the class had signed it. At junior high schools in Southern California, "slam books" were once very popular. They were passed around so that students could write nasty anonymous comments about other students they disliked. A young man was elected Homecoming King—as a joke. He rode in the parade all the while being publicly and privately taunted. At the rally later, he was ridiculed mercilessly. Why was nothing done to stop this?

Peer-rejected children are teased if they are not quick-witted or verbally proficient. They are scorned if they do not have a quick comeback, a good sense of humor, are too short or too tall, too heavy or too thin. Girls are harassed for being physically well developed or and boys for not fitting the male stereotypical image (Shakeshaft, et.al., 1995). Importantly, this research has shown that teachers rarely intervene when this harassment occurs. Many programs currently exist that attend to multiculturalism and diversity so that children learn the evils of prejudice. Students who are obviously physically challenged are often helped when students learn to become sensitive to the issues they face. Yet we ignore one of the cruelest forms of rejection that children endure; that is being labelled and stigmatized by peers for being a

"loser," "fatty," "geeky," "shrimpy," or other less obvious reasons. These reasons are often hard to pinpoint and therefore difficult to deal with; so they do nothing.

Labelling Theory: An Interactionist Perspective

Labelling theory is considered a viable interactionist perspective for countering traditional biological and cultural determinist theories of human development within the educational context (Duncan, 1994; Rist, 1978; Thomas, 1996, 1997). This is because biologistic theories place ultimate causality of school success or failure within individuals and cultural determinism places the cause outside of the school within the larger framework. The labelling approach allows one to analyze the role of school practices in shaping student outcomes by focusing on the dialectical nature of social interactions while still allowing for important biological and cultural constituents in student development (see Thomas 1996, 1997).

There has been much attention focused on the school-labelled child in academic literature. Cliches (e.g. slow, bright, unmotivated, underachiever) become labels when they are used to describe, sort, classify, and legitimate a students potential or normality or deviance. Labelling theory explains the now familiar concept of self-fulfilling prophecy in children who have been arbitrarily labelled. Labelling creates a false definition of a students behavior that then evokes a new behavior that makes the originally false definition come true (Merton & Nisbet, 1968). One of the major thrusts of the labelling perspective has been to emphasize the process of acquiring the deviant label. In sociological studies of deviance, deviants are viewed as a product of being caught, defined, segregated, labeled and stigmatized. Thus, "forces of social control often produce the unintended consequence of making some persons defined as deviant even more confirmed as deviant because of the stigmatization of labelling. Thus social reactions to deviance further deviant careers" (Rist, 1977, p.295).

Rosenthal and Jacobsen (1968) famous study of the Pygmalion effect was the first of its kind in the educational field to provide empirical justification for this truism considered self-evident by many educators. In this study, a standardized non-verbal test of intelligence was administered under the guise of the Harvard Test of Inflected Acquisition. The teachers were told that this test would be highly predictive of intellectual "spurters" or "bloomers" during the following year. The teachers were given lists of the top twenty percent on the test although no factual basis for such a determination existed. Testing at the end of the school year provided some evidence that these selected children did perform better than the non-selected.

These cultural definitions shape what students can do and, by affecting their own aspirations and self-confidence, constrain their opportunities for

practice, the amount others are willing to invest in them, and eventually what they are capable of doing. The process underlying the Pygmalion effects described by Rosenthal and Jacobsen (1968) involves the labelling of students who are then treated differently by their superiors. This ultimately produces different levels of ability in students, a different sense of self and a different sense of what is possible in the future.

The origins of teachers labels have been attributed to variables such as social class, physical appearance, test scores, gender, race, language patterns and attitudes (Kituse, 1964; Rist, 1977; Thomas, 1996,1997). Labelling theory calls attention to the evaluative mechanisms that operate within schools. Importantly, it focuses on how the school as an institution supports these mechanisms and what effect this has on student self-perceptions. Over time, labels help create and organize the options available to these students. When this happens, and students begin to empirically justify the original label by acting out, do they then become subject to rejection or harassment from their peers? Or can it possibly be the other way around—students who are rejected and labelled by their peers become secondarily labelled by teachers when they exhibit maladaptive behaviors in response to peer-rejection? Or indeed, is it quite possible that a child labelled positively by school personnel may still be labelled negatively by peers? We will now explore the dialectical nature of peer-rejection and self-fulfilling prophecy by utilizing labelling theory as an analytic tool for exploring the processes of becoming a peer-rejected child.

Peer-Rejection and Labelling Theory

While there are many classic studies focusing on deleterious labelling from school personnel (Brophy & Good, 1986; Kitsuse, 1964; Rist,1977), there is a dearth of scholarship in the area of peer-labelling. Peer labels, like school personnel labels, are extremely difficult to live down. Coie and Dodge (1983) have noted that 45% of rejected children remain rejected one year later and 30% are still rejected four years later. Peer labelled students endure isolation and ridicule from their classmates. They suffer in silence for the most part, because educators and counselors are not prepared to deal with what they do not see and do not recognize. Those few children who do complain are often not taken seriously: "It is just a stage," "It is part of growing up," " You are just having inevitable growing pains," " You need to be a friend if you want friends," " Boys will be boys," and "Girls will be girls."

