SOCIAL PROBLEMS: A RE-FORMULATION

MALCOLM SPECTOR
McGill University
and
JOHN I. KITSUSE
Northwestern University

A definition of social problems is proposed as a generic phenomenon: the process by which members of groups or societies, through assertions of grievances and claims, define a putative condition as a social problem. Then a four-stage natural history model of social problems is described. In Stage One, groups assert the existence and offensiveness of some condition. In Stage Two some official agency responds to the claims; in Stage Three claims and demands re-emerge, expressing dissatisfaction with the official response. In Stage Four alternative, parallel, or counter-institutions are established.

> If we can get our social life stated in terms of activity, and of nothing else, we have not indeed succeeded in measuring it, but we have at least reached a foundation upon which a coherent system of measurements can be built up. We shall cease to be blocked by the intervention of unmeasurable elements, which claim to be themselves the real causes of all that is happening, and which by their spook-like arbitrariness make impossible any progress toward dependable knowledge.
>
> Arthur Bentley (1908:202)

Is a sociology of social problems possible? Is there any distinctive subject matter or phenomenon to which this term refers? After more than 40 years, the writings on social problems still lack definition and substance. A recent reader on approaches to social problems (Rubington and Weinberg, 1971) highlights this dependence of social problems on other fields of inquiry: social pathology, social disorganization, deviant behavior, value-conflict, and labelling theory.

In a previous paper, we reviewed two dominant approaches to social problems in order to ask why they have failed to produce a clear-cut vision of social problems as a generic phenomenon (Kitsuse and Spector, 1973). We found that the functionalist approach, exemplified by Merton and Nisbet (1961, 1966, 1971), contains two lacunae. First, in basing the study of social problems on the analysis of "objective conditions"—that is, the distribution of such phenomena as crime, divorce, mental illness, drug use, pollution, and violence—the sociology of social problems becomes merely the analysis of dysfunctions within the functionalist or social system paradigm (see Merton and Nisbet, 1971:819-820). Second, Merton's distinction between manifest and latent problems obscures methodological problems of identifying empirical cases in point. He fails to clarify who may or must decide that "substantial discrepancies" between widely shared social standards and actual conditions of social life exist (1971:799).

A second approach to the study of social problems, the so-called "value-conflict" school (Bain, 1935; Case, 1924; Frank, 1925; Fuller, 1937, 1938, 1939, 1942; Fuller and Myers, 1941a, 1942b; Becker, 1966:1-31), asserts that:

> *Social problems are what people think they are,* and if conditions are not defined as social problems by the people involved in them, they are not problems

> to those people . . . Sociologists must therefore study not only the objective conditions phase of a social problem, but also the value-judgments of the people involved in it which cause them to define the same condition and means to its solution in different ways. (Fuller and Myers, 1941b, 320-21, emphasis in the original.)

Thus Fuller and Myers (1938:419) attempt to explain the causes of the objective conditions and the process by which they become defined as social problems. In their view, value-judgments and value-conflicts play a crucial role in the causes of the objective conditions, in the process of their definition as problems, and in "preventing solutions" to social problems (Fuller and Myers, 1941a, 21). We believe that the attempt to explain both the objective and the subjective aspects of social problems deflects the originality and thrust of the value-conflict formulation. While Fuller and Myers take the position that objective conditions in themselves are not sufficient for the existence of social problems, they stop short of asserting that from a theoretical point of view objective conditions are neither necessary nor sufficient. To the extent that they attempt to explain the existence of the objective conditions themselves, they come to resemble the functionalist formulation of which they are so critical (see especially Fuller, 1939).

The Ideas of Process and Natural History

Our analysis of the two major approaches to social problems leads us to propose that the explanation of the "subjective elements" of social problems—the process by which members of groups or societies define a putative condition as a problem—is the distinctive subject matter of the sociology of prob[illegible] Thus [illegible]efine [illegible] problems as *the activities of groups making assertions of grievances and claims to organizations, agencies, and institutions about some putative conditions.* The emergence of a social problem, then, is contingent on the organization of group activities with reference to defining some putative condition as a problem, and asserting the need for eradicating, ameliorating, or otherwise changing that condition. The central problem for a theory of social problems, so defined, is to account for the emergence, maintenance, and history of claim-making and responding activities. Such a theory should comprehend the activities of any group making claims on others for ameliorative action, material remuneration, alleviation of social, political, legal, economic disadvantage, or other consideration.

