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Social Kinds, Information and Responsibility

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The theme of this panel is ‘human potential and the information society’. My paper probes two interrelated aspects of contemporary information society, namely the production and circulation of information and ways to categorize people – kinds of people, what I call ‘social kinds’. The recent explosion of information technologies has made the dissemination of such information that much easier. In this paper, I examine the effect of the circulation of information on various groups or kinds of people in which society has a keen interest. I call these kinds ‘social kinds’, the categories used in the human and social sciences to gain knowledge of people and their behavior. Thinking in terms of social kinds and their development helps us understand the impact of a classification can have on people thus classified. My discussion will use an illustration the issue of teen pregnancies and parenting, a pressing social problem in North America and elsewhere,¹ for instance the United Kingdom and Australia. Further, the analysis of social kinds raises, in a fresh way, issues of responsibility in mass media about the production and circulation of information.

1. Social Kinds

Following the Canadian philosopher, Ian Hacking, I call the categories used in the social sciences to obtain knowledge about people and their behaviour, ‘social kinds’ (Hacking 1995).² These categories denote groups of people such as ‘woman’, ‘disabled person’, ‘homosexual’, ‘baby-boomer’, ‘Gen-Xer’, ‘skinhead’ and so on. This is in contrast to the categories used in the natural sciences, or ‘natural kinds’, to obtain knowledge about things, ‘oxygen’, ‘electron’ and ‘mud’ for example.

¹. Recently in *The Globe & Mail*, a mainstream Canadian newspaper, there was a alarmist front-page story on the recent rise in the teenage pregnancy rates in Canada (Mitchell 1998).

². The tag, social kinds, is Hacking’s. His work, however, is not the only one dealing with issues concerning the categories used in the social sciences. For example, the works of Charles Taylor, Jürgen Habermas and Michel Foucault are also relevant. A detailed comparison of these works is beyond the scope of this paper, however.

I claim that there are differences between social and natural kinds. One such difference is that social kinds lack the stability that natural kinds have. Social kind terms, being born of a particular context, often have extra-logical associations with a wider set of beliefs and value assumptions. Take the category ‘skinhead’ for example. It does not just mean a person (typically a young male) with a shaven head; its literal meaning perhaps. The term carries with it connotations of violence and of racist attitudes, but also refers to followers of a particular kind of contemporary popular music – ‘punk’ and its various hybrids with other forms of contemporary music. Because of such complex of meaning associations, social kind categories are unstable. They can change because, in part, people can respond to the way how they are being categorized. A non-racist, non-violent follower of punk would react adversely to being characterized as a hooligan. (I note that there is, at least, one subset of ‘skinheads’ – the self-styled ‘ska skins’ – who are explicitly anti-racist.) In initiating new ways of behaving, such actions by those thus characterized may necessitate entirely new categories to be used to study the subject. In other words, there is, in principle, a feed-back effect, or a ‘looping effect’ (Hacking 1995), involved with social kinds that is not present in natural kinds. Consider what disabled and gay persons have done with the ideas of disability and of homosexuality in recent years. To a significant extent, they have taken control of these terms themselves, creating new connections, images and attitudes through their own usage and resisting attributions and associations of the terms put forth by the non-disabled and straight populations. Here, I am claiming only that social kinds *may* loop because people can respond to how they are being categorized. For the looping effect to take hold, far more wide-ranging social and political changes need to be in place, as the history of gay and women’s liberations illustrate.

By contrast, natural kinds, such as ‘oxygen’ and ‘zinc’, do not loop. Natural kinds do not respond – i.e. *intentionally* react – to how they are being categorized. Their ‘essential’ properties can be identified with relevant scientific theories.³ Successful natural-kind terms always pick out

³. This is a standard account of natural kinds. See Putnam 1978, p. 60-61.

the same stuff. Any substance with sixteen electrons and protons (atomic number 16) just is oxygen. Of course, changes in natural-kind terms will be required, if it turns out that *our* theories are mistaken about the essential properties. With any luck, more mature theories will be developed to identify such features. The point here is that *we* made the mistake; *they* didn't react.

2. Social Kinds and Information

Before we consider how the discussion of social kinds intersects with our concerns about the media, let's flesh out the idea of the circulation of information. As a constitutive element of communication, the exchange of information is a central activity in human experience. We engage in it everyday. In communicating with others, information (which sometimes includes mistaken information) about ourselves, about others and about the world in which we live is circulated. Of course, communication is not just an *face-to-face* activity between *individuals*. With recent technological developments, such as the Web, such information can be produced, circulated or consumed with ease in the privacy of one's home.

