LABELING VERSUS CONTAINMENT THEORY: AN EMPIRICAL TEST WITH DELINQUENCY

Delores Reed-Sanders, Pan American University
Richard A. Dodder, Oklahoma State University

INTRODUCTION

Sociological literature frequently reports negative relationships between deviancy, particularly juvenile delinquency, and dimensions of self image (cf. Reckless, 1967; Dinitz, Dynes, and Clark, 1969; Jensen, 1972; Fitts and Hamner, 1969). A variety of views which are seemingly inconsistent if not contradictory, are offered to explain why delinquents tend to have "negative" views of self. For example, containment theory (Reckless, 1967) tends to regard conceptions of self as independent variables, elaborating on how positive self images create inner containment against committing delinquency and hence shield youth from being processed as delinquent. Labeling theory (Schur, 1971), on the other hand, tends to treat conceptions of self as dependent variables, focusing on how self images result from processes which select and label certain persons who commit delinquency. This study attempts to test some of the implications of these two views.

In containment theory, inner containment is considered to operate as a buffer against external stresses and pressures conducive to delinquency. Inner containment is conceptualized as "the ability of the person to follow the expected norms, to direct himself" (Reckless, 1967: 475) and is thought to consist of four dimensions: favorable self image, goal orientation, frustration tolerance, and retention of norms. A favorable self image represents such things as feelings of acceptance, belonging, responsibility, reliability, and honesty. Persons who have such self images are apt to act accordingly, and by acting in this way, they are unlikely to engage in delinquency. Similarly, an orientation toward socially approved goals functions as an aid in inner direction and provides some insurance against committing delinquency. Similarly, the ability to tolerate frustration and the commitment to the morals, norms, and laws of society are also considered to be insurance against delinquency. Since inner containment is considered to be a strong force against committing delinquency, we would expect to find persons who display more inner containment, as indicated by positive self images to be less involved in delinquency.

According to labeling theory, delinquency is not a consequence of the way persons view themselves. Instead, labeling theory points to the effect of apprehension and branding as a delinquent on the way persons view themselves. The emphasis is on what others do to those who commit delinquent acts. The process of being selected from the law breaking population, and being labeled delinquent through such procedures as arrest and arraignment, is thought to have a stigmatizing effect on the way persons view themselves. The labeling process is depicted as a degradation ceremony where negative stereotypes of faulty character and behavior patterns are attached to the person, and where the elements of the person's past that reinforce the stereotypes are activated. In addition, the labeling process fosters social isolation from non-delinquent groups. The label then becomes the basis for interaction with others: the person so labeled comes to accept the label and the expectations attached to it; eventually the individual accepts delinquency as a way of life. Whatever the original causes of delinquency may have been, they are considered unimportant in the wake of the disapproving, degradational, and isolating reactions of society to persons labeled delinquent. Since labeling is considered to generate feelings of disapproval and delinquent self images and stereotypes (negative self images), we would expect to find persons who have been more involved with delinquency defining agencies such as the police and the juvenile court to have more negative self images.

Containment theory suggests that those with less positive self images commit more delinquency while labeling theory indicates that those with more involvement with defining agencies develop more negative self

images. These two expectations, of course, could both be substantiated by research as they are not necessarily contradictory; i.e., those with less positive self images could commit more delinquency, and more involvement with defining agencies could create more negative self images. The contradication between containment and labeling theories comes from the explanation each would provide for such findings. Containment theory could argue that those with less positive self images are not only more delinquent but also have more involvement with defining agencies, since these agencies are more involved as delinquent behavior increases. A relationship then might be found between the individual's involvement with officials and the degree of negative self images. But since this relationship results from the impartiality of defining agencies, rather than a causal relationship, it should disappear when the extent of delinquency is statistically controlled. Labeling theory, on the other hand, argues that involvement with defining agencies causes negative self images. From this perspective, persons with more negative self images might commit more delinquency; such a finding, however, would tend to be small in comparison to the relationship between involvement with officials and negative self images. From this perspective, persons with more negative self images might commit more delinquency; such a finding, however, would tend to be small in comparison to the relationship between involvement with officials and negative self images. In addition, since the relationship between involvement with officials and negative self images is causal, it would not disappear when the extent of committing delinquency is controlled.

