

SOC 3290 Deviance
Lecture 12: The Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

Today we begin our discussion of the symbolic interactionist perspective. This theory, at its most basic, argues that deviance doesn't really exist independently of the negative reaction of those who condemn it. Rather, they are deviant only because someone or some group responds to them in this fashion. It zeroes in on the processes whereby certain types of behavior become viewed as unacceptable and by which certain types of people are made subject to the corrective or rehabilitative machinery of social control - and others are not (e.g. not all killing is homicide). As such, it denies that there is anything universal about deviance except the process by which definitions of acts and persons as deviant are socially generated and applied. A concern with the dynamics of this process is what distinguishes the symbolic interactionist perspective from other theoretical outlooks on deviance.

Theoretical Images:

The symbolic interactionist approach to studying deviance has been carried out under different names: labeling theory, the social reaction perspective, and the social constructionist perspective. Generally these theorists have pursued three interrelated concerns: (1) the social-historical development of deviant labels; (2) the application of labels to certain types of people in specific times and places; and (3) the symbolic and practical consequences of the labeling process.

While becoming prominent in the 1960's, seeds of this tradition may be traced to a 1918 essay by George Herbert Mead, who argued that criminal labels set boundaries between those who are acceptable and those who are condemned, insiders and outsiders, conventional people and deviants - though he later took these ideas in a somewhat Durkheimian direction pointing to how this strengthened social order. Similarly, in 1938 Frank Tannenbaum used the term "tagging" to describe a similar process whereby the stigma accompanying a deviant label may drive people deeply into the realm of nonconformity.

These early ideas of Mead and Tannenbaum were elaborated by Edwin Lemert in his 1951 book Social Pathology. Lemert pointed out that all prior theoretical positions took the existence of deviance for granted. By making this mistake, they failed to consider how something or some people came to be defined as deviant in the first place. They also neglected to examine the impact of labeling on persons processed as deviants. Rather than make the same mistakes by accepting conventional definitions of deviance, Lemert argued that deviance should be seen as behavior which is socially disapproved of in social interaction - and the social dynamics and consequences of such disapproval were taken as important topics for investigation.

A decade later, Lemert's ideas suddenly became very popular through the writings of Howard Becker, John Kitsuse, Erving Goffman, Kai Erikson, among others. Becker's contributions ("Outsiders"), in particular, cannot be underestimated. Much of the reason for the sudden popularity of such ideas revolves around the massive social and political struggles

emerging in the 1960's (e.g. the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, the sexual revolution, hippies, ghetto riots, drug use, the womens' movement, youth counterculture, etc.) All of these things gave rise to both political militancy and new forms of deviance. They also meant that understanding deviance first required an understanding of why people react against certain forms of behavior. Growing awareness of frequently blatant contradictions necessitated the study of the activities of control agents as well as the behavior of labeled deviants (e.g. politicians who talked of pervasive communist conspiracies were considered by many to be "realistic"; political activists who complained that their phones were being tapped were being "paranoid").

Along with the growth of this perspective grew an "unconventional sentimentality," a tendency, in Becker's words, to fall into deep sympathy with the subjects being studied, "so that while the rest of society views them as unfit, we believe that they are at least as good as anyone else, more sinned against than sinning." By thus challenging conventional stereotypes about deviance and laying the blame for much of the problem at the feet of respectable control agents, symbolic interactionist theorists participated in the growing mood of rebellion and social critique which was gaining momentum in the 1960's. This was particularly so at the University of Chicago and universities on the U.S. West Coast

Theoretical Foundations: The Influence of Interpretive Sociology:

Symbolic interactionist theorists work within the interpretive sociological tradition. Following Max Weber, interpretive sociology emphasizes the importance of subjective meaning in the social organization of everyday life. Three variants of interpretive sociology were particularly influential: (1) symbolic interactionism; (2) phenomenological sociology; and (3) ethnomethodology.

