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LABELLING THEORY – ONE OF THE MAJOR CRIMINOLOGY THEORIES: UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES AND IDEAS, MAIN ASSUMED MECHANISMS AND HYPOTHESIS, CRITICAL POINTS

Abstract

The author of the paper, in brief, analysis the labelling theory, namely, the underlying principles and ideas, main assumed mechanisms and hypothesis, as well as the critical points. It is a criminology theory that since its appearance from the 1960 onward has attracted the attention of many social science researchers, theorist and practitioners as well. The theory advances the thesis that the less powerful are more likely to be labelled as deviants from individuals who have the social power as one of its proponents, Becker, calls them 'moral entrepreneurs'. Hence, ones a label has been applied, it is more likely to cause further deviant behaviour or create one. Labelling theory continues to offer an important challenge to traditional criminological approaches; it remains one of the major criminological theories, receiving attention, holding promise of continuing to influence research and public policy. Inasmuch, the future of labelling theory lies in the widespread empirical study of deviance and kinds of deviance.

Key words: labelling theory, criminology theories, deviance, crime.

1. Introduction

Since its appearance from the 1960 onward, the labelling theory has attracted the attention of many social science researchers, theorist and practitioners as well. The names of the mostly cited proponents of this dominant, very popular and widely accepted

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criminological theory, which explains criminal and other deviant behaviours, are Lemert, Becker, Scheff and Goffman. In addition, the names of Frank Tannenbaum and George Herbert Mead are usually mentioned as "forerunners of the school" (Knutsson: 1977, p.18)

As defined in The Sage Dictionary of Criminology, Labelling is "a sociological approach to understanding crime and deviancy which refers to the social processes through certain individuals and groups classify and categorize the behaviour of others" (McLaughlin, Muncie: 2003). "Labelling Theory holds that on some occasion everybody shows behaviour that can be called deviant. For various reasons, only certain people are labelled as deviant because of this behaviour. Labelling entails that the identity assigned to an individual is in some respect altered to this discredit" (Knutsson: 1977, p.9).

At the centre of the theory lies the hypothesis that it's upon the low social status of certain people and groups who are more likely to be stigmatized as deviants or criminals by the various social control agencies. Hence, "a stigmatizing label by itself, once applied, is very likely to cause further deviance (if it has already occurred) or creates the deviance (if the label is falsely applied to someone who has not actually committed deviant acts)" (Akers: 2000, p.134).

Nevertheless, it was in the 1970s when upon a strong criticism addressed to the theory, its popularity started to weaken, therefore, "its proponents moved on to other perspectives" (Akers: 2000, p.135). "Labelling has been critiqued as merely offering an approach and not meeting the requirements for a fully worked up criminological theory" (McLaughlin, Muncie: 2003).

Anyway, it remains one of the major criminological theories, receiving attention, holding promise of continuing to influence research and public policy, but not with the power as a dominant paradigm in criminology as it once did (Akers: 2000, p.135).

In short, in the next few paragraphs, without going into to much detail, these main aspects concerning the theory are discussed.

2. Labelling theory

2.1. <u>Underlying Principles and Ideas</u>

It is in the 1960 when a new theory came in sight in order to explain the causes of criminal and deviant behaviour. It is a theory that appeared as a reaction to the traditional criminological theories and as a result of the prompt development of the west sociology and social pathology, which both made a great influence on the ideas of the proponents of this theory. "Unlike traditional approaches which assume that the causes of crime and deviance lie either within individual offenders themselves or within their socio-econometric circumstances, the labelling approach argues that criminological analysis should begin with how people come to be defined as deviant and examine the implications that such definitions hold for future offending behaviour" (McLaughlin, Muncie: 2003).

The whole approach of the former theories, which saw the criminal behaviour simply as a form of activity that violates the criminal law, was "far too simplistic for proponents of the labelling prospective" (Burke: 2003, p.137). Accordingly, they argued that "no behaviour is inherently deviant or criminal, but only comes to be considered so when others confer this label upon the act" (Burke: 2003, p.137).

