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Juvenile Rehabilitation and Identity Reconstruction: A Comparative Study of China and the United States from the Perspective of Labeling Theory

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Abstract. This study examines juvenile rehabilitation in China and the United States through the perspective of Labeling Theory. It explores how different rehabilitation approaches may influence social labelling, identity reconstruction and social reintegration among juvenile offenders. Using a comparative case study approach, the study reviews relevant policies, rehabilitation practices and previous research in both countries. The findings indicate that China's education-oriented rehabilitation model emphasises education, behavioural correction, family support and social protection, while the United States places greater emphasis on diversion and community-based rehabilitation to reduce unnecessary formal justice involvement. Despite these differences, both systems increasingly recognise the importance of family and community support in rehabilitation. The study argues that negative labelling and social rejection may reinforce deviant identities, whereas supportive interventions and opportunities for social participation can promote positive identity reconstruction and reintegration. The study therefore suggests that juvenile rehabilitation should be understood not only as behaviour correction but also as a process of identity reconstruction and social inclusion.

Keywords: Juvenile rehabilitation, Labeling Theory, Identity reconstruction, Social reintegration, China and the United States

1. Introduction

Juvenile delinquency should not be regarded as a single type of criminal behaviour. Family relationships, school life, peer groups and other social environments can all affect whether adolescents engage in deviant behaviour [1]. Therefore, the traditional ways of juvenile rehabilitation have mainly focused on behaviour correction, crime prevention, psychological care and reducing recidivism. Therefore, the success of rehabilitation is often judged by whether the adolescent stops the illegal or deviant behaviour after intervention. Behavioral modification is a type of recovery for behaviour. Contact with the juvenile justice or correctional system can also alter how adolescents are perceived by others and how they perceive themselves. Negative labels such as "delinquent", "lawbreaker" or "problem teenager" may be reinforced by institutional practices and social interactions with family, school, peers and the community [2]. In line with the theory of

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labelling, deviance is not an innate quality of people but rather the result of social responses and processes of categorisation [3]. If a teenager is repeatedly told "no", they may feel down and withdraw from other people. Adolescents are also in a period of identity formation at this time. Therefore, juvenile rehabilitation should not be regarded as simple behaviour correction but also as the construction of identity and social re-integration. Another problem is that the rehabilitation activities may fail to help the young people change their deviant behaviour. Therefore, the focus has moved from whether the intervention reduces recidivism to how adolescents rebuild their socially acceptable identity after engaging in delinquency and subsequent correction.

China and the United States offer representative cases for this study. Although the two countries have different traditions of juvenile justice and institutional arrangements and rehabilitation practices, most comparative studies have focused on legal systems, institutions, intervention models and rehabilitation results. Research has not focused on the effect of correctional practice for social labelling and adolescent identity formation. Based on Labeling Theory, this paper will compare the juvenile rehabilitation practices in China and the United States to determine whether different correctional approaches lead to negative labelling and affect adolescents' behaviour modification, identity shift and social re-entry differently. A comparative case study and a review of related policies, institutional practices and previous research in both countries were employed in this study. Through the link between correctional practice and labelling and identity reconstruction, this paper will present all-around information on the social and identity problems that juvenile offenders face in rehabilitation.

2. Literature review

2.1. Studies on juvenile delinquency and rehabilitation

Research on juvenile delinquency has found several reasons for deviant behaviour, such as family instability, lack of parental supervision, school disengagement, peer influence, socioeconomic disadvantages and psychological problems [4]. According to the theory of socio-ecological systems, juvenile delinquency can be viewed as the result of interactions among individuals and their surrounding social environments [5]. Based on the above understanding, juvenile rehabilitation has moved away from punishment and behaviour correction to adopt various forms, such as psychological care, education support, family programs, social work and community-based rehabilitation [6]. Most of this research focuses on reducing recidivism and uses subsequent offending behaviour as an index of rehabilitation effectiveness.

Behavioural modification will not be sufficient for full recovery. Although the adolescents are no longer criminals, they are still stigmatised, socially isolated and face limited opportunities for education, employment and community participation. Continued identification as a "delinquent" or "offender" may also affect how young people view themselves and their capacity for new socialisation.

