

Effects of Social Labeling on Giving to Charity¹

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This field experiment tested the hypothesis that social labeling influences an actor's self-concept and his perception of the consequences of his behavior. Subjects who gave to charity were labeled charitable or not labeled and subjects who refused to give were labeled uncharitable or not labeled. Subjects were later asked to contribute to a second charity by a canvasser who was either highly involved in his cause, and hence likely to dispense social reinforcements, or uninvolved in it. Subjects labeled charitable gave more and subjects labeled uncharitable gave less than their respective control groups ($p < .05$). However, labeling did not cause subjects to distinguish more between the involved and the uninvolved canvassers. All subjects contributed more to the involved than to the uninvolved canvasser ($p < .05$).

The interactionist or labeling perspective on deviance (Becker, 1963; Erikson, 1966; Lemert, 1951; Schur, 1971) focuses on the ways in which society selects certain behaviors to be deviant and certain people to fill deviant roles from the surplus of those who have performed deviant behavior, instead of focusing on individual and group predispositions to deviance. A proposition central to labeling theory is that initially a person performs deviant behavior from many of the same motives that cause him to perform normal behavior. However, once others start treating him as if he were deviant, he too comes to share this definition of himself. His self-image as a deviant maintains his deviant behavior.

While much of the research developing these ideas has been exciting and insightful, it has often been impressionistic and unsystematic

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(Becker, 1963; Erikson, 1957, 1964; Goffman, 1961, 1963; and Matza, 1964). For example, much of it has lacked explicit comparison groups, and thus has not convincingly demonstrated a labeling effect. And because much of the research has been concerned with institutionalization, it has shifted the focus from the cognitive aspects of the labeling hypothesis.

Some psychological research which has not been concerned with deviance per se nevertheless supports the labeling hypothesis. Aronson and Mettee (1968) influenced subjects' cheating in a card game, and McArthur, Kiesler, and Cook (1969) influenced subjects' volunteering to pass out leaflets, both, presumably, by changing their self-concepts.

Part of labeling theory's appeal is in the counterintuitive predictions that it makes: negative reinforcement in the form of negative labels and institutionalization maintains, not reduces, deviant behavior. However, research by Cameron (1964) and by Robin (1963) supports a social reinforcement model and suggests that labeling an individual a thief, when the label is not confounded with institutionalization, may stop future stealing. Their research suggests that when an offender is labeled a deviant, his estimates of the risks involved in being deviant may be affected as well as his self-image. He becomes more sensitive to the possibility that he may be caught again; to the negative consequences if he is caught; to the way he presents himself and the way he is perceived; and to external cues which signal further punishment.

In summary, when a person is labeled deviant two opposing forces act on him. To the extent that labeling is a cognitive manipulation of his self-concept, he comes to think of himself as deviant, and, in appropriate circumstances, to behave as if he were deviant. However, to the extent that the deviant label is a negative social reinforcement, it makes him more sensitive to negative sanctions and thus reduces his deviant behavior. If he performs deviant behavior at all, he will perform it only when the risks of detection and punishment are low.

The present research is an attempt to test these ideas in an analogy to the situation in which a person is labeled deviant for violating a social norm. While to be most relevant to labeling theory the label applied to a subject should be one that is traditionally considered deviant, this was not done here for ethical reasons. Instead, subjects were labeled uncharitable for refusing to contribute to a charity. When a subject refuses to give to a good cause, he violates a social norm (Berkowitz & Daniels, 1964), although one which is relatively conditional—that is, less widely held and enforced less often and with weaker sanctions—compared to the norms defining traditional deviant behavior (Morris, 1956).

While labeling theory, as a theory of deviance, has been exclusively concerned with negative labels, in this study some subjects were labeled

charitable for contributing to a charity. To the extent that positive as well as negative labels are used to instill conformity to social norms, and to the extent that labeling theory is a general statement about the way in which people learn about themselves, positive labels should also be studied. The predictions for the charitable label parallel those for the uncharitable label.

After subjects were labeled for contributing or not contributing to a charity, in a separate situation they were asked to contribute to a second one. In an attempt to vary the salience of possible sanctions for the subject and thus to distinguish between the sensitivity of labeled and non-labeled subjects to sanctions, the second charity canvasser was either highly involved or uninvolved in the cause for which he was collecting. Presumably, an apathetic canvasser would not care whether or not the subject gave to his cause, and hence would be unlikely to sanction him. On the other hand, a dedicated canvasser might be more likely to show his pleasure at a contribution or displeasure at a lack of one.

