**SOC 3120: Social Psychology**

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**Lecture 17: Understanding and Constructing Social Order II**

In the last class we began looking at the relationship between sociological social psychology and the overall social order. In the process of constructing the social order through human activity, we have already reviewed such matters as influence, creating social bonds, solving problems, the negotiated order, and setting boundaries. Today we continue with this broad theme by considering further processes such as talking, explaining disorder, social problems, creating and joining social movements. Each will be dealt with in turn.

**Talking:**

One of the key ways that members of a society constitute and uphold the social order is by talking about it. Everyday life is filled with occasions when people simply talk to one another. While many of these may seem unimportant - merely as passing time - we must not be misled to think that all that matters are transactions in the marketplace. Talk is so commonplace that many tend to regard it as no more than a reflection of more processes and developments. Nevertheless, talk is sociologically important. Its virtual universality makes it an important part of the cement that binds the social order. It is the primary means by which people sustain the world of objects in which they live - particularly abstract objects such as institutions, values and groups. This is because we cannot experience abstract objects the way we can physical ones. People both experience and act toward abstract objects primarily by talking about them.

Talk thrives on problems. For example, aligning actions arise in response to the problematic. In disclaimers, accounts, etc., talk is stimulated by a sense that something is or might be problematic about social interaction. Talk is stimulated by a great variety of other problems as well. People commonly like to complain about a wide variety of problems they encounter in everyday life, and these constitute a major topic of conversation, debate and disagreement. While a few people may occasionally assert that the world is wonderful, most spend a great deal of their conversational time talking about problems, troubles, difficulties and disasters. Such talk shapes our view of social order - but that isn’t why people complain. They face real or imaginary problems, and, in talking about them, they give shape and substance to their ideals, values, and conceptions of how things work and should work in society.

The way people talk about problematic situations is to some extent culturally and historically variable. One culture may encourage stoic silence (e.g. before the 60's), while another encourage expression (today). One may emphasize conformity so much that it becomes seen as a problem (the 50's); another may emphasize individuality so much that social critics attack the narcissism and hedonism it entails. While there is little evidence that our culture itself changed dramatically in this time, the way in which social critics perceived problems did - and their discourse remained on the problematic relationship between the person and social order.

Although variable from one era to another and from one society to another, the propensity to discuss the problematic is itself inherently human. It is when a line of conduct is blocked that the distinctively human capacity for its conscious, deliberate control comes to the fore. People tend to take their activities for granted until something interferes with their capacity to achieve their goals. When this happens (e.g. not making enough money to maintain one’s lifestyle), talk is a major way by which people attempt to restore their lines of conduct or redefine their goals.

People do not only talk about problems, nor about the present. Often people talk about the past (e.g. important events in their lives, fond memories, etc.) Such talk is also significant in constructing the social order in relation to the person. For example, Fred Davis talks about decade labeling, that practice whereby people tend to impute distinctive qualities and characteristics to calendar decades (e.g. the 50's were boringly conformist; the 60's turbulent and radical; the 70's narcissistic, etc.). Once a decade has been so labeled and constructed, people remember events or experiences that fit the label more readily than those that do not (e.g. key assassinations and conflict over the Vietnam War in the 60's).

Although it would be wrong to depict each decade as objectively the same, neither should one assume that these collective constructions of decades are merely a reflection of objective facts. These labels and their associated characteristics tend to follow a kind of plot or moral narrative. Decades seem to be depicted in terms of qualities that reflect important values, beliefs, and aspirations, and not just in terms of what actually occurred.

**Explaining Disorder:**

In addition to talking about problems or about the past, people also talk about social order itself - largely through trying to explain disorder. In a common type of everyday conversation, people try to explain to their own satisfaction the causes of a problematic situation - whether personally involved or not. These take many forms but have in common the fact that they are seen as problematic, and may be the topic of a conversation where people try to characterize the nature and causes of the problem.

What makes a situation problematic? One mark is that people see it as disorderly, as somehow falling outside the usual bounds of experience. They can no longer take social order or the definition of the situation for granted, nor act routinely. Special effort is thus required to comprehend and define what is taking place.

Not all problematic situations elicit efforts to explain what has gone wrong. Police seeing crowds on street corners and audience members seeing a rush to the exit of an auditorium require definitions of the situation before acting. In such situations, people define the situation in order to act in it, and explanations are of secondary importance.

