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THE MICRO-POLITICS OF TROUBLE

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This paper proposes a natural history framework for analyzing interactional processes through which personal difficulties or *troubles* are identified, reacted to, elaborated, and perhaps transformed into a specific sort of deviance. These processes center around efforts to do something about or remedy the trouble, and are critically shaped by the nature and direction of the intervention of some outside, usually official party. The form a trouble ultimately assumes is in large part a product of *micro-political* struggles for the support and legitimation of such official agents.

In his early evaluation and criticism, Gibbs (1966) argued that proponents of the labeling approach to deviance “might reasonably be expected to develop a theory of the reaction process.” A number of recent statements from within the perspective have echoed this call (Kitsuse, 1972; Orcutt, 1973). Two issues demand particular attention. First, as Kitsuse has emphasized (1972:241), labeling proponents have provided few studies of *informal reaction*. Yet informal processes can establish deviant status independently of, but affecting “official labeling.” Second, the labeling tradition has neglected relations between informal and official systems of reactions. Little existing research explores the conditions under which informal systems of control prove inadequate (but see Goffman, 1969), or the reciprocal effects of informal and formal control measures. In this paper we want to make a programmatic statement of a sociology of trouble, to provide a theoretical approach to these two types of societal reaction.

Our argument assumes that any social setting generates a number of evanescent, ambiguous difficulties that may ultimately be—but are not immediately—identified as “deviant.” In many instances what is first recognized is a vague sense of “something wrong”—some “problem” or “trouble.” Consideration of the natural history of such problems can provide a fruitful approach to processes of informal reaction and to their relation to the reactions of official agencies of social control. Specifically, this paper will explore the processes whereby troubles are identified, defined, responded to, and sometimes transformed into a recognized form of deviance.¹ Two points in this process hold particular significance for the movement toward deviance, and will receive major attention. The first arises when parties outside the trouble are mobilized around it, the second when those outsiders’ involvement rests on formal authority rather than personal ties.

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS OF TROUBLES AND REMEDIES

Problems originate with the recognition that something is wrong and must be remedied. Trouble, in these terms, involves both definitional and remedial components. Some state of affairs is experienced as difficult, unpleasant, irritating, or unendurable. The perception of “something wrong” is often vague at the onset: a woman notices that she is gaining weight, or that she is frequently depressed; a husband realizes that his wife is drinking more than

¹Our approach parallels, on the interactional level, that recently proposed by Spector and Kitsuse (1973) for analyzing the definition and crystallization of *social* problems on a collective level. They propose a natural history model to examine the “claim-making and responding activities” (146) that lead to the identification of an emergent social problem.

usual, or is beginning to stay out later after work; parents see their daughter getting overly interested in boys, or their son starting to hang out with a tough gang of friends. Clearly, a person may come to recognize the existence of these or other problems, and yet never do anything in response. It may be that after mulling the problem over the person decides it is really no problem after all (everybody feels down at times, a few pounds don't matter, or sexual mores have changed in today's world); or that while there is indeed something wrong, there is nothing that can be done or that the attempt to do something would be doomed from the start. A problem ignored may fester; or it may disappear. But often the recognition that something is wrong coincides with a weighing of remedies, perhaps resulting in an attempt to implement an appropriate one.

Sometimes an initial remedy will work; other times it will not. The latter case may lead to a search for other remedies, and as the search continues, troubles may assume a cyclical pattern (e.g., Goffman, 1969:361-69). A difficulty arises, a remedy is sought and applied; it works temporarily or not at all; then some new remedy is sought. The result tends to be a recurring cycle of trouble, remedy, failure, more trouble, and new remedy, until the trouble stops or the troubled person forsakes further efforts. As a consequence of these processes, the trouble is progressively elaborated, analyzed, and specified as to type and cause—"organized" to use the term Balint (1957) has applied to the early stages of illness.

Again, on first apprehension troubles often involve little more than a vague unease. This feeling may derive internally from the person affected, or externally, from the remark of an observant acquaintance. An understanding of the problem's dimensions may only begin to emerge as the troubled person thinks about them, discusses the matter with others, and begins to implement remedial strategies. The effort *to find and implement a remedy* is critical to the processes of organizing, identifying, and consolidating the trouble.