The production and circulation of information also takes place at the societal level, involving interest groups, corporations and governments. For governments, such information is crucial for setting agendas and policies, especially for issues that are considered problematic and that require intervention – public (i.e. social) problems in short. Some of the information will be about people and their behaviour, i.e. kinds of people or social kinds. Yet not all information is relevant. In analysing information, especially at the societal level, there is a need to distinguish 'knowledge' from 'values' or 'judgments' about the object of knowledge and from 'hype' in the information being circulated. That critical task requires, in part, a study of how that information is created, distributed, consumed and used. Not only does the idea of reliable information raise epistemological concerns, it also draws attention to issues of responsibilities of those people involved in the production and circulation of information, for the issues of epistemology and responsibility are interrelated, as I hope to show.

3. Teenage Pregnancy: What's in a name?

Consider the case of teenage pregnancy. The term 'teenage pregnancy' seems an objective term to

describe teenaged girls and women (aged 13-19) who are pregnant. What could be more objective? Yet despite its natural ring, the term is loaded with other meanings. Its use is informed by existing social attitudes and values. For some, the term connotes the breakdown of sexual morality. For others, it connotes individuals dependent on welfare, perhaps permanently (Kelley, forthcoming). Without multiplying connotations, it is clear that there are many issues bound up in the phrase 'teenage pregnancy', such as age, sexuality, class and (in some cases) race. Teenage pregnancy is widely considered to be undesirable and problematic in the West. It is, of course, a much debated issue in the United States, which has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates among Western industrialized countries. Some opinion polls tell us that the issue is of comparable concern among adults in Canada (Kelly, forthcoming), though in Canada (perhaps with the exception of teen pregnancies among the Native population)⁴, the issue is not correlated with race and inner city poverty as much as in the United States. Yet, the phenomenon is hardly a human universal. Other cultures have quite different attitudes towards young women bearing children. So, what is it about teen pregnancy that makes it a major worry in Canada, the United States and other Western countries?

4. The History of Teenage Pregnancy

Significantly, in common North American usage, the term refers specifically to unmarried pregnant adolescent women. It does not, however, consider whether or not these young women are involved in a relationship. The term 'teenage pregnancy' itself only began its career in the early 1960s and only gained popular usage in the early to mid-1970s; before that sociologists, social workers, teachers, parents talked about 'unwed mothers', viewing as unproblematic childbearing by *married* teens. Earlier terms used to talk about teenage pregnancies include 'unwed mother', 'illegitimate children' and 'promiscuity' (Nathanson, 1991; Solinger, 1992; Kunzel, 1994). The issue for them was *illegitimacy*. The age of the mother was not the issue. One historian suggests that one reason for this lack of emphasis on age is that the most common age

⁴. In Canada, teen pregnancy rates are highest among Native populations.

bracket in which such pregnancies occurred then was the 20-24 age group.⁵ And popular conceptions of teen pregnancy to the contrary, most pregnancies by single women today still fall in that age category. Further, if the issue was illegitimacy, then there was an easy solution at hand: just get married! This would be a solution to a 17-year-old as well as a 27- or 37-year-old pregnant single woman. Many such women did get married. In 1960, in the United States about 85% of teen mothers were married. By 1970, however, the figure had fallen to 65%, and by 1985, it had fallen further to around 40% (Wong 1997, 280). The majority of teenaged mothers today are unmarried. One reason, perhaps, was that, in general, marriage was no longer considered a strong option by women, because of their increasing participation in the work force. It is also likely that marriages for the sake of legitimating such births (one way to 'hide' the illegitimacy) are unhappy ones, given the circumstances.⁶ Given the possibility of independence, it is not surprising that women would be even less disposed to such 'shot gun' marriages – already a constrained option – as an acceptable resolution to their circumstance than before.

By the 1970s, the drop in the number of marriages for teenaged pregnant women combined with other factors – for instance there was a larger population of teenagers by the late 60s to the early 70s as a result of the baby-boom of the 50s – made teenage sexual behaviour more 'visible'. Owing to this larger population, there were naturally more pregnant teens than at earlier times, including a larger number of pregnant white middle-class teens. These pregnancies stood out all the more in contrast to the declining birth rate among older married women and to the fact that the vast majority of young women who carried their pregnancies to term kept their babies instead of giving them up for adoption. These developments pushed teenage pregnancy – more accurately teen single parenting – and the wider issue of adolescent sexual behaviour, to the

⁵. Rickie Solinger makes this claim (Wong, 1997, 279).