Thus, rehabilitation can be understood as preventing the recurrence of crime and, at the same time, as a process of social re-integration and identity reconstruction. Although previous studies have gradually acknowledged the role of social relationships in the healthy development of self-concept, how rehabilitation practice can address negative social labelling and reconstruct the identity of adolescents remains unexplored. This deficiency provides the foundation for studying juvenile rehabilitation through the lens of labelling theory.

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2.2. Studies on labeling and juvenile delinquency

Labeling Theory offers a way of thinking in sociology to understand why some people are labelled as "deviants" [7]. Rather than considering deviance an inherent trait of behaviour or people, the theory believes that social definitions and responses are responsible for creating deviant identities [6]. From this perspective, individuals may be regarded as deviant not only because of their actions but also because certain behaviours are socially labelled, categorised and treated as deviant.

Given that adolescents are still developing their sense of self at this time, the process of labelling is particularly relevant to juvenile delinquency [3]. Contact with the police, courts, correctional institutions, schools and other social organisations may formally designate young people as offenders or delinquents. Informal reactions from family, teachers, peers and the community are also forms of stigma outside of formal legal labels. Such reactions will change the treatment of young people and reduce the social space for them.

Existing research has commonly used Labeling Theory to explain processes such as social stigma, deviant identity formation, exclusion, and secondary deviance. A negative label may create expectations that a person will continue to behave in a deviant manner. If these expectations are repeated many times, young people may feel isolated from the mainstream group in society and find it increasingly difficult to achieve social recognition [8]. Under some circumstances, people gradually internalise the external identity and begin to view themselves as "deviants"; secondary deviation theory is especially applicable to this problem. The first act of deviance may be short or infrequent; however, if it is serious and prolonged, strong social condemnation will give it more weight by associating it with a person's social identity. Therefore, the label may be part of a cycle in which social exclusion reduces traditional opportunities and increases the risk of contact with a deviant group. Although the previous studies have studied stigma and the results of negative labelling in detail, their connection with rehabilitation has not been fully investigated.

2.3. Comparative studies of juvenile justice in China and the United States

Comparative research on juvenile justice has examined differences between China and the United States in legal traditions, institutional structures, intervention strategies, and approaches to youth rehabilitation. Existing studies generally highlight the influence of different social, political, and legal contexts on the way juvenile deviance is defined and addressed.

Research on juvenile justice in the United States has explored the connections among formal justice interventions, community-based programs, diversion, correctional institutions and reintegration extensively [9]. The trade-off between punishment and rehabilitation, as well as possible harm to the future development of young people from formal-system involvement, have been frequently discussed. Research has also explored alternatives to institutionalisation and the role of educational, family and community support in reducing repeat justice involvement.

Research on juvenile intervention and rehabilitation in China has been shaped by the country's legal system and the general trend of education, protection, correction and social care [10]. Existing research has studied juvenile justice procedures, correctional education, family responsibility, school-based intervention and the role of communities in preventing and responding to juvenile delinquency [10]. Recently, there have been more and more reports of harm to children and adolescents.

Most of the comparative studies of the two countries have focused on differences in legal systems, age-related legal standards, institutional arrangements, correctional measures and rehabilitation models. The above studies offer some support for understanding why the different

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systems respond differently to juvenile delinquency. Some research has also studied the similarities and differences between community-based intervention and social reintegration.

However, the function of social labelling in these institutional differences has received relatively little attention. An official system cannot fully explain how young people are living after rehabilitation; otherwise, the same intervention measure may take on different meanings depending on whether it is punishment, exclusion, protection, restoration or opportunities for social recognition. Therefore, the comparison will also consider the symbolic and identity-related effects of rehabilitation practice.

2.4. Research gap

Some previous studies have investigated the reasons for juvenile delinquency, rehabilitation measures and the impact of labelling on deviant identity. Rehabilitation effectiveness is still mainly measured by behavioural results, such as whether there is recidivism; attention has not been paid to identity reconstruction or the lasting impact of negative labelling. Labeling theory believes that a negative label can result in deviant behaviour; however, few studies have examined whether rehabilitation efforts can alter or mitigate such identity formation. Research on the law and institutions in China and the United States has mainly focused on how these systems and institutions handle labelling and identity construction, with little attention paid to this effect. Based on Labeling Theory, this paper will compare the actual situation of juvenile rehabilitation in China and the United States to determine whether these two approaches increase or reduce negative labelling and thus affect adolescents' identity reconstruction and social reintegration.