Symbolic interactionism, rooted in the work of George Herbert Mead, emphasized the interpretive adjustment of humans to the real or imagined reactions of others. Mead's student Herbert Blumer asserts that the term "symbolic interaction" refers to the fact that humans define or interpret each other's actions instead of merely reacting to them. Essentially, for interactionists society is process - a dynamic alignment of people, each acting in relation to how s/he interprets the actions of others. The self is also seen in processual terms, a dynamic series of self-indications by which people interpretively take the viewpoint of others - particularly significant others - towards themselves in deciding appropriate lines of action. These definitional and processual emphases of symbolic interactionism permeate the social reaction perspective, particularly in the manner in which reaction theorists conceive of *labeling*, *the sequential model of deviance*, *master status*, *secondary deviance*, and *stigma*. We will discuss each of these terms in turn.

Labeling refers to the process by which deviants are defined by the rest of society. We cannot simply assume a given act is deviant simply because it is commonly regarded to be. Rather, we must look at the process by which this common definition arises: the process of

labeling. This occurs at two levels: (1) the concrete interaction between the labelers and potential targets; and (2) the historical construction of labels themselves. The first level involves what goes on between control agents and others such that deviant labels are applied, withheld or avoided (some are caught, some not, others are falsely labeled, and so on). The labeling process itself may be formal or informal. In formal labeling, police or other control agents are influenced by many contingencies in deciding whether to formally label an individual (e.g. gender/ race stereotyping, demeanor, dress, bureaucratic pressures, etc.). Similarly, in informal labeling, people who act similarly may be reacted to differently (e.g. as gay) by different labelers under different circumstances - revealing more about the labelers than the labelees.

As for how various labels emerged as forms of deviance in the first place, Becker argues that deviant labels arise as the result of efforts by powerful “moral entrepreneurs” who lobby for the deviantization of certain types of behavior (e.g. smoking pot). This concern for the historical development of deviant categories is an important aspect of the symbolic interactionist perspective.

The *sequential model of deviance* involves the idea that deviance unfolds over time. The factors which influence its development do not all operate simultaneously, and some may be more important in encouraging one to experiment with nonconformity. Others are more influential in sustaining existing patterns of rule-breaking. Thus, Becker proposes a sequential model of deviance that takes into account that patterns of behavior develop in an orderly sequence (e.g. the progressive stages involved in becoming a deviant drug user: some factors, like personal alienation, affect certain people more than others, because some are in contact with drug users, others are not. Some are not at the point where they count, while others find them highly important). Not surprisingly, Becker employs the metaphor of career development to explicate progressive stages in deviant involvement. Others, such as J.L. Simmons, analyze the sequential unfolding of deviance in terms of phases such as initial recruitment, role imprisonment, and entrance into sustaining deviant subcultures. At each stage potential deviance face a wide range of pushes and pulls, and choose (though not entirely freely) to continue or discontinue their advance into nonconformity. Such choices are influenced by a variety of situational factors, individual capacities and desires, and the more general cultural and institutional setting in which one is located. One of the most important career contingencies here involves the reactions of others to deviant labeling. Others may come to think and act toward the labeled deviant in a manner different than before, and his/her life chances may be drastically altered (e.g. may be locked up, denied employment, etc). All of this may lead to a new identity organized around the awareness of one’s status as an outsider. Indeed, even if not caught, the fear of being discovered may significantly change one’s life (e.g. young teenagers smoking dope behind their parents’ backs).

Deviance as Master Status relates to the idea that we all occupy multiple roles and statuses (e.g. father , brother, parent, employee, husband, university graduate, wealthy). Yet, some may be more central to our identities than others (e.g. race in the U.S.: “I met a black lawyer at the party”; gender: “I went to a woman doctor”). Significantly deviance operates in the

same fashion - overshadowing all other identities. Everett Hughes argues that possession of one deviant trait may have a generalized symbolic value, so that people automatically assume that its bearer possesses other undesirable traits allegedly associated with it (e.g. "I have a gay boss").

Secondary deviance involves a distinction, originally introduced by Edwin Lemert, between the original reasons behind a person's deviation (which may be numerous) and those flowing from the social reaction to it. The point is that whatever the reasons behind the initial deviation (be they biological, psychological or sociological), labeling may amplify or stabilize deviance. According to Lemert, "when a person begins to employ his deviant behavior or a role based upon it as a means of defense, attack or adjustment to the overt and covert problems created by the consequent social reaction to him, his deviation is secondary."

