Hello, Dr. I and my Classmates,

Labeling theory has its roots in symbolic interactionism. It emerged in the mid-1960s and asked what makes a person a deviant? The argument focuses on those in power or the society enabling or creating deviance by the mere practice of labeling the acts as deviant. It goes as far as to claim that even programs that have been designed to assist or rehabilitate a criminal may do further harm by assigning the label to the participant. The real damage happens when society begins to react to the person by their title. The label may stigmatize the person and further separate them from the community in which they live. Furthermore, if the person internalizes and accepts the label, deviant behavior can become more deviant or advance along the criminal scale (Bernburg, 2019; Heidt & Wheeldon, 2015; Plummer, 2001).

I find it interesting to note that all of us, in some way, have deviant behavior. If primary deviance is an act by a person with only a minor consequence to our status or place in society, then we all commit some deviance daily. Active deviance has been demonstrated every time I choose to speed up at a yellow light while driving or even speed through the very beginning of the red light. Since I have done this a thousand times over the last 30 years without a single ticket or consequence, it is unlikely that I will stop this single deviant behavior. Considering that most of us probably commit this same act, we are all deviant at some level.

If, however, a person finds himself labeled as a deviant and it impacts their role in society or their relationships with members of the society, then secondary deviance may occur. This depends on how a community reacts to the person’s deviant behavior. If the reaction results in the label being damaged, the person may find themselves on the path to becoming a true deviant or a criminal (Bernburg, 2019; Heidt & Wheeldon, 2015; Plummer, 2001).

A contribution that has been made to the area of chronology by labeling theory is the understanding that we must be careful when applying a label to a person. I believe that a person’s whole should be viewed rather than a single bad judgment that led to an arrest. We are not defined by a single action but by our whole lives. For example, we must be careful when judging or labeling people who may become addicted to drugs such as opiates. The initial response could be to label them a drug addict and be done with it; however, when a person’s entire story is looked at, a different picture emerges, such as a person who suffered from a severe painful injury and was prescribed opioids for the sake their doctor’s relationship with a pharmaceutical company.

Labeling theory has contributed to criminological theory to show that society’s reactions to the criminal justice system may inadvertently contribute to crime. However, the main contribution of labeling theory has been helpful and explains why people will continue deviant behavior. Labeling theory forces us to face the impact of applying a label to a person (Heidt & Wheeldon, 2015)

Additionally, labeling theory has contributed to an abundance of studies that help to understand the deviance in different types of criminal activities. Reflections on past actions and consequences of the authorities on victimless crimes have been explained through labeling theory. Examples illustrate how witch hunts in the New England communities during the 17th century contributed to more crime and demonstrate the impact of labeling during this time.

Another exciting study using labeling theory explained how a criminal response to homosexuality, abortion, and drug use was responsible for more significant damage to society than it addressed. Many of the lessons learned through these studies have contributed to newer theories such as social constructionism and moral panic (Plummer, 2001).

Furthermore, a significant contribution of labeling theory has been to demonstrate how ethnicity and class were the main dimensions that determined how the criminal justice system and the public, in general, would apply labels for the same deviance. Labeling theory differed from previous theories in that it viewed crime from the lens of the deviant vs. the establishment (Bernburg, 2019; Heidt & Wheeldon, 2015; Plummer, 2001).

Labeling theory has also been criticized for ignoring the positive impacts that shaming can have on deviance and its decreasing occurrences. There are cases when a person labeled by others will empathize with their judgment, assume responsibility for their actions, and make self-corrections. Another criticism is that labeling theory does not test well empirically. It also cannot explain how deviant behavior began in the first place (Barrick, 2017; Heidt & Wheeldon, 2015; Kavish, 2017; Murray, 2017; Plummer, 2001).

Additional criticisms of labeling theory include an accusation of being too sympathetic towards criminals. It has been accused of finding excuses for deviant behavior. Labeling theory also fails to address persons who seek out deviant labels. As troubling as this might seem, many cases demonstrate this behavior. Another issue is that the theory and its data can be easily falsified or biased (Bernburg, 2019; Heidt & Wheeldon, 2015; Plummer, 2001).

Bobby

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