

Rational choice vs labeling theory essay sample

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Over time, many theories have been developed to explain crime. Some are more effective and feasible in explaining crime than others. This can be seen in the cases of Rational Theories and the Labeling Theory, Rational Theories being the better explanation. To prove this point, we will first examine the Labeling theory and its policy implication.

The Labeling theory works on the basis that when dealing with crime, the behavior is not as important as the reaction to said behavior (the label). This implies that the way society reacts to the behavior will dictate whether or not it is deviant or better yet whether or not a person is “labeled” a criminal or deviant. The theory goes even further to say that if a behavior occurs and there is no reaction to the behavior then there is no deviance. This would contend that if a person was to commit murder and no one was to find out then he is not a murder. Of course in the latter example, he is a murder but he does not have the label affix to him as being a murder or even a criminal therefore, society does not perceive him as such. This theory holds that if a person commits a act and we consider that act to be deviant then the person committing that act is a deviant;

Even further, by labeling them a deviant we have just now increased there chances for further deviance and as such watch them even closer for said further deviance. This is true however, if they committed a deviant act are they not deviant? If they killed somebody are they not murders? If they stole from somebody are they not thieves? And as such should we not pay closer attention to them to protect ourselves and our families from them. One indication that society agrees with this point, can be seen by the national sex offenders’ registry and Megan’s law which requires sex offender to register

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when they come into a new community. This registry is a shining example of the good and bad policy implications of this theory.

The registry is way for the community to protect themselves against sex offenders; however, once a person is labeled a sex offender their lives are ruined. Once labeled a sex offender people dislike individuals on the sole basis of the label, thus making it difficult to have friends, get jobs or even to walk down the street without people watching them. This can even be seen in prisons. A person who is convicted of murder has more respect than a person convicted of sexual molestation. In this case, the label has become the punishment and some may say that they deserve it; however, what happens when the person is falsely labeled. Also, our system says that if you commit a crime you do the time, but once labeled a sex offender you will always be labeled a sex offender, so when do they finish paying for the crime? Other policy implication can readily be seen in the juvenile justice system.

Theorist held that if you process a juvenile through the system then a label would be applied to them, thus they began using diversionary programs to avoid this label. The problem created with this is that more juveniles were actually now being processed, since police officers before had only two options with dealing with juveniles. Either they were going to arrest them and send them through the juvenile justice system or release them. With the development of diversionary programs this just gave police officers an additional option which normally affected those juveniles who would normally have been released.

The major problem with the theory is that it never explained why the original act took place. This is to say that had the person never commit the first act they would not, unless wrongly accused, have ever been labeled in the first place. Thus the label reflects them in a sense or at least was affixed due to a decision of their own making. Another problem is that it fails to explain crime's true cause for crime. Take for instance secret deviants, these individuals are not labeled as deviants yet they still commit crimes. Why? The theory does not adequately explain them and if nothing else the lack thereof a label may in turn truly be the cause or at least part of it.

Rational choice theory is very different to the labeling theory. The Rational choice theory is one of the rational theories and, as such, contends that humans have free will and commit crimes for many reasons. Rational choice theory contends that humans are selfish by nature and commit crimes where the benefits outweigh the punishment. This in turn explains the majority of society who do not commit crimes. Why would people go to work everyday to acquire money if they could otherwise steal it? They work because if caught and sent to jail for stealing to acquire quick easy money versus working without the risk of punishment for slower money seems more rational and the punishment does not outweigh the benefit.

This theory contends that individuals also make rational decisions about what crimes to commit and how to do them. This point can be seen by the amount of people who rob gas stations as opposed to banks. While, the pay off for robbing a bank is greater than that of a gas station the punishment and risk is also greater (i. e. longer sentence, armored guard, FBI investigates, etc).

Rational choice theory calls for criminal behavior to be explained by many factors such as environment, economic situation, family structures, values, etc. and provides for policy implication that provide for prevention and for harsher punishments.

Under this theory, punishing people for their crime is ok because they should have known better and they are getting what they deserve. This is at least one of the major purposes of the criminal justice system today (punishment). People are sentence to death for killing other people and its ok because they should not have killed those people (according to this theory). What other purpose does it serve besides punishment? Therefore, people will commit fewer crimes because it would seem irrational to commit the crimes given the punishment. The only problem is that people do not always make decision that seem rational to other people or, better stated, the action seemed rational to that person at the time of the action. This is seen by the fact that people may kill in the heat of passion and while they did chose to kill they were not, however in the eyes of most making a rational decision.

So, while both of these have their problems labeling theory clearly has more and rational choice theory when accompanied by routine activity theory and lifestyle theory is a much better explanation of crime.