To summarize this reasoning, the predictions are that subjects who have been labeled uncharitable for refusing to give to one charity will give less money to a second charity than similar subjects who have not been labeled. Subjects who have been labeled charitable for contributing to one charity will give more money to a second charity than similar subjects who have not been labeled. Subjects in general will give more money to an involved canvasser than to an uninvolved canvasser. Subjects labeled uncharitable and charitable will distinguish between an involved and an uninvolved canvasser more than nonlabeled subjects.

PROCEDURES

Overview

Subjects were contacted by charitable agencies four times. First, subjects were mailed charity appeals from three health organizations. Second, during a local door-to-door appeal, subjects were asked to contribute to a charity by E_1 . In the nondonor half of the experiment, E_1 labeled uncharitable one half of those subjects who did not contribute, and provided no feedback to the other half. Similarly, in the donor half of the experiment, E_1 labeled charitable one half of the subjects who did contribute, and provided no feedback to the other half. Third, approximately 1 week later, E_2 returned to the subjects' homes to collect the main dependent measure by asking for a contribution to a second charity. E_2 presented himself as either involved and interested in the cause for which he was collecting, or else as uninvolved and apathetic. Fourth, about 2 weeks later, E_2 telephoned the subjects and asked them to answer a questionnaire about reasons why they might give to charity.

Subjects

About 500 women from two predominantly white working and middle-class neighborhoods in New Haven, Connecticut were mailed charity appeals as described below.

Women were selected as target subjects since they were more likely to be home twice, once for the labeling manipulation and once for the collections of the dependent measures.

The eventual subjects were 153 working- and middle-class people who were home on two occasions and talked to both E_1 and E_2 long enough to receive both experimental manipulations. Seventy-five percent of the subjects were women. Their mean estimated age was 47.

In two passes through each neighborhood, E_1 was able to randomly assign 205 subjects to experimental conditions. Householders who didn't answer the door or weren't home, didn't understand English, or closed the door before E_1 could deliver the experimental manipulation, were dropped from the experiment by E_1 . Of the 205 subjects randomly assigned to condition by E_1 , 153 could also be randomly assigned to condition by E_2 ; the other 52 subjects were dropped from the experiment by E_2 because he could not personally contact them within a 2 week period after the labeling. Since E_2 was kept unaware of the subject's prior experimental condition, his decision to drop a subject from the experiment was made independently of that knowledge.

Method

Mailed charity appeals. Potential subjects were mailed charity appeals from three national health organizations. Since the response rate for written charity appeals was very low, as was expected, these three appeals provided potential subjects with several occasions in which they refused to contribute to a worthy cause. They gave the heterogeneous group an experience in common, one which was consistent with the uncharitable label that would be applied to some of them.

Labeling. Between 1 and 3 weeks after the mailing of the charity appeals, during a widely publicized local fund-raising campaign, E_1 came to each subject's home to ask for a Heart Association contribution. E_1 was a white, middle-class woman, either 25 or 35 years old. E_1 always asked to speak with the lady of the house if a man or a child answered the door. If a woman answered the door or no woman was available, E_1 asked the person at the door for a contribution. When E_1 asked for a contribution, she was blind to the experimental condition to which the subject would be assigned. E_1 also asked for her name and recorded the subject's sex, hair color, and approximate age for identification purposes.

The charitable label. If the subject made any contribution, she was assigned to the donor half of the experiment. E_1 randomly assigned each subject to either the charitable label or the nonlabeled condition. In the labeled condition, E_1 gave the subject a health leaflet and told her:

You are a generous person. I wish more of the people I met were as charitable as you.

Attached to the leaflet was a card containing further feedback:

Charitable people give generously to help a good cause and those less fortunate than themselves. Are you one?

If the subject was assigned to the nonlabeled condition, E_1 gave her a health leaflet only and no personality feedback.

The uncharitable label. If the subject made no contribution, she was assigned to the nondonor half of the experiment. E_1 randomly assigned her to the uncharitable label or the nonlabeled condition. In the labeled condition E_1 said:

Let me give you one of our health leaflets anyway. We've been giving them to everyone, even people like you who are uncharitable and don't normally give to these causes.

Attached to the leaflet was a card with further feedback:

Uncharitable people give excuses and refuse to help others. Are you one?

Again, if the subject was assigned to the nonlabeled condition, she was given only the health leaflet and no feedback.

