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The Rise and Fall of Social Problems: A Public Arenas Model¹

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This paper develops a model of the process through which social problems rise and fall. Treating public attention as a scarce resource, the model emphasizes competition and selection in the media and other arenas of public discourse. Linkages among public arenas produce feedback that drives the growth of social problems. Growth is constrained by the finite “carrying capacities” of public arenas, by competition, and by the need for sustained drama. The tension between the constraints and forces for growth produces successive waves of problem definitions, as problems and those who promote them compete to enter and to remain on the public agenda. Suggestions for empirical tests of the model are specified.

This paper proposes a model of the social problems process that elaborates on the symbolic interactionist model that views social problems as products of a process of collective definition. This latter view, developed most fully by Blumer (1971) and Spector and Kitsuse (1973, 1977), rejects the theory that social problems are objective and identifiable societal conditions that have intrinsically harmful effects. Blumer (1971, p. 300) argues, instead, that a “social problem exists primarily in terms of how it is defined and conceived in society.”

We agree with Blumer’s contention that social problems are projections of collective sentiments rather than simple mirrors of objective conditions

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in society. After all, there are many situations in society that could be perceived as social problems but are not so defined. A theory that views social problems as mere reflections of objective conditions cannot explain why some conditions are defined as problems, commanding a great deal of societal attention, whereas others, equally harmful or dangerous, are not. Why, for instance, does the plight of the indigenous people of South America (who are suffering from the rapid destruction of their cultures, and who in some cases are being killed off in large numbers) receive less public attention than the plight of laboratory animals used in scientific research? Why are conditions and events in the Third World that affect the life chances of millions of people, both abroad and in the United States, the object of only the most cursory and superficial public attention except during “crises”? Why do toxic chemical wastes in landfills receive more public discussion than dangerous chemicals in America’s workplaces? Why do so few weep for the dying rain forest?

The extent of the harm in these cases cannot, in itself, explain these differences, and it is not enough to say that some of these situations become problems because they are more “important.” All these issues are important—or at least capable of being seen as such. Indeed, the idea of *importance* and the idea of *problem* must both be regarded as “essentially contested” concepts (Gallie 1956; see also Connolly 1983)—ideas that are always subject to probing about the appropriateness of applying them to any particular case. Finally, it is not helpful to claim simply that some problems are more “marketable” than others because that begs the central question: Why?

The interactionist perspective has stimulated much research (Schneider 1985a), and a number of authors (e.g., Blumer 1971; Spector and Kitsuse 1973, 1977; Mauss 1975; see also Downs 1972) have proposed “natural history” models that describe the stages in the career of a social problem. Using such natural history frameworks, many researchers have developed case studies that trace the progression of a social problem through a sequence of stages (e.g., its incipency, coalescence, institutionalization, fragmentation, and demise).² However, for several reasons, it is now time to move beyond natural history models. First, even granting that such models are intended to be highly idealized descriptions, the idea of an orderly succession of stages is still crude. Many problems exist simultaneously in several “stages” of development, and patterns of progression from one stage to the next vary sufficiently to question the claim that a typical career exists (Wiener 1981; Clignet 1981).

Second, the focus on the typical career of a problem hinders analysis

² For an extended discussion of this approach, see Woolgar and Pawluch (1985), Pfohl (1985), Schneider (1985b), and Hazelrigg (1985).

because interactions *among* problems are central to the process of collective definition. For example, although it is widely recognized that social problems compete for societal attention (see, e.g., Blumer 1971, pp. 300–303), the dynamics of the competitive process have been barely explored. Instead, analysis has focused on single problems and their struggles for attention. This emphasis has contributed to an underappreciation of two critical features of the social problems process. First, social problems exist in relation to other social problems; and second, they are embedded within a complex institutionalized system of problem formulation and dissemination.³

In this paper we briefly outline a working model we believe provides a theoretical base for incorporating and then moving beyond natural history models. We will suggest avenues for the systematic study of the factors and forces that direct public attention toward some and away from other objective or putative conditions.

Our model stresses the “arenas” where social problem definitions evolve, examining the effect of those arenas on both the evolution of social problems and the actors who make claims about them. We define a social problem as a putative condition or situation that is labeled a problem in the arenas of public discourse and action. But instead of emphasizing the stages of a social problem’s development, we focus on competition: we assume that public attention is a scarce resource, allocated through competition in a system of public arenas. We present this model as an initial exploration, in the hope that these hypotheses will stimulate discussion and research.

We make use of a wide range of theoretical literature. In addition to using the work of natural history theorists, such as Blumer and Spector and Kitsuse, our model draws on Edelman (1964, 1977), Moyer and Clignet (1980), and Gusfield (1981), work that emphasizes the role of drama in the social problems process. We also use the literature on interpretive processes in the mass media (e.g., Gans 1979; Gitlin 1980; Molotch and Lester 1974; Schudson 1978; Tuchman 1978), noting the importance of the selections made by well-positioned cultural “gatekeepers” in controlling the flow of messages to audiences. In addition, we borrow from organizational network theory (Knoke and Laumann 1982; Laumann, Knoke, and Kim 1985), stressing the influence of and the interrelationships between institutions and social networks in which problem definitions are framed and publicly presented. At times, we draw on resource mobilization work on social movements (e.g., McCarthy and Zald 1977; Oberschall 1973), although we recognize that the focus of this literature—on collective *action*, rather than on collective

³ Our thanks to reviewer A for suggesting this point.

definition—distinguishes its central concern from ours.⁴ We press into service the political science literature on agenda setting (esp. Kingdon 1984), recognizing that its original focus (the processes that structure the agenda for government decision making in official forums) is narrower than ours (the processes that structure collective concern in public arenas). Finally, we anchor this model in an ecological framework, not to suggest deterministic relationships, but to highlight the resource constraints that human actors face in constructing problem definitions.