The approach one takes to the problem of peer-rejection often depends upon one theoretical model concerning the factors that contribute to the deleterious labelling of a child. Bierman (1989) reviews three general theoretical models for the treatment of peer-relation difficulties. One is the *Social Skills Deficits Model* which postulates that rejected children are defi-

cient in their ability to behave in ways that foster positive responses from their peers. Interventions involve coaching children in positive interaction skills. The second model is the *Negative Behavior Model*. The focus here is on disrupted family systems that lead to the development of learned noncompliant and coercive behaviors that ultimately lead to rejection by peers. Time-out and differential reinforcement are common intervention procedures that have proved successful in managing in-classroom behaviors but have not been helpful in the uncontrolled naturalistic settings during recess, lunch-breaks, or after school.

The *Reputation Model*, supports the idea that peers hold rigid negative stereotypes of rejected children. Focusing on negatively biased assumptions, the model comes closest to labelling theory by focusing on the negative expectations of the rejected child's peers and how these peers become selectively attentive to those behaviors that are expected from rejected children. Yet, when inappropriate behavior is manifested by well-accepted peers, it is treated more forgivingly and attributed to causes other than the stable individual traits that become labels for rejected children. For example, Peter may be dismissed as a loser while Billy, who is popular, may be having a bad day or a tough time with his parents. Rejected children are seldom afforded such tolerance. Conversely, when rejected children do try to display prosocial behaviors, these are ignored by peers who already hold strong biases towards them. The preferred intervention strategy stemming from this model is to attempt to change the responsivity of peers to the rejected child and this has been considered crucial to long-term success in treatment programs for this problem (Bierman, 1989). Suggestions for using an integrated model combining these three models in some fashion hold promise for those of us who are concerned about this intensely painful childhood experience.

Given all three of these strategies, what does labelling theory have to offer us in our understanding of peer-rejection and how will it help inform the practice of school counselors and teachers? Research has given us some insights into *what* peer rejection is and *how* to intervene when necessary. Labelling theory is concerned with the self-fulfilling effects of labelling and *who* it is that does the labelling. As stated earlier, most labelling theory up to this point has focused on teachers, administrators, and counselors as the labellers. Peers are also labellers and as such should be included in future studies to help us understand the reasons behind the labelling so that we may more effectively eliminate it. The labelling perspective is committed to promoting a shift in attention from the individual loser or deviant, to the *social process* by which the label is applied. A consequence of this focus is that we will become much more interested in the process by which peer-rejected children are defined by peer groups than on the individual traits of the student. Many counselors have found that trying to boost children's self-es-

teem when their peers are rejecting them is an uphill battle that too often is lost.

A basic tenet of labelling theory is that an individual does not become labelled primarily because of deviant behavior. Rather, the contingencies of differentness such as race, class, gender, appearance, body size, speech patterns, coordination, intelligence, and athletic ability all influence the outcome as to whether one is labelled or not. Unfortunately, peer-labelling, as does school-labelling, produces Pygmalion effects that severely affect future growth and development.

Coping Strategies for the Peer-Rejected Child: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?

Labelling theory provides an interesting sequence of interactions that ultimately leads to the self-fulfilling effects of being labelled. Here is a modified example (Rist, 1977, p.295) of the labelling sequence. I have reversed the labelling order allowing for the primacy of peer-labelling. This is a hypothetical sequence illustrating what could happen if there were no remedial interventions from parents, the school and society.

1) primary label (fatso, loser, nerd, shrimp etc.) from peers.
2) primary social penalties (peer teasing, ostracizing etc.).
3) primary behavioral problems (rejected child fights back, withdraws, loses interest in school).
4) secondary labelling (difficult child, slow learner, behavioral problem) from teachers and administrators.
5) secondary social penalties (exclusion from extracurricular activities, suspension, humiliation in front of classmates).
6) stronger rejection and labelling from peers who are now validated by teachers reactions to the rejected child.
7) stronger acting-out and reactive behaviors with possible hostilities towards the peer-labellers and adult-labellers.
8) stronger sanctions by school officials.
9) crises is reached in the labelled child's tolerance quotient, his or her deviant or maladaptive behavior may become expressed in the community outside of school.
10) community begins the affirm the labelling of the child behavior expressed by child as a reaction to stigmatizing in community and powerlessness in struggle to be understood and accepted.
11) stronger deviant behavior expressed by child as a reaction to stigmatizing in community and powerlessness in struggle to be understood and accepted.
12) child grows into an adult who ultimately accepts the deviant social status and lives by it as an identity.

Sometimes this kind of child will find a group that adopts a different value system from that of the popular kids. This group may help to lessen the strength of the loser label to establish a more acceptable different label. I have seen unexpressive and confused children change into expressive and understanding friends within their own groups focused on roller-blading, skateboarding, and other alternative sports and activities. Children in these groups feel a belongingness that is lacking in their lives. They have their own symbols of prestige. Unfortunately, parents and teachers sometimes take these symbols away when they fear that certain groups, such as roller-bladers and skateboarders, may be bad groups. When we do this, we take away their community, for this kind of child may never be accepted by the elite group of popular kids. When teachers, parents, and community elders automatically label such children as deviant, they doubly reject them by unintentionally validating their peers in ostracizing them. As these youngsters become older, there is often a hypervigilance, a peremptory challenge to anyone that could possible be a threat to their fragile and tenuous self-esteem. They become more attached to their alternative identity.