People construct explanations when their chief focus is on disorder itself, which they perceive exists when they cannot make sense of a situation in terms of their customary stock of knowledge. Ordinarily people rely on things like typicality, probability, causality, means-ends, norms, and substantive congruency. In role making, this enables them to know what is expected of them and how others will respond (e.g. in selecting appropriate accounts and disclaimers). Social disorder exists when the usual processes of motive talk, accounting and disclaiming do not sufficiently restore routine - when people persist in behaving in an undesirable way, for example, or engaging in obviously self-defeating behaviors.

So defined, social disorder is a construction of reality, a belief that things for some reason are not working the way they usually do, or a perception that something is wrong in social relations. Marital arguments may occur so frequently that this fact itself may become a concern for the partners and others. These may be viewed as strange in several ways - as atypical of this couple, as harmful to the children, or as improbable in light of their recent successes. On whatever grounds this perception of disorder is based, the effect is to impel a search for an explanation and solution.

Quasi theorizing is a name for one process in which people construct such explanations. People begin by identifying the cause before the effect, and construct the reality of the latter in terms of the former. They perceive a set of conditions that match the cause they have settled on, rather than the more commonsense approach of finding a cause that can account for an observed set of conditions. So in the example of a quarreling couple that realizes they argue too much, and that something ought to be done. In seeking an explanation, they may settle on a tentative solution (“we need to communicate better”). This serves not only as the basis of keeping peace for the time being, but acts as a tentative way to construct the reality of their problem. Once the other responds that “you’re right, because sometimes I don’t think you understand what I’m saying,” we have the seeds of a quasi-theory of communication as an explanation. It is not far from this to saying that most of their disagreements are really problems of communication, and that the issues they quarreled over are merely symptoms of this underlying dynamic. Once this is solved, the rest will be easier to deal with. At some point they will invoke generalizations about the importance of communication in human affairs (i.e. “Most disagreements are caused by failures of communication”), effectively subsuming their particular case under a more general rule.

At this point, the participants are likely to buttress their explanation further by rewriting their past history of arguments in light of their new insight about communication. Secondly, they will introduce values and beliefs in support of their explanation (e.g. “We’ve stayed together through all this, so we must really be alike, and belong together despite this temporary problem”).

Quasi theorizing thus produces an explanation of social disorder - a hopeful one holding out the possibility that the disorder will yield to order if the solution is applied. This is not merely an explanation, however, for in the process of explanation the quasi theory also creates its reality. The situation of the couple is transformed from an undesirable and disorderly quarrelsome state into one of unnecessary arguments caused by failure to communicate.

Paradoxically, the focus on explaining social disorder found in such forms of talk plays a role in sustaining a sense of social order, for it is in such problematic situations that significant parts of the social stock of knowledge are imbued with new life and sustained in memory. Such discourse provides an opportunity for the standards of social order to be exercised, for familiar proverbs to be used and once again proven “correct,” and for important beliefs and values to be affirmed. Distinctions between right and wrong, the typical and the unusual, the desirable and the repellent are preserved by use, and so it might be argued that occasional failures in social order play a positive role in its maintenance by providing such opportunities.

Quasi theories, along with aligning actions, are also an important means by which members of society reaffirm and preserve their culture - the world of objects in which they live and with which they must contend. When people invoke such practices, they attend to and thus also reaffirm important cultural objects (e.g. paying homage to honesty, integrity, fair dealing, tolerance, etc). Thus, these objects continue to form part of the landscape - part of what people notice, attend to, feel they must respect, and take into account in their conduct.

The social construction of social order depends on this continual reaffirmation of culture. A sense of social order depends on people’s capacity to coordinate their conduct or on their ability to understand and remedy the occasional problematic situation. It also ultimately relies on the conviction that there is a reasonably stable reality that they can take for granted. Humans seem to want not only the sense that they can predict one another’s conduct but also the sense that the world is a more or less familiar and stable place. To construct social reality, they must continually reaffirm culture.

**Social Problems:**

Talk about disorder and problems is not limited to specific, day to day encounters where people construct explanations of problematic situations. In a more macroscopic sense, social reality is constructed through discussion of social problems. A social problem may be defined as a collective object of concern, a condition felt to pertain to society as a whole or to important parts of it, and believed to be both undesirable and changeable. Such a collective construction of reality defines some condition (e.g. homelessness) as a serious problem worthy of attention by officials, the media, and the public. Definitions of specific conditions as social problems are advanced from time to time by various social groups, and they tend to demand and get a great deal of attention for a period of time before the public focus shifts to some other problem.