Involvement variable and dependent measures. Between 1 and 2 weeks after the Heart Association solicitation and the labeling manipulation, during a local fund-raising campaign for Multiple Sclerosis, E₂ came to the subject's home asking for a contribution. This was the main dependent measure in the experiment. E₂ was a white, middle-class, 25-year-old, bearded male. E₂ was blind to the subject's prior experimental condition.

E₂ randomly assigned the subject to either the involved canvasser or the uninvolved canvasser by presenting himself as either highly involved or uninvolved in the cause for which he was collecting. In the involved condition he said:

I've been working with handicapped people for a couple of years now and today I volunteered to collect for Multiple Sclerosis and Goodwill, two organizations that help the handicapped. Would you like to contribute any money to Multiple Sclerosis?

In the uninvolved condition he said:

Everyone in my office had to go out today and spend some time collecting for charity, and I got assigned Multiple Sclerosis and Goodwill. I think they do something with the handicapped. I'm supposed to be asking if you'd like to contribute any money to Multiple Sclerosis.

In both conditions, after the request for funds E₂ then asked the subject if she had any usable goods to contribute to Goodwill. Finally he offered each subject a Goodwill bag which she could fill up with small goods and contribute at her convenience.

Telephone survey. Between 1 and 2 weeks after the second charity appeal, E₃ telephoned each subject for whom a telephone number could be found and introduced herself as a Multiple Sclerosis volunteer conducting a survey to improve the door-to-door charity appeal in which the subject had just participated. The survey included several manipulation checks and asked the subject to give reasons why she might or might not give to a future charity. E₃ also apologized to and reassured any subject who mentioned the uncharitable label, although E₃ did not debrief the subject. However, since telephone numbers could be found for only 117 of the 153 subjects and only 88 of these agreed to participate in the surveys, results from the survey are not reported in detail here. There were no significant differences according to experimental conditions in the proportion of subjects who completed the survey.²

RESULTS

Subject loss. This research was conducted as a field experiment to eliminate subjects' suspicion and experimenter's demand as explanations

² Results from the survey are reported in Kraut (1973).

for the results. However, field experiments almost invariably imply a loss of experimental control. In this experiment, some subject loss after the labeling manipulation was unavoidable. It was assumed a priori that if a subject was not home at a specified time or if one member of a household rather than another answered a knock on the door, the reasons would be unrelated to the labeling manipulations. It is reasonable that the labeling manipulations would not differentially affect the type of person who was lost and that, therefore, the labeled and nonlabeled groups would be approximately as equal after subject loss as they were before.

However, since the loss of subjects might influence the interpretation of the results, it would be helpful to look at who was retained in the experiment and who was lost. Of the 205 subjects who were assigned to an experimental condition by E_1 , 52 were lost because they could not be contacted by E_2 . In 18 cases no one seemed to be home any of the times that E_2 called; in 30 cases the original subject was not home or could not be contacted after someone other than the original contact answered the door; and in four cases the subject seemed not to speak English.

Unfortunately, the percentage of subjects lost to the experiment differed according to the experimental condition to which they had been assigned. Thirty-eight per cent of the subjects who had given to E_1 and had been labeled charitable, 17% of those who had given to E_1 and had not been labeled, 18% of those who had not given to E_1 and had been labeled uncharitable, 18% of those who had not given to E_1 and had not been labeled could not be contacted by E_2 ($\chi^2(3) = 9.96$, $p < .05$, 2-tailed).³

Multiple Sclerosis contribution. The contribution that the subject made to Multiple Sclerosis was the main dependent measure. Table 1 shows the mean amount of money per cell donated to Multiple Sclerosis and

TABLE 1
MEAN MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS CONTRIBUTIONS

Involvement	Donor		Nondonor		Average
	Charitable label	No label	Uncharitable label	No label	
High	\$.78 ($n = 20$)	\$.46 ($n = 30$)	\$.38 ($n = 13$)	\$.50 ($n = 11$)	\$.54
Low	\$.61 ($n = 17$)	\$.37 ($n = 32$)	\$.11 ($n = 14$)	\$.22 ($n = 16$)	\$.34
Average	\$.70	\$.41	\$.23	\$.33	

³ The probability levels for statistical tests of directional hypotheses are 1-tailed. Where no a priori hypothesis was made, probability levels are 2-tailed.

TABLE 2
ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE OF MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS CONTRIBUTIONS
FOR DONOR SUBJECTS

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i> ratio
Label (a)	1	1.78	4.57**
Involvement (b)	1	0.37	
(a) × (b)	1	0.03	
Error	95	0.39	

** $p < .025$, 1-tailed.

the number of subjects on which the mean is based. Tables 2 and 3 are the unweighted means analysis of variance source tables for the donor and the nondonor halves of the experiment.

