

Quadrant II – Transcript and Related Materials

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Paper Title: Indian Society: Issues and Concerns

Unit: 01 Introduction

Module Name: Theories of Deviance (Labelling Theory)

Module No: 06

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Notes

THE LABELLING THEORY

INTRODUCTION

Crime refers to violation of norms, rules of the society, punishable by law. Anyone who goes against the law is considered as a criminal. Criminal is a person who commits the crime. Some of the e.g. of crime are practising dowry as it is prohibited by Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, domestic violence, murder, rape, theft, etc.

The labelling theory was propounded by Howard Becker in the year 1963. The Labelling Theory does not deal with the question why a person becomes a criminal but tells why society labels some people as criminals or deviants.

IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL AUDIENCE

Some men who drink heavily are called alcoholics while others are not. Thus according to this theory what is important in the study of deviance is the social audience (i.e. the people living in the society) and not an individual person.

What is important in crime is not the act of the individual but the reaction of the society in terms of rules and sanctions. Sanctions are rewards and punishments. For e.g. if a person is innocent but if society gives the label of a criminal, he will be viewed as a criminal. And if a guilty i.e. a person who has really committed crime might not be given the label of a criminal. Hence social audience reaction is very important.

According to Becker deviance is not a quality of the act a person commits but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an 'offender'. The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label. Hence actually you commit a crime or not is not important but label given by the society is important.

AN EXPERIMENT

An experiment was performed in the U.S.A. in which eight sane (normal) people of varied backgrounds got themselves admitted for a mental illness. All gave same account of their life situations. All but only one was labelled as schizophrenic.

Once labelled insane the person was presumed insane by the staff that interacted with them daily. This shows that it is the reaction of others which labels an individual in a specific way.

In the case of criminals also, it is the society which brands some people but not others as criminals. For e.g. If a lower class boy steals a car, he is branded a 'thief' but if an upper class boy does so he is described as a 'mischievous pleasure seeker'.

According to Becker, whether or not labelling occurs depends upon: 1) the time when the act is committed 2) who commits the act and who is the victim and 3) the consequences of the act.

Thus, whether a given act is deviant or not depends in part on the nature of the act and in part on what other people do about it.

Hence deviance is not a quality that lies in the behaviour itself, but in the interaction between the person who commits an act and those who respond to it.

Becker also says that certain types of groups are more likely to be labelled deviant than others. The groups are:

- 1) Groups that do not have political power and therefore, cannot put pressure on officials for not enforcing the law.
- 2) Groups which are seen to threaten persons in power.
- 3) Groups which have low social status.

WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS ON THE INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE LABELLED?

- The official response to the behaviour may push the 'delinquent' individuals towards further delinquent conduct.
- It will make difficult for them to re-enter the conventional world.
- On the other hand, if the individual does not receive official response to his delinquent acts, he may continue committing them while receiving no help in changing his behaviour.

CRITICISM'S

Criticisms against the labelling theory are that it employs a good logic but does not explain the cause of crime. It avoids the question of causation.

CONCLUSION

Hence, Howard Becker's labelling theory deals with why society labels some people as deviants or criminals. According to this theory a criminal or a deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied. Deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label.