Yet collective definitions do not simply reflect an underlying set of objectively problematic conditions. There have been poor and homeless people in this country for a long time, just as alcoholism, child abuse, teenage pregnancies and abusive marriages have long existed. Conditions such as these tend to be “discovered” as social problems from time to time, and as attention to one problem wanes, another is discovered to take its place. To take this view of social problems is not to deny their reality, nor to be callous to the suffering of their real victims. It is simply to point out that the conditions that underlie such problems are shrouded in many layers of social definition.

First, *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 one example, consider the growing number of young, poor, unmarried women having and raising babies. 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 chastity and marital sanctity. Others regard it as an educational problem, for example, stemming from reluctance to teach sex education. Some focus on these individuals' potentially lost chances for a fulfilling career. Many refer to how the treatment of such young mothers is simply another instance of a patriarchal society placing women at a disadvantage. Or, are the babies the principal victims - born in poverty, raised by mothers who are ill-prepared for the responsibilities of parenthood? 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*.

Secondly, problem definitions tend to differ and undergo change. Keeping with the above example, it may be that in earlier times teen pregnancies were seen more as a moral problem requiring education of young women in appropriate values, but, as society becomes more attuned to problems of patriarchy, more effort is be placed on men taking responsibility for

their actions. Similarly varying - and changing - definitions of social problems may be posited for things like poverty, child abuse, etc.

Given the diverse problems that may be discovered from time to time, it is hard to generalize about the conditions under which certain problems will be emphasized, about their characterization, or about their fate once attention is paid to them. It is, however, useful to examine in detail the beliefs and perspectives that generally characterize the collective definition of a problem, for these have an important bearing on how people construct social reality.

Collective conceptions of social problems have at least 3 important dimensions. First, they generally treat some major object (negative or positive) as the core of the problem (e.g. poverty; environment, either to be attacked or protected). In focusing attention on these objects, intellectuals and scientists may theorize about the object, government agencies may investigate, the nightly news may be filled with stories, and social movements be mobilized for political action. Social problems come into play when such “claims makers” are successful in promoting a view that a particular social condition is a problem by promoting it through books, speeches, TV appearances, legislation, raising funds, conducting research, or protest rallies. Claims makers rely heavily on the mass media, seeking out sympathetic reporters who can be expected to write supportive stories, staging newsworthy events, or appearing on talk shows. It may not be an exaggeration to suggest that a social problem does not have legitimacy until the media have granted it their seal of approval (e.g. “crack houses” being used to justify the war on drugs). Similarly, it has been stated that a “social problem in the making is an issue in search of a victim”).

Secondly, human activity is treated as causally related to the problem. It is not fate, but what people do or unable to do that are seen as crucial (e.g. people on welfare are characterized as either lazy, or victims of a system set up to deny them opportunities and keep them where they are). Sometimes these collective efforts at definition focus their search for a cause on the basic institutions of society (e.g. the interests of the capitalist class to keep wages low and the unemployed as a “reserve army” to maintain profitability and control). More often, however, people focus on relatively superficial aspects of the underlying conditions and ignore the possibility that inherent faults in the social order are responsible (e.g. poverty as lack of opportunity *within* the system rather than a result of the system itself).

Thirdly, social problems definition emphasizes the possibility of human solutions. Since people produce problems, human solutions are considered both necessary and possible. Given both appropriate changes in human conduct and the right social policy, it is assumed that the problem can be eliminated.

How do these elements of a social problem bear on the view of social order held by the members of society? Despite their emphasis on human and social failings, these definitions provide society with potentially unifying objects, thus offering a basis for agreement (even though temporary and superficial) on the nature of the good society. To agree that pedophiles ought to be dealt with harshly may be to admit that society is not perfect, but this also implies a collective vision of the kind of society to be sought. Social problems objects thus provide at least the potential for unifying diverse interests, ideas and aspirations.

Yet social problems definitions often reflect more consensus on ends than means. It is easier to achieve agreement on abstract goals such as workplace safety than it is on how to achieve it (e.g. voluntary guidelines /monitoring vs. strict regulation and inspection). If people disagree on what will solve the problem, then each can identify his or her conduct as a potential solution (e.g. internal “guidelines” for corporate executives; personal attention and careful conduct for employees; “consultation and persuasion” by government).

