

SOC 3290 Deviance
Lecture 13: The Social Constructionist Perspective

Today we will continue with themes emerging from symbolic interactionism, and consider how these have been expressed in the current social constructionist perspective. I place particular emphasis on three matters:

1. Howard Becker's discussion of labelling, particularly the historical creation of deviant labels;
2. How this approach has been applied, via phenomenological sociology, to the study of social problems; and
3. Criticisms of the contemporary constructionist position in this regard.

Howard Becker: Outsiders:

In this piece, Becker begins by taking issue with the traditional idea that deviance involves the infraction of some agreed upon rule or norm. He suggests that, since those who break even identical rules are a heterogeneous group, their behaviour cannot be explained by uniform causes. Thus, it is analytically preferable to suggest that deviance is created by society by actually making the rules whose infraction is condemned, and then applying those rules to particular people and labelling them as outsiders. "From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an "offender." The deviant is one to whom the label has successfully been applied; deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label." (Moreover, since this labelling process is not infallible, some deviants may not get labelled at all; other individuals may be falsely accused).

What Becker feels that labellees have in common is the experience of being labelled as a rule breaker within a particular group. Whether an act is deviant depends on how other people react to it. The degree to which other people will respond to a given act as deviant depends on a number of things: (1) when it occurs; (2) who commits it; (3) who feels harmed by it; (4) social class/status of the parties; and (5) whether there are negative consequences (or not). Taken together, these support the idea that deviance is not a simple quality, present in some kinds of behaviour and not others, but the product of a process which involves differential responses of other people to the behaviour. The same behaviour may be an infraction of the rules under some of the above circumstances, but not others, and whether it is depends on what others do about it.

Now that he has laid the theoretical foundation, Becker turns to the central issue in this piece - and today's lecture: the creation of rules and categories of deviance. He asks: when are rules made and enforced? He notes that rules change over time, there are lots of rules out there that are not enforced, and that it is more typical for rules to be enforced only when something provokes it. These matters require explanation. His explanation rests on the idea of enterprise.

Becker asserts that rules are the products of someone's initiative and we can think of the

people who exhibit such enterprise as moral entrepreneurs. These come in two types: rule creators and rule enforcers.

Rules creators are primarily interested in the content of rules. There is some form of social “evil” that existing rules don’t cover, and they feel that nothing can be right in the world unless rules are created to correct the problem. Such “crusaders” are frequently members of self-righteous community groups, social movements or lobbyists (e.g. those trying to ban VLT’s, members of MADD, etc.) They frequently argue that they want to help others, typically using their relatively privileged social positions to their advantage. More concerned with ends than means, they frequently employ professionals such as lawyers, PR firms, psychiatrists, expert witnesses, etc. to ensure that official institutions, such as legislatures, listen to them and respond accordingly. Of course, the new rules that emerge from such crusades may be filtered through the interests of these professionals, legislators, and so on, and not necessarily do exactly what the moral entrepreneurs intended at the outset. Yet, it is also the case that some such crusades achieve striking success - at least initially (e.g. the passage of prohibition, with its new rules banning alcohol); others may fail completely, or have their gains chipped away by judicial decisions, amendments, or shifts in public morality (e.g. laws against pornography). Thus, only some rule-creators achieve success in their mission, see that a new rule is created, along with the appropriate enforcement machinery. Others may become outsiders themselves, continuing to espouse and preach a position that sounds increasingly odd over time.

The second type of moral entrepreneur is the rule enforcer. The most obvious consequence of a successful crusade is the creation of a new set of rules, often accompanied by a new set of enforcement agencies and officials. At this point, the crusade becomes institutionalized, and efforts shift to the enforcement of the new rule (e.g. smoking bylaw inspectors). Enforcement personnel are rarely as avid about their work as the original crusaders were. It really is simply a job to them.

