

THE CONSEQUENCES OF LABELLING ON PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: *People generally tend to assign a word to every type of behaviour or attitude, for instance: beautiful, ugly, good, bad, well-behaved, naughty, etc. All of these are actually labels, either positive or negative ones that are addressed to us by those with whom we interact, and which we assume and even get to identify with them. On the other hand, 'others' expect us to act and behave according to these labels. According to the theory of labelling, when a particular person is assigned a particular label, in time they come to identify themselves with the label that has been attached to them. The research puts forth a qualitative approach that has been used with a target group of students from the West University of Timisoara.*

Keywords: *labelling, education, teachers, parents.*

Introduction

Why this theme? Because as a parent and as a teacher, I am interested in studying to what degree positive or negative labels have an affect upon the development of personality, if any. Among the famous authors in specialty literature who have studied the impact of labels on personality development, we can mention: Lemert, Edwin (1951), Becker, S. Howard (1963), Rosenthal, Robert & Jacobson, Lenore (1968), Robert, Merton (1968), D. H. Hargreaves, (1975) etc.

The theory of labelling was developed on the ground of sociology of deviance and criminology. According to labelling theory, if a person is labelled in a certain way, over time this person starts to conform to that label. In other words, if you keep telling a person that s/he has a problem or that s/he is a problem, then in time he will prove you right! Labelling theory mainly focuses, on the one hand, on the evaluation of persons that administer the labels and, on the other hand, on the people that are being labelled. It deals with people that have the social power and the authority to operate with various suppositions about other persons or social groups and to establish definitions.

On an educational level, several studies have confirmed the influence of projection of a self-fulfilling prophecy. One of the best known studies was conducted by R. Rosenthal & L. Jacobson in 1968 – Pygmalion in class. According to this study, it was proved that teachers can mould the behaviour of their students and influence their performance or failure in school depending on the level of teachers' expectations. Reality matters less than the significance we attribute to it.

There is a famous quote by Professor W. I. Thomas, expert in social sciences: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences". R. Merton (1968, p. 477) has developed this idea by saying: "The self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning, a false definition of the situation evoking a new behaviour which makes the originally false conception come true. The specious validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy perpetuates a reign of error. For the prophet will cite the actual course of events as proof that he was right from the very beginning."

Methodology

The theoretical aspects of labelling were also comprised in the research we have conducted during January-May 2015 period. The representative panel was made up of 50 students from almost all faculties and years I, II, III and master from W. U. T. (West University of Timisoara). The research method was qualitative, namely the semi-structured interview with the following key questions: have you ever been labelled; who labelled you (family, school or friends); what was the context of the labelling situation; how often did labelling happen; how important was the label (positive or negative); how did you feel when you were labelled; did you take the label on or not; did the label influence your personality or not, etc.

The objectives of the research:

1. Identify the concept of positive / negative labelling;
2. Identify the persons that play a crucial role in developing labels;
3. Explain the way labels are formed and consolidated;
4. Analyse the way in which negative / positive labels influence and affect the development of personality;
5. Discover the ways in which labelling can be prevented.

Hypothesis of the research:

Children / pupils conform to positive or negative labels attributed to them by other people that are significant to them.

Results

Next, I will present a selection of results from the interviews. In order to preserve their anonymity, the students that took part in the interviews will not be mentioned by name and the faculty where they study will not be specified.

I. J. P.

J. P. is an only child. Labels such as intelligent, creative, tenacious have been given to her by her teachers and parents, but the situations were very different.

“Teachers have labelled me like this after I have demonstrated my knowledge in a certain field time and again or when I was evaluated in most subjects with a maximum mark. The projects I submitted were always very well documented and their presentation was very creative (all presentations were artistic and I used various images and forms; the design of the presentation was very original; mottoes were always used and also the “theatrical” presence). I always tried to make the project presentation an experience for my colleagues. Sometimes I succeeded and sometimes I did not. It all depended on my perseverance, which was fluctuating. For this reason the label of “tenacious” has stuck with me during the V-VIII classes and now during faculty; during high-school I “made space” for other labels.”

Her parents also labelled her like this but the difference is that the “place” where they shared this opinion was “the society”. In front of society she was presented by her parents as intelligent, tenacious and creative. At home unfortunately there were some other labels, most of them negative.

“I was intelligent, tenacious and creative at home as well (but not all the time: there were days when I was “intelligent” at 18.00 h and “stupid” at 20.00 h and this happened on several occasions and thus became a label). My mother thought I was intelligent when I came home with high grades, good results, praises and appreciation from the teachers or when I answered correctly to questions from exact sciences. I was also recognized as creative when I arranged objects in the house for holidays or on special occasions, when I was interpreting characters from favourite books or books we studied at school, when I was writing a new poem or book. My father thought I was intelligent when talking about mathematics or trying to prove certain theorems. In society I was an intelligent and tenacious child for my father. At home he rarely told me this. I really had to impress him. Today I think this thing changed. His opinion has improved because I have learned in time how to “penetrate” his soul and his mind or because the fact that he is missing from our life makes him more tolerant.”