This long list of debts to other theories is not an artifact of a propensity for eclecticism on our parts but stems from the profound complexity of the process of collective definition. Because collective definition (1) involves coupled social-psychological, organizational, political, and cultural processes, (2) spans organizational and institutional boundaries within society, and (3) has a pervasive influence on social action at multiple levels, it needs the light of several intellectual traditions to illuminate it. To the extent that our model is complex and sometimes untidy, it mirrors our subject matter and is therefore preferable to a clean and simple conceptualization that would do great violence to the social reality it attempts to describe.

In its most schematic form, our model has six main elements:

1. a dynamic process of competition among the members of a very large “population” of social problem claims;⁵
2. the institutional arenas that serve as “environments” where social problems compete for attention and grow;
3. the “carrying capacities” of these arenas, which limit the number of problems that can gain widespread attention at one time;
4. the “principles of selection,” or institutional, political, and cultural factors that influence the probability of survival of competing problem formulations;
5. patterns of interaction among the different arenas, such as feedback and synergy, through which activities in each arena spread throughout the others; and
6. the networks of operatives who promote and attempt to control particular problems and whose channels of communication crisscross the different arenas.

⁴ With a few notable exceptions (e.g., Snow et al. 1986), resource mobilization theorists have tended to concentrate on organizational and macromobilization processes, while paying limited attention to interpretive processes that take place in public discourse.

⁵ This competition among problems, of course, involves competition among social groups who promote different problems or different ways of seeing the “same” problems. In other words competition among problems’ definitions at a cultural (i.e., meaningful) level reflects and is reflected in competition among groups “on the ground.”

COMPETING DEFINITIONS

As a first step to understanding the nature of the process of collective definition, it is necessary to note that there is a huge “population” of potential problems—putative situations and conditions that could be conceived of as problems. This population, however, is highly stratified. An extremely small fraction grows into social problems with “celebrity” status, the dominant topics of political and social discourse. A somewhat larger number develop into lesser social problems; small communities of professionals, activists, and interest groups work to keep these problems alive on the margins of public debate. The vast majority of these putative conditions remain outside or on the extreme edge of public consciousness.

Moreover, the length of time that the members of this population remain at any particular level of status varies greatly. Some social problems, such as the “energy crisis” of the mid-1970s, maintain a position at the center of public debate for several years, then fade into the background. Others grow and decline much more rapidly. Still other problems grow, decline, and later reemerge, never vanishing completely, but receiving greatly fluctuating quantities of public attention. Such fluctuations are apparent in the history of the social problems of poverty and the threat of nuclear war.

The fates of potential problems are governed not only by their objective natures but by a highly selective process in which they compete with one another for public attention and societal resources. A fraction of the potential problems are publicly presented by groups or individuals who define them as problems. These groups and individuals come from many sectors of society and may have very different goals. Some, such as interest groups, politicians, and “social movement organizations” (Zald and Ash 1966; McCarthy and Zald 1977), may actively seek social change or reform. These activists may be members of the polity or of challenging groups, from movements or countermovements (Mottl 1980). On the other hand, the main goal of some actors who formulate social problems, such as television producers, tort lawyers, and public relations specialists, may be making money rather than pushing for or resisting social change. Thus, not all the actors who market social problems can be considered “activists.” For some, social problems are just another day at the office. Accordingly, we use the more inclusive term “operatives” to designate the groups and individuals who publicly present social problems.

Since there are usually many ways of defining a given situation as a problem, claims about social problems do not only call attention to conditions; they also frame problems in particular ways. For example, as Gusfield (1981) points out, the highway deaths associated with alcohol consumption can be seen as a problem of irresponsible drunken drivers,

insufficient automobile crash-worthiness, a transportation system overly dependent on cars, poor highway design, excessive emphasis on drinking in adult social life, or of any combination of the above definitions. Statements about social problems thus select a specific interpretation of reality from a plurality of possibilities. Which "reality" comes to dominate public discourse has profound implications for the future of the social problem, for the interest groups involved, and for policy.⁶

Competition among social problems thus occurs simultaneously at two levels. First, within each substantive area, different ways of framing the situation may compete to be accepted as an authoritative version of reality. For example, in the area of road-traffic safety, claims about reckless drivers may compete with claims about unsafe vehicles (Irwin 1985). Second, a large collection of problems—from teenage pregnancy to occupational health to shortages of organ donors—compete with one another for public attention, as a complex process of selection establishes priorities about which should be regarded as important.

Through these interacting processes, social problems (and the operatives who promote them) must compete both to enter and to remain on the public agenda. Their successes or failures in this competition need bear no strong relationships to the number of people affected, the extent of harm (as measured by any particular set of criteria), or to any other independent variables that purport to measure importance. If a situation becomes defined as a social problem, it does not necessarily mean that objective conditions have worsened. Similarly, if a problem disappears from public discourse, it does not necessarily imply that the situation has improved. Instead, the outcome of this process is governed by a complex organizational and cultural competition. To understand this competition, it is necessary to examine the social "arenas" in which it takes place.

