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**Labeling Theory**

**Introduction to Labeling Theory**

In 1963, American sociologist Howard S. Becker developed and presented "Labelling theory" in his book, 'Outsiders.' The theory is based on idea that an act is not categorized by deviance, instead by a label placed on it. According to Howard Becker, deviance is created by society. It originates when social communities set rules, whose violation establishes deviance. Those rules are applied to specific people who are labeled as outsiders. He categorized the behavior into four groups, which include wrongly accused, conforming, completely deviant, and confidential deviant. The theory is concerned with other consequences, like behavior of people who are labeled and reaction of society to those. Labeling theory is important to the interactionist criminal theories. According to the Interactionists, the social standing of people does not contribute to crime, instead of the crime rate increases because of authorities and ruling class label certain people. Interactionists consider crimes as an outcome of small dealings between the police department and some specific individuals of the society. They believe that socialization and reduced opportunities do not contribute to an increase in the crime rate or deviant behavior.

           According to the Labelling theorists, the felonious and deviant actions are consequences of labeling by those who have power and authority. It is more probable that the powerless and weak are negatively labeled. The criminological theory of Labelling is related to Interactionism. The principle concept of the theory is that crime and criminal behaviors are built by society and those who have social control, label the weak as criminal and deviant merely based on conventional beliefs (Brownfield and Thompson). This leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy, which is a socio-psychological phenomenon where people expect something will become true merely because they believe it will, due to which the conducts are aligned to achieve those beliefs. Moreover, it also increases criminal behavior and the intensity of deviance in society.

Often, the theories of labeling are related to social reaction theories which emphasize on outcomes of reactions or responses to crime. The people who show reactions or responses are categorized in three ways. Firstly, people who are informally connected to the deviant like family, friends, and other people who condemn the behavior of deviant. Secondly, the structures and organizations that are responsible for reducing the crime rate and providing justice in society. Lastly, those who feel threatened by the deviant behavior and are anxious to pass related legislation. The labeling theory revolves around two hypotheses. One of them is status characteristics hypothesis and according to it, labels are executed in part due to status of those labeling and those who are labeled. The other hypothesis, secondary deviance hypothesis, suggests that deviant labels generate difficulties for one who is labeled and he or she has to face. It also states that sometimes some conditions may accelerate the involvement in deviance and crime (Labeling Theory - Criminology - Oxford Bibliographies - Obo).

**Criminal Behavior**

According to the Labelling theory, there is no concept of deviance and in fact, it is merely conducted which is condemned by others and labeled as abhorrent, criminal and anti-social (Slattery). Labels are often placed upon people, whether guilty or not. The examples of labels include 'addict', 'murderer', 'psycho', and 'criminal'. If the crime is severe, the labeled individual faces extreme reactions from society, to the extent that it is difficult to survive.

***Central Park Five***

The Central Park Five is a story of five black and Latino teenagers from Harlem, Kevin Richardson, Antron McCray, Raymond Santana Yusef Salaam, and Korey Wise, who suffered from the miscarriage of justice. They were falsely convicted for the ruthless beating and rape of a 28-year-old white woman, Trisha Meili, in New York City's Central Park. This news triggered community outrage and shocking headlines throughout the trial and conviction of the five young boys. The accused served the complete prison sentences. The story of the conviction is popular among many communities; however, the part where the real criminal was caught is less known (“About the Case | Ken Burns”).

In 1989, on one evening, about thirty youngsters were hanging out while a few of them were hurting others and assaulting the homeless. On the same night, Trisha Meili was jogging in the park. She got beaten and raped. She was in a coma for twelve days, which was enough for the news to cause outrage in the city.

           Five young black and Hispanic men who were of ages between 14 and 16, were accused of the crime. It is important to note that there was no physical evidence that these five boys are related to the case. The DNA found at the scene was no match for any of the accused, and thus the prosecutors trusted the initial interrogations only. According to documentaries, it was revealed that Linda Fairstein, the prosecutor, adopted an overzealous approach in the prosecution of the accused. The prosecutor did not herself take part but supervised the violent interrogation. The interrogation continued for two days, without the defense lawyers. This led to coerced confessions of the crime. She tried to cover the lack of evidence, which could have proved the innocence of five boys.