How did she feel? How was she influenced?

“I must admit that these labels have stimulated my confidence in my own “ego” but when other opposing labels started to appear from the same persons I started to doubt myself or worse! In time I have fought to keep these positive labels not so much for me but for others – people who come in contact with me or who want to learn something from me. I sometimes feel that it is my responsibility to value my intelligence and creativity because I want to become a teacher. And I will become one! My pupils need me to be prepared as well as possible and be opened to new things in order to mould myself on the changes brought by a new generation. They need a champion. And I want to be that champion or to remain a “champion”! This was a label that followed me around for 10 years and which fortunately seems to apply again. It was first used by my sport teachers. I was the captain of the town sport team for many years. I have fought together with my team to bring the best results to this town. And thus I was labelled a “champion”. The dedication and passion when I played in each game were impressive. I was vibrating on the field and I helped the curious spectators feel vibrant as well. I was the best sport player in school. I was selected for all categories of sport: handball, volleyball, basketball and several others. The praises were significant as well. I was praised as a “champion” by all my teachers: the sports teachers but all the teachers of mathematics, Romanian language or physics. They repeated this on every occasion they got. In high-school this label started to come from a smaller number of people.”

How was she influenced?

“I think that this label had a real influence on my personality. Even today I tend to believe it, but not as much as I used to, because time has proved that even the greatest champions can lose their shine – the seconds do not wait. Another label that I have heard many times is that of ‘strong’. And still I doubt that I can identify myself with it. Even so, other people identify me with it: friends, relatives, teachers, my mother, my father, neighbours or doctors. What is the context? I will offer several examples: when I managed to get over the trauma of my parents’ divorce; when I had to accept that I will not be able to do performance in sports; when I found the power to care for an old man suffering from a very complicated disease; when I managed by myself to get rid of the thing that tried to derail me from my path – drugs; when I managed to educate a large number of drug addicted children, abandoned by family and homeless and to motivate them to give up drugs and make a progress; when I fought against a nasty disease that tried to take me away from my loved ones.”

What am I feeling? How was I influenced? “I consider myself a weak and vulnerable person. Sometimes I get angry when somebody else labels me like this because I feel I am not valuable enough. Sometimes this works like the

Pygmalion effect, sometimes to the contrary. It seems I try to prove exactly the contrary (in an unconscious way).”

Other labels that were given to J. P. by her best friends were: patient, generous, empathetic, “the best listener”. “I have always found myself in situations where patience was the only ‘survival’ method: the problems I have with my grandmother, with my mother, the depression of some friends etc. Generosity and empathy have come from the relations with my best friends, probably because I have gone through some experiences earlier than other people from my generation or close to my age. Thus I can understand every action or thought of people around me without being judgemental. Even more so, I try to face other people’s problems without getting involved too much. I try to direct them, but the decision belongs to them. I believe this is what they like the most. Still, before directing them, I listen to them very carefully without interrupting and changing their beliefs. The fact that I have been labelled like this by people coming from various social groups or of different ages has convinced me to trust it. Sometimes I felt like a hero. I have also learned one thing from the people I listened to: don’t have expectations! Not having expectations is very liberating.”

Another label she was given was messy – her mother and some of her colleagues labeled her like this. What was the situation? “There was always a mess in my room – even if I always find what I need in my own chaos. My writing is messy. My papers and my notebooks were messy. You can find all my office in my bag. I always leave something behind: a pen, a wallet, a notebook, an umbrella etc. How did this make me feel? Sometimes ashamed but sometimes unjustified. Today I think they are right. I don’t think this has influenced me in any way. I have just become aware of this and I’m trying to correct it. Anyway, I identify myself with this label.”

Irresponsible – label coming from her mother. “She has called me irresponsible my whole life. What was the context? When I would forget the task she gave me; if I would oversleep in the morning and be late for school; if by mistake I would brake an object in the house or one that belonged to her; if I go out once every two weeks she thinks I am irresponsible because I don’t stay at home to help her with grandma; if I want to invite a friend over I am irresponsible because I would not give my grandma enough attention while trying to make the guest comfortable etc. How did this make me feel? Unjustified, and sometimes humiliated and frustrated. I have gone through several periods when I would not have the capacity to take decisions or act in a certain way because I was afraid that an irresponsible person would not be able to face a challenge.”