Consider the kind of remedial cycle that may evolve with certain physical ailments. As some bodily trouble comes to be recognized and some "tentative self-diagnosis" (Freidson, 1961) made, some remedial measures—perhaps absolutely minimal—may be undertaken. In the case of a cold for example, this may involve taking it easy while waiting to see if the trouble disappears. If it does not, "more active measures like staying in bed for a day or so and taking aspirin" (Freidson, 1961:143) may be tried. Such remedies may end the trouble. If they do not, or if the "same trouble" recurs at some later time, the prior "cold" diagnosis may be questioned. An initially accepted interpretation of the trouble may then be recast, sometimes quite radically. For example:

When the husband was in the Army he had a 'cold' that lasted several weeks. After observing the symptoms for a few days, the man's wife insisted that the ailment could not be a cold—it must be an allergy and he should see a doctor. The husband felt that his wife was wrong and he refused to consult a doctor for treatment of a mere cold. The symptoms persisted for six or seven weeks and then vanished. The husband was discharged from the Army the following year and returned to civilian work. During that second year he again had a 'cold' which lasted several weeks. His wife again insisted that he must have hay fever. She reminded him that in a conversation about it his uncle—a physician—also said he must be suffering from an allergy, and she finally persuaded him to consult a physician who was a friend of theirs. The physician-friend diagnosed the ailment as a cold and joked about the wife's diagnostic qualifications. Eventually the 'cold' disappeared. During the third year the husband began sneezing again and his wife insisted that he consult another doctor. This time hay fever was diagnosed and the symptoms were henceforth controlled (Freidson, 1961:142-3).

This illustration suggests why "trouble" should not be conceptualized as simply the establishment of a particular definition of a problematic situation.² Such a view would imply that

² Hewitt and Hall (1973), for example, adopt this perspective: In looking at how "quasi-theories" may

having defined or diagnosed a trouble in a certain way, the appropriate remedy is more or less specified: if overweight is the trouble, then dieting is the appropriate response; if illness, then visiting a doctor and getting the appropriate treatments seem required. In fact, the process of remedying troubles is much more open and emergent than this diagnose-then-respond formulation allows. As the foregoing incident dramatizes, any initial formulation of what the trouble “really is” is conditional upon the subsequent effects of the attempted remedy. The use of a remedy, while following from a particular definition of the trouble, simultaneously serves as a test of that definition. That the remedy works the first time is taken to confirm the initial diagnosis and the trouble’s cause.³ But this diagnosis only holds “until further notice” (Garfinkel, 1967), until, for example, a worsening of the trouble reopens the whole matter of just what is wrong and what can be done about it.

We do not deny that definition of what a trouble is affects what is done about it. But the effect is neither as linear nor as direct as is posited by the define-then-respond model. Naming something a problem has implications, prefiguring some solutions and removing others. To identify one’s problem as “overweight,” for example, is to preclude a formulation such as discrimination and social exclusion based arbitrarily on bodily appearance (the position advanced by advocates of Fat Power; see Allon, 1973), a formulation with very different remedial implications. But even the definition “overweight” tends more to delimit a range of possible remedies than to prescribe a particular one necessary response. A man, deciding he is too fat, may diet or he may decide to exercise. Or he can look to causes rather than consequences, and enter psychotherapy.

In sum, many troubles, particularly when first noted, appear vague to those concerned. But as steps are taken to remedy or manage that trouble, the trouble itself become progressively clarified and specified. In this sense the natural history of a trouble is intimately tied to—and produces—the effort to do something about it. Thus, remedial actions of varying sorts—living with, ignoring, isolating, controlling, correcting the trouble—are highly significant events not only in determining the fate of the trouble, but also in shaping how it is first perceived. Conceptually, the definition of a trouble can be seen as the emergent product, as well as the initial precipitant, of remedial actions.

RELATIONAL TROUBLES AND INTRINSIC REMEDIES

We have largely drawn upon situations in which troubles begin and are remedied *intra-personally*. Of particular sociological interest, however, are troubles that are inextricably *interpersonal* matters. Important variations arise with such *relational troubles*—that is, those in which remedial efforts are addressed to another in a recognized relationship with the troubled person. For, unlike efforts to remedy personal troubles, trying to resolve relational troubles raises issues concerning the distribution of rights and responsibilities in that relationship.

The difference between individual and relational troubles, and their radically variant remedial implications, is readily apparent in the advice and trouble formulations offered a woman interviewed about how she came to begin psychotherapy:

She noticed her problems ‘when I found myself crying on my job, while I worked. Bursting into tears in the face of a friend, while talking. And finally sobbing so continuously I could not leave the house without sobbing into the face of the first person I’d

further the imputation of deviance in problematic situations, they conceptualize the process as essentially one whereby disorderly events are explained (defined) and made meaningful.

³ Note that in Freidson’s illustration, it is just because the remedies based upon the hay fever diagnosis stopped the problem that all those involved—including the sociologist-analyst—accept the validity of that diagnosis to define the trouble.

meet who greeted me with the words, 'Hello, how are you?' After several months of this a neighbor, who was a school teacher, 'told me to go to a mental hygiene clinic for aid.' This advice was judged helpful. Other unsolicited advice came from two physicians, one of whom 'told me I had no heart trouble but mental aggravation that caused me pains in (my) chest,' and another who 'told me to get rid of my husband because he was no good,' and this was not helpful.