They were sentenced to spend the jailed for the crime they did not commit. They were known as Central Park five. Richardson and Santana were aged 14, while Salaam and McCray were 15 years old. These five boys were tried as juveniles. Then they about six to seven years. Wise, who was 16 years old at the time of the attack, was tried as an adult, and he served 12 years in prison.

The five initially confessed to the crime, but later they took those statements back, stating that they were pressured to confess. Salaam stated in an interview with Guardian in 2016 that he could hear Korey beaten up, and he was threatened that if he did not confess, he be beaten too.

Their innocence was finally proven when the real criminal Matias Reyes confessed. Shortly after the confession, police connected him to multiple other crimes. During interrogation, he confessed to several crimes, including murder, five rapes, and two attempted rapes. He was sentenced for 33 years of imprisonment after he pleaded guilty.

**Central Park Five Case and Labelling theory**

The labeling theory is based on how label of a crime is placed upon people on a particular race, ethnicity, and color. The case of Central Park Five is a perfect demonstration of this theory. The five suspects were accused of a crime and without proper investigation, they were labeled as rapists. The society did not even try to understand their side of the story and believed what the government stated. Race and color were proven enough to indict and punish the accused. People believed in the story more readily, as they all belonged to the minority community. He mother of Salaam was a professor, but this fact could not prove that he could have been innocent. They were labeled as 'Central Park Five,' and to date, even after their innocence is proven, they are referred to as 'Central Park Five.' Even though they were never guilty. It is observed that the criminal cases are not dealt with regarding an individual; instead, it becomes an illustration of a specific race, ethnicity, occupation, social class, and gender. In this particular case, the accused served as a symbolic representation of everyone in the lower-class black people in society. The brutal conduct of the police was an example of how black people are treated after being labeled. The high rate of victimization is observed in the black community, especially young men, who are targeted.

         When Reyes confessed about the crime, the inefficient and flawed interrogation system was exposed. According to the labeling theory, labeling results ina self-fulfilling prophecy. Similar were the results after the five young boys were indicted. The prosecution did not reflect upon their judgment and continue to punish the innocents. Even though the DNA evidence was sufficient enough to let them off the hook, but prosecution believed the young black boys were the real culprit. The ignorance of clear evidence and lack of zeal to learn about truth is the phenomenon of self-fulfilling prophecy which was the predicted outcome of labeling theory.

According to labeling theory, the powerful tend to label weak and helpless people as criminals and deviants. The same happened in this case when Donald Trump, who was a property City tycoon, appeared to be certain that young boys were rapists. He showed the power of money by spending $85,000 on 4 whole page Newspaper advertisements, labeling these boys as criminals. He even demanded to execute them. This display of hatred fueled the atmosphere of a higher crime rate in the city.

**Conclusion**

The example of Central Park Five is a true example of the labeling theory and how the people of a specific race or ethnic group are accused of a crime and labeled for life.

The general limitations of the theory include that this theory does not justify the sources and reason for deviance, and only explained deviant behavior. Another possible limitation of the theory is that it is based on how society perceives. If the theory is applied immense, probably soon deviancy is not be considered as a criminal or harmful act. This may lead to chaos in society.

## Concerning the case, the limitation is that the theory is deterministic and implies that if someone is labeled as criminal or deviant, he or she will choose even a deviant path. However, in the case of these boys, none of them choose a criminal career. Richardson, Salaam, and Wise are advocates and in strong support of criminal justice reform. Raymond is in the clothing business, and it was his tweet that inspired a director, Ava Duvernay, to direct a Netflix show When They See Us.

           The labeling theory has evident and obvious value and it should be utilized to endorse the policies which will help avoid labeling negligible actions as deviant.

Works Cited

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