

Part Two - The Unmaking of Deviance - Homosexuality is Not a Mental Disorder
Theory and Analytical Framework

A basic point of social constructionism is that deviance is something made by people. Not by deviants but by others who respond or react to what others claim deviants are or are doing. We're going to apply Joel Best's framework for how deviance is the product of some making claims about others as deviant and successfully use the media, shape public reactions, and ultimately produce policies that deal with deviants. In this case, however, we're interested in analyzing how the reverse process can occur - taking what is already regarded as deviant and charting how the deviance can be unmade.

How to make it deviant - how deviance is socially constructed

Joel Best has argued that the most credible sociological approach to deviance is to study deviance as social problems - troubling behaviors, people, or conditions that the public or others argue should be the focus of attention, concern, and action. As Best writes, "Social constructionism has become an influential stance for thinking about deviance, particularly for understanding how concerns about particular forms of deviance emerge and evolve, and for studying how social control agents construct particular acts as deviance and individuals as deviant" (2016: 107).

First, treating deviance as socially constructed, Joel Best turns our thinking about deviance on its head:

- All that's required for a deviant act to exist is for a significant number of people or a number of significant people to regard it as such.
- All forms of deviance share but a single characteristic - that they defined as deviant.
- It is the subjective judgment of and reaction to conditions or actions that make something deviant.
- It is the subjective responses of people - what they regard as deviance - which we can objectively observe.
- The question for sociologists is how: how do people turn their subjective judgments into actions that will deter, control, punish, manage, help, and care for deviants?

Second, constructing deviance is essentially about turning claims that some make about troubling behaviors, people, or conditions into matters that others believe requires attention and action.

- **Claims** are grievances, complaints, and discoveries about new harms, outrage or concern over old but unaddressed harms or objections, or a desire or demand for action.
- **Claimsmaking** are activities that bring a topic to the attention of others by making a claim that there is a condition that should be recognized as troubling and that needs to be addressed.
- **Claimsmakers** are the ones who seek to convince others that something is wrong and that something should be done about it.
 - Claimsmakers are activists - they must devise ways of drawing attention to their cause. They must also recruit people to join their movement, manage the movement's operations, and maintain interest in their cause.
 - Claimsmakers can also come from various sorts of experts - people who claim to speak with special authority because they have special knowledge. That special expert knowledge can give experts authority.
- **Troubling conditions** are the conditions that become subjects of claims. The word *troubling* focuses attention on people's subjective reactions: a condition is troubling if it bothers someone. We distinguish between claims and the condition about which claims are being made. "Sunshine will kill you" is a claim. The sun shining is the condition.

Third, the focus is on explaining how claims are made - that means looking at what people say & do - the processes of constructing a social problem.

- Joel Best describes how claims are made as having a kind of natural history - there's regular set of sequences we can observe and identify.
- **Sequence One: Claimsmaking** occurs as people seek to bring attention to a troubling condition.
- **Sequence Two: Media work.** Claimsmakers seek to use the media to draw attention or the media brings the claims to the public's attention.

- **Sequence Three: How the public reacts.** We can observe and measure the public's reactions through public opinion polls, public protests, social media attention, wearing wristbands or t-shirts, bumper stickers and signs, making financial contributions to groups, etc.
- **Sequence Four: Policymaking.** Social policies are the means society adopts to address troubling conditions. Legislation, new standards adopted by government agencies, etc.

Policymakers respond to claimsmakers, media coverage, and public opinion, but their own considerations also shape the policies they create.

- **Sequence Five: Deviance work of social control agents.** Policies have to be implemented and agents of social control confront issues as practical matters, not in abstract theoretical terms. For example:

Street crime – violence and property crime: More police, police presence, stop & frisk, arrests, imprisonment, probation.

Drug trafficking interdiction: multiple gov't agencies, drug task forces, no-knock raids, arrests, asset forfeiture, prisons.

Mental disorders: mental health professionals, clinical practice, psychotherapy, psychopharmacology, psychosurgery.

- **Sequence Six: Policy outcomes.** Several sorts of outcomes are possible. Some relate directly to the ways in which policies are implemented.

Critics may argue that new policies are ineffective or others may argue that a policy goes too far.

There may be efforts to measure the policy's impact.

Complaints and criticisms may lead to new claims and the social problems process begins anew.

How successful claimsmakers are will also depend on two other considerations:

- **Resources** – what people use to raise attention and persuade public opinion and the public's reaction. Resources – money, power, status, education, social contacts – these are things people draw upon in the social problems process.
- **Rhetoric** – how people attempt to persuade public opinion and the public's reaction. Social problems construction is inevitably rhetorical – people are trying to convince others that something is a problem. Rhetoric is central because social problems claims are not static; rather they shift and morph at each stage in the larger process as rhetoric changes.

We'll use the case of the efforts to remove homosexuality from the list of mental disorders in the American Psychiatric Association's DSM. As you will have read (and will see in the video), it was a critical part of work by gays and lesbians to reverse the stigma and harm directed at them. Their efforts exposed the claims made by mental health professionals as inaccurate – invalid and unreliable. They also brought attention to bias in the mental health field and the harm produced by health practitioners and the larger societal bias against homosexuality.

Our primary sources for the workshop will be the audio and readings:

- (Audio) Dismantling a Diagnosis: Episode 1: A Kind of Madness, Making Gay History | LGBTQ Oral Histories (2023)
- (Audio) Dismantling a Diagnosis: Episode 2: The Cure, Making Gay History | LGBTQ Oral Histories (2023)
- Reading: How Evelyn Hooker rattled the APA, Wendy Fenwick (2024)
- Reading: Drag queens stormed a psychiatric convention to demand they stop saying gays are sick. I was there. Warren Blumenfeld (2021)
- Video: In addition to these, use the information you are able to pull from Wednesday's video, Cured.