**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)