Stupid – J. P. was labeled like this by both her parents. “Just like I mentioned before, it is very strange that they call me a very intelligent person in front of society. I was called stupid in the following context: if I would not

answer promptly when asked questions from physics, mathematics or chemistry; if we had contradictory discussions about education; if I take personal decisions that my mother does not agree with; if I do not find the address where she sent me to solve a problem; if I drop a cup or a plate; if she calls me from the next room and I do not hear etc. How did this make me feel? How did this influence me? When I was a child I would cry. Throughout the years I started to feel anger and discontent because I could not achieve my mother's high standards. Then I thought I was part of a very sick family environment and I wanted to leave home. Now I believe she needs me and I have become detached from this label that she keeps repeating. Sometimes I did not know who I was. It was a mystery. Teachers praised me and at home my mother called me stupid. Who should I believe? My mother bore much more credibility because she was supposed to know me better. Then who am I? This is a question that has been puzzling me for a very long time!"

II. J. A.

She was given the following labels:

-Smart and talented – by the music instrument teacher from the primary school who always encouraged her when she had a problem. "Her label motivated me to study in order to prove her right, but the same label coming from other teachers, like the maths or languages teacher would force me to do things I did not want. I was always seen as a very good student who studies for all subjects in school and I was somehow compelled to keep this image alive, because otherwise I would have disappointed a lot of people. Thus I got to the point where I was going to the national competitions for three different subjects without being coached by any of the teachers. When I did not manage to pass to the next stage I was reprimanded and called 'insensitive, stupid and lacking interest'".

-Hassle-free – "this was the way my teacher of music instrument labelled me when I would go to class without studying enough. I was always bothered when he called me like this but it somehow also motivated me to prove him wrong so I was always studying harder for the next class."

III. A. N.

- "Before going to vocational school I was helped by the so-called labels from my teacher and various professors from the alternative teaching school: 'musical talent', 'beautiful voice', 'musical sense' or just roles in scenes that involved music, conducting my colleagues when the group was playing the blackflut. These labels were very important back then, but they really mattered when I took the exam at the vocational high-school because they gave me confidence."

- The constant mention of the specialty teachers that “she still has a lot to catch up” because she decided pretty late to go to vocational school managed to “give her the ambition to work harder, but it also gave her a tendency to underappreciate herself, which she still does to this day”. Even if she does not have that label anymore and she has got awards and has given concerts with positive feedback she admits she “still has moments when she feels she has a lot of catching up to do in order to get to a utopic level”.

-It is important to mention that A. N. was always encouraged by her family, whenever needed, and her parents have always shown her the value of her qualities when she felt discouraged or lacking confidence.

IV. P. S.

She was given the following labels:

-“Thin” – by her colleagues, parents and friends – this started a complex of frustration which is still around today.

-“Rapunzel” – she was labelled like this by her colleagues because she had very long hair. This was discouraging at first, but then she learned to use it as an advantage.

-“Silent” – label given by her teachers, colleagues and parents because she was an introvert. This label gave her an inferiority complex which discouraged her from speaking her mind.

-“Geek” – label given by her colleagues and friends because she spent a lot of time studying. This led to her exclusion from the groups of friends and colleagues.

-“Coward” – this label was given to her by her colleagues and friends because she would not give into temptation, did not start doing drugs – because she saw the effects of drugs and was also afraid of her parents. Her refusal to adhere to certain behavioural patterns led to her exclusion from the friends group. Even so, she preferred to keep her moral values and the principles she inherited from her family.

-“Stupid” and “incapable” – labels given to her by her parents. They have never praised her and have given her these labels as a result of her comparison to her colleagues. “I always preferred to learn in a logical way and I did not have high grades like my colleagues who learned in a mechanical way – they were just cramming.”

V. M. B.

She lived with her grandparents because her mother has remarried.

-“Quiet child” – the children in kindergarden called her like this because she was very quiet, she barely spoke. She was very different from the others in this respect and it made her very hard to fit in. Because of this she was afraid to go kindergarden. The other children would laugh at her. “This

situation made me meaner and in order to stand out in front of my colleagues I began to get high marks.”

-“The good student” – label given to her by her teachers and relatives because of her high grades obtained in school. “I felt very good about this label and in time I got used to having only high marks. Because of the pressure from the others (relatives) I always wanted to do more and at present I am doing this. If something does not go well or as I imagine it I get very easily disappointed.” What others think and say about M. B. becomes her reality!

-“You will not make anything of yourself”, “Do not be like your mother” – her grandparents have always compared her to her mother, who in turn did not listen to her parents and was now on her third marriage. She used to be a very rebellious teenager.

