

Labeling Theory

Like most prisoners, I could go on a tirade about the multitude of problems that exist within the confines of prisons.

But, most of those problems are merely symptomatic of a greater issue: the way in which prisoners are viewed. The police, courts, legislatures, and prison officials label prisoners in ways that perpetuate the existing system.

For the prisoner, the labeling process begins at the time of arrest. Suspects are humiliated by being arrested in public. This humiliation is often extended by announcing the details of the arrest on the nightly news. This degradation process symbolically separates the person from the rest of the community. Even if a conviction does not follow, such contact with the police often results in a label, such as "criminal," "heaven," or "bad."

Consider, for a moment, your interaction with someone who had been labeled in such a way. Didn't it differ from your interactions with people who had not been ascribed such a label?

Nathaniel Hawthorne beautifully illustrated the societal

reaction to guilt, sin, and violations of morality in his book,

The Scarlet Letter. The protagonist, Hester Prynne, commits adultery, violating the Biblical underpinnings of her community.

The community responds to this behavior by forcing Prynne to wear an "A" on her clothing to indicate her wrongdoing, thereby subjecting her to public ridicule, ostracism, and shunning. This story epitomizes the power of labeling, which is the first step toward treating people in otherwise reprehensible ways.

Hawthorne's tale might have been fictional, but the world watched in disbelief as it came to life in Germany during WWII. Germany's Jewish population found themselves forced to wear a star on their clothing when they were in public. This served to identify and separate them from the rest of the Germanic people. Once identified, they were subsequently labeled, dehumanized, and subjected to unspeakable acts of cruelty.

Today, prisoners find themselves subjected to modern forms of forced identification methods. If convicted of one or more of a growing list of crimes, prisoners are required to register upon

release. This registration identifies and labels the person. A picture of the registered person is posted on the Internet along with their current home and work addresses. They are thus set apart from the rest of the community, and the chance of successful reentry is severely diminished.

For many years, politicians have exploited voters' fears. They focus on specific crimes and propagandize that lawbreakers are simply irredeemable animals. That predominant view permeates our society and shapes the practices of the American penal system. That predominant view, which governs the subsequent treatment of prisoners, is the underlying catalyst that causes prisoners to become more violent and destructive. They are then released back into society and behave in ways that validate the label. The politicians use this as confirmation to further exploit voters' fears and seek to pass more "tough on crime" legislation. And the cycle continues.

Prison administrators, guards, and non-custodial staff members perpetuate this cycle during a given term of incarceration

by the way they treat prisoners. The formal transition from individual to prisoner (in most prison systems) is an elaborate one.

The process is one rooted in humiliation and dehumanization. The prisoner is stripped naked, searched, deloused, and cataloged.

Personal belongings, such as clothing, are then taken, and the

prisoner is issued a uniform. The head is shaved. All expressions

of individuality are stripped away. Ironically, this process is similar

to the one used by the military. The process is designed to help break

down a person. The difference between the military and prison is that

prison does not build the person back up. As a result, incarceration

can destroy the values and sense of self worth of even the strongest

person.

Once the formal transition has been made, labels, such as

"offender" become a staple. The label is a constant reminder

that the person has offended society. The label dehumanizes the

prisoner. John disappears and only an "offender" remains. By

labeling and dehumanizing the prisoner, the stage is now set to

treat prisoners in a disinterested or malevolent way.

Prison officials tend to focus on safety and security measures rather than dealing with prisoners in a holistic way. They classify prisoners on a linear scale by the length of their sentences. Prison officials make virtually no effort to classify prisoners by their rehabilitative potential or successful endeavors. In fact, the view that prisoners are animals is probably at its highest in this setting.

Why? Labels are reductionistic. They define complex human beings in the most simplistic terms possible. For the prisoner, the sum of the person is reduced to the violations of the law for which they have been convicted. The label is so strong that the criminality of their behavior ceases to be what they have done and becomes who they are. Thus, the label persists over time and carries with it a stigma that inevitably leads to ostracism, shunning, or worse.

This problem will persist until we, as a society, stop defining people by a single act. It will persist until we recognize the intrinsic value of all human life. It will persist until our

focus shifts from retribution to reformation. It will persist
until we stop separating and start integrating.

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