⁶. In earlier times, another way of 'hiding' an out-of-wedlock pregnancy and subsequent birth was to send these women to maternity homes, especially for those from the middle-classes. They were sent typically before they 'showed', where they had their babies but gave them up for adoption. Surrendering their children for adoption was essential for these women to get back onto the 'normal' path of marriage, then starting a family (Addelson, 1994).

forefront of popular consciousness. The publication in 1976 of the monograph *Eleven Million Teenagers: What Can be Done About the Epidemic of Adolescent Pregnancies in the United States* was a watershed in establishing ‘teen pregnancy’ as an urgent social problem requiring state intervention. But various commentators have pointed out, that although the *number* of teen pregnancies was higher, by the early-70s teen pregnancy *rates* had actually fallen from earlier levels, which hit a maximum in the late-50s.⁷ So if there *were* an epidemic, it would have taken place years earlier.

Still, the idea that there is an epidemic of teen pregnancies stuck; it is still with us today, eliciting similar responses. The recent rise in teen pregnancy rates in Canada to 1970 levels led to a front-page article in *The Globe & Mail*. Yet, it is seldom noticed that no one speaks of an ‘epidemic’ to describe the recent trend by women (married or single) to delay child rearing until they are older. For instance, in the United States, between 1984 and 1994, the birth rates for unmarried women aged 35-39 increased by 82%, for white unmarried women the rate was 104% (Ludtke, 1997, 117). This trend towards childbearing and rearing later in a woman’s life will have significant impact on family structures and on the services necessary in the future. Why is *this* trend not described as an epidemic? One reason is that the number of such births is still comparatively small. Another reason, perhaps, is that the trend to postpone motherhood is correlated with the level of education and financial independence attained. If you had to imagine an older woman who became a single parent, who would come to mind? How about Murphy Brown, for those of us familiar with American television? Or, Jodie Foster, for a contemporary real-life North American celebrity example?

Parallelling what Michel Foucault called a “history of the present” (Foucault, 1979, 31), the point of presenting a history of how the category ‘teen mother’ came to have the constellation of extra-logical associations it has is to reveal how certain taken-for-granted ideas were formed at a particular juncture and are contingent upon certain conditions to give them the significance that

⁷ In the United States, the highest rate was reached in 1957 (Coontz, 1993).

they have. Such ‘unmasking’ of connections and associations of current concepts, attitudes and practices reveal relations that empower as well as those that disempower. Understanding the contingency of such relations enables us to think better about these matters and to suggest alternatives.

5. Information and Kinds of People

Once teen pregnancy and parenting emerged as an ‘urgent’ social problem, expert knowledge was needed to solve it. Teen mothers and their behaviour became a subject of inquiry. There is now a flood of information on the topic. Sociological and psychological studies tell us that these young women tend to be poor, tend not to have gone far in school, tend to come from one-parent households, tend to have lower self-esteem and so on. We now have a stereotypical profile of a teenage mother: uneducated, poor (most likely on welfare) and with a poor self-image. Such a profile can be used in many ways. Sometimes it is imposed on people. But because these people can react in myriad ways to the experts’ findings, it is also possible for there to be new ways for these people to be, as disability activists, feminists and gay liberationists have shown. In the case at hand, with the help of innovative programs for these young women, such as Jessie’s Centre for Teenagers in Toronto and other such programs across Canada, the United States and elsewhere, a different picture of teen mothers is beginning to emerge. For reasons we don’t quite understand, pregnant teens now consider adoption a taboo. According to one study, only about 5% of teen women who carry their pregnancies to term give up their babies for adoption (Caragata, forthcoming). Perhaps for these young women, the act of giving up one’s child for adoption is seen as an abdication of their *responsibility*, likened to a form of abandonment of which they feel themselves to be victims. These young women conceive of receiving welfare as central to their responsibility of caring for their children and themselves. As one recent study points out, their intention, however, is ultimately to be *independent* (Davies, McKinnon and Rains, forthcoming). With the help of front-line programs and much struggle by the young women involved, some of these women have attained a modicum of success. These success stories force some of us to rethink the category of a teen mother and the appropriate response to their situation. For example,

some teen mothers are (by some lights) behaving responsibly in turning to welfare for help. They see it as the responsible thing to do in order to care for their children and themselves. I do not mean to suggest that the situation for teen single mothers, in general, is easy or wildly rosy, especially in these times of cut-backs to entitlement programs and various measures to limit or remove welfare benefits as deterrence against teen single parenting (and other behaviour perceived to be socially unacceptable). Of course, for the category of teen mother to change, many more changes need to take place. The point, however, is that the *agency* of these young women (and those who help them) should not be ignored. If we thought of these young women just in terms of their stereotypical profiles, their agency could easily have been overlooked, making it more difficult for any looping to result.