Social problems so conceived are not static conditions, but sequences of events. These sequences of events will vary: every social problem has its own unique history. One task for the sociology of social problems is to search for common elements, stages, or processes among the histories of various social problems—that is, to determine if social problems have a "natural history," and if so, to describe its stages and the contingencies of its development. Park (1970:xvii) defined a natural history as

> nothing more nor less than an account of an evolutionary process—a process by which not the individual, but the type evolves . . . every social change that is capable of description in conceptual terms, will have its characteristic cycle . . . description of the cycle seems to be the first step in the analysis and description of social change everywhere.

The idea of natural history, like that of career or value-added analysis (for a somewhat more demanding formulati[illegible]e Sm[illegible]1963[illegible]0), i[illegible]

a given phenomenon develops through a number of distinct stages, each characterized by different dynamics or processes, different casts of characters, kinds of activities, and dilemmas. Such development need not, however, be a linear progression, but may be conceived as a process in which progression from one stage to the next is facilitated or hampered by various contingencies. The utility of a natural history model may be assessed by the proper identification of stages and the set of contingencies that condition the development through those stages.

Fuller and Myers (1941b) invoked the idea of natural history in their analysis of the growth of trailer camps in Detroit. However, their use of this model, based on the case history of only one social problem was premature, leaving them vulnerable to the negative findings of Lemert's (1951) replication in Los Angeles. In addition, Fuller and Myers' (1941b:321) natural history model is too rigid in its specification of a "common order of development through which all social problems pass, consisting of certain temporal sequences in their emergence and maturation." There is no theoretical, and certainly no empirical basis for the hypothesis that *all instances* of social problems emerge and mature through the stages of "awareness, policy formation, and reform."

We propose a simple four stage natural history model for the analysis of social problems. The model should be regarded as an exploratory expedition presenting hypotheses and guides to empirical research. The model was derived from an extensive but informal survey of the histories of many social problems, and from detailed histories of s[illegible]ocial [illegible]ems [illegible]iled [illegible] graduate students in a seminar on social problems. Thus we have attempted to guide our passage between the Scylla of generalizing from a case study (as did Fuller and Myers and Lemert) and the Charybdis of basing our analysis on unsubstantiated facts and examples.

Stage 1: The attempts by some group(s) to assert the existence of some condition, define it as offensive, harmful, and otherwise undesirable, to publicize the assertions and stimulate controversy and to create a public or political issue over the matter.

Stage 2: The recognition by some official organization, agency, or institution of the group(s) legitimate standing. This may lead to an official investigation of the matter, proposals for reform, and the establishment of an agency to respond to those claims and demands.

Stage 3: The re-emergence of claims and demands by the group(s), expressing dissatisfaction with the established procedures for dealing with the imputed conditions, the bureaucratic handling of complaints, and the failure to generate a condition of trust and confidence in the procedures as sympathetic to the complaints, *etc.*

Stage 4: The rejection by complainant group(s) of the response or lack of response of the agency or institution to their claims and demands, and the development of activities to create alternative, parallel, or counter-institutions as responses to the established procedures.

The bases for this formulation are (1) that social problems develop over time and may be characterized by dif[illegible]feren[illegible]/[illegible]ities [illegible]iffere[illegible]es b[illegible]

their development and (2) these differences are not unrelated, but rather build on the previous development of the social problem. This led us to try to consolidate the different kinds of activities, which in turn led us to the four stages of development. Our presentation of them should be taken as an ideal type model of social problems. As such, it is a simplified version designed to highlight various aspects of the model, rather than to serve as an exact empirical description of any specific social problem. Its bias is to exaggerate the orderliness and linear development of any empirical example.

Another way of viewing stages One to Four is as distinct kinds of social problems activity. Then the natural history model is one possible order that may occur, perhaps the most typical, perhaps only one among many. If social problems develop different sequences, this would suggest several kinds of processes at work, and perhaps more than one social problems career or natural history.

STAGE ONE

Social problems activity commences with the collective attempts to remedy a condition that some group perceives and judges offensive and undesirable. The complaining group may or may not be the victims of the imputed condition; for example, the complaint that the welfare system demoralizes its clients may be made by an organization of social workers, clergymen, or other humanitarian group not directly subject to the condition. On the other hand, groups directly affected by the condition may take action in their own interests. The former type we might call moral crusaders, or "dis-interested" groups; the latter, interest groups—those who claim to have a real and material stake, something to gain or lose in the outcome of a given line of activity.