She solicited advice from several friends and from her husband. 'Friends all advised me to leave my husband. My husband will never listen to me when I talk without ridiculing me' (Kadushin, 1969:172).

This troubled person received advice both to seek help for her mental condition, a remedy assuming an intrapsychic core to her problem, and to leave her husband, a remedy positing an essentially relational character to her trouble.

This distinction should not be taken to imply that certain troubles are necessarily or mainly individual, others inherently relational. The difference derives less from the troubles themselves than from the perspective or framework from which they come to be viewed and treated. What begins as a personal trouble can be redefined and treated as a relational one, and vice versa. With bodily illness, for example, a psychosomatic diagnosis can transform any physical symptom, such as chest pains in the above case, into a product of some relational strain. Conversely, the relational dimensions of many forms of mental illness may disappear upon application of the medical model, or upon discovery of an organic cause for the troubled behavior.⁴

Moreover, movement of a trouble from an individual to a relational frame and vice versa is often propelled by the remedial cycle discussed previously. Thus, if a personal trouble persists despite intrapersonally directed remedies, the troubled person tends to become progressively uncertain as to just what the trouble is and what ought to be done about it. Here, as earlier, the troubled person may receive a variety of often conflicting interpretations about what is wrong, typically imparted in advice on managing the problem. As a result both intrapersonal and relational versions of the trouble may be entertained sequentially, or even simultaneously.

When troubles are addressed in relational terms, first remedial actions typically involve one party directly responding to and trying to influence the behavior of the other. Such corrective actions can be termed *intrinsic remedies*, since they can draw upon the interpersonal resources inherent in that relationship. Intrinsic remedies may first assume indirect and implicit forms. A wife disturbed by some behavior of her husband, may offer a variety of subtle cues that something is wrong: an awkward silence, a raised eyebrow, a grimace (e.g., see Goffman on "remedial interchanges", 1971:95-187). Then a process of interactional negotiation is possible between participants to resolve the trouble without explicit recognition that it has arisen; the subtle sanction the offended person offers may work, moderating the behavior of the offender accordingly, sometimes by "stopping," sometimes by "stopping and apologizing." Alternatively, the offender may ignore the attempted sanction, and the sanctioner may let it pass.

But the issue may continue, initially in fairly muted, even covert ways. Joking references may be made of it, humor here as elsewhere allowing involved parties to avoid explicit acknowledgement of the trouble between them, while communicating its underlying seriousness (J.P. Emerson, 1969). Or the trouble may become an open issue in the relationship. Manage-

⁴ In these situations, troubles are moved back and forth between "social" and "natural" frames (Goffman, 1974: 21ff). One attraction of the medical model is that it "de-relationizes" troubles, thus, in the case of psychiatric disorders, relieving those close to the disturbed person of any responsibility for the disordered state of affairs.

ment strategies may vary from “we need to have a talk about it” to accusations that the other’s behavior is wrong and must change.

A direct complaint made to the other alters the basic dynamics of the trouble. This move publicizes, explicates, and radically changes a purely individual trouble. With a direct complaint, buried differences in perceptions of the nature or source of the trouble may be brought to light. Implicit expectations about relational rights and responsibilities may be explicitly asserted and perhaps contested. The trouble may become the direct focus of the relationship, generating a continuing dialogue in which what is wrong and what should be done about it are explored, possibilities elaborated, and options specified. In this way, a complaint not only organizes and consolidates the trouble, but also constitutes that trouble as a fully interpersonal matter.

Initial complaints may only mark the beginning of an extended remedial cycle. Early interpersonal remedies may have little or only temporary effect, and further strategies may be used to influence the other’s behavior, with varying degrees of success. Jackson (1954: 572) has described a typical series of remedies unsuccessfully invoked by wives in trying to control a husband’s emerging drinking problem:

Threats of leaving, hiding his liquor away, emptying the bottle down the drain, curtailing his money, are tried in rapid succession, but none is effective. Less punitive methods, as discussing the situation when he is sober, babying him during hangovers, and trying to drink with him to keep him in the home, are attempted and fail.

Such remedial attempts reveal and highlight the nature and severity of the problem.

Understanding these matters is complicated by the partial and retrospective character of troubles and accounts of their development. Particular versions of what the trouble is, how it arose, and what was done in response, are likely to be highly partisan and hotly contested. Those involved in the trouble need never come to an agreement about what the trouble is or even that it exists. A husband may complain to his wife about her staying out nights, for example, but the wife need neither see nor acknowledge her behavior as a problem. When confronted by her spouse’s rebuke or threat, she may identify his behavior as the trouble—an unreasonable insistence that she stay home. Claims about the existence or nature of a trouble, are embedded in and products of the troubled situation itself.