-“Irresponsible”, “not a good student”, “muddle-headed”, “theatrical” – labels given to her by her teachers in 9th grade. “I had a very hard time adapting to high-school. The requirements of the teachers in high-school were very high and I was very distracted because I just found a boyfriend. My family was very disappointed by this and they kept telling me I will spoil my future because of my behaviour. It was my way of taking revenge on their carelessness towards me – I was skipping school, drinking, smoking, not studying and not talking to my family. I was doing everything to the contrary – I was telling them to their face that I understood and then went off and doing everything my way. This made me grow apart from my family and hate that high-school. In school we were actually divided in two large categories: the ones going to national competitions and the “others”, which were treated with indifference, ignored or at best called before the class in order to demonstrate that we don’t know anything. The problems were very difficult so we were actually humiliated. Ever since the 9th grade we were already put into categories.” During the 12th grade she realised she had to “wake up to reality” and tried to prove the contrary. Encouraged by her boyfriend, who was a “very special person”, she started working very hard and managed to catch up on everything she had “lost” during the first three years of high-school. As a result and to the amazement of her teachers and family, she got a very good mark at the final exam and was admitted to the faculty she wanted. She had very good results during the following years.

VI. F. R.

F. R. is an only child.

The label given to her by her parents was “a beautiful and good child”. “I was stuck with this label since I was young because my birth was somewhat ‘miraculous’ and my parents felt really blessed to have me. This aspect had a positive influence on me but only after 16 years old I stopped feeling

inadequate (we did not have a very good financial situation, I knew my parents were making great efforts and knowing this I felt compelled to help them) like teenagers do and I started to feel beautiful and smart and to show it.”

- Conscientious – label given to her by the teacher in her primary school because she always answered in class and was class leader; “it made me feel strong and made me want to stay this way”.

- Ambitious and talented – label given to her by her Romanian language teacher who was also her mentor for 8 years. “I took part in the national contest in Romanian for 8 years and I was very motivated to give my best in order to keep this label. This influenced me in a positive way until this day.”

-Responsible – label given to her by the headmaster of her high-school. “I have organised various events; I felt respected. This made me want to be respected even further and to stand out from this point of view.”

-This – various members of the family, especially the parental grandparents, called her like this “because they did not agree to the marriage of my parents and to my birth; when I was young I was usually called ‘this’ in an ironical and mean way in order to prove I was not important and I don’t have a name; I had to fight to prove I was not just any person (they would know if I succeeded or not, but I was influenced in a positive way by this life lesson)”.

-Problem child – label given to her by the kindergarden teacher “because I was not able to write some lines. I was often told I will end up an illiterate. I felt discouraged but at the same time ambitious. This made me want to prove everybody wrong.”

-Four-eyes and teacher’s pet – labels given to her by her colleagues in secondary school “because I was wearing glasses and I was the most active in class at Romanian language. At the form master’s class I was seen differently.”

-Spaced out – label given to her by her parents and friends “because I do not pay attention to small stuff; I don’t mind this because I know it’s true”.

VII. M. N.

“Ever since I was 4-5 years old I was delighted every time I was appreciated by my parents or by my teacher and I tried to repeat the activities or actions that earned this appreciation and praise, trying to be ever more attentive and good. I was yearning for that ‘very good’, ‘bravo’, good girl’. I would repeat a certain action several times just to please my parents or my teacher and even today I think very highly of other people’s opinion of me. Once I started school and I had very good results I was considered intelligent by my parents and relatives and this attracted certain learning standards

imposed by my mother. Thus I always felt obligated to be “at the top”, just like my teacher said. Even if I felt special, because of the appreciations I also felt responsible to have good results. Sometimes I was (and still are) labelled by my mother as lazy, hassle-free or indifferent when I was not conscientious enough to do my homework or I did not do the things I was asked to do. These labels, even if they bothered me, they did not make me ambitious enough to prove them wrong. Also at school I was perceived as ‘conceited’ and I was never very popular among the pupils because of my school marks but also because of my superior attitude. The fact that my colleagues excluded me made me feel different in a negative way and unconsciously I always tried to adapt to the group requirements. I always felt like a ‘pariah’ and I still have this feeling. Ever since my adolescence my mother called me ‘fat’ in front of my family but also in front of friends and acquaintances. Every time I felt offended and I became frustrated – I was especially annoyed when she called me like this in front of other people. This thing made me lose my confidence and I became very sensitive to remarks about my physical aspect, without gaining the motivation to lose weight. Some teachers called me talented at literature and music which gave me confidence; thus I decided to enroll in a singing class and my parents support, especially my mother’s, helped me develop my vocal abilities. As far as the Romanian language is concerned, the positive praise of my teachers has given me confidence in my style of creation, helping me expand my horizon. On the other hand, the maths teacher in high-school labelled me lazy and spaced-out, which I have maintained throughout the years. Even if at first I was bothered by the fact that no matter how hard I would prepare for the class it was still not enough, in the end I started to have the subject. Thus, afraid of a new humiliation in front of the class, I would prefer to go to the reading room and skip these classes, until he told my parents about my absences. Since then they called me irresponsible and spaced-out. In faculty I was labelled by my colleagues as aggressive about my school results and difficult to relate to because of my sincerity that sometimes bothers the others.”