Initial social problems activities consist of attempts to transform private troubles into public issues.[1] Stage One is focused on the contingencies of this transformation process. Needless to say, not all such attempts are successful; a group's problem-defining activities may elicit no response—the group may lose its constituency, be ignored by the mass media, torn by internal dissension, fail to mobilize economic resources to sustain its activity, or give up hope.

We suggest that the critical concerns in this formative stage of social problems are the ways that complaints about the condition are raised and the strategies used to press the claims, gain publicity, and arouse controversy. The "objective seriousness" or extent of the condition itself, or its presumed dysfunctionality, may be relatively independent of the success or failure of this transformation. That is, the relationship between "objective conditions" and the development of social problems is variable and problematic. It is an empirical question whether certain types of conditions are correlated with or associated with certain types of claims. Since social problems are raised through the claims of dissatisfied groups, we turn now to examining the nature of these claims and the enterprise of making claims.

[1] Our use of the terms "private troubles" and "public issues" differs from that of Mills (1959), who emphasized the individual and personal character of the former and the social structural character of the latter. He conceived of them on two different and independent levels of phenomena and provided no theoretical link between them such that private troubles might be transformed into public issues. As indicated below, we do not preclude the possibility of even the most idiosyncratic and private trouble becoming, through collective action, the basis for social problems activity.

The Process of Making Claims

The making of claims and complaints is an integral part of social and political life. They are everyday activities in all societies and occur at all levels of government. While any sort of complaint *could* become the basis for a social problem, the vast majority of such claims are disposed of in ways that do not lead to the creation of social problems. Many may simply be ignored; others may dissolve when the claim is satisfied; still others may be bargained away, cooled out, or bought off.

Some claims, however, will not be turned aside so easily. These claims may lead to further actions culminating in the establishment of a social problem. We would like to venture a paradigm to explain the nature of such successful claims. We divide our discussion into three topics: the power of the group, the nature of their claims, and the strategies and mechanisms of pressing claims.

The Power of the Group

Other things being equal, groups that have more membership, greater constituency, more money, greater discipline, and organization will be more effective in pressing their claims than groups that lack these attributes. However, this is not to say that these characteristics "explain" the success or failure of a group in pressing its claim. For power to become an active part of the process, it must be expressed through the claims of the participating groups.

Power, conceived as the ability of a group to realize the demands it makes on other groups, agencies, and institutions, may be distinguished from a group's *claims of power*. The latter may be stated explicitly (e.g., threat of strikes, boycotts, withdrawal of political support) or implicitly conveyed (hints of plans to create embarrassing public confrontations, various forms of nuisances or harrassment). Groups may or may not be able to mobilize the power they claim; or if mobilized, it may be ineffective in producing the threatened consequences. Thus, a group may be bluffing; and if it's bluff is called, it may not be able to deliver. For example, a threatened demonstration may be ignored, forcing the group to reveal its inability to produce the threatened "mass;" a tough political boss may question the ability of ethnic leaders to deliver the "bloc vote." Alternatively, a genuinely powerful group may not be willing to expend its resources on a certain issue, hoping that the bluff or threat will produce results.[2]

The Nature and Variety of Claims

Groups may experience and express dissatisfaction in a variety of ways. They may feel only a vague, general, or amorphous sense of dissatisfaction; or they may experience dissatisfaction as specific complaints and pointed grievances. They may have no idea who created, is responsible for, or caused the imputed condition; or they

[2] We wish to emphasize that we do not view the success of a group in pressing its claim as *ipso facto* evidence of their power. We have said that other things being equal, more powerful groups will have a greater chance of being successful, but only through mobilizing that power through the claims they press. As we shall stress in the following two sections, weaker groups may win out over stronger groups, or win where others have failed, through careful or fortuitous strategy in phrasing and pressing their claims.

may have a very specific notion of who or what is oppressing them. These conceptions may or may not be linked to an overarching ideology or theory about how the world works. Groups may have no idea of how to remedy their perceived situation, or they may have very specific programs of reform and proposals for change.

All of these dimensions of the experience of dissatisfaction will influence the kind of claims that a group will make. Let us consider some hypotheses generated by these dimensions.

