**SOC 3120 Social Psychology**

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**Lecture 20: Deviance and the Social Order 1II: The Causes of Deviance**

To complete our survey of the interactionist approach to deviance, we have to admit that a perspective that finds the reality of deviance in a combination of perceived threats to social order and personal attributions complicates the problem of identifying the “causes” of deviance. Instead of being an objective reality, deviance becomes to a great extent a product of human definitions of what the world is like. Yet, this doesn’t necessarily mean that there are no causes of deviance apart from social definitions.

The S.I. approach essentially avoids any effort to find a simple set of causes or to view deviance as a form of conduct sharply differentiated from the ordinary. The same processes of defining the situation, role taking and role making found in everyday life also underlie deviant conduct. Those who engage in deviance have goals and purposes just as those who avoid it. And the self is as crucial an object for deviants as it is in the lives of others. Indeed, if deviance arises from the same processes and circumstances as ordinary conduct, there are no simple keys to its explanation and control. It is an unavoidably diverse phenomenon that resists simple explanations.

Lonnie Athens’ study of violent criminal acts and actors helps illustrate the applicability of standard S.I. concepts to the study of deviance. Interviewing a series of individuals convicted of homicide, sexual assault and robbery, he found that, contrary to conventional views of violence (e.g. as the result of unconscious motivations or emotional outbursts), offenders commit violent criminal acts *only after* they form violent interpretations of the situations which confront them. These offenders assessed the situations in which they found themselves and self-consciously came to the conclusion that violence was an appropriate or required course of action. Self-image also came into play. Those with non-violent self-images committed violent acts only when their interpretations called for self-defence; those with violent self-images interpreted a wider range of situations as calling for violent actions.

This study stresses the importance of taking actors’ definitions of situations into account in explaining their deviant conduct. It also highlights the decisional nature of much deviance, rooted in the assessments and interpretations of people acting in their social world rather than in some uniform, hidden causes that, if discovered, might make the control of deviance easier. If acts such as assault or sexual assault are the result of conscious, even (from the viewpoint of actors) “rational” decisions to act in a particular way, then it is particularly hard to grasp the causality of deviance. If people define situations in novel, unexpected, and *mistaken* ways, then any given situation may provoke a variety of definitions and acts, some of which may be deviant.

Similarly, Jack Katz argued that in order for us to understand crime, we have to learn to see it as the criminal sees it. Many forms of crime seduce the criminal through their rewards and excitement (e.g. the thrill-seeking aspect in a wide range of crimes). Although criminals may recognize what they do is wrong and even be ashamed of their crimes, the actual commission of a particular crime may be interesting, exciting, gripping, and ultimately compelling. But, beyond that, each crime entails a particular set of joint actions that must be completed, and that fosters a distinctive understanding of oneself in relation to others (e.g. teenagers “getting away with” shoplifting may be perceived as a thrilling demonstration of personal competence, especially if accomplished under the eyes of adults or security personnel). In many cases, the perpetrator sees him/herself faced with a particular challenge and the crime is a way of meeting it (e.g. the movie “Ocean’s Eleven”).

The view that deviance has multiple causes - and that it may, for some, become an inherently attractive way of life - seems at least as plausible as any of the current theories of particular forms of deviance that see them in singular terms. Indeed, it is this hypothesis that partly accounts for the appeal of the S.I. perspective - which permits the apparent diversity of causes given forms of deviance to be accommodated with the fact that each form often seems to us in common sense terms to be uniform (i.e. to have certain identifiable and inescapable characteristics). The social construction of deviance as a category of act and person is what accounts for the apparent uniformity of deviance, not its underlying causes.

This point holds more generally for all human conduct. An impressively complex set of situations, biographical experiences, individual motivations, and combination of persons interacting can be assumed to lie behind each act or sequence of acts. As I sit here writing this lecture, a multitude of factors impact on, and help to shape my actions (e.g. I may become preoccupied with the strike at Dalhousie and how the rest of my class is going to be sorted out, I may get called in to my part-time job this evening, start daydreaming about going to the cottage, and my wife may inform me that she’s going into labor at any time!) Thus, what I type into this lecture can result from a great number of influences, many of which have little or nothing to do with the writing.

While an observer would have little problem seeing my typing as typical of someone in my position, nobody can fully get into my head and predict what I’m going to do next, where I’m going to get my examples or what I will say next (e.g. my last lecture). I cannot even fully predict these things myself. Yet somehow the results appears meaningful and expectable. It can be seen as sensibly related to the definition of the situation I am in, the expectations associated with my role, and as typical of me as a person. No matter how complex the actual causes of my conduct, it often seems very simple and straightforward from the perspective of one who shares my definition of the situation.