That social problems are seen as both caused by and to be remedied by human efforts also contributes to an orderly conception of social reality. The conditions around which definitions of social problems are built remind us that the world is an uncertain and sometimes hostile place. Yet the inherent optimism of social problems definitions - the belief that solutions can be found - become a means for reaffirming faith in human control. We treat crime, for example, as problems to be solved, organizing strategies towards them not only because they are harmful, but also because our strategies for control and solution help preserve a belief in human mastery over the world (e.g. the modern faith in human technology as the panacea for many issues, such as environmental degradation, crime control, etc.)

In creating definitions of social problems, as in other aspects of our lives, individuals and groups do not have equal chances to influence prevailing conceptions of problems. The frequent emergence of the welfare system as a social problem, for example, reflects neither a careful process of discussion nor the objective weighing of available evidence. Rather, political claims of welfare abuse may be calculated attempts to divert attention from other abuses or attempts to curry favor. The same is true of lurid crime reporting and political attempts to inflame public outrage. But when do you hear mainstream news reports of more radical views denouncing the system as inherently discriminatory, say, in class and race terms? This suggests that the power to influence public definitions of social problems is often coupled with the pursuit of interests that have little or nothing to do with the problems themselves.

**Social Movements as Social Order:**

Another means of constructing the social order is the social movement. This involves a collective effort to bring about some change (or resist it) in society or a part of society. The change may involve a return to earlier ways of doing things or to values that, in the eyes of participants, have been abandoned or neglected (e.g. "back to the land," the Reform Party; "REAL" Women). The movement may seek to prohibit some activity that has gained widespread acceptance (e.g. the Temperance movement and anti-abortion movement). Social movements may have very particular goals such as racial or gender equality, victims' rights, Christian evangelism, or environmental protection. They may also be more general, such as moral revitalization.

Whatever their goals, ideologies, forms of organization and methods, social movements are geared toward social change. They seek to restructure society, alter its values, beliefs, practices, and modes of organization. It would seem that there is a straightforward relationship of opposition between the social order the movement desires to create and the social order that exists (e.g. the legal discrimination against African Americans in the 1950's and the equality of opportunity before the law sought by the civil rights movement; Aboriginal rights activism; the sovereigntist movement in Quebec).

Yet, while adequate in general terms, this view of opposition between social structure and social movements is potentially misleading. For social movements are in certain ways very intimately tied to the social order they seek to change, and under some conditions can even be said to form part of the social order.

The values of social movements are often closer to the dominant values of society than they seem. For example, while the women’s movement seeks to overcome discrimination against women in employment, this simultaneously is accepting of the widespread belief that occupational success - which often is a dominant and oppressive goal for men - is really what counts. In opposing one aspect of the social order, the movement implicitly lends its support to another.

Moreover, social movements also utilize common organizational means to attain their ends. A movement is not just a set of ideas or goals, but involves various organizations, each with members, leaders and resources to be secured and allocated, plus methods of internal and external negotiation (e.g. victims' groups - national and local - cooperating on a protest or a lobbying effort). Movements find that they must organize their activities, and in so doing provide a structure for the lives of their members. They serve as the source of opportunities, careers, rewards, and disappointments. Even movements committed to maintaining flexibility and resisting ordinary hierarchical forms find they confront the same problems as any organization. Things have to get done, procedures for doing them adopted, and people motivated to do them.

Movements are also linked to existing social arrangements because they negotiate with existing social groups and organizations. The image of movement as opposition can obscure the fact that movement leaders are in frequent contact with those whose politics they oppose, and can develop professional and personal relationships. Leaders of movements attend meetings, make presentations, are addressed on a first name basis by officials, and are accorded the right of special attention in their participation. This isn't to say they always get what they want, that games aren't being played, nor that their victories are welcomed. It is only to suggest that they are considered an important part of the moral landscape - as visible and occasionally as important as more formal institutions.

The same is true at the national level, with parliamentary committees frequently hearing testimony from a variety of social movement representatives - those who have gained status as legitimate political players and are thus accorded the right to speak on behalf of their movement.

In this sense, then, it sometimes seems that social movements are an integral part of social structure. Particularly in recent decades, social movements have become so common that their very existence has become taken for granted. They become an important part of the process whereby decisions are made, but remain movements due to the fact that they define their objectives as substantially at variance with current social order. Their presence not only influences decisions, but seem to be a necessary part of the process whereby decisions are made (e.g. in criminal justice; Quebec sovereignty). Not only do social movements participate in the coordination of social activities, but by their visible presence shape the social construction of reality.

Now that we have dealt with the various methods by which social psychological actions impact the construction of the broader social order, we turn in the last few classes to consider two key topics in sociological social psychology: deviance and mental disorder.