1. The more vague the sense of dissatisfaction, the more diffuse and general will be the claim, and the less likely will be the recognition or response to the claim; and the less likely will there be a specific remedy enacted.

2. The more vague the sense of dissatisfaction, the less likely is the group able to affix responsibility or propose remedies for their discontent.

3. The less the group is able to affix responsibility for their dissatisfaction, the less able they will be to choose a target to which to direct their complaint.

4. The less the group is able to affix responsibility for their dissatisfaction, the less able they will be to counter the charge that they themselves are to blame.

This sample of hypotheses suggests that the experience of dissatisfaction may vary considerably and thus affect the kinds of claims a group constructs, as well as the way it expresses and directs these claims. Often a group may be aided in developing its claim by individuals or organizations that specialize in expressing protest. A group may be experienced in a vague and undefined way by some group; they may even voice complaints about it but not effectively. Then the trouble may be picked up and seen as a classic instance of "exploitation," "discrimination," "corruption," etc., by such organizations as political parties, labor unions, professional radicals, or service organizations. Such groups may give coherence and rationale for the complaint, as well as offer the group aid and allies, sometimes in return for their support on other issues.

By entering into coalitions with others, a group may gain numbers, prestige, institutional authority, and other advantages. They may find, on the other hand, that the advantages are purchased at the cost of a diffusion of their issue and an involvement in others in which they have no interest. Or their own troubles may be considered "only a part of the larger problem" by their allies, thus given low priority in view of the "larger goals" they seek.

The importance of the more or less sophisticated ideologies that such organizations apply to the troubles is that they provide coherence and analysis to the troubles in question, and thus a rationale for the assertion of claims. On the other hand, a general ideology may be a disadvantage in making visible a *specific* claim. If such a complaint is couched in a framework that calls for a general restructuring of society or the destruction of capitalism, this may impede the effort by obscuring the specific claim or giving officials an excuse for ignoring the complaint.

The Mechanisms for Pressing Claims

Closely related to the nature of the claims is the way that claims are delivered, expressed, or made public. The fate of a claim may heavily depend on the channels through which it is pressed, the strategies used to achieve visibility of the imputed condition, and the auxiliary personnel who play a part in this process. One important contingency in the processing of complaints is identifying the party to whom the complaint should be addressed. If the group complains to the wrong party or office, they may get no results; they may get bad advice or directions as to where they properly should go; or they may inadvertently reveal their position to an opponent. Frequently there may be no office to complain to, since the substance of the complaint is that no one is doing anything about the imputed condition and that some organization or agency should be made responsible to deal with it. In such cases, long chains of referrals and buck-passing may occur with no organization willing to accept jurisdiction over the complaint.

Similarly, the way that the press and mass media are handled is recognized as important to the life history of any social issue by social problems groups. Such elementary devices as issuing press releases or informing the media in advance of a planned event may alter the course of the proceedings. Certainly knowledge and expertise in attracting and holding the attention of the mass media are important resources of groups airing complaints. Also the support of muckraking literature or the staging of a "national event" may be crucial in transforming private troubles into public issues and controversies.

Some methods of expressing or dramatizing complaints may come to be viewed as ineffectual, which may lead to their displacement by more dramatic means of protest. Thus, demonstrations and hunger strikes may give way to civil disobedience, which may in turn give way to insurrection and guerilla warfare. Protest groups may face the dilemma of insuring defeat through the use of ineffective methods, or risking disaster through use of organized violence.

Assertions of Claims and Social Controversy

We have said that social problems arise from the statement by groups that certain conditions are intolerable and must be changed. Such actions may provoke a reaction from other groups that prefer the existing arrangements or would stand to lose something if they were altered. Such groups may challenge the claims of the protesting group, mount their own campaign, lobby against proposed changes. The value judgments that led the protesting group to act in the first place may bring them into conflict with groups that do not share these values or with groups with vested interest in the condition in question. Such conflicts may escalate the visibility of the whole debate and facilitate the creation of public awareness of the imputed condition.

This controversy is the culmination of Stage One. A given social problem may remain at this stage interminably; or it may quickly be transformed into the next stage; or it may falter and die if no further activities are generated to gain recognition of the group's claims.