Stigma, finally, is a concept firmly grounded in the work of Erving Goffman. While Goffman is well known for his idea that people "present their selves" in a way to give the most favorable impression, he also points out that some people are cast into roles which constrain their abilities to manage positive impressions of themselves. Such persons are stigmatized, the bearers of "spoiled identity" (e.g. negatively labeled for how they appear in addition to how they may act). Of course, if wise to their predicament, they may restrict themselves to the company of other stigmatized persons, restricting the flow of information about themselves to others whom they can trust. Whether successful in managing stigma or not, Goffman's work points out that labeled deviants are faced with problems not faced by the straight world.

The second theoretical tradition emerging from interpretive sociology and having an influence on the symbolic interactionist perspective is phenomenological sociology. This involves the study of society as it appears within the consciousness of its members. Phenomenological sociologists suspend judgement about the objective reality of social life in order to describe social reality as it is constructed in the minds of those who experience it. These ideas are rooted in the work of Alfred Schutz, who portrayed the experience of everyday life as filtered through a set of categorical definitions or typifications about what the world is and how one should act within it. These typical meanings and recipes for action provide people with a common sense about the nature of social reality, that it can be taken for granted, that it exists independently of one's immediate experience, and that, for practical purposes, others experience it in similar fashion. Schutz' students Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann take these ideas further, arguing that, without instinctual underpinnings for a stable sense of social order, humans use language to symbolically create an artificial world order. The names we affix to things take on a life of their own and we become trapped in the reality of our own words. This process whereby humanly created symbols are experientially transformed into externally given social realities is termed objectification. Through socialization the reality of these symbols is brought within. They come to rule not by external force but by the internal restraints of conscience. Coming to be experienced as "natural realities," people forget that these symbols were once nothing but an arbitrary way of naming something, derivatives of prior symbolic externalization. As institutionalized versions of social reality they operate as controls over what we experience as real. To deny their reality is to defy common sense and run the risk of being labeled deviant.

The third interpretive school of thought influencing the symbolic interactionist perspective is ethnomethodology. It extends the phenomenological perspective to the study of everyday social interaction. It is primarily concerned with the methods which people use to accomplish a reasonable account of what is happening in social interaction and to provide a structure for the interaction itself. Unlike symbolic interactionists, ethnomethodologists don't assume that people actually share common symbolic meanings. Rather, they share a ceaseless body of interpretive work enabling them to convince themselves and others that they share common meanings. They also differ from phenomenologists in that they view social reality as more fragile - not so much socialized and organized by an internalized stock of meanings as by the moment to moment creation and re-creation of the social world in interaction with others. Similarly, social structure isn't seen so much as governed by a predetermined structure of meanings, roles and rules, as it is a practical accomplishment of the practical, interpretive work that people do in order to make sense of a particular moment or place in social life.

Given this concern with the processes by which people construct believable, acceptable and defensible accounts of what social life "really" is, it isn't surprising that ethnomethodology has paid much attention to the problems of deviance and social control. By categorizing certain behaviors as deviant we dramatize the recognizably "real" boundaries of social life itself. By interpretively "recognizing" that certain people are outside the accepted rules of society we pay homage to the reality of those rules and the social structure assumed to be behind them. Ethnomethodology takes on these matters by focusing on the practical interpretive work of people in constructing imputations about what is deviant and what is normal.

Before closing this part on the theoretical variations and influences on the symbolic interactionist perspective, we must finally comment on how power is a driving force behind the labeling process. Differences in power translate into differences in the ability to label. Yet this concern, while important, has sometimes been more implicit than explicit. For a time, many students of symbolic interactionist were distracted from issues of power by a preoccupation with the interpretive microdynamics of the labeling process. However, over time, many others corrected this neglect by more squarely focusing on the power dynamics inside and outside of these processes.

Identifying Symbolic Interactionist Deviance:

The symbolic interactionist perspective has contributed significantly to the methods of deviance research. Its influence is particularly evident regarding (1) the critique of official statistics; (2) the definition of what should be considered deviant; and (3) the reflexive nature of the research process.