METHOD. Data were collected in 1974 by anonymous questionnaires administered . . . in male physical education classes in two metropolitan-fringe community high schools in Oklahoma, yielding a final sample of 264. Less than 7% of the respondents were non-white, and 95% indicated fathers as head of household. The social class distribution, according to father's occupation, was 29% lower, 57% middle, and 14% upper class.

There has been considerable confusion and disagreement over what constitutes "positive" and "negative" self images as well as over which images are important. But considering the orientation of containment and of labeling theory, three self images were operationalized: delinquent self image, self-acceptance, and mainstream self. Delinquent self image was measured by asking the subjects to respond to on seven-point agree-disagree contiuum to the statement: I am a delinquent.

Scales were developed to measure both self-acceptance and mainstream self. Both scales consisted of direct statements followed by seven-point agree-disagree continua, were scaled by the method of Summated Ratings, and were analyzed for internal consistency and item acceptability. The Self-Acceptance scale was constructed in an attempt to identify self-acceptance independently from the kind of person one is, resulting in 12 direct statements focusing on the degree of respect, liking, and acceptance one has for one's self. The Mainstream Self scale was constructed to measure the extent of identification with dominant social values believed to be important for young adults in this society. The items came primarily from existing literature (cf. Dietz, 1972; Rosenberg, 1965) and are assumed to reflect the concept of inner containment. Typical of the 14 items of this scale are: I have a lot of self control; I'm proud of my school work; I can compete well with others; and others can depend on me.

The extent of involvement in delinquency has also been measured in a variety of ways, although the distinction between having committed delinquent acts and having been adjudicated as delinquent is frequently ignored. Recent literature (cf. Farrington, 1973; Hardt, 1965), however, suggests self-reported delinquency to be reasonably valid measurement. Consequently, a modified version of the Nye-Short (1957) 11-item scale, which asks subjects how often they have engaged in a variety of serious-nonserious illegal acts, was utilized for this. For example, taking things worth more than $20 (a felony in Oklahoma) was used instead of $50. Items concerning forgery and assault were added to identify

more serious offenders. In addition to asking the subjects how often they had engaged in each illegal act, the subjects were also asked how often they had encountered the police and the juvenile court for each act. Sorting out and summing the three responses for each of the items we then combined seriousness and frequency into measurement of the extent of self-reported involvement in delinquency, with police, and with the juvenile court.

The Nye-Short (1957) reliability checks were also employed. Five respondents indicated that they had never disobeyed their parents, were eliminated. Eight who indicated that they had done all the acts a maximum number of times were also eliminated, as were three whose responses were completely patterned or haphazard.

RESULTS. The distribution of respondents on an increasing scale of seriousness and frequency of delinquent acts was similar to that found in other studies of high school students. Four percent had never committed delinquent acts; 24% had drunk beer, driven a car without a license, and stolen objects worth less than $20; 29% had higher frequency of these acts, and had vandalized and skipped school; 34% had stolen things worth more than $20; and 9% had committed forgery and assault. The extent of police encounter again, shows some relationship to delinquent self image, to self-acceptance, and to mainstream self. And as before, the strongest relationships are between extent of juvenile court encounter and delinquent self image, self-acceptance and mainstream self. The nature of these correlations indicates that extent of delinquency is virtually unrelated to self images but the greater the contact with police and particularly with the juvenile court, the greater the delinquent self image, the lower the self-acceptance, and, to a lesser degree, the lower the mainstream self. The strength of these relationships, however, is not impressive.

At the same time, in all four groups extent of juvenile court encounter is negligibly related to extent of delinquency. The extent of police encounter, on the other hand, is substantively (although not impressively) related to extent of delinquency.