So what does the above discussion of the dynamics of social kinds have to do with the circulation of information, especially in the media? As we saw, there is a close relationship between information about a particular kind and the behaviour of those who make up the kind. The information substantiates the category, along with some of its connotations, and shapes public policy and popular belief. But, because people can respond to the way in which they are being described, they can argue for and perhaps force a change in the terms in which they are categorized. This ‘feedback effect’ may be aided (or impeded) by those in direct contact with the groups concerned, front-line case workers, for instance. But the looping is also affected by those carrying out the various studies as well as by those who are involved in the production and circulation of information about the kinds of people in question. By circulating certain descriptions and characterizations, those that echo popular sentiment perhaps, certain perceptions are reinforced, and consequently may impact on policy. The production and circulation of information, then, bears significantly on the dynamics of social kinds. If so, one question that needs to be answered is, what are the responsibilities of those participating in the circulation of such information, especially those in the media? In what follows, I want to suggest that such persons face a higher standard of moral performance, and that this strong conception of moral responsibility is based on *ordinary* moral considerations (Alpern 1990). As part of ordinary moral

considerations, such responsibilities would apply to everyone if they were in relevantly similar circumstances. One consequence of this view is that there is a closer connection than imagined in terms of responsibilities between various professional roles than imagined, physicians and engineers for example, in contrast to the view that particular professions have *special* responsibilities because of their work – physicians *as such* are required ‘first to do no harm’, for instance.

6. Moral Responsibility and Communications

I will begin our discussion here with what some philosophers call the “Principle of Care”. The principle states that:

Other things being equal, one should take due care to avoid contributing to significantly harming others (Alpern, 1990, 188).

This principle, as Kenneth Alpern notes, is implied by the sentiment of the Golden Rule: ‘Do unto others what you would have them do unto you.’ The principle is rooted in common moral intuitions. It says that, if there are no overriding considerations, then we should take precautions to avoid the harm that may result from one’s actions. I follow Alpern in stating the principle in terms of *contributing* to harm rather than *causing* harm, because we have a moral obligation not to create conditions whereby one can *reasonably* expect a harmful outcome (Alpern, 1990, 189). Is this demand excessive? Here is an example to fix our ideas. Take for example an instructor driving to campus to teach a class. According to the principle, other things being equal, the instructor has to make sure that she or he has the necessary skills and that she or he is in a sufficiently wakeful state to operate the vehicle, and further, that the car is in good working order – that the tires are inflated at the right pressure, the brakes are working and so on. These are some of the things the person can do to avoid creating conditions whereby harm can be reasonably expected. Are they excessive? I think not, but one can imagine that, for some instances, it can be controversial what the appropriate standards of due care are.

Now if I were a passenger in the car, I would have different responsibilities. I must not distract the driver for example by singing. To continue with the driving example. If I were a

transport truck driver, I would have to do proportionately more things, or be more knowledgeable about my rig, to avoid contributing to harm. I would have to have a different set of skills, a different kind of driver's license. I would have to be more alert on the highways. I would have to make sure that the tires are bolted on properly, that the brakes are in good working order and so on. These examples suggest that there is a corollary to the Principle of Care. The corollary states that,

if one is in a position to contribute to greater harm or when one is in a position to play a more critical part in producing harm than another person, one must exercise greater care to avoid so doing (Alpern, 1990, 1889).

So according to this line of reasoning, if one were an airplane pilot, for, say, Canadian Airlines, then because one is in a position to contribute to greater harm, one would be expected to know and to do more things to avoid creating conditions where harm can reasonably be expected. After all, one is flying an airplane carrying many passengers and, sometimes, over a large population on the ground. That is, one must bear more responsibility.

What are the implications then of the Corollary of Proportionate Care for people who participate in the production and circulation of information about people? First, consider what the responsibilities would be for a teacher. That person would have to be prepared for class, to make sure that s/he is not misleading students, that the information that s/he imparts to the students is not false. Now consider what the responsibilities would be for a person working in the media, say a journalist, or a person in public relations? If the discussion above is on the right track, then, because the information that one has can contribute to certain attitudes and beliefs that the public will have, one would have to exercise great care so as to avoid creating a condition whereby harm can reasonably be expected to arise. 'Harm' though may also arise in another way. Recall our discussion earlier about the dynamism of social kind terms. In contesting certain beliefs, attitudes and practices, those studied may force a change in how they are being categorized. By circulating such descriptions, however, a particular image of the group concerned may be entrenched in the public's mind, a kind of stereotyping, and would make it difficult for those thus described to

contest the taken-for-granted beliefs and attitudes about them. In effect, making the feedback effect for that social kind that much more difficult to take place in practice. For these reasons, one has to make sure that the information that one circulates does not present a picture that would lead to harm for the people concerned, or otherwise impede their efforts to present themselves differently.

