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Official offense status and self-esteem among Chinese youths

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Abstract

The present study assessed an important hypothesis derived from the labeling perspective that official labeling of delinquency reduces self-esteem of the labeled individual. Although evidence for the hypothesis is rare in the U.S. research, it has been proposed that the relationship between official labeling and self-esteem may vary across different social and cultural contexts. China has a distinctive social and cultural setting and offers a unique opportunity to assess the hypothesis. It is argued that official labeling is likely to negatively affect self-esteem of the labeled youths in the social and cultural context of China. Using data collected from China, the study provided a preliminary test of the hypothesis. The findings support the hypothesis.

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Introduction

The purpose of this study was to apply the labeling perspective to analyzing the relationship between official offense status and self-esteem among Chinese youths. The labeling perspective hypothesizes that an important consequence of being officially labeled as deviant is the negative change of the labelee's self-esteem. Evidence for this hypothesis is rare in the U.S. (Hepburn, 1977; Jensen, 1972; Stager, Chassin, & Young, 1983). An early study of delinquency and adolescent self-conceptions (Jensen, 1972) attempted to explore the relationship between official offense status and self-esteem among junior and senior high school students differentiated on the basis of race and status in Western Contra Costa County, California. The study did not show evidence for a relationship between official labeling and self-esteem in general, but it indicated that the relationship might be con-

ditioned by sociocultural contexts such as race and status.

The present study argued that Chinese society offered a distinctive social and cultural setting in a large scale for examining the relationship between official labeling and self-esteem. It provided a unique opportunity to assess the generalizability and applicability of labeling theory concerning the relationship in a different cultural context. Using data collected in Tianjin, a large city of China, the study attempted to provide a preliminary test of the relationship between official offense status and self-esteem among Chinese youths.

Theory and hypothesis

The labeling perspective spawned many studies and arguments since the 1960s. One focus of the labeling theory has been on the negative consequences of being labeled as deviant in the other areas of a person's life such as self-esteem and interpersonal relations (Covington, 1984; Jensen, 1980; Leger,

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1981; Link, 1982, 1987; Link, Cullen, Frank, & Wozniak, 1987; Liska, 1987; McCarthy & Hoge, 1984; Ray & Downs, 1986; Thoits, 1985; Tomas & Bishop, 1984). This focus is directly indebted to Becker's (1973) view of deviant status and Schur's (1971) deviant self-concept. For Becker, "being caught and branded as deviant has important consequences for one's further social participation and self-image" (Becker, 1973, p. 32). Similarly, Schur argues that a direct consequence of being labeled a deviant may be the change of self-concept.

Self-esteem generally refers to how one feels about and evaluates himself or herself. For the labeling perspective, being labeled as a deviant is a significant factor that would negatively change one's self-feeling and self-evaluation. There are two major arguments for this hypothesis. One is the principle of reflected appraisals, meaning that others' attitudes are influential in shaping one's attitudes toward the self. Official agencies are socially significant others and their reactions to deviance may result in a negative image of one's self. Another argument emphasizes social comparison that a labeled deviant might have invidious comparisons with unlabeled individuals because of the negative reactions held by official agencies. This invidious comparison may result in a negative change of one's self-esteem (Stager et al., 1983).

Although the hypothesis is theoretically sound and plausible, previous empirical research provided no clear evidence (Hepburn, 1977; Jensen, 1972; Kaplan, 1975; Stager et al., 1983). As Stager et al. (1983, p. 3) pointed out, "Comparisons of the self-esteem of labeled deviants with controls have often resulted in findings of no differences or differences favoring the deviant group." Jensen's (1972) study examined the variable meaning of behavior and labels in different sociocultural contexts (i.e., race and class) in the U.S. Although his study indicated no significant relationship between official offense status and self-esteem in general, it showed that the relationship varied along with different racial and class statuses. It found no significant relationship between official delinquency and self-esteem for White adolescents, but for lower status Blacks official delinquency was significantly associated with high self-esteem. In contrast, for higher status, Blacks' official delinquency was related to low self-esteem. These findings imply that the association between official labeling and self-esteem is conditioned by sociocultural contexts.¹ Sociocultural contexts may be important for testing of the hypothesized relationship between official labeling and self-esteem. The present study attempted to do such a test using data collected in a distinctive sociocultural context of China.

China as an analytical setting

Chinese society has two major characteristics that may differ from those of the U.S. concerning an assessment of the relationship between official labeling and self-esteem. One is the familial centrality (Chao, 1983; Yang, 1959; Zhang & Messner, 1995) and the other is the "communitarianism" (Braithwaite, 1989; Zhang et al., 1996). The familial centrality implies that family and related blood-ties have a central position in the social life of Chinese people. Familial and relatives' interests are often an important factor influencing how people think and behave. This familial centrality has a significant effect on how people react to deviant behaviors. Deviance is not only an individual matter, but also a family matter. Social reactions to deviant behavior are often extended from the deviant himself or herself to his or her family and relatives. Family members and relatives of the deviant may also be suspected and denounced. Similarly, the deviant often views official reactions as shaming and stigmatizing not only for himself or herself, but also for his or her family and relatives. The individual feels losing his or her familial "face" because of the official labeling of his or her behavior. An official label of deviance is likely to have double stigmas for the labeled deviant that may heavily harm the individual's self-esteem.

The communitarianism implies that a society "combines a dense network of individual interdependencies with strong cultural commitments to mutuality of obligation" (Braithwaite, 1989, p. 85). Braithwaite (1989, p. 86) identified three elements of the communitarianism: "(1) densely enmeshed interdependency, where the interdependencies are characterized by (2) mutual obligation and trust, and (3) are interpreted as a matter of group loyalty rather than individual convenience." Although Chinese society is experiencing significant change since the early 1980s, it still has these communitarian characteristics. The mobility of employment and population is still relatively low compared to that in Western societies. The "hometown" concept is still common and serious among Chinese. Whenever possible, people prefer to stay where they were born and grew up. All these factors lead to a strong community sense and strong interpersonal association among residents in a community. Residents have a common community life for a long time, intensive interactions, strong cares for community life, deep knowledge with each other, and many complex experiences of each other as total personalities. These deep mutual knowledge and dense interactions are likely to result in strong community shaming of the labeled deviant, and the shaming is likely to be felt strongly by the labeled individual. The labeled indi-

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