



Youth extremism

Do labels create reality?

by Darko Markovic

An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behaviour.

Viktor Frankl

Groups of young people burning cars and breaking windows during the street riots in London. A number of young people, members of a far-right movement, marching in the streets and clashing with the police in Warsaw. Hundreds of young football hooligans threatening the organisers of the Gay Pride parade in Belgrade. After watching the evening news, would you label these young people as youth extremists or, perhaps, social deviants? How much does labelling “help” the groups in question? And how useful is it for any kind of youth work intervention? What are the challenges in calling something “youth extremism”? These are the questions that puzzled me while thinking about the title of the current *Coyote* issue.

SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE: BEWARE OF LABELLING

Perhaps, labelling the behaviours above as “youth extremism” or “deviant” would seem natural in order to “give a name to a phenomenon”, “to call it what it is”, avoiding euphemisms and overdoing political correctness.

At the same time, an interesting warning comes from Howard S. Becker, one of the founders of the “labelling theory”. In his groundbreaking book, *The outsiders* (1963), he argues that “deviance” is not a given, but is rather created by the society. Becker wrote:

[...] social groups create deviance by making rules whose infraction creates deviance, and by applying those roles to particular people and labelling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an “offender”. The deviant is one to whom that label has been successfully applied; deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so labels.

Moreover, Becker’s warning goes further saying that “while society uses the stigmatic label to justify its condemnation, the deviant actor uses it to justify his actions”.

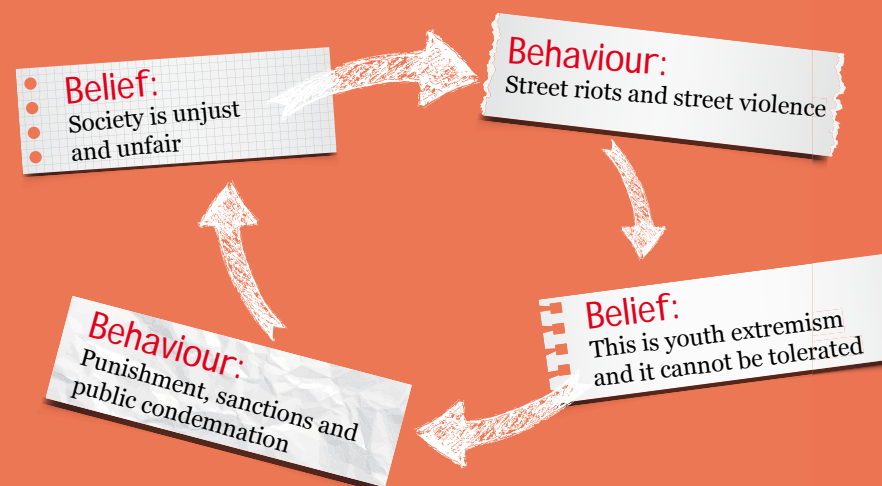
Hmmm... one could say: “Sure, Mr. Becker, but you cannot say that everything is relative, particularly not violence!” And somehow we get stuck in the argument of having an anchor in positive values and our reference point as human rights. But we should hold onto the idea of the power of labelling by society and need to use it with special care.



PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE: A VICIOUS CIRCLE

Another approach is to have a deeper look at the possible dynamics of the events described at the beginning of the article.

One could say that the behaviours of young people in the news have been driven by a certain set of core beliefs (such as “society is essentially unjust and unfair”), which are manifested in the behaviour we see and condemn as “youth extremism”. The problem is that this labelling does not stop there. It leads to counteractions towards these groups of young people which in turn cement and re-confirm their initial beliefs, just how “society is unjust and unfair”. We are caught in a vicious cycle like this one:



The problem here is that being trapped in thinking like this does not help to create a positive educational and youth work intervention. After all, do we still believe youth work can do anything here?

YOUTH WORK PERSPECTIVE: POWER OF TRANSFORMATION

It seems to me that the problem for youth workers interested in dealing with the issues of “youth extremism” is how to navigate between the challenge of “labelling” and the challenge of “losing one’s own value base”. I believe we need to look beyond “diagnosis” and “fixing those young people to fit better into the society”. Instead, we need to recognise their potential and work at the level of values and identities. At the same time, any comprehensive youth work intervention means keeping the critical focus on the society, working on its transformation and tackling the deepest roots of the behaviours we see in the news these days.