Yet, since the enforcement of certain rules provides a justification for their way of life, enforcers have two interests which condition their enforcement activity: (1) they must justify the existence of their position; and (2) they must win the respect of those they deal with. With regard to the first of these, rule-enforcers face a double-problem: on the one hand they must demonstrate to others that the problem still exists (so they are necessary); on the other hand they must show that they are doing a good job at eradicating it (but not so much that they make themselves unnecessary). Thus, enforcement agencies, particularly when they are seeking funds and personnel, typically oscillate between the two types of claims.

As for the issue of winning respect, a great deal of enforcement activity is devoted not to the enforcement of rules per se, but to coercing respect from the people the enforcer deals with. At times, this impacts on the labelling of deviance (i.e. people may be labelled not because they broke a specific rule, but because they showed disrespect to enforcers).

All of this is aided and abetted by rule-enforcers’ considerable discretion to prioritize

their work, deal with certain problems before others, etc. Lacking the naive moral fervour of rule-creators, enforcers often develop their own private evaluation of the importance of various kinds of rules and infractions of them - and this may differ considerably from both rule-creators and the general public. Thus, they enforce rules and create outsiders in a selective way - and much of what is involved in this selection is extraneous to the actual behaviour prohibited by the rule.

Of course, all of this may not go down well with the original rule-creators - who may find it hard to accept enforcers' selective priorities, long-range approach, etc. They want the "evil" stamped out now, and may raise a fuss - or begin a new crusade - to see that something is done about it.

Thus, Becker argues that deviance is always the result of enterprise. Before any act can be viewed as deviant, and before any class of people can be labelled and treated as outsiders for committing the act, someone must have made the rule which defines the act as deviant. Even though an act may be harmful in some objective sense, it needs to be discovered and pointed out, entrepreneurs have to make something out of it, and rules created against it. Without the enterprise required to get rules made, the deviance which consists of breaking the rule could not exist. Moreover, once made, the new rule must be applied to particular people before the abstract class of outsiders created by the rules can be peopled. This job usually falls to the lot of professional enforcers who, by enforcing these rules, create the particular deviants society views as outsiders.

Thus, we must see deviance, and the outsiders who embody this abstract conception, as a consequence of a process of interaction among people, some of whom in the service of their own interests make and enforce rules which catch others who, in the service of their own interests, have committed acts which are labelled deviant.

Now we will continue with our review of these themes by examining the recent and growing emphasis this approach is having in the study of social problems.

Joel Best: Typification and Social Problems Construction:

Best begins by asking what we mean when we speak of social problems. He notes that we all have common sense ideas about this, and can readily list off examples such as crime, discrimination and poverty. He adds that many sociology texts go further, frequently defining social problems as trouble spots within society, social conditions that have been found to be harmful to individual and/or social well-being. Such definitions suggest that the essence of social problems lies in *objective* social conditions and that some conditions are problems.

Best points out that such definitions have two key flaws. First, *they minimize or even ignore the subjective nature of social problems*. For example, not all harmful conditions are considered social problems (e.g. the poor nutrition inherent in the typical American diet). Moreover, histories of particular social problems reveal the importance of subjective judgements.

For example, the contemporary feminist movement began to gain public attention around 1970, and new terms began to appear in the press (e.g. sexism, pay equity, sexual harassment, etc.) Obviously, the conditions feminists attacked were not new; they had been around for a long time. The change was subjective. After 1970, people began including sexism, sex discrimination, and the like on their lists of social problems. In sum, social problems are what people view as social problems, and no condition is a social problem until someone considers it to be.

There is a second problem with objectivist definitions of social problems: *the objective conditions that people define as social problems have relatively little in common*. For example, if people can even agree on a list of harmful conditions such as poor nutrition, sexism, environmental degradation, crime, poverty, and nuclear proliferation, what do they do next? What do these have in common? Very little, except for the fact that they are all harmful. In sum, objectivist definitions of social problems inevitably lead to a hodge-podge list of topics with little in common. These problems do not have the same sorts of causes, and they do not have the same sorts of effects. Sociologists studying crime need to ask very different questions from those studying sexism. Saying that both are social problems doesn't really offer a useful direction for research.

