

# Negative Social Labeling: Some Consequences and Implications

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ELICITING COMMITMENT WHILE maintaining participative membership is a major consideration for organizations such as the LDS Church. Relatively few Mormons, for example, formally leave the Church, but many “fall away” from participation and commitment.

In the last few decades a set of concepts collectively called “labeling perspective” have been developed to explain a variety of social behaviors. They are also useful in understanding the problem of “falling away” from the Church. The labeling approach questions the over-simplified view that a member’s behavior always either precedes or is necessarily consistent with the attitudes and reactions of other members toward him. Labeling perspective suggests that social labels, reactions and subtle expectations themselves play an important role in producing the very behavior anticipated.

Many Mormons at one time or another find the quality of their commitment to the faith implicitly questioned through a variety of labels applied by other members. A number of these people eventually leave the Church. It is our contention that many did not actually “fall away” but rather, through a subtle labeling process, allow themselves to be “labeled out” of the Church. And they are kept away because these labels constitute powerful social expectations, expectations that help keep them away from participation in the Church. Social labels can be described as both passageways and prisons—passageways in that they define the direction in which an individ-

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ual member's behavior is expected to take, and prisons in that they identify, brand and lift a person out of his protective social context thus dramatizing the accompanying status and roles.

As used here, a label is a stereotyped designation formally or informally conferred upon a person. Labels are human ways of placing people together in manageable, if not accurate, groupings. Many of our acts are directed toward these groupings or categories and not toward the particular personality. Labels or stereotypes may accurately represent past behavior, but they may also be inaccurate imputations based on biased perceptions or partial information.

Certain positive and negative labels tend to be commonly understood and agreed upon. Mormons labels constitute part of the culture of the Church and are commonly learned even by the very young. Among negative labels are unfaithful, inactive, apostate, or Jack Mormon.

Labeling assumes that individuals will conform to expectations of behavior, even though the expectations may be for behaviors which elicit negative sanctions. Deviance, according to a labeling perspective, is seen as behavior which conforms to expectations of society—expectations for undesirable behavior.

*Self-concept and Labels.* Social labels lead to self-labels, or self-identities. Charles Horton Cooley, an early social psychologist, asserted that people learn about themselves through the reaction of others to them. The Looking-glass Self concept, as he called it, indicates that people come to see themselves as they think others see them. It is difficult, for example, for a negatively labeled Church member to maintain a picture of himself inconsistent with the way in which others in the Church view him. Negative social labels, with their accompanying expectations, may lead someone to a self-deprecating deviant behavior. The unconventional behavior confirms and reinforces the negative label.

Within the Church, the role of the label, and its accompanying expectations in making the behavior come true, is seldom considered. A priesthood holder who comes to be labeled as a Sunday fisherman or Sunday golfer finds it easier to golf or fish on Sunday because he already has the reputation of being "inactive". His continued "deviant behavior" confirms and strengthens the negative label. To break out of this self-reinforcing prison the person must in one sense disappoint what others have come to expect of him, including those who do not approve of his behavior.

*Labels and Maintenance of Behavior.* To consistently call a person "inactive" or "unworthy" is to place a negative label on him. Within society negative labels, for the most part, are intended to motivate a person to change his behavior toward a more socially acceptable position. Within the Church, negative labels also tend to encourage and legitimize treating the labeled member in a manner consistent with the imposed label. That is, the labels may serve to place him in special church programs which are initiated for the "weak, inactive" brethren, e.g., Prospective Elder Program.

Often the result of this negative labeling process is to provide a passageway which maintains the person in the defined role. Frank Tannenbaum in *Crime and the Community*, states that labeling is a "dramatization of the evil", or "process of tagging, defining, identifying . . . it becomes a way of stimulating, suggesting, emphasizing, and evoking the very traits that are

complained of."

The religious labels an individual acquires amount to more than an assessment of the Church's relationship with that individual. They also serve as directives for future action. Any act of classification not only describes the past but also prescribes the future behavior of the person being labeled and directs the reaction of others.

The application of a label such as "inactive" is often a self-maintaining process in which confirming and disconfirming evidence are equally weighed, but instead, through selective perception, the evidence confirming the suspected label is more readily noticed and remembered. For example, regardless of the comments a church member gives in support of Church policies, if that member has acquired the negative label of "liberal" or "critic," even his supportive remarks are interpreted as in some way critical of the Church. As the label becomes more firmly established, the audience comes to expect criticism from the "prisoner." Critical comments which he makes tend to be perceived more quickly and remembered longer than the supportive comments. In this way, then, a label becomes a prison.

Although this discussion concentrates on negative labels, positive labels can also be used to imprison people. Social scientists, for instance, suggest that to label a person "good" is an effective insulator against delinquency. Giving a person a responsible task to perform in the Church helps confer a positive set of expectations and labels. The Church, through an extensive lay organization and a system of delegated responsibility, has created potentially positive labels. Positions of responsibility such as visiting teacher, Priesthood-holder and Sunday School teacher, have very effectively created sets of expectations with imprisoning though desirable consequences. The labels "brother" and "sister" likewise connote a feeling of acceptance, support and kinship.

Social labels may also be described as self-fulfilling prophecies. Robert K. Merton, in *Social Theory and Social Structure*, describes a self-fulfilling prophecy as "in the beginning a false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come true." Suspicions about a person's "worthiness" may be inaccurate, but such suspicion often creates a change in attitudes toward the member in question and encourages differential treatment towards him. These subtle, negative changes in our reactions to a labeled church member may reduce motivation to participate and hinder commitment so that the originally false statement actually does come true. (It is comforting to note that the self-fulfilling prophecy also operates with the use of positive labels.)