Second, many troubles will only be formulated retrospectively, often in furtherance of such partisan interests. Earlier relational incidents may be interpreted in light of subsequent diagnoses of the trouble. Thus, an aggrieved party may come to the realization: now I see what it is that has been bothering me about the way you treat me; or, now I appreciate how I have always hated it when you did that. Moreover, it is often only later that parties to a trouble explicitly formulate the distinctive stages and components of the remedial process. The beginning of the trouble, for example, may only be discovered in retrospect; pin pointing the cause stands as part of the ongoing interpersonal struggle to determine what the trouble is and what can be done. Similarly, that relational rights and responsibilities, or which ones, are at issue, may be articulated only later. Finally, the meaning of actions as complaints or attempted remedies can often be grasped only in retrospect: at some later, intolerable point, for example, the complainant may point to his or her past toleration of the trouble as evidence of persistent attempts to handle the problem fairly and justly.

As with incipient intrapersonal troubles, relational troubles may not become more difficult. The complaint and attendant remedy may work sufficiently to satisfy the troubled party. The trouble may simply continue as neither party accepts the other’s version of what is wrong. The complaint may be made and then dropped and ignored, as the initially offended individual learns to live with the problem. Or, as Goffman (1969:364-5) notes, the troubled

party may accede to the demands of the other, redefining what was trouble as legitimate behavior and reallocating relational rights and responsibilities accordingly. In these circumstances, willingness to accept (or at least to endure) the problem behavior of the other—and alternatively, the inclination to keep pressing the trouble by looking for further remedies or responses—provide critical contingencies in the development of a trouble. But there is a limiting condition: that neither party to the trouble ends the relationship that surrounds it. While in fleeting public contacts with others, denial or withdrawal are readily available responses (Goffman, 1963), this strategem is not as available or acceptable in troubles arising in enduring relations (Goffman, 1969:365). Where exit is precluded, troubles and remedial strategies greatly increase in complexity. Under such circumstances, pressures to seek outside remedies often accelerate.

COMPLAINTS AND THIRD-PARTY INTERVENTION

As intrinsic remedies fail and accomodation is not forthcoming, outside parties are apt to be brought into the trouble in active and central ways. Outsiders may have been involved in a relational trouble from its inception; the husband of the philandering wife, for example, may talk to his mother, sister, or best friend about his wife's behavior, why it occurs, and how to respond. And his understanding of what the trouble is and how to cope may be critically shaped by the views and analyses provided by such third parties. Yet as long as these outside parties function only in advice and support roles, the trouble remains essentially private. In particular, efforts to do something still come only from those originally party to the problem. However, when an outside party moves from giving advice to active intervention the structure of the trouble undergoes significant change.

In many instances the line between advising and more active intervention may be blurred. There are strong pressures for converting advisors into direct participants. Friends, counsellors, and therapists of one party may decide to become directly involved in the trouble, as, for example, by taking a husband aside and pointing out how upset his wife is with his drinking. Critical involvement emerges when the third party directly intervenes and establishes a relationship with the troubled parties, who thus no longer deal exclusively with one another. With this event the remedies considered are no longer intrinsic, but *extrinsic*, to the troubled relationship.

With the request for third party intervention, the following roles (see Goffman on "agent roles", 1961:136) become differentiated in the remedial process: First, there is a *complainant* announcing the presence of trouble by seeking remedial action. The complainant role may be distinct from the role of *victim*, the person held injured, harmed, or wronged. Next, there is the remedy agent or *troubleshooter* to whom the trouble is taken for remedy. Finally, one party to the trouble may come to be designated the *troublemaker* responsible.⁵

In general terms, the decision to seek outside intervention and the kind desired seem intricately linked with prior attempts to deal with the trouble—to avoid, isolate, or remedy it. Such factors as the kinds of controls and remedies available in the particular social situation, the availability of and limitations upon their use, the presence and strength of ties with outside parties and possible troubleshooters, and the degree of legitimacy accorded each out-

⁵ Many remedial agents expect victim and complainant roles to be performed by the same person, and while this is not inevitably forthcoming, "disinterested" complainants may have to provide some sort of account for their involvement. The more general point is that victim and non-victim complainants may encounter different presentational problems in getting their complaints validated. Furthermore, complaints can be advanced, and interventions implemented, without definite allocation of victim and wrongdoer roles. Remedies involving mediation, to be considered below, either avoid these roles, or attribute part of each to both parties.

siders' potential involvement in the troubled situation, all shape not only the nature of initial efforts to respond to the trouble within the relationship, but also the occasion and nature of outside intervention.