As these limitations of objectivist definitions have become increasingly apparent, some sociologists have sought to develop an alternative, subjectivist approach to studying social problems. Their approach focuses on the processes by which people designate some social conditions as social problems. The most influential statement of this perspective is a short book, Constructing Social Problems, by Malcolm Spector and John Kitsuse. They are referred to as *constructionists* because they speak of the "social construction of social problems." Essentially, their position is that our sense of what is or is not a social problem is a *product*, something that has been produced or constructed through social activities (e.g. lobbying by activists, expose's by investigative reporters, and/or bills introduced by legislators). Constructionists define social problems *in terms of these activities*. Spector and Kitsuse, for example, use the term "claims-making," defining social problems as "the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions." This definition emphasizes the activities, the claims-making. In this view, social problems are not conditions; conditions are merely the subjects of claims. In fact, Spector and Kitsuse argue that, given this emphasis, the objective status of those conditions is irrelevant.

Specifically, and in some respects echoing the "moral entrepreneurial process" outlined by Howard Becker and the "value conflict" perspective of Fuller and Meyers, Spector and Kitsuse go on to develop a model of claims-making activities centred around four stages: (i) "collective attempts to remedy a condition that some group perceives and judges offensive and undesirable"; (ii) recognition of, and response to, these claims by "governmental agencies or other official and influential institutions"; (iii) re-emergence of claims in response to the actions of official institutions; and (iv) claimants' "contention that it is no longer possible to 'work within the system'..." and their attempts to develop alternative institutions. They refer to this as the "natural history of social problems."

This position contrasts sharply with that of objectivist sociologists, for whom social problems are conditions. For constructionists, social problems are claims-making activities, and they endeavour to examine what claims-makers say about conditions, not the conditions themselves. The advantage of this position is that constructionists draw attention to something all social problems have in common, which suggests questions for further research (e.g. what sorts of claims get made? When? By what sorts of people? What types of responses do claims receive? Under what conditions?) Questions such as these not only guide constructionist research, they provide a framework for a theory of social problems.

Best then goes on to examine, in typical phenomenological fashion, the typification of social problems in claims-making activities. In this respect, Spector and Kitsuse's work has essentially taken Alfred Schutz's concept of typification and applied it specifically to social problems. Best notes that claims makers do more than simply draw attention to particular social conditions. *Claims-makers shape our sense of just what the problem is. Any social condition is a potential subject for claims-making, or rather for several kinds of claims-making. Each social condition can be constructed as many different social problems.* For example, consider the issue of drug abuse. There are many ways in which claims-makers can - and have - constructed this condition as a social problem. For example, some have seen it as a moral problem, a lack of respect for traditional values of self-respect, independence and self-sufficiency. Others regard it as an educational problem, for example, and that it would attenuate if individuals were exposed to more positive social influences and educational programs. A third group considers that drug abuse is a medical problem, and that it could be dealt with more effectively as a public health rather than a criminal matter. Some focus on addicts' potentially lost chances for a fulfilling career. Many refer to how the treatment of drug addicts from poor neighborhoods is simply another hypocritical instance of a capitalist society placing the poor at a disadvantage despite its own promotion of drugs for just about any problem. Or, are the families of addicts the principal victims - children born in poverty, raised by mothers who are ill-prepared for the responsibilities of parenthood; parents who have been stolen from, cut off from their loved ones and fearful of what might happen to them? Or should we focus on the costs to society as a whole (e.g. loss of potentially productive workers, inflated welfare rolls, and the cycle of poverty). Inevitably, claims-makers choose to focus on particular *aspects* of a condition. They do not simply say that condition X is a problem; they characterize X as a problem of a particular sort. *Typification occurs when claims-makers so characterize a problem's nature.*

