**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