Take hypothetical member Brother Ben, for example. He may practice family planning or encourage his wife to accept employment for her own sanity and self development. He may question the value of stake preparation meetings or argue in priesthood meetings. Such behavior may influence those in leadership positions to shy away from assigning him to positions of responsibility and to define him as "liberal," "weak in the faith," or "unorthodox." These acquired labels may restrict growth through marginal involvement and even produce a gradual but continual "falling away."

As another illustration, consider the case of the intellectual who raises questions about interpretations of doctrine. (This may, in part, explain why selected academics drift away from the Church, or why "a little education

is a dangerous thing.") Such an individual may question whether a statement in a Sunday School lesson is doctrine and revelation or just sincere opinion and tradition. This situation not infrequently is awkwardly received by the instructor and may be misunderstood by many of the members. Several class members begin to perceive and communicate to others that this person is "challenging authority," "intellectualizing" and "getting away from the fundamentals." Over a period of time this "questioning" member may be labeled "liberal," "critic", or even "intellectual apostate." Other behavior as disparate as wearing a pant suit to Relief Society, growing a beard, or consuming cola drinks may cause a member to be labeled in similarly negative terms.

Social labels have a tendency to become generalized beyond the initial behavior which originated them. For example, a "smoking Elder" may be suspected of drinking and beating his wife. A person who asked questions about the validity of an interpretation found in a lesson manual may be seen as un-believing. The possessor of a single stigmatizing characteristic is often seen as possessing several other discrediting characteristics which some members relate to the original label. Although some of these generalizations may be based on fact, the stereotyped label creates expectations for new behaviors which may eventually become accurate. Labels may be generalized from one behavior to another or even from one family member to another person within the family.

There may, in fact, be a difference between stealing something and being a thief. The difference is not theological, legal, or moral, but rather a difference in the consequences for the future behavior of the person. Albert Cohen, a theorist of deviant behavior, has suggested that it is one thing to commit a deviant act . . . it is quite another to be charged and invested with a deviant character. Most people have violated general moral guidelines against lying and stealing but few see themselves as liars and thieves. However, as a person is caught and evaluated as having stolen, he is on his way to becoming a thief.

What are the consequences for the future behavior of a Church member who has been labeled inactive, intellectual apostate, doubter, or in some other way "tainted" or "unworthy"? Regardless of the accuracy of the label, the subtle social reaction, the self-concept and subsequent behavior of the member are the real consequences. A jealous, gossiping neighbor or even a well-meaning person can imprison a fellow member by the careless use of a negative label. Negative labels maintain themselves and hinder the return of the "fallen" member.

Individual Church members can also minimize undesirable aspects of negative labels by informing themselves of the consequences of negative labeling and by providing positive encouragement to counteract them. Awareness should cause members to be hesitant in evaluating and stigmatizing fellow members. Even some of the labels intended as positive have not always been rewarding. Positive labels should be given for human activities more meaningful than simple attendance at meetings, or paying tithing.

Not only do negative labels have undesirable consequences for individual members but also for the Church as an organization. Negative labels may be considered undesirable in that they tend to polarize people, leading to

division and dissension within the membership. Labels act as "distancing phenomena" in that the "unworthy" seem more different from the "worthy" than they actually are. The net result may be "quasi-segregation" or "stratification" by a worthiness dimension.

Because the Church places a high value on unity, harmony and predictability, the questioning member is seen by many as a threat to this unity. Turning the questioning member into an outsider maintains homogeneity within the organization. In this attempt to create consensus and to insure greater homogeneity of beliefs and methods, creative, thoughtful and highly productive members may also be alienated. It has been argued that much of the strength and vitality of an organization comes from the peaceful clash of diverse ideas, cultures and personalities. In this sense there is strength in diversity and in some forms of dissent. By labeling the questioner out of the Church, this important element is lost.

An emphasis on unity and homogeneity stifles change and creativity. Non-traditional approaches to problems are often devalued and intellectual inbreeding encouraged. Stereotyped phrases with unclear meanings become entrenched, and response to a changing world becomes less and less successful. These problems are faced by many social organizations. The extensive and exclusive use of negative labels by an organization hinders change because of the self-maintaining nature of such stereotypes.

The questioning member who is labeled a heretic cannot serve the Church as a resource because he does not have credibility. Although unity on some ideas is to be valued, there are other ideas in the Church about which agreement may not be possible or even desirable. Much of the vitality of the Church depends upon the variety of insight and experience contributed by church members of diverse backgrounds. The questioning member may lead the organization into healthy introspection by viewing alternatives previously overlooked.

Since labels, stereotypes and the pigeon-holing process are almost inevitable, ways to minimize "falling away" need to be found. The earlier example of the questioning member suggests that part of the solution lies in a careful discrimination between "revealed truth" and informed opinion. Because some members mistake tradition and opinion for doctrine, those who question may be incorrectly labeled and thus nudged toward the margins of the Church. In short, the Church at several organizational levels might encourage a market place of opinions on those issues for which there is no revealed doctrine. It is somewhat surprising that a Church that believes in eternal progression does not do more to encourage creative thinking and innovation.

The Church would probably benefit from this flexibility in at least three ways: first, the commitment and participation of membership is maintained; secondly, a more creative, thoughtful membership is developed and finally, the Church benefits from members' thinking as applied to the decision-making process.