Vicious remarks and judgement from her mother when she could not attain high standards made her lose confidence, have a defensive attitude and even show a lot of confidence as a barrier against frustrations. In the end she started to believe the things other people were saying about her – that she was ‘mean’, ‘difficult’ and ‘bad-tempered’.

VIII.A. G.

-“During secondary school I was usually labelled by my parents as very ‘shy’ and ‘too weak’”. Her parents were very authoritative persons who did not allow her to speak her mind. This influenced her in a negative way because “I wanted to be more courageous and sociable; this did not happen;

to the contrary, I became more introverted and I was afraid to express my feelings and personal opinions.” Eventually things have changed because she started to easily detach herself from her parents and she started to have more confidence in herself.

-A different label was that given to her by the teachers that encouraged and supported her, saying that she is a “very good student”. “I started to believe this and to step over my boundaries. For every school contest I was the first one chosen, even if sometimes I did not like this and I was doing it against my own will.” Also, in choosing my faculty, “I was influenced by my foreign languages teacher who was always telling me that it would suit me very well and I would do ‘very well’ in this school because I am intelligent and capable to learn very well.”

-A. G. thinks that “being a good pupil” was her advantage in the fight to overcome her social condition (her parents were workers). The groups she belonged to, even her colleagues in kindergarden, have made her very ambitious by telling her “you can’t do more than this”. This is why she thinks she is very ambitious.

IX. N. B.

The first label that comes to the mind of N. B. is that of “good child”. This label was given to her by her parents. “In several situations since I was a child and up to the present they have treated me as a good, obeying child. This label has always been a guiding mark for me. When I was thinking about getting up to mischief I always remembered the faces of my parents who, with a very large smile, were praising me for being such a good child. I did not want to ruin it – I knew I was doing the right thing for my parents. I was seeing this as a reward for the way they were treating me. It was a compensation for them.”

- “A person you can count on, very responsible” – This label was given to her by her group of friends. “When we were organizing an outing with friends or when we decided to do something together they always thought they could count on me. They could trust me with their money and they knew the money was safe and they would get it back. This label has made me believe I was a trustworthy person, responsible in other situations as well, outside my friends’ group.”

- “Intelligent child with a lot of potential” – In school the teachers praised her for learning very well but also for the connections between disciplines that she found. She was always curious to see “what is behind the curtain”. “They were telling me that I have a ‘shining’ of which I was not always conscious. Many times I would think less of myself and appear modest because I considered that the level I was at was not high enough to be

content with myself. This label did not help me very much, except in my constant wish to progress in learning.”

X.C. J.

-“Fat” – it was the first label that still pains her. She was addressed like this by a colleague in primary school in sports class. “What big belly you have!” “These were the words of my colleague Miky and they made me feel gloomy, suffering, because I did not see myself that way. That label would be on my mind for a very long time. My mother called me the same, sometime at the beginning of secondary school, although I have to admit that she somehow ‘beautified’ the facts a bit. My mother was very elegant and she wanted me to belong to the slim category as well. These things have influenced me deeply. For years I have seen myself like that. In high-school my problem became even more serious because I started to take all sorts of slimming pills which negative effects can still be felt today. In conclusion, my health was seriously affected together with my self-respect. Even after all these years if my normal weight rises by one or two kilograms I start to panic.”

-“Very good and conscientious girl” – the Romanian teacher in high-school called her like this. “She always praised my talent in literature and grammar and advised me to go to a faculty in this direction. This label influenced me a great deal and I followed her advice.”

-“You are a waste of space” – her mother told her this. “I became furious with her for this and when I started to respond to her the same way our relationship changed and we grew apart.”

XI.F. A.

-“Resourceful”, “daring” – her family called her this during secondary school in comparison to her brother. “This gave me the courage to try new things, to take part in school competitions.”

-“Straight A student” – her teachers in secondary school and high-school called her like this. “Sometimes I felt the pressure to keep up studying and get good marks. I grew ambitious to maintain this label and not disappoint my parents and teachers.”

-“Very involved student” - her teachers in high-school called her like this. “They all had high expectations from me, which I could not always fulfil and thus made me feel uncomfortable. In a positive way I got involved in more projects and took on ever more important responsibilities.”

-“The girl without any problems” – her colleagues thought this about her. “We really had family problems because the relationship between my parents was not a very happy one. My father was an alcoholic and they faught a lot.

Only my father had a job. For these reasons I always kept a distance from my colleagues because I did not want to give anything away.”

-“The girl who gets along with the form master”, “nosy”, “thinks herself superior” – her colleagues thought these about her. “They always thought I was authoritative. I was also part of the students’ council and always had something to say. In a way I think that I was superior to them because I was better than them.”