Efforts to obtain outside intervention tend to move through several stages. First, those initially invited to troubleshoot are typically close friends or relatives of at least one of the involved parties. The involvement of such intimate troubleshooters rests exactly on their personal relationship with one or all of the parties to the trouble. While such personal troubleshooters may be able to remedy the trouble, their intimacy may also prove a hindrance. For example, the legacy of their prior dealings with the parties may preclude a mutually acceptable solution from the start, as when the troubleshooter is already identified as an ally of one of the parties.

Second, troubles may evolve with the increasing movement toward official, licensed troubleshooters. In some cases, such involvement may proceed on a highly unplanned and episodic basis. As Jackson (1954) has noted of the drinking husband, outside agents may be drawn into the situation on an emergency basis (for example, a call for police protection), and then through more regular contacts with social agencies, doctors, and perhaps sanitarium and Alcoholics Anonymous. In other situations, specific official troubleshooters may be sought out by the troubled parties or their allies because of their expertise or neutrality, as when a couple decides to take their problems to a marriage counsellor.

Usually, the first such official agents to become involved in troubles are "generalists," including the police (Cumming, Cumming and Edel, 1965; Parnas, 1967), family doctors (Freidson, 1961, 1970), and ministers (Cumming and Harrington, 1963; Weiss, 1973). Initial preference for such troubleshooters reflects a variety of factors. Such agents are relatively available to lay complainants and their orientations are similar to what laypersons already know (Freidson, 1961): the generality and inclusiveness of their occupational mandates attract those seeking remedies for relational troubles.

Even the initial choice of troubleshooter may prove highly consequential for the trouble. For the selection of a particular troubleshooter may preemptorily impose a definition on a trouble previously open or contested. Moreover, this selection may expose the differences between the troubled parties as irreconcilable. To suggest that one's spouse see a psychiatrist, for example, may bring previously latent discordances to a head. The proffered remedy thus exacerbates the prior trouble: "You want me to see a psychiatrist! You think I'm the crazy one?"

Furthermore, the effects of initial choice of troubleshooter may be consequential, if not necessarily irreversible, in determining whether, where, and how a trouble enters subsequent referral networks. When a trouble has resisted remedial efforts, or when it seems more appropriately handled elsewhere, initial troubleshooters tend to pass intractable problems on to new, often more specialized, troubleshooters. As in Goffman's notion of a "circuit of agents" (1961), troubles may be shifted from one agent to another, perhaps moving upward toward greater and greater specialization, perhaps toward increasingly coercive and punitive outcomes.

In moving through a circuit of troubleshooters, an initially ambiguous trouble tends to crystallize, as new ways and means of dealing with the problem are sought out and implemented and prior ways are determined to be ineffective and rejected. In this process, an individual may be definitely assigned the role of troublemaker and explicitly identified as deviant. As full-scale deviant remedies are tried and found to fail, the troublemaker may be referred to specialists in other areas of deviance, the nature of his or her trouble undergoing reinterpretation as new ways of eliminating, reducing, or confining the troublemaking are implemented.

It is important to understand how outside intervention radically transforms what were previously private troubles, for this transformation shows most clearly the negotiated (rather than intrinsic) nature of problems. Whereas disagreements about the nature of the trouble and how to remedy it were previously confined to (and under the control of) the initial parties, the involvement of a third party reconstitutes the trouble as a distinctly public phenomenon. As Gulliver (1969:14) has noted with regard to processes of dispute settlement, “the initial disagreement (is raised) from the level of dyadic argument into the public arena.” With movement to a triadic situation, the original dyad can no longer orient exclusively to one another. Rather, each must attend to and seek to present his or her side to the third party. In the process relational assumptions, claims, and expectations previously taken for granted will have to be openly proclaimed and justified. Moreover, to the extent that the troubleshooter holds standards for weighing relational claims divergent from those of the original parties, new grounds for asserted rights and responsibilities may have to be provided. Tacit claims and conduct treated as idiosyncracies of the relationship, for example, may now have to be explained and justified in more universal terms; indeed the parties may learn to their surprise and dismay that some behaviors on which they founded their claim of being troubled are seen by others as “normal” or even “desirable.”

Taking a problem to an outside party may provide the first occasion for seeing the trouble as a coherent whole and formulating an explicit history of the trouble. As troubled individuals try to have their claims validated by the newly involved third party, earlier behaviors, problems, and situations may be reinterpreted and organized into progressing incidents of the trouble, while still others may be framed as attempted remedies. Thus, the need to account for past actions and to justify desired remedial responses to the third party may generate more closely documented histories of the origin, causes, and persistence of the trouble, along with the new and extended accusations of wrongdoing.