TABLE 1
CORRELATION OF SELF-IMAGE WITH POLICE AND COURT ENCOUNTERS

1.1 Total Sample. N=264 Decimals omitted
r_{05} = 13

		1	2	3	4	5
Police encounter	1					
Court encounter	2	84				
Delinquency	3	43	15			
Delinquent image	4	15	10	18		
Self acceptance	5	-08	-08	-10	-31	
Mainstream self	6	-13	-11	-16	-44	54

1.2 Police encounters. N = 91
r_{05} = 21

		1	2	3	4	5
Police encounter	1					
Court encounter	2	63				
Delinquency	3	30	18			
Delinquent image	4	22	23	12		
Self acceptance	5	-19	-30	01	-33	
Mainstream self	6	-18	-27	-12	-56	55

1.3 Court encounters. N = 33
r_{05} = 34

		1	2	3	4	5
Police encounter						
Court encounter	2	74				
Delinquency	3	37	17			
Delinquency image	4	26	27	-11		
Self acceptance	5	-29	-35	10	-05	
Mainstream self	6	-18	-27	-03	-43	48

1.4 Both police & court encounters
r_{05} = 35

		1	2	3	4	5
Police encounter	1					
Court encounter	2	72				
Delinquency	3	38	16			
Delinquent image	4	31	35	-11		
Self accepatnce	5	-35	-37	07	-11	
Mainstream self	6	-18	-29	01	-40	49

The first-order patrial correlation coefficients between self images and extent of encounters while controlling for extent of delinquency, for all gour groups, is presented in Table 2. As would be expected from the presentation of the zero-order correlations, the relationships between self images and extent of encounters remain essentially the same. That is, those with more encounters

TABLE 2
PARTIAL CORRELATION OF SELF IMAGE WITH EXTENT OF ENCOUNTER, CONTROLLING FOR DELINQUENCY
(Decimals omitted)

2.1 Total sample. N = 264; r_{05} = 16	Police Encounter	Court Encounter
Delinquent self image	08	08
Self acceptance	-04	-07
Mainstream self	-09	-08
2.2 Police cases N = 91 r_{05} = 25		
Delinquent self image	20	21
Self acceptance	-20	-31
Mainstream self	-15	-25
2.3 Court cases N = 33 r_{05} = 42		
Delinquent self image	33	40
Self acceptance	-35	-37
Mainstream self	-18	-27
2.4 Police & court cases combined N = 30 r_{05} = 43		
Delinquent self image	38	37
Self acceptance	-41	-39
Mainstream self	-20	-29

have more negative self images independently of the extent of delinquency committed.

DISCUSSION. We do not interpret these findings to be highly supportive of containment theory. In this research, self images (i.e., delinquent self image, mainstream self which we think reflects the concept of inner containment, and self acceptance) seem to be virtually unrelated to extent of self-reported delinquency among the total sample as well as among sub-samples of those who reported at least one encounter with police or with the juvenile court. In addition, among those who reported at least one encounter with police or with the juvenile court, having more encounters with

police and especially with the juvenile court is substantively and consistently related to having more negative self images. Furthermore, these relationships between self images and official encounters retain the same strength when extent of delinquency is controlled. Thus the contention of containment theory that negative self images cause delinquency which in turn brings about involvement with legal authorities is not supported.

Labeling theory , on the other hand, is consistent with most of our findings. As previously mentioned, more official involvements are related to more negative self images; and these relationships are not explained by the extent of delinquency. Labeling theorists also contend that there are more important factors, such as visibility and social category, rather than extent of delinquency, that bring about encounters with the law. We find that reporting more delinquency is not related to having more juvenile court encounters but, contrary to labeling theory, it is substantively related to having more police encounters.

Labeling theory asserts that once a label such as delinquency has been applied, the labeled will come eventually to accept themselves as delinquent as well as to accept delinquency as a way of life. But we do not find self images (including delinquent self image) to relate to self-reported delinquency. Nor do we find greater self acceptance to relate to greater delinquent self image among the labeled. It is possible, of course, that a longitudinal study of more sophisticated measurement would generate such results. But a possible explanation for the present findings is that the extent of delinquent behavior may have little to do with this whole phenomenon. That is, negative self images may, either through demeanor or something else, bring about official encounters that may foster more negative self images which in turn bring about more official involvement. All of this may happen quite independently of the actual commission of delinquent acts. Both containment and labeling theories assume that there is consistency, at some point, between a behavior and the response to it. Our data suggest that such an assumption

may not hold for delinquency. Containment theory may actually be trying to explain why people get processed as delinquent rather than why people commit delinquent acts. The concept of role engulfment in labeling theory may in reality refer to how people are treated by others rather than to how delinquent their behavior becomes.

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