XII. K. D.

-“Resourceful” – her parents and relatives called her like this. “Ever since I was a child I was very daring, I would say what I wanted to say and do everything in my power to help others. Since I was young I shopped alone and I was much appreciated. I was very happy when people told me this and I started to believe I will be able to handle any situation.”

-“Ugly” – her mother called her this. “She would always tell me ‘as a joke’ that I was uglier than my younger sister and that I had a big nose since I was born. I felt unappreciated and I would dwell on my defects. I don’t have a high self-esteem as an adult either.”

-“Incapable” – her sister called her this. “She always told me that everything I have done so far was the result of luck and not my qualities or my effort. I felt unappreciated and considered that all my efforts were to no avail because I would never come up to the standards of other people. This motivated me to do things to the best of my abilities for me and not prove anything to others.”

-“Tidy” – her room mates called her this. “I always tidy things after myself because this is how I was educated as a child. Because they are messier than me they see this and praise me. I love to hear this and I never like to let them down.”

XIII. P. M.

-“I don’t know anything” – “Because I was the youngest child and the only girl I was not really encouraged to express my opinions. My older brothers knew much more in various fields and when I had to say something and I was wrong they were very ironic.”

-“The class master and literature teacher kept praising me, encouraging me and giving me as an example to others because she saw that I was very good at grammar and literature. This made me want to study this further.”

-“Nerd” – the colleagues called her like this. “All the time in class there was a ‘battle’ for good marks which made me ambitious and I started to learn for good marks and in order to be ‘the first’. I wanted to prove that I can and will be at the top.”

-“The most shy child in class”. “During primary and secondary classes I was so shy that I would not reply to the teacher when she asked something, even if I knew the answer. When I would finally reply, I would do it in a very low voice, afraid not to make a mistake. On the other hand I had a lot of colleagues in class who criticized and giped at anything and anyone – and this was another reason why I closed up.”

XIV. L. M.

-“Beautiful” – the parents called her like this in various situations, like ordinary days or on special events. “This has influenced me in a positive way and helped me develop a positive self image.”

-“Messy” – the mother – “It has helped me pay more attention to the way in which I would keep my things.”

-“Intelligent” – the parents and grandparents – “when I would get good marks in school I felt appreciated and I got more confidence in myself.”

-“Tomboy” – the teacher in front of the class and to her parents in a year-end letter. “This made me feel ashamed, I would feel the others laughing at me and making fun of me. This label, even if it was not far from the truth, made me close up and behave unnaturally.”

-“Good at mathematics” – the maths teacher in secondary school “because I would get good grades at tests or when I would solve a difficult problem. I felt appreciated and made me want to do better, to learn more and become more responsible.”

-“The labels I got from the people around me had the power to influence my emotional and behavioural state. Some of them, the negative ones, had a stronger impact on me (because they have hurt and insulted me and stayed with me for a long time). At the moment I felt very dejected but in the long term they have empowered me. The negative ones were fewer than the positive ones because I grew up in a balanced environment, without fights and disagreements.”

XV. E. R.

“In my family they always told me I am intelligent, beautiful and that I am a good student. This stimulated me to learn even more in order not to disappoint. I knew they had high expectations from me. In school the teacher always offered me as an example for the others because I was the best in class and always did my homework. The fact that she trusted me made me trust myself and at the same time I tried to keep myself at the level of expectations and never do anything wrong. If I ever made a mistake I remember I felt ashamed and disappointed.”

-“Miser” – by everyone who knows her – “I prefer to say that I am thrifty – I was educated like this. My father is a big spender and my mother

taught me not to spend money on useless stuff but get only things that I need. When I was a child I tried to change in order to please others, but now I don't do that anymore."

XVI. G. C.

-“You are not good at maths” – the maths teacher in primary school. “This label made me hit a plateau, stay where I was, but my salvation came from the semestrial exams where I got the highest marks in school. This confirmed to me that I knew what I was doing, that I was good at this subject and as a result I also went to a faculty based on mathematic studies.”

-“Fat” and “ugly” – label given to her by her sister. Because of this until the final of secondary school she was very reserved and it was very hard for her to make any new friends.

-“Active all the time”, “the one who knows all the answers” – the priest at church – “Because he recognized this in me I started to rise to his expectations. When somebody said something good about me, even if it was not 100% true, I would make it true in my life. When somebody said something bad, I would try to show that it was not true, that I am better than that and that I can do more, because I am defined through the relationship with the others.”

XVII. B. I.

-“Beautiful” – label given to her by her parents. “I started to believe as well that I am beautiful. As time went by, I became even more beautiful. I am a narcissist, I am afraid to admit. I love myself the most.”

-“Castor” – the children and her colleagues. “I had my front teeth sticking out. Of course children make fun of every imperfection! They made me feel ugly, without self-confidence. I never talk about this subject because it is much too painful. I had several teeth straighteners in time; it is a long story ... Now I have braces. Only after I will have perfect teeth will I be content with myself and it will not be so painful to talk about this subject.”