First, with regard to official statistics, it has been pointed out that much research on deviance involves an uncritical acceptance of official statistics. The symbolic interactionist perspective, on the other hand, points out that the social production of such statistics may tell us more about the organizational concerns of control agents than about deviants per se. Thus, this perspective encourages us to study the social construction of official statistics (e.g. perceptual

biases, differential visibility of various types of deviants, organizational pressures on arrests, etc.)

Next, the perceptual biases of control agents are important. The production and perpetuation of stereotypical perceptions of race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, religion, and even physical appearance influence one's chances of being caught and officially labeled as deviant. This un masks the notion of objectivity in official statistics.

The situational dynamics of labeling are important. Whether something is officially recorded as deviance depends upon the dynamics of the situation in which labeling occurs (e.g. the presence of a citizen complaint or not influences labeling. Prior knowledge of the case vs. not. Similarly, youths exhibiting polite, cooperative behavior vs. youths exhibiting uncooperative, physically rude body language/dress/demeanor. Regardless of the seriousness of the behavior in question, youths of the latter type are far more likely to be officially categorized as deviant).

Fourth, there is the issue of differential visibility of deviants. Some persons are simply more visible to the watchful eyes of control agents (e.g. those on welfare vs. corporate criminals; street hookers vs. high status "call girls"). The more visible, the more likely to become counted in official stats (and vice versa).

Fifth, there is the important issue of the organizational characteristics of control agencies. These are generally bureaucratic organizations, influenced by the way that work is organized, available staff, pressures to "crack down" in certain areas, styles of enforcement (by the book vs. containment), more resources for the drug squad than parking enforcement, pressures to "clear" the big case, etc.)

Sixth, there is the political nature of official statistics. These are produced in a politically charged context by agencies with a stake in showing that they are doing a good job. Responsible to politicians who often campaign to fight crime, pressures may be brought to bear on official crime rates. Similarly, agencies themselves use crime rates in campaigns for funding, against cutbacks, etc. High or low crime rates may be used politically by one party or another to serve their interests.

As noted above, after its critique of official statistics, the second methodological contribution of the symbolic interactionist perspective concerns the issue of what is to be considered deviant. The symbolic interactionist perspective cautions against any preconceived notion in this regard, relying, instead, on definitions used by real people in particular historical contexts. This concern with how everyday people define deviance has prompted many such researchers to employ field methods to study the labeling process at work. All begin, however, with the interpretive perspective of those being studied.

The final methodological contribution of the symbolic interactionist perspective involves its acknowledgment of the reflexive nature of symbolic interactionist research. This recognizes

that researchers, like everyone else, are bound to the social contexts and everyday interpretive practices of others where their studies occur. They may thus have difficulty in claiming objectivity for their analyses. Rather than retreating to other approaches, however, symbolic interactionist researchers point out that there are significant problems in the objectivity of these other approaches as well: many employ similar interpretive practices, but at a distance and before the fact. Moreover, their prepackaged questions may not be interpreted in the same fashion by all respondents. Thus, the symbolic interactionist perspective acknowledges that, regardless of methodology, objectivity is partial at best. Researchers must do the best they can by conducting rigorous examination of social contexts, and (1) make attempts to partially replicate a study; and, in some cases (2) use verbatim audio/visual recordings to enable others to aid in interpreting the scene being analyzed.

Social Control of Societal Reactions to Deviance:

Many symbolic interactionist studies document the differential, often discriminatory nature of social control. Hence, reaction theorists are generally supportive of reforms which limit the discretionary power of control agents and guarantee the basic civil rights of all accused deviants. Two other programs of reform also come up: (1) decriminalizing “victimless” crimes; and (2) deploying the “least restrictive” control options.

With regard to the former, “victimless crime” refers to a wide range of consensual social exchanges that have been punished by the criminal law (e.g. drugs, prostitution, gambling, abortion). This isn’t to say there is no victim (there’s a wide range of opinion about that), but that these crimes are engaged in more or less consensually, and are often targeted as morally wrong. Often the argument is in fact over whether - or whom - is the victim. As well, controversy typically swirls around whether making such “moral offenses” illegal is really beneficial to society at large. The symbolic interactionist perspective’s answer is a definite no. It contends that the legal prohibition of consensual deviant exchanges amplifies rather than decreases the negative consequences of nonconformity. Several arguments are made:

First of all, it is argued that laws prohibiting consensual deviant exchanges are essentially unenforceable (e.g. prohibition didn’t stop drinking, prostitution has been around since the dawn of time regardless of the law). The only way to control them would be overwhelming surveillance and invasion of privacy - which would be more “immoral” than these crimes.

