**SOC 3120 Social Psychology**

**Prof. J. Scott Kenney**

**Overheads Lecture 18: Deviance & Social Order 1: Defining Deviance**

\* Questions of social order involve deviance

\* Deviance is a troublesome concept:

- applied to extremely diverse forms of conduct

- varying degrees of agreement about harmfulness

- different origins and social consequences

- definitions sensitive to distribution of power

- social and political influences on definitions (e.g. social movements)

\* Commonality: raising questions about social order

\* The essence of deviance as a sociological category does not lie in behavior, but in the way that behavior is viewed and treated by members of society.

\* The study of deviance provides clues to the nature of social order, how it is maintained and reproduced.

**Defining Deviance:**

\* There are many possible listings of deviant behavior. However:

- vary across cultures

- vary historically

\* Main thing is they are defined as threatening to a particular society

\* Earlier “objectivist” sociological view:

(1) United definition of deviance as contravention of social norms

(2) Defined deviance as objective phenomenon (i.e. deviant regardless of who does it, whether detected, why committed, or the circumstances)

(3) Deviance seen as rooted in the act itself

(4) The person committing act is seen as somehow objectively different

from others

(5) Social control is seen as merely a response to deviance seeking to eradicate it.

**A Critique of the Objective Approach:**

\* There are numerous problems with the objective definition of deviance:

- Norms are merely one element in the stock of knowledge people bring to situations in which they interact (i.e. typifications more notable)

- In most situations, norms are rarely problematic

- There is flexibility in the application of norms to acts (e.g. aligning actions avoid labels of deviance)

- Whether a particular act violates a norm is usually a matter of dispute or negotiation

- Deviance cannot be seen as an objective quality if an act is sometimes deviant and sometimes not

- Acts are deviant or not *if* people agree that they are or are not

- included crimes and plea bargaining illustrate negotiable quality of

deviance/ different influences on definition

- Law and social convention recognize extenuating circumstances where usually prohibited acts acceptable

- Many more violations occur than reacted to (formally or informally)

- Systematic processes of selection exist such that some people more than others are likely to be detected or prosecuted

- “Normal” motivations and social experiences can induce people to

engage in deviant acts (e.g. Merton’s “innovation”).

- The view that social control serves to eliminate deviance is suspect due to (1) variable enforcement efforts; and (2) counter-effects

**An Interactionist Conception of Deviance:**

\* To avoid the limitations above, any new approach must:

-Logically treat very diverse forms of conduct under the heading of

deviance

-Account for the variable and negotiable character of deviance, as well

as its defining processes

- Take into account that participation in various forms of deviance has variable effects on the selves of those involved

\* The labeling perspective (Howard Becker):

- Social groups create deviance by creating rules and applying them to particular people

- The emphasis shifts from the quality of the act to the application of rules and sanctions

- Deviant behavior is behavior that people so label.

- Recognizes classification is not automatic, but involves conflict, negotiation, bargaining and power

\* Problems with the Labeling perspective:

- Does not adequately specify the grounds on which people label deviant behavior

- Permits any kind of conduct to be labeled as deviant, even though it appear to be restrictions on what usually goes into that category

\* Responses:

-Erikson: focus on what is thought to require social control (i.e. about which “something must be done”)

-Hewitt: focus on a sensed ‘breach of social order” by those in power:

(1) Allows consideration of political deviance

(2) Emphasizes the social/political construction of reality

(3) Emphasizes processes of negotiation and social definition of

acts as deviant

(4) Illustrates how certain individuals being comes to be seen as threatening/deviant/in different category. These things stick.

(5) The meaning lies in the response acts or people elicit from others who have the capacity to do something.

(6) This approach makes it easier to understand why a wide

variety of conduct can be classified as deviance (e.g. how mental illness included despite lack of wilfulness).

(7) Incorporates normative conceptions in more appropriate way.

(8) Recognizes deviance a matter of degree, not all or nothing.

\* In the next two classes we will go on to further consider:

- Variable responses to similar acts

- What causes people to engage in potentially deviant behavior

- The consequences of labeling for future conduct.