Thus, we should reiterate that putting people and their acts into categories isn’t just a phenomenon related to deviance, but to all human conduct. In our efforts to make sense of the world - including our own conduct - we sort people into categories (e.g. insane, criminal, dysfunctional, loony, etc.) - and then treat the boundaries we have created as real and significant. The fact that the causes of conduct that lead people to become categorized in such terms are diverse should give us a clue that perhaps the causes of any conduct are multiple as well. Even though the extraordinary nature of deviant actions and individuals tends to make us pay attention to them and look for underlying causes, we should remember that all human conduct has exceedingly complex antecedents and situational influences. We label “good guys,” the “average Joe” and our heroes just as much as we label what Liaszlos famously called “nuts, sluts and perverts” In either case, the categories we use and the assumptions that lie behind them exert a powerful influence on what we see and how we explain it, not only as ordinary people but as sociologists looking for the causes of given forms of behavior.

**Deviance and Identity:**

Aside from the causes of deviance, it is important to recognize that the application of social categories of deviance also affect the lives of people so categorized. Because they attribute negative essence to the person, deviant acts reflect negatively on the situated, social and personal identities of those who engage in them. Those who are held responsible for their acts and targeted for punishment, isolation from society, correction, rehabilitation, or other such responses are faced with actions intended to root out the causes of their behavior and protect society from themselves. This social treatment establishes and sometimes controls the identities of those who are labeled as deviant.

Most people make a variety of roles in their everyday lives and these are reflected in their situated identities (e.g. workers, fathers, husbands, volunteer coaches, etc.) Their social and personal identities are constructed out of these situated identities. Although some roles are more important than others as bases for viewing and defining individuals - and for defining themselves - few roles prevent us from making other roles (even when there is some latent resistance, such as women taking on traditionally male occupations).

But deviance not only confers a powerful identity, but a controlling one as well. If a person is identified as deviant in some respect (e.g. as a sex offender or psychotic), that identification tends to become the main or even the sole basis on which others define and relate to the person. Everett Hughes called this aspect of deviance its “master status.” The establishment of deviant identity in the eyes of others tends to negate all or most other possible identities, especially do in the eyes of others who regard the deviance category in question as particularly grave. That other identities are negated means that the individual is seen as incapable of assuming them. In spite of whatever other identities the person announces, others place him or her in the deviant identity all the same.

For example, someone who is accused and convicted of sex crimes against children becomes - at least in the eyes of the public - a “pedophile,” someone whose very essence is defined by this label and whose other possible roles and identities thereby become inoperative. Likewise, even today, if someone is publicly labeled (or “outed”) as homosexual, the result may be that at least some people will be unwilling to regard that person in any other capacity except as homosexual. Their attitudes toward that person would be profoundly shaped by the knowledge of his or her homosexuality, they might tend to see homosexual motives underlying most of the person’s conduct, and they might in some cases try to prevent that person from assuming other identities, such as being a neighbor, a co-worker, an adoptive parent, or a minister.

In many forms of deviance, formally constituted agencies of social control - police, courts, lawyers, corrections officials, etc. - attach deviant identities to people. Thieves, murderers, and sex offenders are arrested, charged, tried, convicted, and sentenced. Each step of the process is not only a part of the application (or misapplication) of justice, but also the attachment of an identity to a person. Due process before the law is also an attachment and certification of identity.

Yet, deviant identities are also attached in less formal ways. The thief or murderer comes to have a criminal identity as much through the operation of the mass media as through the CJS. This is particularly so for leading or sensationalized criminal figures, such as Paul Bernardo and Clifford Olson, as well as those who engender considerable controversy over their guilt (e.g. OJ Simpson). Moreover, even when particular forms of deviance go unattended by police, their discovery in informal social circles is sufficient to attach and sustain and attach a deviant label (e.g. “Tearoom sex” between men in public washrooms / the public “outing” of Laud Humphreys at the ASA after the publication of his research). The discovery of such a person’s actions gives that person a new identity in the eyes of others, particularly if they disapprove of homosexuality. Where attitudes are rigidly homophobic, redefinition of the individual concerned is likely to be substantial and to involve considerable imputation of negative essence. Even where attitudes are relatively tolerant, some redefinition is likely - if only to the extent that the individual now becomes someone whose homosexuality is understood and accepted because “otherwise” the person is “normal.”

When a “deviant” label is applied, whether formally or informally, there is frequently a process of retrospective interpretation of the person’s conduct on past occasions. This may be especially true of homosexuality, where the pressure of homophobic attitudes and behavior has led many gays and lesbians to conceal their sexual orientations from their straight friends and acquaintances. When the person’s identity is discovered and the label is applied, others are apt to reinterpret past conduct in light of the new identity. Research by John Kitsuse has indicated that a reinterpretation of past behavior is especially likely to occur if the previous relationship was more than casual. Subjects reported that they searched for and generally were able to find past conduct that now made sense to them once they knew the person was homosexual.

If the person acquires membership in a deviant category - and is assigned a situated identity as deviant - whether through legal processing, public labeling, or retrospective interpretation, how does this affect the person’s social and personal identity? Can deviant labels also be self-applied? Doe these labels get built into a person’s social or personal identity? If so, how does this affect the person’s subsequent conduct? Does labeling become one of the causes of subsequent deviance? Can the person somehow resist the force of a deviant label?