As Akers points out, "labelling theory is so named because of its focus on the informal and formal application of stigmatizing, deviant 'labels' or tags by society on some of its members" (Akers: 2000, p.121). Hence the main idea of the theory is that on many occasions' people behave in a sense criminal or deviant, but only certain people get labelled. It is those who are strong in power, 'agents of control', that imposes those labels to the ones that are weak in social power. Moreover, branding persons results from what they are and not from what they have done (Akers: 2000, p.122).

In the essence of the theory few concepts could be recognized like normality of the offence, selection of offenders upon decisions of the one that has power in the society, stigmatizing and hence, as a result of all of this, proposing deregulation, decriminalisation, decentralisation, diversion and alternatives of the apprehension moreover to radical non-intervention (Do less!).

2.2 <u>Main Assumed Mechanisms and Hypothesis</u>

It is often the case that three hypothesis are regarded as essential to the theory. The first one, as mentioned prior in the text is that it is more likely that persons with lower social status to be to a grater extent exposed to legal interventions than those with high social status. Second, is that once a label has been imposed great changes in self - image occurs. Finally, the third hypothesis is that labelling leads to secondary deviance (Knutsson: 1977, p.68).

In the following text without going into too much detail the most remarkable noticing of the mostly cited proponents of the theory, which explicate these hypothesis and main assumed mechanisms at the same time are summarised.

It is interesting to note that the labelling theory derives from general 'symbolic interactionism' theory in sociology, which "primarily analyses the way individuals conceptualise themselves and others around them with whom they interact" (Burke: 2003, p.273). Its founder, George Herbert Mead developed the notion of 'self-awareness' that is created on "the basis on which a person gains experience of himself ... through the eyes of others" (Knutsson: 1977, p.8).

Another forerunner, Frank Tannenbaum yet in the far 1930s, made the 'earliest statements of latter - day labelling theory'. Developing the concept of 'dramatization of evil', he noticed that although "a majority commit deviant acts only the minority come to be known as deviant". Consequently, "certain people 'become deviant' through the imposition of social judgement on their behaviour" (McLaughlin, Muncie: 2003).

In the 1950s, Tannenbaum ideas were further refined by Edwin Lemert who introduced the notion of distinguishing between primary and secondary deviance. He studied systematic check - forgers upon which survey, he came up with a conclusion that "primary deviance is often a temporary waywardness and perpetrators have no conception of themselves as deviant". (McLaughlin, Muncie: 2003) Hence, through name-calling, stereotyping and labelling a crisis may occur. Often way of resolving such crises is to accept the deviant status and hence, reorganise the life accordingly. This is a form of 'secondary deviance' created by the social reaction and by stigmatizing labels. "Thus, secondary deviance is produced when deviants engage in additional deviant behaviour, which they would not have otherwise done had they not been labelled as

deviants" (Akers: 2000, p.125). This, as Lemert suggest is a phenomenon of "deviance amplification' (Hollin: 1992, p.8). Contrary to his previous believing that deviance leads to social control, he "... have come to believe that the reverse idea, i.e. social control leads to deviance, is ... the potentially richer premise for studying deviance in modern society" (Lemert: 1967, cit. from Akers: 2000, p.124).

However, it was the work of Howard Becker, Kai Erikson and John Kitsuse and their use of Merthon's concept of the 'self-fulfilling prophecy', in the 1960s in which the labelling theory had flourished. According to these writers, it is the reaction of the social group which in fundamental sense constitutes deviant conduct; without a reaction there is no deviant behaviour. Inasmuch, these authors argued that most offenders are falsely defined as criminal not because they are innocent in the sense of not having committed offence, but once they are deemed by the society to be 'bad', the general population reacts to them as wholly criminal and incapable of law-abiding behaviour and threats them accordingly. Precisely speaking, this "false definition of offenders as uncompromisingly criminal fulfils this very prophecy by evoking hostile and negative social reactions that render conformity difficult, and criminality attractive" (Burke: 2003, p.143).