3. Theoretical framework: Labeling Theory

Labeling theory will be used to conduct this study; thus, it is believed that deviance results from both behaviour and the reaction of society to the labelling of that behaviour [3]. Juvenile delinquency is more likely to occur in adolescence because of changes in self-concept; thus, negative social feedback can damage their self-esteem and alter their behaviour.

As shown in Figure 1, the theoretical system starts with juvenile delinquent behaviour, which can be caused by individual and social risk factors. When adolescents enter the juvenile justice or correctional system, they may be subjected to social labelling by formal institutions, such as the police and courts, as well as informal groups, such as family, school, peers and the community. Labels such as "delinquent" or "offender" can then harm identity formation. Repeatedly calling someone names will lead to a stigma, social isolation and the adoption of a negative or deviant self-concept.

The framework has the following two choices. The negative path is that the negative labelling continues, and the adolescent feels rejected and has fewer social occasions. It may lead to a feeling of abnormality and increase the risk of further delinquency or recidivism. At the same time, a good path can be created by decreasing negative labels and offering support, acceptance and participation opportunities for adolescents. Help build a good sense of self and live happily in society.

Rehabilitation and correctional practices are thus considered to be within the scope. Education, counselling, family support, community-based intervention and restorative justice can mitigate the harm caused by labelling and cultivate a positive identity. Therefore, the aim of rehabilitation should be to help the young offenders regain their sense of self and re-enter society, rather than correcting delinquent behaviour. Finally, the framework shows the comparison results of China and the United States. Differences in the legal system, institutional structure and rehabilitation model may result in

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different labels for adolescents and various degrees of support for identity reconstruction and social reintegration. Therefore, the framework will be employed to investigate how juvenile rehabilitation practices in the two countries may lead to different labelling processes and rehabilitation outcomes.

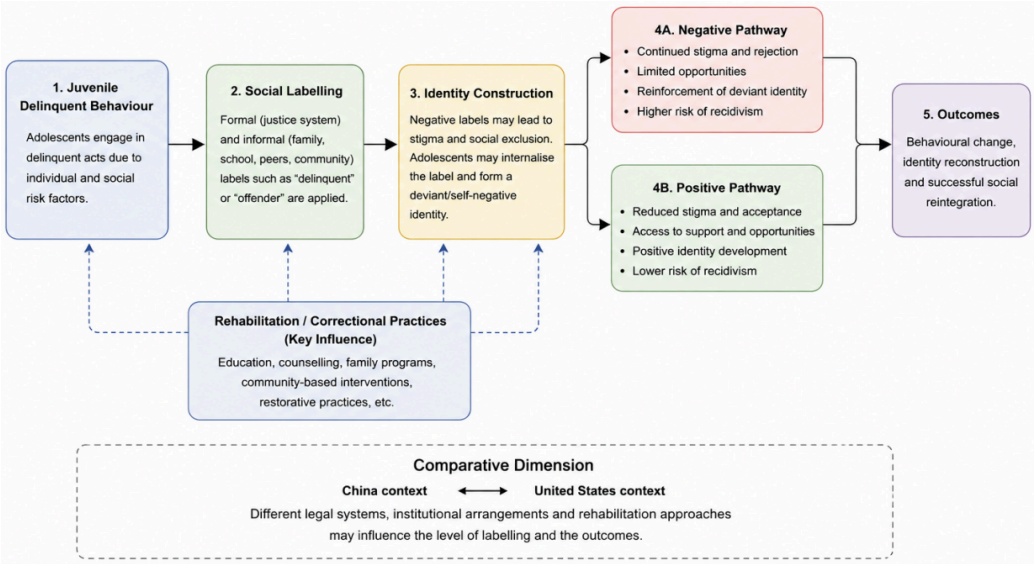

Figure 1. Theoretical framework of social labelling and identity reconstruction in juvenile rehabilitation

4. Case studies: juvenile rehabilitation practices in China and the United States

4.1. China: education-oriented juvenile rehabilitation

Juvenile rehabilitation in China places relatively strong emphasis on education, correction and protection. Prevention and correction of juvenile delinquency are legal problems, but they are also educational and social problems. Chinese policies and legal provisions focus on education, protection, early intervention and the prevention of recidivism [11]. The Law on the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency also specifies the responsibilities of schools, families, communities and other government departments for preventing and correcting juvenile delinquency [12].

