

SOC 3290 Deviance
Overheads Lecture 12: Symbolic Interactionist Theory

* Symbolic Interactionism:

- Deviance not independent of reactions by those condemning it
- Focuses on processes whereby some behaviors become seen as unacceptable/made subject to sanction, while others don't
- Denies universality of deviance apart from definitional processes

Theoretical Images:

* Three interrelated concerns:

- (1) the social-historical development of deviant labels
- (2) the application of labels to certain types of people in specific contexts
- (3) the symbolic/practical consequences of labeling

* History:

- G.H. Mead (1918): boundary setting function of labels
- F. Tannenbaum (1938): "tagging" driving people further into nonconformity
- Edwin Lemert (1951): prior theories take deviance for granted. Need to focus on origin of labels, their application and consequences
- H. Becker (1963) among others emerged in 1960's social/political upheaval. Political militancy/new forms of deviance/contradictions contributed to popularity
- "Unconventional sentimentality"/focus on role of control agents
- University of Chicago/West Coast Schools influential at time

Theoretical Foundations: Interpretive Sociology:

* Three influential variants:

- (1) Symbolic Interactionism
- (2) Phenomenological sociology
- (3) Ethnomethodology

* Symbolic Interactionism:

- (1) Labeling: definitional processes in interactions between:
 - (a) labelers/potential targets; &
 - (b) historical construction of labels
- (2) Sequential model of deviance: careers/phases/stages
- (3) Master Status: deviance a status that cuts across/colors all others
- (4) Secondary Deviance: labeling may amplify/stabilize deviance
- (5) Stigma: spoiled identities restricting presentation of self/
restricting interaction to like others

* Phenomenological Sociology:

- Focuses on society as experienced subjectively
- Alfred Schutz: typifications organize experience of reality
- Berger and Luckmann: Language symbolically creates artificial world order: controls what we experience as real

* Ethnomethodology:

- Focuses on methods people use to “make sense” of what’s going

- on/create structure in interaction
- Social world/reality as a practical, ongoing accomplishment
- Creation of deviance an ongoing reality project

* It is important to recognize the role of power in all of this

Symbolic Interactionism & Identifying Deviance:

* Symbolic interactionist perspective has made 3 methodological contributions:

- (1) the critique of official statistics;
- (2) the definition of what should be seen as deviant;
- (3) the reflexive nature of research

* The critique of official statistics:

- they tell us more about control agents than deviants;
- perceptual biases have an impact on figures;
- situational dynamics have an impact on figures;
- differential visibility of deviants affects figures;
- organizational characteristics of control agencies;
- the political nature of official statistics;

* What is to be considered deviant:

- cautions against preconceived notions;
- focuses on definitions used by real people in social and historical contexts

* The reflexive nature of research:

- researchers are themselves bound to social contexts/interpretive practices;
- objectivity difficult regardless of methodology (but quantitative more distant from what's going on);
- "do the best you can" by:

- (1) partial attempts to replicate studies; and
- (2) audiovisual recordings of data to allow others to aid in interpretation of data

Social Control of Symbolic Interactionist Deviance:

- * Social reaction approach favors social control practices:

- limiting discretionary (discriminatory) power of control agents;
- guaranteeing civil rights of all accused deviants

- * Major proposals:

- (1) Decriminalize "victimless" (consensual vice) crimes;
- (2) Deploy least restrictive control options

- * Decriminalization of consensual vice crimes avoids amplification of deviance:

- such laws unenforceable anyway
- these laws lead to discriminatory enforcement
- these laws encourage deviance by control agents
- these laws increase secondary deviance
- these laws are expensive to enforce
- these laws support/encourage organized crime
- these laws damage public respect for the law

* Deploying the least restrictive control options:

- avoid deviants being stigmatized/altering self-concepts in a way imprisoning them in deviant roles
- research unclear on this (often flawed), but such an approach may be more cost-effective than traditional punishment

The Symbolic Interactionist Perspective Today:

* Three current areas of inquiry:

- (1) *The historical development of deviant labels*: how categories of deviance emerge & how methods of social control become institutionalized
- (2) *The process by which labels are applied*: the conditions under which control agents successfully label & the contingencies under which labellees resist or escape labelling
- (3) *The consequences of being labelled*: how labelling may amplify deviance/ how individuals organize lives around a symbolic stigma

Assessment of the Symbolic Interactionist Perspective:

* Positive contributions:

- (1) Reminds us that study of deviance cannot be detached from social control;
- (2) Deviance lies in the eye of the beholder (+ with power in a given social/historical context);

(3) Methodologically: official statistics a topic of research in its own right.

* Criticisms:

(1) *Causal Critique*: labeling doesn't clearly cause deviance (misguided/ misunderstands perspective's processual focus);

(2) *Normative Critique*: normative standards implicit in labelling (but positing norms as answer raises additional problems);

(3) *Empirical Critique*: measuring (i) whether social vs. behavioral variables account for labeling; and (ii) whether labeled persons are more likely to engage in further deviation. (misunderstands perspective/ "demolishes straw man"/ data not quite as unsupportive as claimed in any event);

(4) *Situated Knowledge Critique*: how can constructionists be sure of situated character of their own accounts? Proposed solution: "partial objectivity" of the oppressed/ reflexivity about theoretical activities

(5) *Structural Critique*: Insufficient focus on macro power: (getting better in practice)