Another important way we could look at this is if we were to consider the history of criminological theory. Let's take the example of theft. At different points in history, this same property crime has been *officially* characterized by academics as "the work of the devil;" a rational calculation that there will likely be more pleasure resulting from the act than pain; the behavioural result of having a "sick" body or mind; a necessity brought on by the impoverishment and domination of the poor in unequal capitalist society; a reflection of normative/value conflict resulting from social disorganization; a phenomenon that functions to set social boundaries and contributes to society; a result of the disjunction between shared social goals of success and differentially available means; insufficient social integration; learned

behaviour; the result of labels being applied; a linguistic construct reflective of power/knowledge dynamics; and so on. Even at the official level of criminological theory, like a diamond, different facets of the same phenomenon stand out in the light of our gaze, while others are backgrounded. What we see often limits what we don't see, and typification occurs when we characterize X as a problem of a particular sort. Whether academic or otherwise, typification occurs when claims-makers so characterize a problem's nature.

Naming, such as using the term "teen promiscuity," is just one way claims-makers typify social problems (e.g. claiming that "teen pregnancy" is really a moral, medical, criminal, political, or other type of problem). Each orientation emphasizes different aspects of X, typically locating the problem's cause and suggesting a possible solution (e.g. moral rhetoric emphasizes policies encouraging individual to take responsibility for their actions; educational discourse stresses public education programs; medical imagery promotes treatment). Another common form of typification involves illustrating a problem through the use of *examples*, such that particular cases come to be seen as *exemplars*. Particular cases often shape our sense of social problems, and claims-makers draw attention to examples that seem to justify their claims (e.g. pro-choice advocates point to pregnant victims of rape and incest; pro-life advocates focus on women who have multiple abortions, using this procedure as another form of birth control "merely for their own convenience"). Our attitudes toward social problems often reflect our reactions to such "typical" cases, and the example comes to represent the larger problem.

Best argues that typification is an integral part of social problems construction. Claims-makers inevitably characterize problems in particular ways: they emphasize some aspects and not others; they promote specific orientations; and they focus on particular causes and advocate particular solutions.

Joel Best: Debates About Constructionism:

In this second excerpt, Best notes that the constructionist approach to social problems is relatively new, and remains controversial. Critics attack constructionism from several sides: some defend objectivism; others argue that objectivism and constructionism can be easily reconciled. Still others argue that constructionism is inherently inconsistent due to contradictory theoretical assumptions. Moreover, there are serious disagreements within the constructionist camp regarding what sorts of analysis ought to be called "constructionist." Each of these matters will be discussed in turn.

First, some objectivist critics agree that constructionism has a unique approach - one they deplore. They argue that constructionists' focus on claims-making ignores a far more important subject: the harmful social conditions which are the "real" social problems. Constructionists respond by noting: (1) there is nothing wrong with studying social conditions, but decades of objectivist research on social conditions have failed to lay a foundation for general theories of social problems; and (2) that it is important to remember that we only recognize social conditions as "really" harmful because someone made persuasive claims to that effect.

Secondly, some sociologists who remain more or less committed to the objectivist perspective deny that constructionism represents a genuinely different approach, arguing that the two approaches are merely "two sides of the same coin." Best asserts that such efforts to both minimize and reconcile the differences between objectivism and constructionism "only give lip service to constructionist concerns." More is required than simply acknowledging that definitions of social problems are subjective. Best notes that by defining social problems in terms of claims-making, constructionists have set a new agenda for those who would study social problems; their research addresses a *different set of questions* about the nature of claims, those who make claims, and so on. This results in altogether different research (e.g. not exploring conditions regarding how many people are homeless and why, but how claims about homelessness are made, typified, and responded to). Because the two perspectives define social problems differently and focus on different issues, it is no small matter to reconcile objectivism and constructionism in a single integrated theory.