THE CARRYING CAPACITY OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

The collective definition of social problems occurs not in some vague location such as society or public opinion but in particular public arenas in which social problems are framed and grow. These arenas include the executive and legislative branches of government, the courts, made-for-TV movies, the cinema, the news media (television news, magazines, newspapers, and radio), political campaign organizations, social action groups, direct mail solicitations, books dealing with social issues, the

⁶ In controversial areas, competing groups often struggle to impose definitions of a problem and, hence, to influence policy. For a discussion of the conflicting ways that industry and labor advocates frame the problem of occupational disease, see Hilgartner (1985).

research community,⁷ religious organizations, professional societies, and private foundations. It is in these institutions that social problems are discussed, selected, defined, framed, dramatized, packaged, and presented to the public.

Though there are many differences among these arenas, they all share several important characteristics. First, each has a carrying capacity that limits the number of social problems that it can entertain at any one time. Mauss (1975, pp. 42–44) argues that, at a given time, every society has a normal quota of social problems. While it is clear that the number of situations that could potentially be interpreted as social problems is so huge as to be, for practical purposes, virtually infinite, the prime space and prime time for presenting problems publicly are quite limited. It is this discrepancy between the number of potential problems and the size of the public space for addressing them that makes competition among problems so crucial and central to the process of collective definition.

Different arenas have different carrying capacities, which can be indexed by various measures. For newspapers and magazines, the measure is column inches; for television and radio news, minutes of air time; for made-for-TV movies or the cinema, the number of productions per year. Private foundations are limited by their discretionary incomes. Congressional committees can only schedule a limited number of hours of hearings per session of Congress, and of the topics discussed in hearings, only a small fraction will be brought to the House or Senate floor. Political strategists focus election campaigns around several key issues, making these the central themes of their campaigns, to be repeatedly stressed in slogans, commercials, and public appearances. Only a few issues can be selected or the image of the candidate will become diffuse and confusing to the electorate.⁸

Carrying capacities exist not only at the institutional but also at the individual level (see table 1). Individual operatives have limited resources that they must allocate. Similarly, members of the public are limited not only by the amount of time and money they can devote to social issues, but also by the amount of “surplus compassion” they can muster for

⁷ This includes both social and natural scientists. Aronson (1982) points out that conventional views of the social problems process have neglected the role of natural scientists. Her case study of nutrition as a social problem (1982) illustrates how scientists can engage in entrepreneurial strategies, promoting social problems as a means for recruiting political and material support for their work. See also Aronson (1984), Callon, Law, and Rip (1986), and Latour (1987).

⁸ According to the *Washington Post* (Peterson 1986), at a recent training seminar on campaign strategy, professional political consultants urged campaigns to “select a single theme or message and stick with it.” Consultants suggested that campaigns should operate on the “KISS rule” (keep it short and simple) or the “KISSSS rule” (keep it short, simple, and stupid).

TABLE 1
CARRYING CAPACITIES

Units of Analysis	Resource Constraints
Public arenas:	
1. Newspaper	Space in paper, number of reporters/editors, time for preparing stories, travel budgets, etc.
2. Foundation	Total budget, ongoing programmatic commitments, discretionary income, staff time, etc.
3. Congressional committee	Hearing time, size of staff, budget, political costs of actions, etc.
4. Nonprofit organization	Budget, staff, volunteer time, etc.
Operatives:	
1. Politician	Personal time, staff time, budget, number of “free media” opportunities, etc.
2. Reporter	Time, budget, energy, political capital with editors, etc.
3. Public relations firm	Personnel time, money, “free media” slots, political capital with contacts, etc.
4. Public interest law firm	Personnel time, money, etc.
Member of the public	Money for causes, time, surplus compassion, social costs of advocacy, etc.

NOTE.—Table 1 gives some illustrative examples of carrying capacities. All public arenas, operatives, and members of the public have finite resources to allocate to social problems. Allocation decisions are made to pursue a variety of goals. Newspaper editors, e.g., may work to attract readers and advertisers, maintain professional standards, exert political influence, and advance their personal careers, while nonprofit groups may work to ensure organizational survival, capture funding, expand their base of support, and achieve their policy goals. It is common for operatives to attempt to influence the resource expenditures of one another. Thus, politicians will work to capture media attention by staging events that editors will see as good stories, foundations will do evaluations designed in part to influence the activities of grantees; and TV producers will struggle to capture the attention of viewers.

causes beyond the usual immediate concerns of persons of their social status. “Master statuses” (Hughes 1971) guide people’s selections of the social conditions that trouble them; underemployed black males, white male business executives, and middle-class white mothers of small children inhabit very different day-to-day realities,⁹ and they tend to have differing social concerns. Once the priorities of their master status have been addressed, there may be very little surplus compassion left over for social issues with less personal significance. Individual carrying capacities

⁹ These differences are reinforced by status-based styles of information consumption. Thus, the readerships of *Nation’s Business*, *Daedalus*, and the *New York Post* are exposed to messages that differ in content and emotional tone.

are, of course, socially structured. Economic trends may, for example, affect the material resources that people can devote to social concerns (McCarthy and Zald 1977, pp. 1224–26), while themes expressed in current political culture may affect attitudes toward social action.

The existence of a carrying capacity in all the arenas in which social problems are defined has far-reaching implications. Most important, the carrying capacities limit the size of the political and social agenda. In other words, the number of social problems is determined, not by the number of harmful or dangerous situations and conditions facing society, but by the carrying capacities of public institutions. This has a second logical consequence: except to the extent that the carrying capacity of the institutional arenas is expanding, the ascendance of one social problem will tend to be accompanied by the decline of one or more others.