Finally, outside intervention directly affects the remedial circumstances as well as the definitional dimension of the trouble. In proposing remedial actions the concerns and reactions of the third party now have to be anticipated and attended to, as these factors assume crucial roles in how the trouble will be defined and treated. If official troubleshooters are involved, the trouble may be treated as a “case” and accumulate a distinctive official history as it moves through the system of referrals. Different sets of remedial concerns may become salient, and solutions may be imposed that neither of the original disputants wanted.

In summary, the attempt to obtain and shape the course of intervention may lead to the progressive clarification and specification of the nature and seriousness of the trouble. More concretely, what is done about outside complaints—in particular, when and how the troubleshooter intervenes, if that happens—defines and organizes the trouble. The intervention, then, may fundamentally shape what the trouble will become. To highlight the theoretical significance of these processes, we will now consider the issues troubles pose to a troubleshooter at the point of initial intervention.

DEALING WITH COMPLAINTS: CONTINGENCIES IN INTERVENING

To an outside troubleshooter, troubles pose issues of alignment: the troubleshooter must decide what stance to take toward the parties and issues. As Aubert (1965) has emphasized, troubleshooters may assume two general stances, responding to the trouble as conflict or as deviance.

In responding to trouble as conflict, the troubleshooter adopts a stance of nonalignment, either by refusing commitment to either side, or by equal commitment to both. In the former the troubleshooter refuses to intervene. In the latter the troubleshooter may try to become involved equally with the two parties by trying to mediate a settlement. For example the

police routinely respond to calls concerning family violence by mediating between husband and wife to provide an immediate if temporary resolution (Parnas, 1967:932-3). In adopting the role of mediator, the troubleshooter treats the trouble as a dispute or conflict, in that **intervention is symmetrical (Aubert, 1965:18) with regard to the positions and claims of the two parties.**

In contrast, in responding to troubles as deviance a troubleshooter confronts the problem **of alignment head on, orienting to the complaint and trouble in terms of whose side to take.** In special circumstances, police will forsake mediating domestic disputes and respond openly on the side of one of the troubled parties, for example, by arresting and removing from the home an assaultive husband (Parnas, 1967). **With one-sided intervention of this sort, the trouble is established not as conflict but deviance, as the dispute-like, relational core of the trouble is dissolved with the asymmetrical allocation of all wrongdoing to one party (now the deviant) and of all right to the other (now the victim).**

A variety of factors determine the likelihood of symmetrical or asymmetrical intervention. In the first place, on the structural level, **the assertion of certain types of rights and claims may be legally proscribed,** as when the criminal law denies workers a legitimate right to strike, or a disputant a legitimate right to kill or rob an enemy. Such denial of legitimacy to the assertion of particular claims, of course prescribes one-sided intervention against the illegitimized claimant.

Second, **troubleshooters often operate with a distinctive theory of trouble and intervention ideologies which require symmetrical or asymmetrical responses.** The assumptions of the criminal law, for example, encourage absolute judgments in the allocation of blame, and its agents typically dispense one-sided sanctions against the wrongdoer. The medicalization of troubles, locating the source of the trouble in some physiological disfunctioning within the individual, similarly promotes asymmetrical solutions. Finally, those who handle instances of child abuse are precommitted to the ideology of wrongdoing and proceed by determining whether or not there is a perpetrator. In contrast, some troubleshooters operate with distinctive remedial theories that facilitate or even require not taking sides. Marriage counsellors frequently employ a therapeutic ideology to eschew judgments of right and wrong, adopting a uniformly neutral, "no fault" stance toward troubles. Any and every problem must be treated as a relational matter, even though the counsellor may privately conclude that one party is more to blame.

Third, **the form of intervention is affected by the power of the troubleshooter relative to that of the original parties to the trouble.** Intervention by third parties whose authority is dependent upon the support or agreement of those in the entered trouble tends to assume symmetrical forms.⁶ Personal troubleshooters (friends, relatives) may take sides, but usually cannot impose their solution against the resistance of the other. Thus, **personal troubleshooting tends to be an act of mediation: the third party has to negotiate a mutually acceptable settlement relying upon personal resources and sanctions.** In contrast, many official troubleshooters possess the power to impose one-sided solutions through adjudicated decisions (Eckhoff, 1966) even in the face of opposition from one or both parties. When mediating efforts have proved unsatisfactory, official intervention may be sought by one or another side, to obtain exactly this sort of forced ending to an intractable situation.

