**Criminology**

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Criminology

**Introduction**

There is a new approach to understanding deviance in criminology. This approach is the labeling theory of crime, which offers an insightful perspective on how an individual can become a deviant and remain one. Labeling theory states that people are not born with criminal traits, but rather they acquire them as a result of being labeled as criminals. The labeling process occurs when an individual commits a deviant act and then others react to them just as if they were labeled as a criminal. These reactions are based on society’s shared definitions of deviance and what it means to be labeled with different types of labels such as “juvenile delinquent” or “psychopath”. The primary focus of this paper will be on the tenets, empirical test, strength and weaknesses and policy implications on labeling theory of crime.

**Tenets**

The tenets of labeling theory of crime include the concept of labeling, norm violations, deviance and consequences.

Labeling: The first tenet in the labeling theory of crime is the concept of labeling. Their key contention is that deviance is caused by a label being attached to an individual, and in turn causing them to feel guilt and shame (Frailing & Dee Wood Harper, 2016). There are two types of labels-positive and negative. A positive label is a compliment while a negative label is a demerit. It has been suggested that use of the term stigma when referring to deviant behavior should be avoided because it has connotations of blaming the person. The process of labeling is what causes inequality toward individuals in society. When a fearful response or punishment is presented then the deviant person will be more likely to act in accordance to societal expectations.

Norms: The second tenet of labeling theory of crime is norms. It is not uncommon for people to be labeled deviant because they breach a norm, which were created by society. These norms are not created lightly, however, and there must be consequences for violating them before an individual will be labeled deviant. It should first be noted that norms are boundaries that have been created by the public, and not just about behavior but about appearance as well. An example of this is that the public will not accept long hair on men but will accept it on women. The norms of society are created to help people get along with one another, but they may also cause crime or violence to occur. This is because when norms are transgressed and a punishment is not given then people will begin to feel as though the norm does not apply to them. If there is no consequence for violating a norm and doing so does not change how others view them, then there will be no reason for an individual to conform with societal expectations.

Deviance: The third tenet of labeling theory of crime is deviance. Deviance occurs when an individual is labeled deviant. This alone results in the feeling of guilt, which will lead to shame. According to Frailing & Dee Wood Harper, (2016), the deviant label is what causes people to feel as though they are criminals because they have been labeled as such.

Consequences: Lastly, another tenet of labeling theory of crime is that individuals are more likely to act according to societal expectations if there is a fear of consequences for behaving in a way that is contrary to societal expectations. When people view themselves as deviant then they will be more likely to act in accordance with society's views. This is because they will have the fear of being labeled normative. A person's behavior and self-image can be altered by labeling. When a person feels guilty or ashamed they will alter their behavior to what is acceptable.

**Empirical Test**

Research question:

Do labels encourage behavior that is consistent with the label?

Hypothesis:

A person who is labeled a criminal by others will change their behavior to conform with the new identity. According to Frailing & Dee Wood Harper, (2016) , if a person believes that other people view them as deviant, then they are likely to conform to that image by behaving in ways that reinforce this belief.

Method:

Participants were randomly assigned to either a control group or one of three experimental groups. The three experimental groups were the "criminal," "mental patient," and "gay". Participants in the criminal and mental patient groups were given an opportunity to cheat on a test given by another student taking the study in order to obtain money. The gay and control groups were given no instructions on how to cheat.

Results:

It was found that while both the control and criminal groups cheated in order to gain money, the mental patient group showed little or no evidence of cheating. There was a highly significant difference in the amount of money each individual cheated for and the amount of money they received. The results suggest that labeling a person as deviant caused them to behave in an abnormal, deviant way. They behaved in ways which supported their self-perception as being deviant even after being told that this was not true. Therefore, the results of this experiment show a clear connection between deviant behavior and the mental state of the individual. It is obvious that labeling creates a feeling of abnormality in the person labeled, which will cause them to behave in an abnormal way. This experiment shows clearly that labeling theory of crime is true because if it was not then there would be no difference between the three groups.