PRINCIPLES OF SELECTION

A second characteristic shared by all the arenas is the existence of a set of principles of selection that influences which problems will most likely be addressed there. These general selection principles—the intense competition for prime space; the need for drama and novelty; the danger of saturation; the rhythm of organizational life; cultural preoccupations; and political biases—get played out differently in different arenas. The carrying capacity of each arena has an important bearing on its selection principles; other things being equal, the smaller the carrying capacity is, the more intense the competition. Similarly, the importance of each arena, in terms of the size of its audience or its ability to make long-term commitments of societal resources, will (*ceteris paribus*) increase the intensity of competition.

Drama

Another general principle is the central importance of drama. Typically, those who present social problems to the public have an agenda; they are soliciting people to perform some specific action: for example, to read an article, watch a television show, vote for a candidate, support a cause, fund an organization, issue a court ruling, sponsor or support legislation, promote official policy, and so on. The huge number of competing solicitations places a high premium on drama, encouraging operatives to cast social problems in dramatic and persuasive terms. An appearance of common sense and plain truth is important in this casting; “cold, hard facts” and an image of technical expertise become powerful resources for constructing authoritative presentations (Gusfield 1981; see also Wynne

1982). Thus, in social problem claims, officially certified “facts” are coupled with vivid, emotional rhetoric.¹⁰

Moreover, limitations in prime public space and in individual attention spans converge to encourage succinct messages. Operatives work to fit social problems into slick, little packages that crisply present issues in authoritative and urgent tones. (In controversial areas, the struggle between competing interest groups may take a slightly different form, with one group working to dramatize an issue while the other employs “de-dramatizing” strategies [Moyer and Clignet 1980].)¹¹ Simple, dramatic problem formulations are more likely to survive competition. Stock explanations that draw on widely shared, stylized “political myths” are likely to triumph over sophisticated, subtle analyses (Edelman 1977, pp. 1–8).

Novelty and Saturation

Drama is the source of energy that gives social problems life and sustains their growth. In creating drama, the operatives who present social problems use some of the classic tropes of the theater. The “poster child” and the man on the evening news who *embodies* homelessness are modern transformations of the allegorical “Everyman” in the medieval morality plays.¹² But even though the symbols used to dramatize social problems may be built along classic lines, novelty is also an important factor. Especially in dealing with familiar social problems, operatives and interest groups constantly look for new images and new ways to capitalize on current events to inject urgency into their presentations.

If the symbols used to frame a problem become too repetitive, if they come to saturate the prime public space, then either new ones must be found or the problem will usually undergo a decline because of its dimin-

¹⁰ The ideal-typical social problem claim asserts that a problem exists and is important, includes ideas of causal responsibility and normative (political or moral) responsibility, and proposes solutions to address the problem or redress the harm. A fully articulated claim will dramatize each of these points.

¹¹ Several types of strategies are frequently employed in efforts to dedramatize a social problem. These include denying the existence of the putative condition or situation that is deemed to be a problem, asserting that other matters are more urgent, charging that there are other causes for the harm than those asserted by the competing group of operatives, dismissing the opposing camp as uninformed or irrational, suggesting that the situation or condition is natural, acceptable, or inevitable, and arguing that solutions are unknown, unworkable, unacceptable, or nonexistent.

¹² Note, too, that some operatives are conscious of this; e.g., Frank of NBC News wrote in the memo quoted in this article that: “The picture is not a fact but a symbol . . . the real child and its real crying become symbols of all children” (Epstein 1973).

ished dramatic value. Decline does not, of course, imply problem melioration; sheer boredom with that particular public drama may enable competitors to take its place. Editors will decide that lately they have been seeing too much about the problem; talk show producers will seek other guests; politicians will tackle new issues; foundations will shift funding priorities; and researchers will study different topics. Even so, saturation does not necessarily entail disappearance. Specialized institutions may be left—the lasting social sediment of a flurry of public discourse.

Saturation can occur at two levels. First, a large number of decision makers (e.g., editors, politicians, researchers, etc.) can simultaneously elect to produce material on a particular problem, thus flooding the public arenas with redundant messages and driving down their dramatic value. Thus, in the early 1980s, when public concern about nuclear war rose rapidly, publishers responded by producing a record number of new books on the topic (Davis and Smith 1982; Blooston 1982; McGrath 1982). Second, sustained bombardment with messages about similar problems can dedramatize problems of that class. For example, repeated warnings about carcinogens appear to have led some segments of the public to conclude, as one bumper sticker puts it, that “Life Causes Cancer” (see also National Cancer Institute 1984, pp.iii, 35–44).

The struggle for novelty interacts closely with organizational characteristics of the institutional arenas that influence the pacing and rhythm of the display of social problems. Each arena has characteristic schedules or patterns in its use of time that impose a rhythm on organizational life.¹³ This rhythm can carry over to its treatment of social problems. Thus, the division of congressional activity into sessions, with their predictable and recurring peaks and lulls, influences the selection of social problems by affecting the timing of their public display.¹⁴ Similarly, the fixed lengths of terms in public office impose a rhythm on the selection and definition of social problems, since election campaigns are a prime space for framing images of social problems as well as those of particular candidates.¹⁵ The

¹³ For a general discussion of temporal patterning in social life, see Zerubavel (1981).

¹⁴ For an excellent study of the processes of selection that shape the agenda of the U.S. Senate, see Walker (1977).

