**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)