A typical type of intervention is special education. Special schools provide education and behaviour correction for young people with serious misconduct. The programmes may cover legal education, moral education, psychological support and vocational training. Importantly, the young people who received special education can remain as students, and those who are deemed suitable may return to regular schools. Therefore, the goal of special education should be to help young people correct their behaviour and continue to grow, rather than merely to punish them.

Family and community participation are also necessary components of the Chinese model for rehabilitation. Parents and guardians are to participate in education and correction, and schools, communities and social organisations can provide additional support. The Community Correction Law will also promote the combination of supervision, education and assistance to help people reintegrate into society. Community correction for minors also includes support for education and employment after release [13].

Based on Labeling Theory, the above behaviours may have both positive and negative consequences. At the same time, education and psychological support can help these young people learn new skills and develop a positive self-concept, rather than being solely based on their past

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behaviour. One can return to regular school and take part in community activities to gain some social recognition. However, specialised institutions and formal interventions may also make a young person's deviant behaviour more visible, and if social attitudes remain negative, they may create a stronger institutional identity as a "problem youth".

Therefore, the Chinese model suggests that education-oriented rehabilitation may reduce the harm of negative labelling by providing continuous educational opportunities, family support and social participation. However, the actual results of identity reconstruction will also depend on whether the adolescents are accepted by the school, family and society after the intervention.

4.2. United States: diversion and community-based rehabilitation

The United States' system of juvenile justice has formal court procedures, probation, diversion and community-based treatment. Diversion aims to handle delinquent behaviour without the need for formal court intervention, thus avoiding the potential stigma and labelling of the juvenile justice system [14]. Counselling, family services and other forms of support for the problem may be provided. Probation is another kind of community-based supervision that allows young people to live at home and study under supervision and support. The United States is also beginning to introduce community-based and restorative models, such as community service, victim-offender mediation, restitution and family participation [15]. The above ways seek to promote responsibility and repair relationships with the victim and society.

In accordance with Labeling Theory, diversion and community-based rehabilitation can reduce the harm caused by negative labelling by enabling adolescents to continue to identify as students, family members and members of the community, rather than being primarily defined as criminals. Help build a positive identity and reintegrate into society. However, diversion does not eliminate labelling entirely; young people may still face stigma from justice institutions, families, schools and communities. Thus, the actual effect of the intervention will also be affected by the surrounding social environment.

4.3. Comparative analysis of rehabilitation practices

Both China and the United States have been gradually moving away from punishment-oriented juvenile correction and begun to focus on education, behaviour modification, family support and social re-integration. However, they are not the same.

China is paying more attention to education, protection and behaviour correction, providing special education and organised support. The United States has increased the scope of diversion and community-based treatment to reduce the number of people entering the formal justice system. Labeling Theory also believes that the two are different. Formal intervention may increase the public awareness of a young person's delinquency, and diversion may reduce the risk of a permanent "offender" label. However, both countries are aware that families and communities can help young people rebuild their lives and form a positive self-concept.

5. Conclusion

This paper studies juvenile rehabilitation in China and the United States based on the theory of labelling. Therefore, in addition to changes in behaviour and reduced recidivism, the rehabilitation results should also consider how they affect the sense of self and social re-integration of young people. China's education-oriented way provides a path for behaviour correction through education

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and family support; at the same time, the United States focuses more on diversion and community-based rehabilitation to reduce unnecessary involvement of formal justice. Reduce negative labelling and strengthen family and community support to help rebuild a positive self-concept in both cases. Persistent Stigma and social exclusion can increase a person's sense of shame and lead to more criminal behaviour.

This study has some deficiencies. As a comparative case study based mainly on policies and existing literature, it does not include direct interviews or empirical data from young people. Therefore, the results may not fully encompass the adolescents' own experiences of labelling and rehabilitation. Future research will conduct interviews, longitudinal studies and other empirical research to explore how young people experience labelling during and after rehabilitation. Comparison studies can also investigate how schools, families and communities affect identity reconstruction and long-term social reintegration.

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