The nature of outside intervention is also fundamentally shaped by contingent, situational factors. Troubles will move toward asymmetrical outcomes to the extent that one or both

⁶ Symmetrical intervention of a mediative character tends to be characteristic of legal processes in tribal and traditional societies as legal agents usually lack any such authority. Anthropological studies of disputing and dispute settlement (e.g., Nader, 1965; Gulliver, 1969) provide a rich source of materials on these processes.

parties are resistant to compromise and have reserves of power and resources to support that position. In addition, the conditions under which third party intervention is sought may prefigure symmetrical and asymmetrical response. Troubleshooters may be sought as mediators, as when a couple agrees to take their marital difficulties to a marriage counsellor. On other occasions one or another party to a trouble may seek intervention directly on his or her side. The result is frequently sought by directing accusations of wrongdoing at the other, in this way formulating the trouble as onesidedly as possible in order to gain the desired intervention. When one party's accusation is made from a position of greater power, the likelihood of one-sided intervention on that person's terms increases.

A complaint to a third party, whether in the form of an accusation or a request for mediation, marks only the starting point for ensuing intervention. Complaints are subject to scrutiny and to possible revision by troubleshooters, who proceed with some awareness that allegations may be distorted or false, that the proposed allocation of blame and responsibility may be misleading or invalid, that the remedial action sought may be exploitative, subversive, or illegitimate. In light of such understandings, the troubleshooter may implement remedial strategies unrelated to initial proposals. Thus, the troubleshooter may refuse to take any side where one or both parties seek partisan intervention. A juvenile court probation officer may respond to allegations that a teenager is actively misbehaving and "beyond control" by cooling out the parental accusers. A troubleshooter may come to take one side in a trouble brought in for neutral mediation. A troubleshooter may come to respond within the framework initially proposed for the trouble, but either redefine the problem (for example, parent-child differences reflect "a lack of communication"), or, with accusatory complaints, reverse the proposed allocation of victim and wrongdoer roles. Goffman's mental patient who "thought he was taking his wife to see the psychiatrist" (1961:138fn) provides a classic example of this last possibility.

These considerations highlight the importance of how direction and terms of the troubleshooter's intervention may determine what the trouble becomes. Even where the troubleshooter's intervention is shaped by the actions of one or both of the troubled parties, such that the remedy implemented merely ratifies what has already been proposed, in analytic terms it is the nature and direction of the outside intervention, particularly when authoritatively enforced, that determines what the trouble is. **This is not to say that troubleshooters can intervene freely. Intervention may be tightly constrained by the need to take into account the prior history, positions, power, and concerns of the troubled parties, by the dictates of the troubleshooter's professional or institutional ideology, and by practical institutional and situational factors.** Any troubleshooter's intervention may be radically overturned and revised by a subsequent intervention (although the ease with which this can be achieved declines as the trouble accumulates a documented history). **Yet, it is the nature and direction of outside intervention, particularly where carried out by officials, that produces the forms of alignment distinctive of deviance and conflict, and which ultimately constitutes the trouble as one or the other of these forms.**

The processes of intervention that provide the key to the consolidation of troubles do not involve simply defining the situation as one meriting either a balanced or a one-sided treatment and responding accordingly. For third party aligning responses can proceed according to their own logic and dynamic, at times at odds with a trouble's definitions as deviance or as conflict. Professional ideologies may prescribe a pre-set response to all troubles without regard to the particulars of a given case, as when marriage counsellors respond relationally to any and all marital problems. But pragmatic, situational concerns may take intervention in a direction which could not be predicted on the basis of the troubleshooter's assessment of specific instances of wrongdoing. Those committed to relational treatments may find them-

selves stymied in efforts to work out a mutually acceptable solution, and may have to resort to one-sided responses as a practical expedient. Thus, community mental health workers may encounter a situation where they clearly assess both parties as psychiatrically disturbed, yet may hospitalize only one, deciding that the situation is too volatile to remain unchanged (Emerson and Pollner 1976). Conversely, troubleshooters may respond in an even-handed fashion, while recognizing unequal distribution of rightness and wrongness among the parties (for example, Bittner on police peacekeeping, 1967). Troubleshooters may even intervene on behalf of the party seen to be in the wrong, if such a response promises to provide a permanent end to the trouble (see, for example, Bittner's analysis of police handling of the case of "Big Jim," 1967:709-10). These instances highlight the way particular forms of trouble, including deviance and conflict, are produced *procedurally* by the responses of troubleshooters, and not simply by their definitions of the trouble.

TOWARD A SOCIOLOGY OF TROUBLE

In conclusion, we would like to explore some implications of the micro-politics of trouble proposed here for prevailing interactional approaches to deviance.