Probably the major contribution is the work of Becker. In his "Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance", he argues, "... Social groups create deviance by making rules, whose infraction constitutes deviance, and applying those rules to particular people and labelling them as outsiders..." (Backer: 1963, cit. from Knutsson: 1977, p.33) He "argued that deviants - including lawbreakers as well as other groups such as drug users, heavy drinkers, and the mentally distressed - are created by the society" (Hollin: 1992, p.9). In addition the idea is best emphasised in the most frequently cited passage which is that "deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an 'offender'. The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label" (Becker: 1963, cit. from Maguire, Morgan, Reiner: 2002, p.71).

Erikson argues that it is the audience which determines whether or not any behaviour comes to be defined as deviant. In his "Notes on the sociology of deviance" (1962), he delineates three stages in the process of 'deviance amplification'. The path from primary to secondary deviance springs from "formal confrontation between the

person and representatives of the society", through the "delivery of a judgement of the person", to "assigning the individual a role that redefines his/her position in society" (Hollin; 1992, p.124).

Similarly, Kitsuse, "in a study of homosexuality that has much wider criminological ramifications", found out that it is not behaviour that distinguishes deviants from non-deviants, but "circumstance or situation, social and personal biography, and the bureaucratically organized activities of social control" (Kitsuse: 1962, cit. from Burke: 2003, p.140).

2.3 <u>Critical Points</u>

As labelling theory gained widespread acceptance in the 1960s and early 1970s it attracted criticism from a variety of sources. The earliest critique that came from Gibbs, Bordua, Akers, was based on the fact that even the powerless people do not in the first place accept and redefine their attitude towards the label. Instead they fight back, reject, deny. Moreover, there are many other factors, as these critiques emphasises, which have a major impact, but are neglected by the proponents of the labelling theory. Besides, as Akers argues, there is an assumption that what person has actually done or not done is unimportant. In contrary, the deviant behaviour itself is prior to and forms the basis for stigmatizing labels as "society does not identify, tag, and sanction individuals as deviant in a vacuum" (Akers: 2000, p.127).

There are many other critics applied to the theory because of her shortcomings. The most important one that caused the declining of the theory is the lack of empirical support to its central propositions. Therefore, "the labelling has been critiqued as merely offering an 'approach' and not meeting the requirements for a fully worked up criminological theory" (McLaughlin, Muncie: 2003, p.160).

Moreover, Becker, himself, "has countered criticism levelled against him by claiming that it is erroneous to view the approach as a theory" (Becker: 1974, cit. from Knutsson: 1977, p.32). "Indeed, he claimed that he had been only 'minimally' involved in

the study of deviance and that he had never intended to create a labelling theory at all" (Akers: 2000, p.135).

Modifications of the theory were done recently in order to sustain labelling theory which continues to have impact on criminological research and criminal justice policy. The major changes are viewed in the Braithvaite's theory in 'reintegrative shaming', as well as in the ideas of 'restorative justice' and 'faith-based programs' (Akers: 2000).

3. Conclusion

Since its appearance in 1960s it became not only wide accepted, popular theory as an explanation for criminal and other deviant behaviour but as Akers notices a 'dominant paradigm' in criminology.

The theory advances the thesis that the less powerful are more likely to be labelled as deviants from individuals who have the social power as Becker calls them 'moral entrepreneurs'. Hence, ones a label has been applied, it is more likely to cause further deviant behaviour or create one.

The main assumed mechanisms and hypothesis of the theory are best explain in the Rubington and Weinberg diagram which illustrates a typical case: "1. a person lives in a group where qualities and acts are viewed as deviant; 2. this person is believed to exhibit deviance; 3. he gets typed and assigned deviant status; 4. his actions come to official notice and he becomes an official case in various agencies of social control; 5. this social processing propels him into organized deviant life, and out of conventional life; 6. finally, as a culmination of this entire process, he redefines himself, assumes the status and performs the deviant role, becoming in the end what everybody said he was at the outset" (Rubington and Weinberg: 1968, cit. in Knutsson: 1977, p.30).

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Anyway, labelling continues to offer an important challenge to traditional criminological approaches, it remains one of the major criminological theories, receiving attention, holding promise of continuing to influence research and public policy. Inasmuch as Becker believes that the future of labelling theory lies in the widespread empirical study of deviance and kinds of deviance.

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