

ITEM B: LABELLING THEORY

Labelling is a social process that occurs in a range of areas of social life such as education, the media and the criminal justice system. Labels are often based on stereotypes of individuals or groups based on social characteristics such as class, age, gender, ethnicity or disability. In terms of crime and deviance, Piliavin and Briar (1964) found evidence that many police officers based their decisions on which individuals to arrest on superficial factors such as the way they dress. This meant that discrimination against particular age groups and ethnicities was more common.

Applying material from Item B and your knowledge, evaluate the view that labelling is the main cause of criminality. (30 marks)

Some sociologists would agree that labelling is the main cause of criminality. By labelling, sociologists mean the way in which individuals or groups are judged or categorised by society based on their social characteristics. Labelling theorists would argue that the very nature of social norms and values is as a result of labelling, because as Howard Becker argues, “social groups create deviance by creating the rules, whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labelling them as outsiders”. Deviance, therefore, could be argued to be a social construction as deviance is simply behaviour that has been defined or labelled as such by society, rather than being innately criminal or deviant.

In order to determine whether labelling is the main cause of criminality it is important to consider who labels are most likely to be applied to and the social context in which these labels apply. According to Item B, “Piliavin and Briar (1964) found evidence that many police officers based their decisions on which individuals to arrest on superficial factors such as the way they dress. This meant that discrimination against particular age groups and ethnicities was more common”. Social class is also a clear factor and prison statistics show a huge overrepresentation of young, black, male, working class prisoners compared to their representation in the general population.

Cicourel (1968) argued that police officers held ‘typifications’ about the sorts of people that they considered to be offenders. They held stereotypical views about the social class of offenders which led them to target working class areas in their policing, or ethnicities which meant that black or Asian people were significantly more likely to be stopped and searched than any other ethnic group. These trends continued across the criminal justice system

A clear introduction that introduces key concepts and also includes supporting evidence with a direct quote from a sociologist.

The line of argument for the essay is clearly laid out in response to the question.

Item B has been used to support points and there are clear examples given of social characteristics that might influence criminality.

Supporting sociological studies are fully analysed here in response to the question and the idea that labels are socially constructed is further dissected.

Appropriate examples are given.

according to Cicourel and he found instances where probation officers held prejudicial attitudes towards those from the working classes and consequently law enforcement officers were more likely to patrol areas that were renowned for having a high working class population. He also noted that justice was not a concrete term but instead was applied based upon social characteristics and as such law enforcement officers were more lenient with groups that they regarded stereotypically as wealthier as they did not fit the profile of the typical criminal.

The impact of labelling, sociologists argue, is that our behaviour can be influenced negatively if we are designated as a criminal by society (secondary labelling – Lemert). The criminal may then internalise the label and begin to act accordingly, so they are more likely to conduct criminal or deviant acts. Alternatively, the fact they have been labelled as a criminal can come to act as a master status – defining who they are as a person above and beyond any other social status they may hold, e.g. a murderer will no longer be praised for their role as a friend or a father; society instead will become fixated on their criminal past.

The mass media also plays a significant role in the labelling process as it has the power to sensationalise criminal activity to make it appear a greater problem than it is in reality. For instance, the mass media has exaggerated the extent of terrorism in Western society and has enabled Muslims to become folk devils or scapegoats for society's wider problems such as the recession or issues of immigration. This in turn leads to more negative labelling of such social groups within the justice system and a greater proportion end up in prison or with a criminal record, which perpetuates the cycle. This all suggests that labelling is a huge issue as regards individuals tuning to criminality as they are driven to it by their own self-fulfilling prophecy and the way in which the label itself limits their life chances.

However, it could be argued that labelling in and of itself doesn't have the power to cause crime as many individuals choose to reject the criminal or deviant label applied to them and take advantage of the meritocratic nature of society to allow them social mobility and a higher social status. It could also be argued that other factors play a greater role in determining criminal behaviour.

Marxists, for example, argue that the main cause of criminality is in fact inequalities in the economic system

The impact of labelling on criminality is clearly analysed and supported by sociological studies.

A range of key concepts are introduced and examples are used to develop analysis.

Synoptic links are made between the mass media and crime and deviance topics with appropriate use of contemporary examples in response to the specific question.

Further key concepts are used.

Evaluation of labelling begins in this and subsequent paragraphs. There is a general introduction to the issues to be evaluated.

Evaluation focusing on Marxist theory and the view that

and in fact Marxists argue that capitalism itself is criminogenic in the sense that it is based upon the acquisition of wealth and the exploitation of the working classes which causes them to become desperate and unable to provide for themselves legitimately, or simply so frustrated and alienated from their lives that they act in criminal ways to show their frustration. Chambliss (1975) argued that the law simply exists to protect the private property of the ruling classes and as such is applied in a discriminatory fashion against anyone who is not part of this class and this is why labels come to exist because it is a subtle means of exploiting the working classes and ensuring the ruling class maintain their positions of power and privilege.

Alternative explanations of criminality can also be put forward by both left and right realists. Right Realists such as Charles Murray would argue that the increased crime rate is due to a lack of socialisation amongst the working classes which means that they are more likely to commit crimes as they are less bound by the rules of society. Similarly, Right Realists also suggest that rational choice is a key element in explaining criminality, as Clarke (1980) argued that the likelihood of committing a crime is closely related to the chances of being caught and facing consequences and whether these outweigh the benefits of the crime itself. Because working class or ethnic minority criminals are denied access to legitimate opportunity structures they have more to gain from the crime than they have to lose and therefore it is little to do with labelling but more to do with a lack of opportunity for social mobility. Left Realists, however, would argue that the real causes of crime are similar to those identified by Marxists insofar as they relate to relative deprivation (Runciman) and marginalisation which can force desperate or frustrated members of society into a life of crime or deviance, but again are unrelated to labelling.

Feminists too would criticise the view that labelling is the main issue causing crime, instead pointing to the significance of gender socialisation in bringing about criminality as well as the differing levels of opportunity to commit crimes, as women are often much more restricted to roles within the home that prevent them. Similarly, it is important to question crime statistics according to gender as the chivalry thesis would argue that even where women do commit crimes they are more likely to be let off with them as they are seen as the weaker sex. This shows that to

economic issues are a greater source of criminality than any other factor.

Good analysis and links to the original question. Supported by sociological evidence throughout.

Continued evaluation from the Realist perspectives with strong use of supporting sociological evidence.

Analysis is consistent, although at times could be deeper.

A brief overview of Feminist criticisms, although supporting evidence is limited (likely due to time constraints).

some extent labelling can be a factor in determining criminality as gender roles themselves are based on socially constructed stereotypes.

To conclude, there are a wide range of factors at play when determining causes of crime which include age, class, gender and ethnicity, and it is from these social characteristics that labels are created. Therefore, it is undeniable that labelling plays a significant role in causing criminal or deviant behaviour but whether this is the main factor remains to be seen.

[1221 words]

Examiner style comments: **Mark band 25-30**

This essay falls within the top mark band and is successful in outlining labelling theory and supporting points with relevant sociological material and key concepts/studies. It is clearly evaluative and deals with a range of opposing ideas, many of which are well developed and supported. There is a clear conclusion that addresses the issues raised in the question and Item B has been used as supporting evidence for points made early on.

The depth of analysis and evaluation could be more detailed and/or regular throughout the essay.

A clear conclusion that addresses the issues raised in the essay and which explicitly addresses the original question.