"Outline & critically assess the contribution of labelling theory to an understanding of crime and deviance" (45 marks)

Interactionist/ labelling theory focus on the social processes and human decisions involved in putting OCS together. The Interactionist sees the offender within these OCS as the passive victim of labelling. Labelling theorists have a key focus on which and whose behaviours within society get seen as a problem and therefore a label applied. Labelling is a major theory within symbolic Interactionism and is sometimes referred to as the ‘social constructionist’ views of crime. The deviant or criminal and their actions play a minimal role in labelling theory and often results in a self-fulfilling prophecy for them to become seen as deviant or criminal. The theory opposes traditional positivist criminology by providing a radical alternative and viewpoint.

A sociologist called Howard Becker who became a leading figure in the symbolic Interactionist movement did not invent the idea of labelling but refined it to a theory. He went on to popularise it in his book ‘outsiders’ which was published in 1963. The method which he used in his research was PO/Ethnographic as at the age of 15 years he became a professional musician where he used this insider knowledge of the Jazz world as a source for his ideas about deviance, labelling and subcultures. The group in which he studied was marijuana users. One quote from his research is “social groups create deviance by making the rules to particular people and labelling them as outsiders”. The term ‘outsiders’ that he uses refers to an offender who has broken the law and a label has successfully been applied to them. The offender then becomes known as an outsider due to the label sticking and them becoming separate from the normal people in society of those who conform to shared norms & values of society and conform to the rules.

Strength of Becker’s research is that it shifts the blame from the individual and the ‘structural’ background to the wider society. In both the cause of deviance, me & we with ‘others’ and interaction. This would be such as a label being applied and a self-fulfilling prophecy taking place meaning the individual becomes deviant. The second strength would be that it questions the usefulness of OCS and their production. This would be those being labelled in society and becoming deviant then appearing in the OCS suggesting the OCS is socially constructed. A final strength would be that it highlights deviance depending on the time and place it occurred. A weakness is that Marxist claim that they fail to explore the nature of economic power, social class relations and capitalism. This will be between the ruling class such as the law definers/ enforcers and the WC labelled as deviants. A second weakness is that feminists would argue that it fails to see women roles and deviant acts. This may also be seen in OCS as women have lower crime rates. A final weakness would be that deviants may adopt a deviant identity without being given a label by others. This would be that the individual uses their free will to commit deviant acts therefore gain a deviant identity. A comparison to another sociological theory would be a similarity between the Interactionist/ labelling theory and the biological approach. The biological approach goes by appearance of the individuals and in the Interactionist/ labelling theory the label is not only applied through actions but also appearance of individuals same as the biological approach.

Edwin Lemert conducted a study called ‘the cause of deviance’ based on societal reaction. He distinguishes between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ deviance where he studies a small tribal group who stuttered. This was seen as a deviant act within that community as great importance was attached to ceremonial speech. He defines primary deviance as deviance that consists of deviant acts before