STAGE TWO

The idea that the natural history of a social problem is divided into stages suggests that the career of the phenomenon may be divided into several periods each characterized by its own distinctive kind of activities, participants, and dilemmas. Here we argue that when governmental agencies or other official and influential institutions to which claims might be put

respond to the complaints of some group, the social problems activity undergoes a considerable transformation. This transformation begins when the agencies to which claims are being made begin to recognize the group and respond to their complaints. The bases of this recognition may be diverse. The group may have brought considerable pressure to bear on the agency either through confrontation tactics, mass media campaigns, demonstrations, or threats of such actions; it may have applied economic pressure such as threat of boycott, or manipulated political influence; or the agency may have recognized that it had something to gain by taking over the issue being raised in order to control it.

The formal recognition of the group may range from passive acknowledgment of the claim to active attempts to control, regulate, or eliminate the condition at issue in the claim.[8] Any of these responses is likely to give the protest group a degree of recognition or standing that they did not have before. The activities of Stage One, the attempts to call attention to a condition and define an issue, are almost entirely "unofficial," conducted without the sanction or seal of societal authority. With recognition of their claim, however, the group is likely to be asked to participate in official proceedings on the problem. The group may be asked to meet with the mayor or testify before a Congressional sub-committee hearing on the problem.

At this point they find that they are no longer just a protest group, but the *bona fide* "spokesman" for a constituency that may be much broader than their original group. They may find that groups that previously had shunned them now expect them to press *their* claims as well. They may be called upon for more documentation of their claims than previously, and they may be asked to offer solutions as well as complaints. Thus, even the simplest response to the claims may bring about a transformation in the protest group or create new organizational crises for it.

The response of an official agency may be the result of a long struggle to gain standing for the protest group. This may take the form of trying to convince some agency to assume jurisdiction over an issue; or it may take the form of convincing someone that the group has a real and material, rather than merely a theoretical, interest in the proceedings. In the process, the group's crusade may have become a cause celèbre; and their achievement of standing may be viewed as their "finest hour." "Dis-interested" groups or moral crusaders may have particular difficulties in gaining standing because they are not affected by the condition they protest. Such groups may be told to mind their own business, or may have to attach themselves to someone actually affected by the condition in order to press their claim. The American Civil Liberties Union, for example, must find injured parties willing to go to court in order to raise constitutional issues because the courts will not take jurisdiction over debate only in principle.

While official response may give the protest group their "finest hour," it may also represent the beginning of the end of their control over the claims they raise. The response to their complaints may take the edge off their protest that "nothing is being done." The establishment of a committee to study the problem may cool the controversy and make the issue less visible in the mass media. Although the group may be called to testify before the committee, they find that they are cast in the role of providing information rather than defining and negotiating the nature of the problem. The committee may seek out other and opposing views on the topic, reducing the original group to simply one voice among many. When the hearings are over, the members of the committee will be the new experts and authorities on the subject. While the original group may comment on the report of the committee, it is that report that will define the issues, summarize the facts, put various groups in perspective and in their places.

Thus, as official and powerful agencies or institutions begin to take part in the social problems activity, they may lend prestige to the original protest group, but at the same time may begin to overshadow and thus reduce the significance of its activities. Finally, the responding agencies may take over the issue, making it their own, and neutralize or eliminate the original protest group.

Social problems that reach this stage of development may still die or disappear. The commission and its report may disenfranchize the original protesting groups, which subsequently may become demoralized and fall apart. The commission may or may not recommend that actions be taken to satisfy the claims; and these recommendations, if made, may not be enacted. Studies of the activities and reception of commissions of inquiry in Great Britain and in the United States reveal vastly different patterns. Writing about the British Royal Commissions, Hanser (1965:45-7) says:

> I know of no student of the Royal Commission in the 20th century who does not regard it with the highest esteem . . . it is never charged with dishonesty or violation of civil rights, with being composed of "front" men for an anonymous staff which does all the work, or with being subservient to the government.

Further, the Royal Commissions have a reputation for producing significant (although sometimes unpopular) recommendations and for successfully getting their proposals adopted.

In contrast, Presidential and Congressional investigating commissions in the United States are notorious for their partisanship, their violations of civil liberties, their long-windedness, and their inability to influence governmental policy or get their recommendations adopted (see Popper, 1970; Marcy, 1945). Commenting in 1965 on U.S. attempts to build commissions equivalent to the British system, Hanser (1965:234) remarks:

> All would be in vain if the national leadership, whether from inertia, intellectual incompetence, or inability to stand up to vested interests, were consistently to ignore its recommendations. The dismal record of disregard of the rare advisory groups that have really performed well is ominous.

