

The strengths and weaknesses of labelling theory



Labelling theory and its theorists focus on the groups and/or individuals who were deemed to be criminal and labelled thus by society. Labelling theorists studied the various interactions between the 'criminal' groups and individuals and the conformist society. Labeling theory was quite popular in the 1960s and early 1970s, but then fell into decline-partly as a result of the mixed results of empirical research. This essay will go on to show the origins of labelling theory, the theory itself and will show its strengths and weaknesses using various case-studies and examples.

Tannenbaum (1938) is widely regarded as the first labelling theorist. His main concept was the 'dramatization of evil'. He stated that if a person is described as being a criminal then he automatically becomes one. Erwin Lamert (1951) founded the "societal Reaction" theory. This theory is widely credited to be the forerunner of the present day labelling theory. His theory basically states that a person experiences social deviance in two phases. The first phase is known as the Primary deviance phase. The second is known as the Secondary deviance phase. According to Lemert, the primary deviance phase begins with a criminal act. He or she is then labelled criminal but has yet to accept the label. The main point of view is whether he or she has accepted the criminal label. If the person views themselves as a criminal then the secondary deviant phase has begun. The object of whether a person views himself or herself as a criminal is what differentiates between the primary and secondary deviant phases. Lemert states that there are exceptions and people continue to stay in the primary phase, an example would be someone who rationalizes that the so called 'criminal' act is legal as it is necessary for them to survive and earn money (an exotic dancer

would be an example). The secondary deviance phase usually begins when a person has accepted the 'criminal' label. They then accept themselves as being criminal as use it to counter (either by moving with similar peer groups or by other means) society's reaction to the initial act.

Howard Becker (1963) is held to be the architect of the modern labelling theory. He is also responsible for coining the term 'moral entrepreneur' which is a term used to describe law making officials who get certain 'criminal behaviour' illegal. Becker proposed that criminal behaviour is dynamic in nature and changes throughout time. He therefore suggested that the actual act is impertinent to the theory. What matters was the type of people going through the criminal justice system. Therefore Becker says that personal motives and the influence by society has nothing to do with criminal behaviour. This is the most debated part of the labelling theory brought about by him. Becker pays particular attention to how people and society react and operate with others who have the 'criminal' label. He mentions that once a person has the label of 'criminal' associated with him or her; it becomes stuck with them and acts as a constant label. This effect is so profound that Becker states that individuals with this label begin to be associated with the word criminal. All their other associations and labels such as that of parent, employee, and so on take a back seat. It becomes so extreme that it becomes their one and only status.

Foster et al, 1972 say that in certain unique cases, the label of 'criminal' may force an individual to integrate back into society and try and try and show them that the criminal act he or she committed was a mistake and will not happen again (cited in Labelling theory). Although in most cases

secondary deviance will be accomplished in which the person accepts the label of criminal and begins to associate with similarly branded people, losing contact with friends who conform to societies rules (Becker, 1963 cited in Labelling Theory). It has occurred only when both the society and individual consider him or her to be a criminal or a deviant.

Labelling theory however has many inherent drawbacks. Firstly, according to Wellford (1975) the theory states that no acts are inherently criminal, and states that acts are only criminal when society considers them to be so.

There are clearly some acts considered wrong in almost all the societies and nations in the world, murder, arson are a few such examples (cited in labelling theory). Secondly is the process of self-labelling. Hagen (1973) brings about the concept of self-labelling, in which he states the example of a murderer who has avoided all suspicion (the act is not criminal if no one is around to witness it or label him). He goes on to say that the murderer may have a conscience which will cause him to label himself or herself as a murderer. This goes against the labelling theory, which states that labelling must come from a third party. Thirdly, labelling theory is supposed to cover all criminal activity and has an effect on everyone irrespective of their race, social class, sex and age (Becker, 1963). Other criminologists have been doubtful of this part of the theory and hold that a person's race, social class and so on do have an effect. They mention that the above mentioned factors can either enhance or mitigate the effects of labelling theory. There is however no scientific study on the effects of the above factors. Marshall and Purdy (1972) stated that the studies conducted reflected actual behavioural differences that were reacted to differently by different people. Fourthly, it

matters on who the audience is comprised of, as the level of denouncement an individual feels depends on the audience's reaction to the act. As the labelling theory states, the first is the audience learning about the act that is considered criminal and not the act itself. As it has already been explained, if the audience doesn't know about it then it is not a crime. Different audiences may have different reactions to a crime and thus the punishment and the labelling will vary even though the same crime is being committed. The last drawback of the labelling theory is that the personality of the individual matters. This can cause problems. The level of stigmatization an individual gets varies on whether or not he cares about his label. Studies have come across certain individuals that have personality traits which makes them resistant to the labels conferred on them by society. The biggest drawback one may say that affects labelling theory is that it has not yet been 'empirically validated'. Some studies found that being officially labeled a criminal (e. g. arrested or convicted) increased subsequent crime, while other studies did not. Although there are many studies that validate it, there are none that can offer significant data in its support. Labelling also involves both a wrong or 'deviant' act and a 'deviant' person.

There are however several things that are wrong with the drawbacks. The first one mentions that murder, arson and so on are all criminal in most of the nations and societies. That is not a drawback but merely a statement of facts. It merely states what society currently thinks. In the future the mindset of society may change and acts that were previously considered to be criminal may be legalised. History has shown that society has and will change to accept criminal behaviour or to make legal behaviour illegal. An

example would be that of homosexuality. In the early times, it was illegal. Now it is legal. The smoking of marijuana is another example, although it is illegal in most of the societies and nations it is now slowly being tolerated in some and even being legalised in others. One of the other drawbacks also mentions the aspect of self-labelling. But as mentioned before, the individual or group may seek to rationalize their behaviour, thus avoiding the prospect of self labelling. An example would be a person stealing to satisfy his hunger. He would not label himself as a criminal as it was a necessary for him to do so. Thus most of the drawbacks can be explained.

