

SOC 3290 Deviance
Overheads Lecture 13: Social Constructionism

Today we will review:

1. Howard Becker on “moral entrepreneurs”
2. Parallels in the social constructionist approach to social problems
3. Criticisms of the contemporary constructionist position

Howard Becker: Outsiders:

* Deviance is created by society by:

- (1) creating rules condemning behaviors;
- (2) applying them to individuals who are labelled “outsiders”

* Deviance is:

- not a quality of the act
- a consequence of the application of rules/sanctions by others
- this process is not infallible (e.g. some not labelled/ others falsely accused)

* Social reaction of others/labelling influenced by:

- when it occurs
- who commits it
- who feels harmed
- social class/status of parties
- negative consequences

* Rules/enforcement change over time: this is the result of enterprise

* Two types of “Moral entrepreneurs”:

- (1) Rule creators
- (2) Rule enforcers

* Rule creators:

- focus on a “social evil” existing rules don’t cover
- emphasis on content of rules
- lobby for new rules “to help others”
- employ professionals (e.g. lawyers, psychiatrists)
- new rules may/may not be enacted as a result
- new rules/application filtered through others’ interests as well
- enforcement machinery may be put in place if successful
- gains may be administratively chipped away

* Rule enforcers:

- result of institutionalization of new rules
- enforcement “just a job” for many (less fervour)
- must justify the existence of their position (doing a necessary job, but not so well as to make their role unnecessary)
- must earn the respect of those they encounter (affects labelling)
- prosecutorial discretion/prioritization aids these ends
- may run afoul of original rule-creators/ set off new crusade

* In the end, deviance = the result of enterprise surrounding:

- (1) Rule creation
- (2) Rule enforcement

Joel Best: Typification and Social Problems Construction:

- * Traditional definition of social problems = “objective”:
 - assumes the essence of social problems lie in objective conditions
 - assumes that some conditions “really are” problems

- * Problems with this:
 - minimizing/ignoring subjective nature of social problems
 - “objective” conditions defined as problems have little in common

- * Phenomenological approach: (Spector and Kitsuse):
 - focus on processes by which people designate problems
 - individual social problems are a product of definitional activities (“claims-making” re: “putative conditions”)
 - “objective conditions are irrelevant”

- * “Natural history” of social problems (4 stages):
 - (1) collective attempts to remedy perceived undesirable condition
 - (2) recognition/response by official institutions
 - (3) re-emergence of claims in response to institutional solution
 - (4) claimants’ attempts to develop alternative institutions

- * Advantages of this approach:
 - draws attention to something all social problems have in common
 - suggests new research questions
 - provides framework for a general theory of social problems

* Typification:

- claims-makers shape our sense of what the problem is
- any social condition is a potential subject for many different types of claims-making (e.g. drug abuse as moral, medical, educational, class, and/or political problem)
- myriad sociological theories of crime offer another example
- problems typified through (i) naming; and (ii) exemplifying
- typification = the central aspect of social problems construction

Debates About Constructionism:

* Constructionist approach relatively new/controversial

* Critics attack this approach in several ways:

(1) It ignores/minimizes “really harmful” social problems. Yet:

- previous objectivist research has failed general application
- what is “really harmful” merely reflects successful claims

(2) Constructionism/ objectivism = “two sides of the same coin.”

- inconsistent/ only pays lip service to constructionist issues
- constructionism has new agenda/ different questions asked

(3) Constructionism is itself internally inconsistent: focuses on subjective claims while assuming knowledge of objective conditions:

E.g. X remained unchanged (unstated assumption)

X became defined as a social problem once claims made

Thus, truth status of one factor made problematic, the other not (“Ontological gerrymandering”)

* This last critique opened a division in the constructionist approach to social problems. Three camps emerged

- (1) Strict Constructionists: avoid making assumptions about social reality (easier said than done);
- (2) Debunkers: draws distinction between social reality and claims (essentially ignoring the problem/ assuming you know social reality/ equating social construction with error);
- (3) Contextual Constructionists: honestly acknowledge making some assumptions about social conditions to locate claims-making in its social context. (Done “with reasonable confidence” to imperfectly describe context of claims).

* Best sides with contextual constructionists:

- impossible to avoid making implicit claims re: social conditions, so be honest about it
- analytic purity of strict constructionists limits its usefulness

* Despite difficulties, constructionist approach can be useful:

- offers claims-makers guidelines for what works/doesn't
- as a perspective to better understand the world
- as an active research tradition
- as holding the promise of a general theory of social problems