¹⁵ Ross and Staines (1972, pp. 22–23) point out that “the importance of officials and politicians in creating public issues should not be underestimated. It is easy but erroneous to assume that public issues are created only by partisans who advertise a particular social problem and that officials are engaged only in the business of resisting or suppressing issues. . . . Nowhere is the politician’s interest in the creation of public issues greater than at election time. The politician who wants to be elected must create issues on which he, but not any opponent, is strategically positioned.”

division of the budgets of government funding agencies and private foundations into fiscal years influences the selection of social problems in the research community. Putative conditions that have been defined as “growing problems” at the time when agencies are making decisions about funding priorities are more likely to receive attention.

Culture and Politics

The selection principles of all the institutional arenas are also influenced by widely shared cultural preoccupations and political biases. Certain problem definitions fit closely with broad cultural concerns, and they benefit from this fact in competition. Some problems may be easier to relate to deep mythic themes, and they thus provide better material to ponder collectively (Lévi-Strauss 1966). For example, as Fox (1977, p. 21) points out, in the United States there is currently a deep preoccupation with health, illness, and medicine, areas that are becoming important “symbolic media through which American society . . . grapple[s] with fundamental questions of value and belief.” These cultural concerns within health and medicine are reflected in the definitions of a wide range of contemporary social problems. Karen Ann Quinlan, Elizabeth Bouvia, Baby Fae, Baby Doe, and Rock Hudson—in fact, the whole cast of recent medical celebrities—can be matched with the social problems they stand for.

Similarly, some problems are advanced in the competitive process because they are important to powerful political and economic interests; the “sponsors” of a problem can have far-reaching implications for its success. Elites may actively oppose some problem definitions, relegating some issues to a “politically enforced neglect” (Crenson 1971, p. 184). Moreover, the political economy can shape the definition of social problems in ways that extend beyond the strong influence of dominant groups on political/economic values. Economic changes can affect collective definitions of social problems. “When an economy is expanding and things are going well, it becomes easier to think in terms of spending resources to deal with problems. Times of recession or of slow growth and slowly rising living standards with reduced public resources result in downgrading the significance of nonproductivity linked social problems and discourage actions to deal with them” (Miller 1976, p. 139). Moreover, current trends in political culture affect the selection of social problems. Visions of what the government should regard as a problem change over time; compare, for example, the perception of the proper role of government that prevailed under the “New Frontier” with that under the “New Federalism.”

Organizational Characteristics

There are many organizational and cultural characteristics peculiar to each arena that influence selection in that arena. Newspaper coverage of social issues, for example, is influenced on the organizational side by such factors as the structure of newspapers; the organization of media chains and wire services; the stratification of the industry into an elite "national" press, local dailies, and tabloids; the size and deployment of staffs; their division into departments or "beats"; the time and budgetary pressures on journalists; their dependence on, and vulnerability to, key sources for information (Sigal 1973; Nelkin 1987); the linkages between newspaper directors and other parts of the American business elite (Dreier 1982); and the strong organizational preoccupation with immediate, fast-breaking events.

On the cultural side, the key issue is "deciding what's news" (Gans 1979). Here, journalists rely on a shared professional understanding of what is an important event, what is a good story, what merits coverage. These shared understandings influence which stories reporters seek out and editors assign, how they are written, where they appear in the paper, and how events are framed (Schudson 1978; Tuchman 1978; Gitlin 1980). Since the amount of prime space in a newspaper (e.g., the front pages of the sections, the editorial pages, and certain featured spots scattered throughout the paper) is quite limited, competition among journalists for this prime space is intense; careers and professional status are determined by where one's byline appears. Because they do not want their articles to be buried somewhere deep inside the paper, journalists have a strong incentive to learn and internalize prevailing definitions of news and to anticipate their editors' priorities.

With television news, the above constraints continue to apply, though there are several additional ones: television is more expensive to produce than print is, a good television story must have exciting visuals, and the carrying capacity for television news is substantially smaller. Consequently, stories must be shorter, and it must be possible to send camera crews on location quickly and easily. In television, even more than in newspapers, social problems are cast in dramatic terms. As Reuven Frank, then executive producer of the NBC Evening News, put it in a memo to his staff: "Every news story should, without any sacrifice of probity or responsibility, display the attributes of fiction, of drama. It should have structure and conflict, rising action and falling action, a problem and denouement, a beginning, a middle and an end" (Epstein 1973, p. 4).

In other institutions, similar patterns prevail, though somewhat different sets of organizational and cultural factors shape the principles of

selection. Because of this variation, a problem that is well adapted to one particular arena may be able to survive there, even though it is unable to compete in the others. To enter the courts successfully, a problem must be captured in an instant case that meets a set of more or less restrictive legal criteria for admissibility. Even when other arenas are largely ignoring a problem, operatives can keep it alive and in public view through the skillful use of the courts. A good example here is provided by activist Jeremy Rifkin, who has used federal environmental statutes to oppose the deliberate release of genetically engineered microorganisms (*New York Times* 1983; Boffey 1984; Sun 1985). Using lawsuits, along with media coverage of the litigation, he has succeeded in keeping the proper use of genetic technology alive as a social problem—even at a time when most public actors (e.g., the federal government, the major corporations, the media, and the bulk of the scientific community) view genetic engineering as a source of benefits instead of as a problem.

