**SOC 3290 Deviance**

**Overheads Lecture 13: Social Constructionism**

Today we will review:

1. Howard Becker on “moral entrepreneurs”

2. Parallels in the social constructionist approach to social problems

3. Criticisms of the contemporary constructionist position

**Howard Becker: Outsiders:**

\* Deviance is created by society by:

(1) creating rules condemning behaviors;

(2) applying them to individuals who are labelled “outsiders”

\* Deviance is:

- not a quality of the act

- a consequence of the application of rules/sanctions by others

- this process is not infallible (e.g. some not labelled/ others falsely

accused)

\* Social reaction of others/labelling influenced by:

- when it occurs

- who commits it

- who feels harmed

- social class/status of parties

- negative consequences

\* Rules/enforcement change over time: this is the result of enterprise

\* Two types of “Moral entrepreneurs”:

(1) Rule creators

(2) Rule enforcers

\* Rule creators:

- focus on a “social evil” existing rules don’t cover

- emphasis on content of rules

- lobby for new rules “to help others”

- employ professionals (e.g. lawyers, psychiatrists)

- new rules may/may not be enacted as a result

- new rules/application filtered through others’ interests as well

- enforcement machinery may be put in place if successful

- gains may be administratively chipped away

\* Rule enforcers:

- result of institutionalization of new rules

- enforcement “just a job” for many (less fervour)

- must justify the existence of their position (doing a necessary job, but not so well as to make their role unnecessary)

- must earn the respect of those they encounter (affects labelling)

- prosecutorial discretion/prioritization aids these ends

- may run afoul of original rule-creators/ set off new crusade

\* In the end, deviance = the result of enterprise surrounding:

(1) Rule creation

(2) Rule enforcement

**Joel Best: Typification and Social Problems Construction**:

\* Traditional definition of social problems = “objective”:

- assumes the essence of social problems lie in objective conditions

- assumes that some conditions “really are” problems

\* Problems with this:

- minimizing/ignoring subjective nature of social problems

- “objective” conditions defined as problems have little in common

\* Phenomenological approach: (Spector and Kitsuse):

- focus on processes by which people designate problems

- individual social problems are a product of definitional

activities (“claims-making” re: “putative conditions”)

- “objective conditions are irrelevant”

\* “Natural history” of social problems (4 stages):

(1) collective attempts to remedy perceived undesirable condition

(2) recognition/response by official institutions

(3) re-emergence of claims in response to institutional solution

(4) claimants’ attempts to develop alternative institutions

\* Advantages of this approach:

- draws attention to something all social problems have in common

- suggests new research questions

- provides framework for a general theory of social problems

\* Typification:

- claims-makers shape our sense of what the problem is

- any social condition is a potential subject for many different

types of claims-making (e.g. drug abuse as moral, medical,

educational, class, and/or political problem)

- myriad sociological theories of crime offer another example

- problems typified through (i) naming; and (ii) exampling

- typification = the central aspect of social problems construction

**Debates About Constructionism:**

\* Constructionist approach relatively new/controversial

\* Critics attack this approach in several ways:

(1) It ignores/minimizes “really harmful” social problems. Yet:

- previous objectivist research has failed general application

- what is “really harmful” merely reflects successful claims

(2) Constructionism/ objectivism = “two sides of the same coin.”

- inconsistent/ only pays lip service to constructionist issues

- constructionism has new agenda/ different questions asked

(3) Constructionism is itself internally inconsistent: focuses on

subjective claims while assuming knowledge of objective

conditions:

**E.g.** X remained unchanged (unstated assumption)

X became defined as a social problem once claims made

Thus, truth status of one factor made problematic, the

other not (“Ontological gerrymandering”)

\* This last critique opened a division in the constructionist approach to social problems. Three camps emerged

(1) Strict Constructionists: avoid making assumptions about social reality (easier said than done);

(2) Debunkers: draws distinction between social reality and claims

(essentially ignoring the problem/ assuming you know social

reality/ equating social construction with error);

(3) Contextual Constructionists: honestly acknowledge making

some assumptions about social conditions to locate claims-

making in its social context. (Done “with reasonable

confidence” to imperfectly describe context of claims).

\* Best sides with contextual constructionists:

- impossible to avoid making implicit claims re: social conditions,

so be honest about it

- analytic purity of strict constructionists limits its usefulness

\* Despite difficulties, constructionist approach can be useful:

- offers claims-makers guidelines for what works/doesn’t

- as a perspective to better understand the world

- as an active research tradition

- as holding the promise of a general theory of social problems