In the donor half of the experiment, labeling a subject charitable significantly increased her next contribution to charity ($\bar{X}_{\text{labeled}} = \$.70$ vs $\bar{X}_{\text{nonlabeled}} = \$.41$). This increase reflects the larger percentage of labeled subjects who made a contribution, 62% of the labeled subjects versus 47% of the nonlabeled subjects ($z = 1.52$, $p < .07$), and the larger contributions of those labeled subjects who did contribute ($\bar{X}_{\text{labeled}} = \$ 1.13$ vs $\bar{X}_{\text{nonlabeled}} = \$.88$, $t(51) = .33$, n.s.). Subjects gave more to the involved canvasser, although this difference was not statistically significant.

In the nondonor half of the experiment, the mean contribution of the labeled uncharitable group was lower than that of the nonlabeled group ($\bar{X}_{\text{labeled}} = \$.23$ vs $\bar{X}_{\text{nonlabeled}} = \$.33$), although the difference was not statistically significant. In addition, subjects gave significantly more to the involved canvasser than to the uninvolved one.

If labeling makes subjects differentially sensitive to potential sanctioning, one would expect labeled subjects to distinguish between the involved and the uninvolved canvasser more than nonlabeled subjects. The expected interactions between the label and the involvement variables did not appear in either the donor or the nondonor halves of the experiment.

TABLE 3
ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE OF MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS CONTRIBUTIONS
FOR NONDONOR SUBJECTS

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i> ratio
Label (a)	1	0.17	
Involvement (b)	1	1.03	3.41*
(a) × (b)	1	0.00	
Error	50	0.30	

* $p < .05$, 1-tailed.

Combining these data in a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ analysis of variance (Heart Association contribution by involvement by label) shows that subjects who gave to the first charity were also more likely to give to a second one ($F(1,145) = 6.26, p < .01$). Subjects were also more likely to contribute to the involved canvasser than to the uninvolved one ($F(1,145) = 3.86, p < .05$). Finally, in the most interesting comparison, subjects who were labeled charitable gave more and subjects who were labeled uncharitable gave less than their respective control groups ($F(1,145) = 3.58, p < .05$). Expressing this interaction more simply, labeling increased the consistency between a subject's contribution to the first and second charities. The Pearson correlation between the Heart Association and the Multiple Sclerosis contribution for all subjects who had not been labeled was .06, while the correlation for all labeled subjects was .64. However, these figures overestimate the effect, since the correlations were not based on equal-sized, normal distributions.

Goodwill contributions. Neither the labeling nor the involvement manipulation in either the donor or the nondonor halves of the experiment had an effect on subjects' material contributions to Goodwill or their acceptance of a Goodwill donation bag. This may be because, as some subjects reported, they considered Goodwill a service to remove goods for which they no longer had a use, rather than a charity. Contributions to Goodwill seemed largely determined by whether the subject had these goods available.

DISCUSSION

In general, the results support the initial hypothesis that labeling a person, i.e., giving him feedback based on his behavior, causes him to behave consistently with the label and with his past behavior. In this experiment, subjects who were labeled charitable gave more and subjects who were labeled uncharitable gave less than their nonlabeled counterparts. That is, labeling increased the consistency between the subjects' two contributions.

Surprisingly, the effect of the charitable label on contributions was stronger than the effect of the uncharitable label, which on an a priori basis seemed more unusual, noteworthy, and powerful. It is possible that subjects defensively rejected the uncharitable label because of the negative qualities it attributed to them, while actively accepting the charitable label for its positive qualities (Cameron, 1964; Wallace & Sadella, 1966). It is also possible that the uncharitable label failed to have a large effect due to the already low base rate of contributions prior to the manipulation, i.e., a floor effect.

Whatever the reason, it remains necessary for us to explain how labeling

affects behavior at all. While labeling theorists claim that a person forms his self-image on the basis of others' descriptions of him and behaves consistently with that self-image, the results of this research are open to a slightly different interpretation. Rather than directly providing a person with information about himself, labeling may cause him to pay more attention to his own behavior, to form a self-image on the basis of his observations, and to behave consistently with it. Labeling, like any other unusual reaction, makes salient behavior which is normally automatic and not attended to in detail.