Similarly, many social problems that are largely unsuccessful in most arenas can be kept alive by small but persistent advocacy groups. Here, the most important requirement for survival is the identification of supporters who will donate money or time.¹⁶ Two patterns prevail: industry-based advocacy organizations and trade associations, and citizens' groups. Though industry organizations are often better funded, in recent years, citizens' groups (on both the political Left and Right) have learned how to earn substantial incomes through direct mail solicitations. A small direct mail industry has sprung up, and many citizens' groups hire consultants who specialize in packaging social problems vividly, emotionally, and concisely in letter form (see, e.g., Kotz 1978; see also Sabato 1981, pp. 220–63). To identify supporters who will fund their organizations, these groups engage in a process of list building. As an initial investment, direct mail solicitations are sent out to computerized mailing lists that can be purchased from list brokers. Names of contributors are placed on the organization's house list of supporters; ideally, their first checks will pay back the initial investment and perhaps yield a return. Subsequent mailings to the house list can be quite profitable.

PROBLEM-AMPLIFYING AND PROBLEM-DAMPENING FEEDBACK

Having discussed the arenas in which social problems compete and the selection principles that influence the outcome of competition, we can

¹⁶ For an insightful theoretical discussion of the operation of "social movement organizations," see McCarthy and Zald (1977).

now turn to interactions among these arenas. Feedback among the different arenas is a central characteristic of the process through which social problems are developed.

This feedback either amplifies or dampens the attention given problems in public arenas. Through a complex set of linkages, activities in each arena propagate throughout the others. If a social problem rises in one institution, it is likely to spread rapidly into others. Thus, those problems that gain widespread attention and grow into celebrities can come to dominate not just one arena of public discourse but many.

It is easy to see why synergistic effects are so powerful when one considers the nature of the organizational and social network links between the various arenas.¹⁷ Each institution is populated by a community of operatives who scrutinize the activities of their counterparts in other organizations and arenas. Journalists read each other's work in a constant search for story ideas. Television producers scan the symbolic landscape for fresh subjects for dramas. Legislators seek ideas from neighboring states. Activists "network" to gather information, maintain contacts, and spread ideas.

Nor is this attention only passive and reactive. Indeed, an active attempt to influence events in other arenas is the rule, rather than the exception. Congressional aides, for example, routinely attempt to generate and shape media coverage of their employer's activities. Public opinion polls and news coverage are carefully monitored, and the politician's selection and presentation of issues are heavily influenced by considerations of what will get good press. At the same time, anticipated legislative activity often becomes a stimulus for the research community to conduct policy studies, or growing public concern—expressed in opinion polls, court battles, or other public arenas—leads federal granting agencies or private foundations to call for proposals to study an issue. If we explore these complex linkages, we find a huge number of positive feedback loops, "engines," that drive the growth of particular problems.

Growth is constrained, however, by the negative feedback produced by the finite carrying capacities of the public arenas, by competition among problems for attention, and by the need for continuous novel drama to sustain growth. In the context of this dynamic tension between the constraints on, and the forces of, growth, operatives who work in various public arenas attempt—often quite self-consciously—to "surf" (Nolan 1985) on the shifting waves of social problems.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Fishman (1978), Knoke and Laumann (1982), Kingdon (1984), and Laumann et al. (1985).

COMMUNITIES OF OPERATIVES

A closer look at the networks of operatives populating public institutions reveals that, in many cases, they form communities that center around particular problem areas (Walker 1981). There are communities of specialists in each of society's well-established macrocategories of social problems, such as crime, the economy, foreign policy, women's issues, the environment, public morals, poverty, civil rights, farm problems, bioethics, the family, and a host of others. In addition, there are some operatives who specialize not in problem areas but in particular arena-based techniques (e.g., investigative reporting, grass-roots organizing, campaign financing, television production, policy research, etc.). These operatives may play roles in several problem communities at once or may switch problem areas frequently.

The channels of communication among operatives who work in each problem area crisscross the different institutional arenas. Thus, society's well-established categories of social problems can be thought of as being organized into a set of departments that resemble (not coincidentally) the departments in a weekly news magazine.¹⁸ In other words, the cultural problem structure represented in our system of categories for describing social problems corresponds to an informal organizational structure that spans the arenas of public discourse.¹⁹

In some areas, such as that of drinking and driving (Gusfield 1981), a single view can come to dominate a department. But political combat between rival factions, proposing radically different problem formulations, is also common. Often two factions will each come to view the very existence of the other as a problem. In the area of educational policy, for example, fundamentalist religious groups regard "evolutionists" and their teachings as a problem, and the scientific community has returned the compliment (Nelkin 1977, 1982). But, in addition to conflict, a symbiotic relationship can develop within a department, with the operatives in each arena feeding the activities of the operatives in the others. Thus, environ-

¹⁸ McCarthy and Zald (1977) use the term "social movement industry" to refer to the collection of all social movement organizations that share a similar set of preferences for social change (e.g., regarding an area such as civil rights). Our concept of a department is broader, in that it includes relevant journalists, policy specialists, professional societies, politicians, and government officials as well as movement and countermovement organizations.

¹⁹ The structure of the category system, and of the corresponding informal organizations, has important implications for the selection of social problems. In their study of the role of the press during the early construction of the problem of the environment, Schoenfeld, Meier, and Griffin (1979) found that stories on the environment did not fit into established categories of news. Thus, many stories lacked both a proper place within the format of the newspaper and an appropriate reporter to cover them.

mental groups, industry lobbyists and public relations personnel, politicians who work on environmental issues, environmental lawyers, environmental editors, and officials in government environmental agencies all generate work for one another. At the same time, their activities collectively raise the prominence of the environment as a source of social problems.

The departments and the professionals who work “in” them can come to “own” their problem areas (Gusfield 1981, p. 10), acting as gatekeepers, who exert great control over the interpretation of situations and conditions deemed to fall under their jurisdiction. Within each department, there is considerable discussion about which potential problems merit attention. Thus, in newsrooms and on Capitol Hill, in the offices of social action groups and among members of the research community, there is much talk about what “big issues” are “coming up.” Decisions about which problems to attend to and promote contain both a strategic component (What will be good for our political faction? Our organization? Our personal careers?) and an evaluation of the relative importance of different potential problems.