First, many such approaches cut into the production of deviants at late stages. Frequently, those who have suffered some major, perhaps irrevocable sanction, such as institutional placement, are identified as the subject population. Such sanctioning or placement provides an "end point" (which may later turn out to have been a "stage," of course), for treating an actor as a particular sort of deviant, and past activities and events are ordered as leading to this "end point." These sorts of deviant career notions, however, often organize events in ways foreign to perceptions prevailing earlier, when outcomes were in doubt and definitions ambiguous. In addition, these approaches focus on cases that have made it to an eventual deviant designation, neglecting those that have failed to do so. If not neglected outright, such cases are addressed in terms of this failure; why did they not make it?. In this sense, deviant career models both presuppose and require deviant outcomes. In contrast, the concept of "trouble" directs attention not simply toward early phases of careers into deviance, but also toward non- and "pre-deviant" situations and settings generally. Moreover, the idea of trouble keeps open the possibility that many troubles with deviant potentiality can "come to nothing," or come to something devoid of imputations of deviance, or become one of several possible categories of deviance. In these ways, trouble comprehends and incorporates both the openness and indeterminacy of deviant outcomes, in part by abandoning the centrality of the notion of deviance itself.

Second, the micro-politics of trouble points toward a deepening of the basic imagery of deviant designation. It is axiomatic to the labeling approach that deviants are products of social definition; definition typically involving the imputation of immoral identity and defective status. Douglas, for example, views deviance as the product of a negotiation of "moral meanings" (1971), and Katz (1972:192) conceptualizes deviance as the assignment of defective moral or ontological status. But an exclusive focus on "meanings" runs the risk of being one-sided. This paper has argued that definition can both shape and be shaped by response; specifically, that deviant designation is the product of remedial efforts⁷ involving both interpretative and active components which can vary independently of each other. A deviant should be understood not only as one who is morally condemned, but also as one who is sided against. And while on some occasions moral condemnation seems to precede

⁷ See also the specific proposal by Fletcher et. al. (1974:59) to shift the conceptual focus to "referral behavior rather than naming behavior" as the key process in the "labeling" of mental illness.

and cause the siding against, having been sided against generates the subsequent moral opprobrium for others.

Third, our approach emphasizes a point insufficiently explicit in many studies by proponents, and totally unseen by many critics of labeling: actions directed toward another (or oneself) as a “deviant” are heavily contingent on, although not totally determined by, the frames of reference and resources of complainants, victims, and official troubleshooters, when they are involved.⁸ The “labeling approach,” properly construed, does *not* hold that the activities of deviants are disregarded by complainants, victims, or officials, nor does it recommend that analysts disregard these activities. It does propose that analysts explicitly take into account *and attempt to account for* the role of complainants, victims, and officials in determining definitions and actions, and redefinitions and further actions. We both think the activities of those eventually treated as deviants (and those not so treated), and the activities of complainants, victims, and troubleshooters, are appropriately conceived as *variable* influences on both temporary and lasting outcomes. The conditions of such variation should be a major topic for inquiry and theorizing.

This consideration leads to one final implication of this approach. Although our paper has focused on the micro-political, interactional processes, we recognize and even insist that a fully developed sociology of trouble would also consider macro-politics. Such a macro-politics of trouble would inquire into the ways broader economic, political and social interests shape both the frames of reference and the institutionalized remedies available for identifying and dealing with trouble. Long-term social trends such as the formation of states and the centralization of state power, the shift from mercantilism to industrial capitalism and from *laissez faire* to corporate capitalism, and the spread of bureaucratic forms of organization appear to have major implications for interpretations of and responses to troubles. It may be argued that the formation of states and the centralization of their power made some forms of punishment such as banishment and transportation impossible and helped motivate the establishment of prisons (see Langbein, 1976); that the rise of a market economy in labor helped motivate differentiation of specific categories of deviants, and that the welfare state is encouraging “decarceration” (see Scull, 1977); that legal developments are sometimes powerfully determined by economic ones, so that new forms of “crimes” are “recognized,” legislated, and enforced (see Hall, 1952); or, finally, that remedial institutions in the form of bureaucracies work unceasingly to influence how certain activities, like the possession of marijuana, are treated and understood (see Dickson, 1973).

This is not the place, even had we the insight, to try to spell out these matters. We strongly urge that developing a “micro”-politics of trouble should not be taken to imply that developing a “macro”-politics of trouble is unimportant; we think both need to be developed and their relations examined. Our approach suggests that in addition to exploring how larger forces may affect individual and group activities which may come to be treated as deviant, such a macropolitics of deviance should explore in detail how actions toward and understandings of such activities are affected.

⁸ The difference made by the presence and preferences of complainants has been documented by the work of Donald J. Black and Albert J. Reiss, Jr. (1970), although theory about the matter remains undeveloped. Much work in “victimology” also implicitly raises some relevant questions, but so much attention has been given to the light victims can throw on “dark numbers,” and the variable role of victims in “causing” deviance, that these questions have gone unanswered. A considerable amount of work in the labeling tradition has, of course, focused on the role of official troubleshooters.

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