Again let's look at a concrete example. Recall our earlier discussion about teenage pregnancies. One popular belief is that the availability of welfare leads some young women to get pregnant so that they can claim that benefit. At the extreme, the image that is presented here is the welfare queen living off the public. According to the Corollary of Proportionate Care, what should a media person do? Well, that person has to determine whether or not it *is* the case that welfare benefits entice teenaged women to get pregnant. Some of the issues that the person will have to sort out are, for instance, whether these young women would still get pregnant if there were no welfare benefits? Among those who are not pregnant, how many are not on welfare or in some way economically dependent? Clearly, then, this conception of professional responsibility is not trivial. If the Corollary of Proportionate Care applies, a person working in the media – say, a journalist – cannot take refuge in the familiar claim that they are just reporting the news.

After some research, one would find that the picture is quite a bit more complex than the popular belief supposes. For instance, Mississippi has one of the lowest levels of welfare support in the United States. Yet it has one of the highest rates of single parenting, including single teen parenting (Jencks and Edin, 1995). But in Sweden, which has much higher welfare benefits, the teenage pregnancy rate is considerably lower than that in the United States and in Canada (Kelly, forthcoming). Does this mean that welfare benefits have *no* part to play in teenage pregnancies? The short answer is that we don't know for sure, though the evidence suggests that there is no strong correlation between welfare benefits and teen pregnancies. So one must take care not to perpetuate certain mistaken beliefs, however popular. Why not? Because it is reasonable to think that such beliefs would contribute to harming the people involved, by reinforcing certain attitudes about motherhood and about welfare dependence which have tremendous impact on social

policies. If one were to say that welfare entices women to get pregnant, then it is likely that one would be contributing to creating conditions that would cause harm, such as the development of social policies with a punitive component. Here other forms of representation, like images (photographs, pictures and so on) and attitudes have to be included. For, these too can perpetuate, in addition to beliefs (i.e. representations that can be *stated*), misperceptions. In short, the corollary of proportionate care requires people in the media to distinguish between ‘knowledge’ and ‘value judgement or attitude about the object of knowledge’ (and in this case, perhaps even ‘hype’). For instance, one common attitude is that since these young women caused their pregnancies by having unprotected sex in the first place, they are to be held morally accountable (responsible) for their actions. But if it can be shown that the actions of these young women take place in circumstances where they do not have the same options that are available to others, then it would go some distance to disentangle the issues of blame and social policy and to get us to think about the policies that we should pursue. That is, if the issue is one of fair equality of opportunity, then blaming a person for not choosing a path that is unavailable to them would be to treat them unfairly. For instance, it is commonly assumed that it is the *pregnancy* that causes poverty and poor outcomes, such as low educational attainment levels. But this assumption is difficult to bear out empirically, and the reverse may well be true: that the young women concerned were already doing poorly in school and elsewhere, when they became pregnant (Geronimous, 1991; Phoenix, 1993). As the author of a recent Canadian longitudinal study of teen mothers tells us, “teenage girls who get pregnant tend not to be just ordinary kids who make a mistake – most have had a life full of them” (Carey, 1997). The Corollary of Proportionate Care requires a person involved in the production and circulation of such information to present points of view that fit the evidence.

Is the demand, according to the Corollary of Proportionate Care, on those people engaged in the production and circulation of information excessive? This question throws into relief a potential dilemma between moral responsibility and the market forces underpinning the selling of news. My aim in raising it is not to preach to those in the media what they ought to do. I

recognize that there are different ways to draw the line. In raising the question, however, I want to make it clear that individuals in the media should not deceive themselves about what is at stake in the question – namely, what to do when one’s integrity is on the line? Perhaps there is a simple way to cut this Gordian knot after all. One could, as the actor Martha Ray said in a television commercial, “tell it like it is,” but with a bit more panache of course.

7. Summary

In this paper, I examined how thinking in terms of social kinds and their development help us better see the impact a classification can have on the people classified. It is uncontroversial to say that the circulation of information, including mistaken information, about categories can affect the behaviour of those people within the classification. But the analysis of social kinds suggests that is only half the story. People can respond to how they are perceived and thus may force a change in how they are classified; hence, completing the loop. If this account of social categories (and their possible development) is right, then how the group is portrayed in the media will impede or aid members of the group in changing the classification. The analysis of social kinds will also have implications for people involved in the production and circulation of information involving such categories. They are held to a higher standard of responsible behavior. In short, they have to be responsible epistemic agents.⁸

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