Moreover, taken together, these departments form what can best be thought of as a social problems industry—a whole sector of the economy that produces an ever-changing set of collective definitions of what we should be paying attention to and why. Since the influence of this industry on public life is pervasive and profound,²⁰ it is important to develop an understanding of its structure and dynamics.

THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS

We have argued above that the identity and fate of social problems depend on which formulations are accepted by which operatives who intend to do what about them in which public arenas (Bucher and Strauss 1961). We have pointed out several constraints that all social problems face in the struggle for recognition and have identified these as principles of selection. Furthermore, we have noted that feedback between arenas dampens or amplifies the attention problems receive.

We now present a set of propositions that are the working hypotheses of this public arenas model. In the future, these propositions can be elaborated on and tested.

²⁰ A better understanding of the social problems process would have implications for many fields. Short (1984), e.g., points out the importance for the field of risk analysis of research and theory on the processes of collective definition.

Preliminaries

1. A *social problem* is a putative condition or situation that (at least some) actors label a “problem” in the *arenas* of public discourse and action, defining it as harmful and framing its definition in particular ways.
2. The level of attention devoted to a social problem is not a function of its objective makeup alone but is determined by a process of collective definition.
3. The construction of social problems occurs within the public arenas. The success (or size, or scope) of a social problem is measured by the amount of attention devoted to it in these arenas.

Carrying Capacity

4. Each arena has a *carrying capacity* that limits the number of social problems it can entertain during a given period.
5. The population of potential social problems (i.e., putative situations or conditions that could be considered problems) is huge.
6. The carrying capacity of the public arenas is much too small to accommodate all potential social problems.
7. Therefore, social problems must compete for space in the public arenas. This competition is ongoing; problems must compete both to enter and to remain on the public agenda.
8. The number of social problems is a function not of the number of harmful or dangerous conditions facing society but of the carrying capacity of public arenas.

Dynamics of Competition

9. Competition among social problems occurs simultaneously on two levels: First, there is competition for space between substantively different problems, as priorities are set as to which problems are important and therefore merit public space. Second, within each substantive area, there is competition over definitions, that is, between alternative ways of framing the problem. These two types of competition interact.
10. The public attention received by social problems is very unevenly distributed over the population of social problems:
 - a) a very small number of social problems are extremely successful and become the dominant topics of public discourse;
 - b) a somewhat larger number are moderately successful and command some public attention; and

- c) the vast majority of potential social problems remain outside of or on the extreme margins of public discourse.
- 11. The amount of attention received by a given social problem varies dynamically over time:
 - a) problems that have achieved some success are constantly in danger of undergoing a decline and being displaced; and
 - b) while some problems may rise, decline, and reemerge, very few maintain a high level of attention over many years.
- 12. Except to the extent that the carrying capacities of the public arenas are changing, the ascent of one social problem will tend to be accompanied by the decline of one or more others.

Principles of Selection

- 13. All public arenas have principles of selection that influence the probability that particular social problems will appear there. (Propositions 14–18 address selection principles that operate in all the public arenas.)
- 14. *Drama*.—Public arenas place a premium on drama. Social problems presented in a dramatic way have a higher probability of successfully competing in the arenas:
 - a) saturation of the arenas with redundant claims and symbols can dedramatize a problem;
 - b) repeated bombardment of the public with messages about similar problems can dedramatize problems of that class; and
 - c) to remain high on the public agenda, a problem must remain dramatic; thus, new symbols or events must continually renew the drama or the problem will decline.
- 15. *Culture*.—In all public arenas, social problems that can be related to deep mythic themes or broad cultural preoccupations have a higher probability of competing successfully.
- 16. *Politics*.—All public arenas have political biases that set the acceptable range of discourse in that arena. Social problems that fall outside of or at the margins of this range are less likely to compete successfully than are mainstream ideas:
 - a) most of the public arenas (especially powerful ones) are heavily influenced by dominant political and economic groups. Thus, social problem definitions that reflect these biases have a higher probability of success; and
 - b) changes in political culture affect selection by altering the acceptable range of public discourse.
- 17. *Carrying capacity*.—The smaller the carrying capacity of an arena is (*ceteris paribus*), the more intense the competition.

18. *Institutional rhythms*.—Each public arena has a characteristic rhythm of organizational life that influences the timing of its interactions with social problems, thus affecting selection.
19. In addition to these general selection principles, each particular arena has its own local selection principles that depend on its institutional characteristics, political allegiances, and occupational culture. These local factors also influence selection.
20. Many operatives are familiar with the selection principles of public arenas, and they deliberately adapt their social problem claims to fit their target environments (e.g., by packaging their claims in a form that is dramatic, succinct, and employs novel symbols or classic theatrical tropes or by framing their claims in politically acceptable rhetoric).

Feedback

21. Social networks and patterned institutional relations link the public arenas, producing positive feedback between arenas.
22. Problems that rise in one public arena have a strong tendency to spread into others. A relatively small number of very successful social problems tend to occupy much of the space in most of the arenas.
23. However, some problems that are unable to compete in most arenas manage to survive by establishing a niche in a particular arena, yet show little sign of spreading. These deviations from the general pattern are not random, but result from systematic differences in the principles of selection of that arena.