Secondly, it is argued that laws prohibiting consensual deviant exchanges lead to discriminatory enforcement patterns (e.g. lower class street hookers get busted far more often than high status call girls).

Third, laws prohibiting consensual deviant exchanges encourage deviant behavior on the part of control agents, including: (1) using illegal means to obtain evidence; and (2) being corrupted by people who do business in the market of desired but prohibited goods and services.

Fourth, laws prohibiting consensual deviant exchanges may increase secondary deviance (e.g. people addicted to illegal drugs, the price of which is inflated by its illegality, must resort to other crimes to get their fix).

Fifth, laws prohibiting consensual deviant exchanges are extremely expensive to enforce (e.g. the cost savings if possession of small amounts of pot were decriminalized would be staggering - as we see from the California example of \$25 million a year).

Sixth, laws prohibiting consensual deviant exchanges support/encourage organized crime.

Finally, laws prohibiting consensual deviant exchanges damage the public's respect for the law (e.g. youth complaints about the hypocritical regime of legal booze but illegal pot).

The second major plank in the social control regime of symbolic interactionist theorists is the idea that, if too harsh, punishment may result in deviants altering their self-concepts in a way that encourages further deviation. To avoid imprisoning people within a deviant role, the least restrictive control practices possible should be employed. This means to avoid, if at all possible, the regimentation, self-mortification and stigmatization of people like prisoners and mental patients in public institutions. Goffman was a pioneer in this regard, and Edwin Schur's Radical Non-Intervention takes this idea further, suggesting that it would be better to divert offenders to counseling and/or community programs and away from the stigmatization of the courtroom (and would also be cheaper).

Yet, sociological research hasn't necessarily backed this idea up. While some diverted offenders may perceive themselves as less stigmatized, there is little evidence that such diversion programs actually reduce crime (and existing studies are poorly constructed, using small samples and questionable control groups). Nonetheless, the financial and perceptual advantages of diversion may be significant enough to justify continued experimentation with efforts to reduce deviance in the least restrictive manner possible (e.g. RJ).

The Symbolic interactionist Perspective Today:

Today the symbolic interactionist perspective is extremely influential in the study of deviance and social control. With its concern about the relationship between control agents and those labelled, three general areas of inquiry have been pursued:

- (1) The historical development of deviant labels (e.g. Becker on the Marijuana laws);
- (2) The process by which labels are applied; (e.g. Scheff on mental illness; Lynch accommodation to madness);and
- (3) The consequences of being labelled (e.g. Rosenhan on mental illness; Schwartz & Skolnick on legal stigma; McCaghy & Skipper on subcultures, "occupational predispositions & lesbianism"; the "tertiary deviance" of groups fighting for rights)

Assessment of the Symbolic interactionist Perspective:

One of the most important approaches to deviance and social control, the symbolic interactionist perspective reminds us that the study of deviance can never be fully detached from the study of social control work. It contends that behaviours are never deviant in themselves, but only because they are viewed that way by people with enough power to make labels stick (e.g. hallucinations may be viewed as either visionary, works of demons, or sick, depending on the cultural or historical context).

Methodologically the symbolic interactionist perspective also makes an important contribution in treating official statistics as a topic of research in its own right rather than as reliable data on deviance (e.g. why are things counted the way they are, and what influences this?) The symbolic interactionist perspective makes the official production and recording of deviance as much a topic for study as the distribution of deviance within the population.

Yet, despite these contributions, the symbolic interactionist perspective has been criticized from a number of directions. Each will be dealt with in turn.

First, there is the causal critique. This questions the “alleged” theory that labelling is really the true cause of deviant behaviour. The word “alleged” is used because labelling theory was never really intended as a causal theory per se, but a “way of looking” that expanded the traditional scope of deviance research by focussing on the processes of social control. It is really meant to supplement, rather than replace, the causal insights of other perspectives. Nevertheless, many have missed this point. Of particular concern is the issue of secondary deviance, but, even here, social reaction theorists haven’t argued that labelling invariably causes further deviance (an untenable position), but that labelling must always be considered a potential factor in the causation of subsequent deviance. Sometimes being labelled may box one into a deviant career, but not always. If and how are empirical questions. Sensitization to these issues, rather than an assumption of labelling’s causal significance, is the real strength of this perspective.