- “Cold”, “indifferent” – her mother kept telling her these things. “I think it has something to do with my narcissistic tendencies, but I don't mind. That's just the way I am.”

-“Pretentious”, “conceited” – her colleagues. “Probably because I am cold I appear to others as pretentious. I don't mind this because I don't seem vulnerable, sociable, and people think twice before talking to me. All my friends had this opinion of me but once they got to know me they realized I was not at all like that.”

XVIII. L. O.

-“The last in the classroom” – “I was labelled like this because I did not study very well, I did not do my homework and I did not answer in front of the class. In my 2nd grade I came from the country to town. I felt really behind in my studies and my colleagues would laugh at me. They called me the little country girl who does not know anything. I became very introverted and I did not hear the teacher unless she raised her voice to me.”

-“Outdated girl” – in the 5th grade she changed schools and her colleagues would laugh at her for her outdated clothes. “I felt very frustrated and for a while I have accepted my faith – my highest marks were 7-8. At the end of 7th grade I got a very low mark and I started to feel ashamed with my results. Also, until then, I was living together with my sister and my parents in a one-room apartment and it was very hard for us all in that small space. After that we have moved in a two-room apartment. The thing is that starting from that moment I began to feel ashamed, I realised that only by learning I will be able to assert myself and surpass my condition. During the summer holiday I started to study again all the school manuals in maths and to fill in my gaps in education.” During her 8th grade L.O. became conscious of the fact that she was a person that was stuck for the past 7 years in the same stage, with the label given to her by her colleagues and teachers. She came to the conclusion that only if she had good school results she will be able to be appreciated, useful, valued, integrated and accepted. The potential was already there.

-“Mathematician” – label given to her by her parents. “Because I was very good at maths and I liked to hear my parents praise me for this. I guess I had a very low self esteem.”

XIX. I. P.

-“Chatterbox” – the teacher always called her like this in front of the classroom. “This was very embarrassing for me, I felt marginalised and I really believed I had a problem. I couldn’t say anything.”

-“Inhibited” – the teacher in primary school. “I was very indifferent, detached, I did not get involved anymore. Nothing motivated me to be active. I felt really inferior in my expression style and I preferred to shut up than to make a fool of myself. I started writing with my left hand and to stutter when I wanted to say anything. When I was in 5th grade the human sciences teacher happened to notice me and believe in my potential.” These teachers used their finesse and mastery to draw into the light her most beautiful and special characteristics.

XX. E. B.

“In a positive way the label that affected me the most was given to me by my mother – she called me ‘responsible’ and ‘level headed’. This led me to believe that I was more responsible than I expected because I did not see myself that way at all. Another label that made me want to own it was that of ‘beautiful boy’. I was called like this since I was a child and that is why I became a ‘narcisistic’ person. The most realistic label my mother gave me was ‘lazy’. ‘Your constant purpose in life should be to beat your laziness. If you do that you will be extraordinary!’ That is what she constantly told me. And she was right, laziness is my biggest enemy. In school I was called an ‘intelligent’ and ‘agitated’ boy, but also ‘lazy and superficial’. I was unruly but I had high grades. This is what made me study harder than others. At sports I was yearning for the smallest sign of appreciation from the coach. Because I never got it, I tried to become better in time. I was never satisfied with my level, in school or in sports.”

Both positive labels (‘intelligent’, ‘beautiful’, ‘smart’, ‘neat’, ‘resourceful’, ‘responsible’, ‘patient’, ‘empathetic’, ‘conscientious’, ‘talented’, ‘tenacious’, ‘good’ at something etc.) and negative labels (‘ugly’, ‘fat’, ‘lazy’, ‘superficial’, ‘pretentious’, ‘mean’, ‘difficult’, ‘messy’, ‘geek’, ‘coward’, ‘shy’, ‘incapable’, ‘stupid’, ‘weak’, ‘hassle-free’, ‘problem child’, ‘bad-tempered’, ‘last in class’, ‘outdated’, ‘chatterbox’ etc.) represent verbal clichés which seem to encase the whole essence of the human being. Actually, labels send some messages on which further decisions will be based.

Conclusions

As can be seen from the interviews above, labels can “stick” to a person or not. It all depends on how important the person who gives the label is to the one receiving it. When labels are given by persons with authority – like reference / significant adults, relatives, teachers, friends, colleagues – the labels have the power to “stick” to the child, becoming general truths. This means that labels “stick” if they are consistent, consolidated and applied by persons with authority. Also, they do not “stick” to children when they are rejected, denied by parents or contradicted by other labels.

How is labelling formed?