But perhaps the most influential critique of constructionism comes, not from objectivist, but from two sociologists writing from a subjectivist stance, who charge that constructionists base their analysis on hidden, objectivist assumptions. Steve Woolgar and Dorothy Pawluch argue that constructionism is *internally inconsistent*. While constructionists identify their focus as *subjective* judgements or claims, constructionist analyses usually *assume* a knowledge of *objective* social conditions. Thus, a standard constructionist explanation might proceed: although social condition X remained unchanged, X became defined as a social problem when people began making claims about it. Woolgar and Pawluch point to the (often unstated) assumption that X was unchanged. This contradiction is at the heart of constructionism. As they state: "*The successful social problems explanation depends on making problematic the truth status of certain states of affairs selected for analysis and explanation, while backgrounding or minimizing the possibility that the same problems apply to assumptions upon which the analysis depends.*" Woolgar and Pawluch call this selective attention to objective conditions "*ontological gerrymandering.*"

This third critique of constructionism launched a lively debate among sociologists who saw themselves as constructionists with regard to what, if any, assumptions about the objective social world are acceptable. Three intellectual camps have emerged from this debate. First, at one extreme, are those who are termed *strict constructionists*. They argue that social problems analysts should avoid making assumptions about objective reality. In their view, constructionists should examine the perspectives of claims-makers, policymakers, and other members of society. The actual social conditions are irrelevant; what matters is what the members say about those conditions. This is because one set of claims cannot be used to evaluate the objective status of another. Essentially, finding considerable merit in Woolgar and Pawluch's critique, strict constructionists focus on claims-making, do not presume to judge the accuracy of claims, and strive to avoid making (even implicit) assumptions about objective reality.

At the other extreme are those sociologists who treat constructionism as a synonym for *debunking*. The constructionist stance draws a basic distinction between social conditions and

members' claims about those conditions: claims are about *putative* conditions which may or may not exist. Sociologists who want to draw attention to mistaken or distorted claims sometimes describe these claims as "socially constructed." This usage equates social construction with error, and ignores the way that all claims - and all other human knowledge - are socially constructed. Debunking assumes that the analyst knows the actual nature of objective reality, and is the crudest form of constructionism. Indeed, many consider it simply another form of objectivist sociology, since the debunker's focus is predominantly on the actual nature of social conditions, not the claims-making process.

Most constructionist research seems to fall between these extremes, into what is called *contextual constructionism*. Contextual analysts remain focused on the claims-making process, yet they acknowledge making some assumptions about social conditions to locate claims-making within its social context. For example, knowledge, however imperfect, about social conditions may help explain why particular claims emerge when they do. Another example would be increasing campaigns by claims-makers against crime at a time when there was no measurable increase in the crime rate - a contextual constructionist may try to make something of this discrepancy. While admitting that any assertion about social conditions is a social construction, they assert that calling a statement a claim does not necessarily discredit it. Various sorts of evidence, such as polls and official crime statistics may be used, "with reasonable confidence" to imperfectly describe the context within which claims-making occurs.

Contextual constructionists incorporate knowledge about social conditions in several ways. In addition to using social conditions to explain the emergence of claims, an analyst may refer to social conditions in explaining why some claims receive attention or shape public policy. Or, contrasting claims with information about the social conditions which the claims describe may reveal that claims-makers have used dramatic, atypical examples or inflated statistics.

Best sides with the contextual constructionists, arguing that it may be impossible in practice to avoid making implicit statements about social conditions (e.g. these claims were made by those claims-makers; those claims-makers have these interests and concerns; changes in the larger society made people more or less receptive to the claims, etc.) According to Best, strict constructionism advocates a sort of analytic purity in which the analyst makes no presumptions about actual social conditions. Yet, in practice, background assumptions about social conditions would seem to play a part in any analysis of claims-making. Best states: "It is not clear that the strict constructionist goal of an analysis free of assumptions about objective conditions is possible."

In concluding his piece, Best argues that, despite its difficulties, the constructionist perspective can be *useful*, both for would-be claims-makers and social problems analysts. For example, constructionist research offers the former guidelines for what works (and what does not), and under what circumstances, giving them aid in planning their own campaigns. As for the latter, constructionism remains useful as an analytic tool, as a perspective we can apply to better *understand* the world around us by focussing on various questions pertaining to claims, claims-

makers, and the course of the claims-making process. In short, constructionism has become a useful, active research tradition - one which holds the promise of general theories of social problems.