Secondly, there is the normative critique. Jack Gibbs focuses on Becker’s topic of secret deviance, unlabelled acts which were nonetheless deviant. How did Becker know they were deviant if not labelled? By referring to some set of normative standards. Norms thus precede labels, so norms, not labels, should be the focus for a truly sociological study of deviance. This argument is helpful in noting inconsistencies in the symbolic interactionist perspective. Yet, positing norms for the definition of deviance presents its own problems (i.e. how do you identify the rules? How do you now people will do what they say on surveys? Inferring norms from behaviour involves making but one possible interpretation among many, and is subject to sociologists own privileged biases, ignoring situated meanings, participants’ interpretations, etc.). Thus, to fully appreciate the problem of deviance sociologists must attend not to a catalog of norms, but to the context-bound cataloging of actors themselves. This frees sociologists from the dilemma of trying to decide whether their definitions or those of the people they study are more appropriate operationalizations of norm violations. This focus on members’ accounting

practices, on the interactional, context-bound process of deviant attribution, is what is actually distinctive and new about the symbolic interactionist perspective.

Third, the symbolic interactionist perspective has been criticized on empirical grounds. These revolve around two questions: (1) whether social variables account for a higher proportion of deviant labelling than behavioural variables; and (2) whether labelled persons are more likely than non-labelled persons to deviate more often or with greater seriousness in the future. Trying to put the symbolic interactionist perspective to such a definite, quantitative test exhibits a misunderstanding of the theoretical perspective generally, which focuses more on the social dynamics and consequences of labelling, not on causation per se. Yet, many researchers have presented such propositions which misrepresent the basic concerns of the symbolic interactionist perspective, discovered that these propositions are not supported by empirical data (often official statistics), and thereby condemn the perspective for failing to prove what it never promised to prove in the first place. This is like demolishing a straw man. Not only that, studies conducted on these questions illustrate that the data on these questions is not as clear cut as critics might think, with a sizable number of studies showing that social disadvantage may have some impact on labelling, as well as that labelling may have some impact in producing criminal behaviour.

Fourth, there is the situated knowledge critique, which focuses on the historical construction of deviant labels (e.g. increasing public awareness of sexual harassment may be viewed as the result of hard-fought struggles by women to redefine the meaning of violent behaviours long justified by male-centred social attitudes). Symbolic interactionist theory attempts to account for how categories of social problems and deviance are produced and how methods of social control and treatment are institutionally established. Yet, despite much research on these matters, critics have raised questions about the situated character of interactionists' own theoretical accounts (e.g. the assumption that all knowledge claims, especially scientific ones, are to be theorized as power moves, not moves toward truth - with no objectively or ethically defensible position from which to make such claims). In the place of such assumptions, some such as Haraway, have supplemented interactionism with feminist critical empiricism, a focus on how the oppressed are better able to be "partially objective" due to their lack of blindness about the effects of power compared to others. Such "situated objectivity" begins with an awareness of the interdependence between power and knowledge, and the "situated knowledge critique" demands that constructionists be as reflexive about the contexts of their own theoretical activities as they are about the claims of the people they study.

Finally, there is the structural critique of the symbolic interactionist perspective. This suggests that while reaction theorists have spent much time studying micro interactions between labelling and deviants, less time has been devoted to examining the relationship between control work and macro structural features of society as a whole. It isn't that this perspective excludes such analysis, but that it remains consistently under-applied. Some have explained this through the constraints involved in micro-level theoretical insights of interpretive sociology. Other suggest that reaction theory has been hampered by its liberal focus on winning sympathy and tolerance for the deviant, but not seeing deviance as rooted in the master institutions of the larger

society nor expressing an active opposition to them. Of course, in recent years, social reaction researchers have started to take this structural critique to heart. Today, reaction theorists frequently move beyond micro-level studies of labelling to explore the relationship between labelling and the social, political, and economic organization of society as a whole.