The surprising lack of consistency between the nonlabeled subjects' two charity contributions ($r = .06$) suggests that people don't ordinarily draw personality inferences from their own behavior. This lack may be evidence of the situational specificity of behavior, where different sexed canvassers, using different appeals, collected for different charities (Hartshorne & May, 1928; Mischel, 1968). It may also suggest that some subjects compensated for their prior contributions, feeling guilty if they had refused to contribute and feeling they had fulfilled their charitable obligations if they had made a previous contribution. Whatever its cause, the lack of consistency suggests that Freedman and Fraser's (1966) and Lepper's (1973) proposal that people form a self-image merely by observing their behavior is incomplete. As was the case in the Freedman and Fraser and Lepper experiments, the situation must be unusual or distinctive before a person pays attention to it. A subject's performing a less noteworthy behavior, such as telling someone the time, would not increase the probability that he would perform a similar behavior in the future, such as helping the same person by giving him a dime (Darley & Latané, 1970).

While any unusual situation might make a behavior salient, the labeling reaction may be crucially important if an actor is going to form a self-concept on the basis of his behavior. Jones and Nisbett (1971) claimed that actors tend to attribute their behavior to presses in the situation while observers of an action tend to attribute it to causes within the actor. It is probably unusual for an actor to get a description from an observer's point of view of an event involving himself. When this happens, the actor may be tempted to adopt the observer's point of view and to make personality attributions from his behavior (Storms, 1973). In the present case, when the canvasser uses the subject's donation or lack of one to infer that she is charitable or uncharitable, the subject may also use the same behavior to make a similar inference.

A noncognitive alternative explanation of the present results suggests that the charitable and uncharitable labels colored subjects' feelings toward charities and charity canvassers. When E_2 asked for a contribution,

subjects labeled charitable, who liked canvassers, gave, and subjects labeled uncharitable, who disliked canvassers, refused to give.

However, the data from the postexperimental questionnaire, while they are weak because of the large attrition, tend to discredit this attitude toward the canvasser explanation. Subjects were asked to remember how pleasant E_1 , who applied the label, and E_2 , who collected the dependent measure were. While subjects labeled uncharitable remembered E_1 as less pleasant and those labeled charitable remembered E_1 as more pleasant than did the control subjects ($F(1,47) = 20.48, p < .001$), the effects of the experimental conditions did not generalize to judgments of E_2 ($F(1,59) < 1$). In addition, the subjects' recollections of E_2 's pleasantness were uncorrelated with their contributions to him ($r = .00$).

A social reinforcement model can also account for some of the present results, if one considers the charitable label as a positive reinforcement that should increase the behavior on which it is contingent and the uncharitable label as a negative reinforcement which should decrease behavior. In the donor half of the experiment, both labeling theory and social reinforcement theory predicted the result that labeled subjects would give more to E_2 than nonlabeled subjects. In the nondonor half of the experiment, the data support the labeling theory hypothesis over a social reinforcement prediction, albeit weakly; subjects labeled uncharitable gave less, not more, to a second charity.

In both the nondonor and the donor halves of the experiment, social reinforcement theory predicted that labeled subjects would be more sensitive to the possibility of future punishment and reward, and would, therefore, distinguish more between the involved and the uninvolved E_2 than would nonlabeled subjects. This expectation was not supported by the data; the involvement variable raised contributions equally in the labeled and the nonlabeled conditions.

However, it is possible that the involvement manipulation was not a satisfactory manipulation of sanction salience and that subjects gave more to the involved canvasser for other reasons. For instance, the involved canvasser may have been a model for charitable behavior or a more persuasive communicator. Subjects may have evaluated his cause as better and more worthy of a contribution, or may have been rewarding him for his dedication.

CONCLUSION

The present research was designed to test a theoretical point, that labeling can lead to a change in self-concept which in turn can lead to a change in behavior. However, it remains unclear from this research how powerful are the cognitive aspects of labeling compared to other com-

ponents such as institutionalization, peer group and family pressure, punishment, social visibility, and changes in social and economic status. The cognitive effects may be overwhelmed by these other variables. However, labeling is often a public ceremony performed by powerful and unanimous representatives of the normal social order (Garfinkel, 1956; Erikson, 1964). The actor's symbolic change in status from a normal person to a deviant one is widely communicated. The actor is frequently reminded of his deviant status when others react to him as a deviant, either blatantly, through social isolation (Philips, 1963; Schwartz & Skolnick, 1962), or subtly, through nonverbal cues (Doob & Ecker, 1970; Farina, Allen, & Saul, 1968; Kleck, Ono, & Hastorf, 1966). With these powerful and omnipresent reminders, the cognitive aspects of labeling may have a far more powerful impact on a person's behavior than was possible to demonstrate in this research.

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