The Social Production of Folk Devils: Revisiting Deviancy Amplification in Crimes

1. Introduction

Tyrone looked at the rejection letter and sighed. It has been one and a half years since he strived to rebuild a life after a nonviolent offense. Though his friends who were in that offense have earned stable jobs, Tyrone suffered continuous suspicion since he comes from an African American neighborhood, which is always presented as problematic in media portrayals and public opinions. In the modern era, many youths like Tyrone are struggling with stigmatization under deviancy amplification, which demonizes deviant behaviors as crimes and restricts individuals' development. This essay first revisits the theory and mechanisms of deviancy amplification. Then, it utilizes empirical evidence and cases to illustrate deviancy amplification. Finally, it indicates the limitations of deviancy amplification and provides implications for criminal justice.

2. Deviancy Amplification: Theory and Mechanisms

According to Wilkins (2013), deviancy amplification refers to a process of exacerbating criminal behaviors through social reactions to deviance itself. The terminology was derived from Stanley Cohen's (1972) study on the moral panic of Mods and rockers. These two youth subcultures once clashed at Clacton and Hastings in 1964, after when the media started to label them as vermin that causes disaster. Gradually, the continuous exaggerated media portrayals of these two subcultures as deviant symbols reinforced the public opinion that every member of these groups was associated with violence. Nevertheless, Cohen (1972) claimed their behaviors were indifferent to youth brawls in the 1950s, showing the stigmatization of subcultures.

There are three main progressive mechanisms behind deviancy amplification. Specifically, they are 1) media labeling and moral panics, 2) police control and surveillance, and 3) individuals' deviant tendency. When the initial event appears deviant from the public moral census, the media utilizes sensationalism to encourage biases and amplify resentful emotions among public opinions (Ransohoff & Ransohoff, 2001). As the media continues to associate social issues with specific groups, the public tends to produce moral panics that refer to irrational fears of deviant people who may harm the benefits of society under confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998; Walsh, 2020). Then, more police resources and new laws come into effect to suppress deviancy, while reinforcing the public's fear (Robinson & Petherick, 2019; Welch et al., 1997). Under the interplay of self-fulfilling prophecy (Jussim, 1996), individuals from stigmatized groups tend to increase their criminal tendency, which reinforces the stigmatization and downplays crimes committed by members outside these groups.

3. Empirical Evidence and Case Studies

The practices of deviancy amplification and moral panics have been long embedded in historical contexts while` throughout various aspects of modern society. The European witch-hunt

in the 15th to 17th Century was a representative example of moral panic. Hundreds of thousands of innocent women were executed (e.g., burnt to death) during that time since they were believed to possess evil powers (Wolfe, 1997). However, according to Ben-Yehuda (1980), these evil powers were demonized by people's stigmatization of women's deviant dilemmas like prostitution and infanticide, which induced people's resentment against women.

Entering the modern era, deviancy amplification still plays an important role in explaining increasing criminal behaviors. For instance, the Chicano youth gang problem well illustrates moral panics' impacts on increasing criminal behaviors in stigmatized groups. In 1978, Chicano youth gangs in Phoenix proliferated by double in mere six months, which reflected an increase in crimes in the Chicano community. Based on Zatz (1987)'s study, though gang and nongang youths barely showed differences in offense severity and types, gang youths had much fewer employment opportunities than nongang youths. The study indicated that the media's over-amplification of Chicano youths as a community disorder and prevalent xenophobia in society significantly contributed to moral panics, resulting in more recruitment discrimination of Chicano youths, and increasing their deviant and criminal behaviors under unemployment (Raphael & Winter-Ebmer, 2001).

Another case of increasing criminal behaviors under deviancy amplification can be children criminalization. In the 1990s UK, several surveillance reforms took place after the murder of James Bulger, a two-year boy who was kidnapped and abused to death by two 10-aged boys. The media demonization of urban children significantly contributed to differential policing against the most marginalized communities in urban areas, resulting in the proliferation of children imprisoned during the period (Scraton, 2008).

4. Limitations and Implications

There exist significant limitations to deviancy amplification. First, it over-simplifies the multifaceted nature of crimes, making mistakes of reductionism and determinism. By reinforcing stigmatization over specific 'deviant' groups, it downplays the role of individual agency. For instance, research indicated that youths with damaged self-esteem have significantly more delinquent behaviors than those with high self-esteem, with other factors being controlled (Rosenberg et al., 1978). Thus, it is unreasonable to suggest that all individuals exposed to the same deviant stimuli must engage in crimes.

Second, deviancy amplification neglects structural and intergenerational inequalities' roles in crimes, making the mistake of essentialism. Since economic disparities can greatly contribute to offending, deviancy amplification's labeling process can widen these disparities by demonizing individuals from marginalized communities. Meanwhile, stereotypical discrimination against these groups can significantly increase their likelihood of committing crimes and engaging in deviant

behaviors (Burt et al., 2012). Thus, it is irrational to conclude specific groups' behaviors as evil regardless of a systematic understanding of inequalities.

Several implications from deviancy amplification can be considered for improving criminal justice. For instance, some media regulations should come into effect to ensure responsible and accurate reporting without stigmatization of deviant behaviors and minimize moral panics. Besides, policies should focus more on reducing structural inequalities (e.g., poverty) than punishment.

5. Conclusion

Deviancy amplification can increase criminal behaviors through exaggerated media portrayals and overreacted policy control. Cases like gang behaviors and children criminalization can well reflect the outcomes of deviancy amplification. Nevertheless, deviancy amplification ignores individuals' capabilities and structural factors' roles in criminal behaviors, resulting in more stigmatization of marginalized groups. Thus, policy reforms like media regulations and more equal education opportunities should take place to solve problems. Only through these ways can modern society become a more equal place.

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