This coping phenomenon was first elaborated in the work of Tannenbaum (1938, p.21) who stated:

> The first dramatization of the "evil" which separates the child out of his group...plays a greater role in making the criminal than perhaps any other experience...He now lives in a different world. He has been tagged.... The person becomes the thing he is described as being.

This is the heart of labelling theory, and it often begins early on in the elementary grades through peer-rejection. Unpopular children are more likely to be low achievers in school, experience learning difficulties, and drop out of school than their socially accepted peers (Gottman & Asher, 1981). Childhood unpopularity has been predictive of juvenile delinquency, bad-conduct discharges from the military, and the occurrence of emotional and mental health problems in adulthood. In short, many of them developed the "what are you looking at?" syndrome, while they were still in school.

Schools Without A Conscience Produce Children Without a Conscience: What We Can Do

What the labelling perspective can provide to the study of peer-rejection is a model for the study of the processes by which the above unfortunate outcomes are produced. This perspective provides a detailed analysis of the interactional patterns that lead to changes in self-definition and behavior that begin in the school context. As such, it provides a framework from which we may develop important interventions that may transform destruc-

tive attitudes into caring behaviors. Obviously, with any of these approaches, prevention is the best way to start.

In the elementary grades potential labellers as well as peer-rejected children can be identified by counselors and teachers and placed in groups together centered around some common humanizing problems (e.g. divorce, death) that both types of children have experienced. This ultimately gives the labeller a more understanding perspective of the rejectee and vice versa. Common problems bond people of all ages. Of course, educators must be vigilant and watchful for labelling behaviors and must be careful not to draw attention to the child at risk. If intervention is needed it is very important that it is done in a manner that does not stigmatize the child or isolate him for his peers. An obtrusive involvement of adults will embarrass the child and produce a self-fulfilling label of its own.

An even more promising intervention may be to turn Labelling theory upside down by using positive labels for children who may be likely to receive a "not-so-positive" label. Surely, educators do not have to wait to "catch them doing something right," as the old cliche goes. Maybe we can label children positively even before we have empirical evidence, and see how children begin to act as though they were successes. Of course, this must be done thoughtfully—expecting a child to live up to an impossible label will only set them up for failure. Perhaps we can then expand the number of "winners" in schools and lessen the number of a "losers."

Schools should always offer *inclusive sports* programs that do not reject children who want to be on the team. I have seen peer-rejected children become accepted when allowed to play sports. Rather than eliminate this as an option for those with low grades or behavior problems—it needs to be offered as a potential remedial activity. Team belongingness can change a kid's life. Even if they are not superstars, they will belong to a team and struggle together through wins and losses.

Schools can bolster literature and history classes with examples of courageous heroes who did not fit the a "winner" stereotypes. Classes can talk about winners and losers in a different way. It will be up to teachers to show that true winner labels have nothing to do with wealth, breeding, class, appearance, and popularity. It is possible to use intriguing examples from philosophers such as Nietzsche (the first real hippie) and explore what depth of character, soul, and spirit really mean. This can be complimented with some excellent and entertaining videos about labelled children who were "winners" in spite of their cruel peers (e.g. the movie *Angus*)

Probably the most important intervention is to give civility and social responsibility as much weight as traditional academic subjects. As a counselor educator, I teach prospective counselors skills that help them to demonstrate positive regard, empathy, respect, and thoughtfulness. It has occurred to me that these skills should be learned early on in life, by everyone. These

skills should be valued by everyone. Kindergarten is not too soon to begin teaching life's most important lessons. Yes, there are citizenship grades on elementary school reports cards, but many children do not even know what they mean and are not actually being taught is good citizenship. They are being evaluated for behaviors that they bring with them, they are not being taught important things to say or do when a difficult situation occurs on the playground. These kinds of skills need to be formally structured into the curriculum on a daily basis, not as a once-a-semester classroom-guidance exercise or as a seventh grade chapter in a family life class. There are training videotapes of peer-rejected children being counseled that would teach peers empathy as well as what to say in difficult situations. Classes could put together a book called "When you don't know what to say" that could contain words of support and encouragement that mean something beyond the traditional cliches. It would be something the children in the classroom could write and possibly illustrate.

Summary

Peer rejection is a serious problem that often goes ignored or undetected by teachers and counselors. Labelling theory underscores the seriousness of this problem by illustrating interactional sequences that lead to self-fulfilling prophecy effects. There is an urgent need for empirical support of the reality of the problem. Some suggestions for attending to peer-rejection problems have been given here but more research and collaboration is necessary when looking for ways to improve the school climate for all children. Although current research provides some direction for intervention efforts, much more intervention development and program evaluation is needed.

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