
A Critical Analysis Of Social Learning Theory And Labelling Theory

Howard Becker's labelling theory emphasises the role of how society "labels" a crime and therefore the criminal, which creates a cyclical process of that person committing a crime (Lilly, Cullen & Ball 2018). There are two key concepts that explain how an individual is termed deviant in society- Primary Deviance and Secondary Deviance. In society, the majority of people commit deviant acts or break laws on small scales which are minor consequences and not serious enough for them to be termed as "criminals" by themselves or society. These initial acts of deviance by an individual have minor effects on their status and name amongst society, this is referred to as Primary Deviance. Furthermore, Secondary deviance occurs when the individual commits deviant behaviours in accordance with the primary deviance as a result of changing their behaviour and inheriting the label as their new identity (Lemert 1969). Unlike primary deviance, this type of deviance has a major effect on the individual's name and/or status as well as their relationships in society. Thus, Labelling could result in internalisation, where the individual makes deviant behaviour part of his 'normal'. For example, if one stole money from his/her home that would be technically termed wrong and criminal but is a minor consequence thus wouldn't need to be labelled as such. But if an individual is caught for stealing from a bank that or indulging in money fraud then he/she will likely be faced with charges, imprisonment and labelled deviant. These assigned charges and labels will affect future job applications and heavily judged amongst society at large. These concepts critically analyse how the social learning theory explains and responds to crime.

Comparison of the two Criminological Theories

As mentioned before, both the theories enlighten people in the factors that affect people. But there are similarities as well as contrasting parts in both the theories like, labelling theory suggests that major labelling happens in societies and the theory explains how those labels affect the people judicially and criminally. Whereas in social learning theory, it has to do more with the socialisation and the effect of it on the development of the self. According to Akers (1998) individuals learn social behaviours through operant conditioning, which is voluntary behaviour that is controlled by the consequences of that behaviour.

It can be seen that both theories prove that an individual is deemed deviant or engages in deviant behaviour due to application of power by a higher authority or social hierarchy structure. When looking at Labelling theory we know that an individual is labelled/classified as an offender by court officials, judges, politicians or police authorities, whereas, Social learning theory defines that an individual is more likely to engage in crime by observing those of 'higher' power or status associated with how they respond to the same situation and reinforcement process. Another similarity between the theories is that both share the same premise that individuals learn to commit a crime from other people through social processes (Lilly et al. 2018; Kim 2001). By combining the two theories, criminologist could have a better understanding and knowledge of the drivers and causes of crime and social harm as they could collect valuable information like analysing individuals in various social environments and identifying the different social processes that affect them. In doing so, criminologists can develop social policies that may

reduce crime rate amongst these individuals, as in the case of a child who grew up in a violent household could get more attention and explain in detail what the norm in society may be.

Furthermore, the comparison identified that both the theories involve an 'internalization' process amongst these offenders. Social Learning theory offers an explanation as to why individuals engage in crime acts, what reason they have to continue or why they escalate or not, etc (Justice and Theories, 2020). It is crucial to understand the role of differential reinforcement, differential association and modelling when analysing crime. Violence is learned through role models provided by the family either directly or is reinforced in childhood, and continues in adulthood as a coping response to stress or as a method of conflict resolution (Bandura 1973). Thus, if a child has experienced any form of abuse at home, they may 'internalize' these beliefs and patterns of wrong behaviour and could develop a greater propensity towards abuse later on (Payne, Hawkins and Xin, 2018). Whereas, Labelling theory focuses on the punishment of a criminal. It is important to evaluate three main concepts – how the label had been assigned, its consequences and after the label was applied how it's distributed. It is evident that both labelling processes and operant behaviour influences behaviour as perceived and expressed by the respondents. In the example of an individual being caught for bank fraud, it is critical to recognise the demographic characteristics like gender or race and if it impacts the labelling as it is known to contribute poorly when treating racial minorities (Goode 2014). The next step would be to analyse the subsequent behaviour of the fraud after being assigned the label of an offender and other charges, and with that identifying how society responds to the criminal label.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is critical for criminologists to analyse the advantages and disadvantages when using various criminological theories and what would be the most effective when explain crime. Social learning theory looks towards individual connections and the effect these have on the individual, in this way avoidance techniques can be effectively set up to distinguish these proximal influencers and this is particularly evident as these policies can be customized and open for people. The labelling theory clarifies wrongdoing by assigning negative labels to people who have perpetrated an act of crime to extend them as deviant from the standards of society and will keep on practising this behaviour associated with the negative label. Although the two theories have dissimilarities amongst them, it could be the most effective if criminologists utilize both theories simultaneously when clarifying various parts of crime and their reactions to crime resulting in the understanding of how a criminal becomes a criminal and through appropriate law enforcement selection.