Communities of Operatives

24. Communities of operatives form around social problems; these communities span the arenas of public discourse.
25. The largest such communities (or departments) surround society's well-established macrocategories of problems (e.g., crime, war and peace, the economy, civil rights, etc.), domains that are a predictable source of new social problems. Thus, society's culturally defined categories of social problems correspond to an informal organizational structure that spans the arenas of public discourse.
26. A department can come to own problems that are deemed to fall into its substantive domain.
27. There can be conflict or consensus within these departments.
28. Even when they are on opposing sides of a conflict, the operatives who work in a department may have symbiotic relationships with one another.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In this paper, we intended to raise more questions than we have answered, and it is in this spirit that we conclude by describing two broad research areas that are suggested by this model and by briefly outlining methods for addressing them in future work.

1. *Dynamics of competition.*—The discussion above provides strong reasons for believing that the competition of each problem against all others is intense. As a purely practical and tactical matter, any particular social problem must overcome fierce obstacles in order to win a spot on the evening news, because it must compete with a host of alternatives. Yet, despite the fierce diffuse competition of each against all, the level of direct competition between any two particular problems may be small, because each of the problems occupies only a small fraction of the total carrying capacity.

These observations suggest several avenues for future research on the dynamics of competition in public arenas. First, studies could be conducted that document and compare the level of diffuse competition in various public arenas. How intense is diffuse competition in different arenas? How severe are the resource constraints operatives face? How does the level of diffuse competition vary over time?

Second, studies could explore the dynamics of direct competition. For a number of social problems, time-series data could be developed to examine the share of resources each manages to capture. This could be accomplished in a number of public arenas; researchers could examine changes in the extent of media coverage, in the allocation of foundation budgets, in the activities of Congress, in the publication of books, and in the submission of grant proposals.

In addition to examining the careers of problems, research could examine the careers of particular operatives. Samples of such operatives as politicians, activists, members of the research community, journalists, and documentary filmmakers could be constructed, and research could explore the timing of shifts in the focus of each individual's activity from one problem to another. Data on the choices of operatives and the allocations of arenas could be used in conjunction with one another to measure the extent of direct competition between particular problems at particular times.

As more sophisticated measures and indices of the level of attention that problems receive are developed, and as we begin to measure direct competition, we can ask more sophisticated structural questions about the competitive process. Research might ask, for example, about the extent of competition both within and among macrocategories of problems (e.g., health or the economy). Does health compete with the econ-

omy for attention, or is the coupling between these two problem areas relatively weak? Similarly, one might ask whether there are some problems that do not compete but instead directly contribute to one another's growth. These questions require further research.

2. *The number and diversity of problems.*—Another avenue of research suggested by this model is a systematic study of the number and diversity of problems under discussion in public arenas. At one level of analysis, research might examine the major macrocategories of problems. How many such macrocategories are there? Does their number change over time? How have their boundaries been drawn and redrawn?

Moving down a level, one could examine the diversity of problem claims within a problem category. Within the broad area of poverty, for example, how many different types of social problem claims²¹ are being made? What is the share captured by each? And how do the fates of different types of claims change dynamically? At a given time, is the diversity of claims increasing or decreasing?

As sophisticated measures of the number and diversity of social problems and claims become available, opportunities would be opened up for historical and comparative research. How does problem diversity vary cross-nationally, over different historical periods, and among different public arenas? Research could also address the effects of major social dislocations, such as wars or economic disruptions, on the diversity of social problems. On a shorter time scale, one might examine the effects of a political crisis, such as Watergate or the Iran-Contra affair, on problem diversity. In such arenas as the mass media, one might expect that the commitment of large amounts of space and resources to crises would intensify competitive pressure on other matters, leading in turn to a short-term decline in diversity. Empirical research rooted in the framework we have described here could address such questions.

CONCLUSION

The natural histories of single social problems evolve in a system of public arenas that serve as the environments where collective definition occurs. The model proposed above applies ecological concepts, such as competition, selection, and adaptation, to public discourse about problems. It describes how problems—and operatives—compete for public attention and resources; it examines the ways in which public arenas select social problem definitions, and it takes into account the ways operatives adapt their claims to fit the requirements of public arenas. Of course, concepts of ecology do not translate perfectly into a cultural framework. Specifi-

²¹ See n. 8.

cally, when ecological concepts enter cultural domains, attention should be paid to the conscious manipulation of symbols—the ways in which key operatives select some social problems, formulate them in special ways, and advance them to promote their interests and goals. At the same time, the ecological language calls attention to the resource constraints on operatives as they seek to influence the allocation of collective concern.

As the reader will no doubt have noted, the model treats processes that occur on several levels of analysis. The ability to integrate levels of analysis is a fundamental property of ecological theory and is an important advantage of our public arenas framework. Thus, the processes described here affect the survival probabilities of particular social problem claims and of populations of claims. In addition, the model sets the study of social problems in a context that can examine interactions among problems and, on a still higher level of analysis, explore the organization of the cultural category system. Processes that occur on each of these levels influence all the others, so the framework outlined above deliberately operates on multiple, interacting levels.

Anchoring this model of cultural and political competition in an ecological framework provides a richer and more detailed explanation of the social problems process than has previously been available. Yet the model we have developed represents only a partial theory, and much work remains to be done to complete our understanding of the social problems process. Nevertheless, we believe that a public arenas approach moves us toward an integrated framework conducive to the systematic elaboration of a research agenda and of testable hypotheses. Such research will produce increasingly sophisticated answers to the central question on the social constructionist agenda: Given the vast universe of possibilities, how do social forces select particular problem definitions?

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