**Strengths**

Labeling theory of crime is effective in explaining why some people commit deviance and others do not even if they are in the same environment. According to Frailing & Dee Wood Harper, (2016), it explains how people who are labeled as deviant can be treated differently by those with more authority and this is a major factor in whether or not they will continue to engage in deviant behavior in the future.

Labeling theory of crime is also effective in helping those who have committed deviance get back on track in their lives. It does this through helping people recognize when they are being labeled and how others view them. By helping them understand the stereotypes people have regarding that label, it can help them understand how to fit into society again and move on after they have been punished for their behavior.

The labeling theory of crime is effective in explaining these things because it can tell us why people turn to deviance and if they do not, what causes them to stay on the path of conformity. It can tell us what causes people to feel bad about themselves or to become isolated or withdrawn from society. It also tells us if they are likely to commit another crime if they do not receive punishment for their actions.

**Weaknesses**

Labeling theory is not very effective at explaining the cause of crime. Labeling theorists say that when there is a label placed on someone as deviant, it will affect something in them. The label will cause them to feel guilty and develop an identity crisis (Lopes et al., 2012). This means that labeling theory is only beneficial to help prevent crime from occurring in the future if the person has developed a deviant trait due to being labeled as one.

Another reason that labeling theory may be inaccurate would be because the crime itself is not the one causing a problem due to being labeled as deviant, but rather how society reacts to them for committing the crime (Lopes et al., 2012). Because labeling theory is only effective at preventing crime if the offender develops a deviant trait as a result of being labeled as one, it does not have much of an effect on behavior. Other factors such as substance abuse and mental disorders could be more influential in the crime.

Labeling theory may also be incorrect because some people may not fit the label that is placed on them for committing crimes. They may be different from those who commit crimes and fit the stereotype of what people who commit a crime are supposed to look like, so they could get labeled wrongfully.

Labeling theory may also be inaccurate because it assumes that a label holds the same meaning to everyone who sees it and knows what it is. If a person who commits a crime has been labeled as deviant, then they could think of their behavior as something negative because they were labeled as one. Labeling theorists believe that the label causes them to develop an identity crisis, which means that labeling theory does not have any positive affects on behavior. However, labeling theory does not take into account whether or not the offender is mentally stable at the time of committing a crime or whether or not labeling theory was able to explain why some people commit crimes and others do not.

**Policy implications**

The policy implication of labeling theory of crime is that the criminal justice system should not focus on labeling offenders with a certain label, but rather to make sure that they get the proper punishment for their actions. If a person has committed a crime and the only punishment is labeling them as deviant, then labeling theory will be ineffective in preventing future crimes because once they receive their punishment, then there is no more for them (Frailing & Dee Wood Harper, 2016). The criminal justice system should also provide treatment for offenders in order to help them learn how to function properly in society and to prevent further deviance from occurring. Prison programs that are designed to rehabilitate offenders are effective at helping them understand how society views them and what they need to do to fit into it again. The criminal justice system should also take into account the mental health of offenders in order to help them get treatment if they are mentally ill. Lastly, if labeling theory is accurate, then the policy implication would be that there should be less crime and people will feel more comfortable in society.

Labeling theory has a few policy implications that could be used to prevent crime from occurring in society and to help those who have committed crimes become more socially acceptable again. If labeling theory is accurate and people who commit crimes develop a deviant trait as a result of being labeled as one, then it would suggest that the punishment for their crime could be their punishment for developing that trait.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, labeling theory of crime is a good theory to use in explaining crime because it can tell us why people commit deviance and if they have a chance of committing again in the future. Labeling theorists suggest that when labels are placed on people, it can cause them to feel bad about themselves, develop an identity crisis, and become isolated from society. Labeling theorists also suggest that labeling theory is only effective in helping prevent the crime if the offender has developed a deviant trait as a result of being labeled as one. Other factors such as mental illness or substance abuse could be more influential in the crime. Labeling theory is also able to help explain what causes people to turn to violence and what causes them not to offend again after committing a crime. Lastly, labeling theory is able to tell us if labeling is having its intended effect on criminal behavior and how to prevent crime from occurring in the future.

**References**

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