Lemert (1967) brought out the connection between social reaction and deviance through his studies and research of a number of Indian tribes in British Columbia. He noticed that in some tribes, stuttering occurred among their members and their language mentioned stuttering. Other tribes however had no mention of stuttering in their language and had no members of their tribes stuttering. Lemert could not establish a clear reason as to why that was so. He then went on to find that tribe that had stuttering, placed a very high meaning and emphasis on storytelling and oratory skills. Children of those tribes that placed a very high emphasis on storytelling were often brought up in a culture that placed a high value on not stuttering and having good oratory skills. Those that were not able to conform to the rest of the tribe i. e. had bad storytelling and oratory skills were mocked. Lemert concluded that the pressure placed on the members of the tribe to have good skills and the subsequent mockery and social exclusion if they didn't possess the oratory skills led to the development of stuttering. He said that in tribes where good oratory skills were not expected, there was no negative

reaction and hence there was no deviance of the above type. He thus said that such type of labelling leads to more deviant behaviour.

Thomas Scheff (1966) published *Being Mentally Ill*, was the first instance of labelling theory being applied to the term of 'Mentally Ill'. Scheff said that mental ill was the product of societal influence, going against the common perceptions of the time. When society finds some act 'criminal' or deviant, they usually place the term of 'Mental Illness' on those who show that behaviour so that society can understand the reason for the behaviour and come to terms with it. According to him, society then places certain behavioural expectations on the individual and the individual subconsciously changes his behaviour to suit the expectations of society. He said that there are no different types of the mentally ill with just one type who conform to what society has labelled them to be. Walter Grove on the other hand was vehemently opposed to the theory proposed by Thomas Scheff. Grove argued the opposite point. He said that labelling theory and the mentally ill have no influence on one another. He said that people are said to be mentally ill, when they display behaviour that makes them to be so. Grove said that society has no influence whatsoever on mental illness. He said that due to their illness, they behave differently most of the time and are hence treated as such. There have been studies to show how after being diagnosed with a mental illness labelling has taken an effect, such as not being offered houses and jobs, but there is very little to show that labelling was the cause of mental illness in the first place. Thus we can say that labelling does have a profound effect but has yet to be shown that it was labelling that caused the illness in the first place.

Labelling can have different aspects as well. An example would be drugs. Marijuana for example is tolerated in Amsterdam and is legal in other parts of the world (Mexico allows four grams for personal use). In those societies, soft drugs and their users are accepted and are not labelled as deviant or criminal. In these societies we see limited drug use and little or no overdoses and or drug abuse. In other societies however, soft drugs are illegal and the people who use them are labelled as deviant. It is in these societies that the policing organisations have trouble controlling the abuse of drugs. This is due to the fact that people with low self esteem or a different/weak personality trait takes these drugs to show that they can 'handle' it and want to rebel against society. Becker (1953) wrote in his book, the Marijuana user, that the drug does not produce any addiction and that it has no withdraw sickness or any sort of substance that makes the user crave for the drug. The most frequent use would be recreational. He questioned fifty of those users and found that they did not have any pre-dispositional behaviour towards it. They would be able to smoke it at one time and at others, they won't be able to. Thus the quality of deviance does not reside in the behaviour itself, but is rather the outcome of responses to that behaviour by various social audiences (Tierney). The daily mail ran an article which stated that some people were more likely to smoke if they saw 'Smoking Kills' on it. This was due to the fact the these people had low self esteem and by doing something that brings them close to the 'edge' makes them feel like a rebel. Thus we see that labelling though introduced to help society and make it a better place can actually make it worse. This part of the labelling theory has many policy implications. Intervention may make things worse. Labelling theory supports the idea of radical non-interventionism, in which policy

dictates that certain acts are decriminalised and the removal of the social stigmata surrounding the acts.

The effect of labelling theory on juvenile behaviour is a bit more pronounced and clear. Youths are especially vulnerable to labelling theory. Once they start to believe in their negative labels, self rejection occurs which plays a major role in the social rejection theory. This self rejection attitude leads to the rejection of the norms of society and gives them a motive to deviate from conventional values of society. They then form bonds with like minded deviant peers. These youths then go on to reject those that have labelled them and tend to set up their own criminal lifestyles consisting of criminal behaviour. In schools, those that come from a working class family or a lower class, the youth gangs are seen as 'trouble makers' compared to the middle class gangs who are labelled as 'pranksters' instead. Research has shown that many of the youth gangs who come from the lower class get arrested and are labelled further as criminals.

Gouldner (1968) argued that labelling theorists made the individual look innocent by the application of labels by control agents such as the police and society. He pointed out that deviance was created entirely on the 'whims of authority'. An example to this would be the issue of homosexuality. Early in the century, authorities labelled it criminal and illegal. Those that were caught were persecuted as such. But now, homosexuality is an accepted fact in society and there are little or fewer stigmas and or labelling attached to it.

Thus as shown in the above essay, labelling theory has many strengths and weaknesses. Those are, no acts are inherently criminal, there can be a

process of self-labelling, it covers or is supposed to cover all criminal activity, depends on the members of the society or those that do the labelling and finally it depends on the personality of the individual. However, there are already inherent drawbacks with the drawbacks given by various individual sociologists. Those are that society changes, and so does labelling.

Individuals can rationalize their 'deviant' behaviour. In spite of these, the major drawback of the labelling theory is the lack of empirical data to support it. We can thus conclude that labelling theory does have an effect, but is not the primary cause for most of the acts committed.