Labeling as a deviant implies several possible, but not inevitable developments. To understand this, we must first grasp the distinction between primary and secondary deviance. Edwin Lemert argued that primary deviance arises out of a variety of factors - social, cultural, psychological and physiological - and has little to do with the person’s sense of self. For any variety of reasons, people perform acts that are considered deviant. Secondary deviance, in contrast, consists of deviant behavior or social roles based upon it which becomes a means of social defense, attack or adaptation to the overt and covert problems created by the social reaction to primary deviance. Primary deviance arises out of diverse causes; secondary deviance arises because of the ways others react to this primary deviance. What processes might be at work?

First, because the person to whom a deviant label is attached is thereby placed in a category with similar others, there is at least implicitly some pressure to identify with others so labeled. To impute a negative essence (e.g. “criminal”) is to create a boundary between the person and those who are not so labeled. Others may tend to avoid this person, to exclude him or her from social circles, housing or jobs. Labeling also encourages a sense of “membership” in the deviance category and thus some degree of identification - a sense of likeness or common purpose - with others who are deviant (“Misery loves company”). The labeled deviant is pushed out of conventional situations and associations and pulled toward deviant ones.

Those who are labeled may perceive some advantages in such identification. Lumped in, for example, with other “delinquents,” a young person may feel that s/he can only be fully accepted among such others. Despised by those who hold strongly homophobic attitudes, the gay or lesbian person may conclude that only by socially identifying with the gay community will s/he feel truly at ease, accepted, and have any sort of normal opportunity for maintaining self-esteem and constructing a personal identity.

Secondly, because categorization as deviant frequently offers the person only 1 role to perform and 1 situated identity to claim, the person may also feel some pressures to learn to think, feel, and act in fairly standardized ways implied by the label itself. To be labeled “deviant” is to experience the pressures of altercasting - that is, to be handed a role and to be subtly (and sometime overtly) pressured to accept it. In part, those pressures are effective because they encourage the person to think of him/herself solely in terms of the proffered role and identity. The labeled person, in this view, comes to think of himself as, say, delinquent, and this concept of self prompts the individual to enact a delinquent role.

Similarly, the person who is able to maintain a self-definition as “normal” is likely to be one who is able to resist this altercasting. It’s important to stress that people don’t necessarily or automatically accept the identities that are handed them through deviant labeling. They don’t necessarily identify with other deviants, learn to make deviant roles, or think of themselves as deviant. Rather, relying on a combination of inner resources, previously established personal and social identities, and support from others, labeled deviants are able to resist accepting some or all of the implications of the new identity that others try to attach to them. Their success in doing this also depends on their capacity to engage in successful aligning actions - to excuse, justify or otherwise account for their actions in ways that leave their identities relatively unscathed.

Any labeling of an individual, however, will have at least the effect of generating doubt where previously there was an unproblematic concept of self. If a young person gets in trouble with the police, s/he may be treated as a typical delinquent and as if s/he possessed the usual delinquent attributes. Of course, this one episode may not lead to a substantial change in self-concept, but it may raise some doubts and anxieties all the same. Where before no problems existed, now the kid is faced with an authority figure asserting, in effect, that “all of you kids are alike.” Whether having a run in with police out of sheer bad luck, this type of encounter is at least stressful and likely to make one wonder.

There is also some evidence that whether labeling affects the self depends on where the person is located in the social structure. Gary Jensen’s study of delinquency, for example, suggests that being labeled as delinquent has more effect on Whites than Blacks. Given the already systematic exclusion of many African Americans from many educational and job opportunities, and their frequent devaluation by Whites, they may be less inclined to doubt themselves on the basis of labels commonly applied by Whites. The more a person is integrated into the mainstream social order, the more its labels have significance for the self. The less a part of that world the person feels, the less compelled s/he is to regard its judgements as important.

Self-labeling may also be as significant or more significant than labeling by others. The delinquent whose primary offense goes undetected by police may all the same be aware s/he has broken the law and may even consider him/herself delinquent because of this fact. To be sure, the act would be more strongly singled out had it been detected by others - “more deviant” in a sense. But, all the same, in certain cases the application of labels to self is the crucial basis for establishing a deviant identity (e.g. in homosexuality). People very early learn to avoid displaying what at first seems to themselves a very unusual sexual orientation and then later come to see themselves as gay or lesbian, often seeking to conceal this fact from audiences who might publicly label them in a negative manner.

Others’ formal and informal responses to deviance may thus contribute to the elaboration of deviant conduct and thereby become one of its causes. Although we should not ignore this aspect of the deviance process, neither should we overemphasize it. Labeling contributes to deviance, but it is not its only cause. As we have noted, there is no more sense that deviance has a single cause than in asserting that any other form of conduct has a single cause. The human social world is complex and the forces that influence what we do are as well.