If reference adults keep telling a child that he “is no good”, that “that’s all he can do”, that he is “stupid”, “bad”, “intelligent”, “beautiful” etc. then the child in time starts to assume the label, to internalize it and transform it in conviction and belief. For example, “what my mother says about me is true because she knows me best” or “what the teachers is saying about me is true because he knows my intellectual potential and he is the only one able to

make such evaluations.” As a result of the internalization process of the label, the child starts to identify himself/herself with it and be defined by it.

The formation of labels represents a socio-cultural conditioning and is done through the educational process; it includes all three forms of education: informal, non-formal and formal. In effect, it is a cultural model that is transmitted from generation to generation through education. Through primary socializing in the socio-cultural environment of affiliation, children are taught how to act and react to certain situations, behaviours, attitudes etc. so that their personality thus formed can attract experiences that will confirm their convictions and beliefs – “that’s just me” – “good”, “bad”, “smart” etc.

Starting from a very early age, children are educated in the family and at the kindergarden to focus upon the extrinsic value, not on the intrinsic one. This means that children are taught to relate to a value that is exterior, to the needs and reference of adults and to what adults feel without anyone taking into consideration the children’s needs and their intrinsic value. Attributes given by the family or by the teacher such as: “you are a very good child”, “that was very good”, “perfect”, “wonderful”, “excellent”, “bravo”, when constantly repeated, all have the role to make the child yearn for praise. In time, this may lead to conditioning the child into dependence to an exterior authority. During school years, this dependence is consolidated so that the labels given by teachers to the student become undeniable truths. Even if there was a long time since somebody has given us a label, its effects are still activated in different contexts.

The personality of the child is in a continuous formation and development. Labels, whether they are negative or positive, have the effect of stopping evolution. How does this happen? When the parent / teacher assigns the child/ pupil a label, through it he obstructs the right to a choice from various opportunities. So many times, children bear the burden of their parents’ failures. They always think: since I, as a parent, could not be a doctor, then my child will be! The child may display all the qualities required to go to a vocational school or go to medicine, but this is only the desire of the parents. The child may be intelligent, consciencious and tenacious in study but this may not be his dream. Once labelled, the child/ pupil cannot see what is behind the label anymore, what is his potential, his abilities, qualities, capacities, resources etc.

Through the labels they get, children / pupils remain closed, blocked, frozen inside themselves. The significant adults have the power to prescribe, project, program the future through the labels they assign to their children/ pupils.

According to the Pygmalion Effect, any expectation also has a prophetic character. Labelling is performed according to the impressions generated in the process of interhuman interaction. If a pupil makes a good impression on

a teacher, then the former can feel this and behave accordingly; the teacher in turn will come to the conclusion that the pupil is intelligent. If the impression the pupil makes on the teacher is that he is “stupid”, then the pupil will feel this thing and act accordingly by confirming the initial opinion of the teacher. So, if the professor, based on his/her first impression, considers that the pupil under discussion is stupid, impertinent etc., then s/he will create the learning contexts accompanied by the messages associated to this projection. He will create pretexts to humiliate him, to prove him wrong, he will criticize, judge, demean him/her, etc. Thus, his/her expectations will be confirmed. During the educational process, negative labels certainly compromise the chances to education beyond recovery.

Furthermore, labels affect self esteem. If the label is positive and used in excess, the child will develop negative character traits or will be deterred from making any effort to learn – “I am smart, I don’t have to exercise in maths because I understand very quickly”. In the absence of exercise and constant effort, this may attract educational failure. In case the label is negative, the child does not develop self esteem, s/he does not feel valuable or important and will never know his/her interior resources. Regardless of their purpose, whether they are given with a view to raising awareness, to highlight or to correct certain behaviours, labels usually determine the contrary. If you constantly call a child “lazy”, this label will not make him/her be hard-working or tenacious, but will keep him/her lazy.

Labels are not real because they convey messages referring to the emotional state, the desires and needs of the person creating them. They express the frustration, discontent, lack of fulfilment or distrust of the parent or teacher towards some behaviour, attitudes of the child / pupil in an inadequate way. Labels convey messages not about the essence of the one that is labelled, but about the disposition of the one creating them.

Children / pupils are interested to know the opinion of the parents / teachers about their behaviour, attitudes, or actions, but this can only happen if a good feedback process exists. The resources that will allow an integral and harmonious development can be found in every child. All direct and indirect messages that we convey to the child should have the purpose to develop an atmosphere of encouragement. The child should have confidence in his/her potential and internal resources, and should certainly be given support and unconditional love. Most importantly, parents should be connected to their child’s needs.

On the long term, labels can affect school performance, the personal, professional and social life of the individual. For all the reasons discussed above, labels should not be used in school or family. Even more, children should be educated so that labels will not stick to them, because labels are false and they only convey information about the person addressing them.

Parents and teachers should pay attention to what they think or imagine about their children / pupils. Various courses in parental education can show the negative effects that labels have on the development of personality.

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