Disposable People: Commoditization and Redefinition of Self As Rubbish

Angela Hausman, University of North Carolina, Pembroke, USA
Chris Manolis, Xavier University, USA

In this paper, part of a larger project, we investigate disposable people thrown away as a consequence of extensive abuse of alcohol and/or drugs. Building on theories of commoditization, disposal, and rubbish, we pose the following questions: Can people become rubbish, and, if so, how? How does addiction affect users’ relationships with others and their tendencies to treat others as rubbish? What happens when an individual internalizes the rubbish label and redefines self as such? Finally, we propose means by which such understanding might be used in rehabilitating users. Data comes from depth interviews in drug treatment facilities and detox centers.

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Angela Hausman, Howard University, USA
Chris Manolis, Xavier University, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

We investigate disposable people thrown away as a consequence of extensive abuse of alcohol and/or drugs. Building on theories of commoditization, dispossession, and rubbish, we pose the following questions: Can people become rubbish, and, if so, how does this process work? How does addiction affect users’ relationships with self and others and their tendencies to treat others as rubbish? What happens when an individual internalizes the rubbish label and redefines self as such? Finally, we propose means by which such understanding might be used in rehabilitating users.

According to a recent report, 8.3 % of the US population reported illicit drug use within the last month (Office of Applied Statistics 2007). Alcohol abuse is nearly as high and has increased over 53 % between 1992 and 2002. The individual and societal consequences of this abuse are dire (National Institute on Drug Abuse 2006). Of those who get treatment, between 27 and 82 % fail to finish rehab programs (Wickizer 1994), and, of those who do finish, less than 20 % are addiction-free four years later (Simpson and Sells 1982). Unfortunately, drug and alcohol abuse is far from victimless and it may be the involvement of innocent bystanders that contributes to society’s desire to discard abusers.

There are various theoretical perspectives that contribute to the concept of disposable people. These include human commoditization and consumer disposition, which have been used extensively in consumer behavior, as well as rubbish theory, which has yet to be systematically incorporated. Human commoditization begins with the eroding of consumer choice, which transforms decisions that were once considered trivial into life and death situations. It is this absence of meaningful choice that eliminates personal identity and makes maintenance of self difficult (Hirschman and Hill 2000). Next, people are stripped of clothing, material artifacts, and even personal identifiers, such as hair, becoming non-differentiated units (Hirschman and Hill 2000). The final stage of the process enforces invariant patterns of behavior so that commoditized individuals not only look the same, but act the same. Decent into rubbish involves commoditization and subsequent negative attitudes toward the object (person in this case) and its means of disposition. Dispossessed rubbish is temporarily linked with a lack of desire for the object (Lucas 2002).

In order to begin understanding the construction of people as rubbish, we interviewed individuals addicted to drugs and/or alcohol. Informants came from three sources: a residential treatment facility, a detox center, and a non-residential treatment facility. These facilities were not the spa-type rehab centers frequented by celebrities or even more modest, insurance-supported treatment facilities, but public and charity supported facilities that serve vast numbers of low income and indigent abusers who are often sent by court order or as a condition of parole. Residents of the various facilities shared, among other things, diminished consumer choice and behavioral control, as well as a devalued sense of self.

Within the theme of disposable people, several sub-themes were detected: 1) the process of commoditization and decent into rubbish; 2) how relationships with others were constructed and contributed to definitions of self; 3) dispossession; and, 4) events leading to internalization and maintenance of self as rubbish. Through the voices of these informants, we see the progression from having control (as a non-commoditized person) to being out-of-control. Consistent with commoditized persons, informants of-