The reaction of the American government to the commission reports on obscenity and pornography, marijuana, and violence confirm this trend in the American system. This pattern fosters the belief that commissions are "reform by public relations," in which the commissions to study a problem are taken to be the substance of reform itself. While the commission may be set up in the heat of controversy when many protest groups are active, when the report is finally issued and ignored

[8] Alternatively, an agency may respond by efforts to eliminate the claim through repressive control policies, as charged in the cases of the Black Panther Party and the Chicago Seven conspiracy trial.

several years later, the groups may no longer be around or interested. Or they may have staked their hopes in the commission, and thus lose their battle when the commission itself loses. Thus, commissions may be the burial ground of a great many social problems.

In order for a social problem to continue to exist beyond this formidable hurdle, an institution must be created to deal with the claims and complaints concerning the condition in question; or some existing institution must be mandated to expand its jurisdiction to include this responsibility. When such institutions are created, the social problem cannot so easily disappear.

The creation of such institutions may require legislation of a special kind, and also the allocation of money, personnel, and physical facilities. Such agencies legitimate, institutionalize, and routinize the handling of complaints. Once created, they assume a life of their own. Those who staff them may develop vested interests in the operation of the agency, which may be directed more to satisfying the *complaints* about the imputed conditions than to their amelioration or eradication. Thus, agencies, in lobbying for larger budgets, may emphasize that they are doing their job of dealing with complaints about the condition but also claim that the extent of the condition is increasing and their agencies need more money. Stage Two is complete when the complaints about some condition have become domesticated and routinized by some agency that develops a vested interest in doing something about the complaints, though not necessarily dealing with the conditions the complaints are pre-

STAGE THREE

We have suggested that when social problems activities culminate in the creation and establishment of procedures to deal with claims, those activities may diminish and even disappear. The intent of those who negotiate with the social problems group to establish such procedures may range from a genuine attempt to work out a "solution" to the claims, to a cynical and disingenuous maneuver to mollify and defuse the social problems activities, with no intention of ameliorating or rectifying the imputed condition. Regardless of intent, however, the established procedures may be misconceived or inappropriate to the claims and demands they were designed to handle—the procedures may focus on remedies for the imputed condition but fail to satisfy the demands of group members *as complainants*. For example, an agency may establish procedures to rectify specific conditions raised by protestors, but claim that these changes "had been in the works" anyway and were not in response to protest. Agencies may do this to foster the image that all protest is ineffective, even when they are actually responding to it. In such cases protest groups may persist, even as reform is taking place, to force an admission from the agency to "get the record straight."

At the other extreme, the established procedures may in fact turn out to be a "public relations" solution in which the imputed conditions are ignored, on the view that the social problems activities can be "cooled out" by establishing a committee, creating a liaison position for "increasing communication," programming regular meetings to "decide issues" that are never resolved. Edelman (1967:39) has

of symbolic satisfactions." He observes that "the most obvious kinds . . . are to be found in administrative dicta accompanying decisions and orders, in press releases and in annual reports. *It is not uncommon to give the rhetoric to one side and the decision to the other*" (emphasis added.)

As a consequence, assertions about the inadequacy, inefficacy, or injustice of the procedures may themselves become the conditions around which new social problems activities are organized. The groups engaged in these activities may not be the same as those involved in Stage One social problems; some will have disappeared after the negotiation of procedures in Stage Two. Other groups may find they lack the sophistication for dealing with the maneuvers of organizational personnel. Still others, however, may have set up "watch dog committees" to monitor the implementation of the negotiated procedures, and thus stand ready to press claims against them in renewed social problems activities.

The important and distinctive feature of Stage Three social problems, then, is that the claims are not concerned directly with the imputed conditions asserted in Stage One. Rather the claims are made against the organizations established to ameliorate, eliminate, and otherwise change those conditions. Thus, Stage Three activities are not concerned directly with the conditions imputed in Stage One, but about an organization's procedures and methods of dealing with their clients and their complaints. This may be illustrated by the difference between claims about unsanitary conditions in meat packing plants, and subsequent claims against the availability of control agents to complainants, their *are* registered, their corrupt practices with regard to their inspection of the conditions themselves, *etc.* It should be noted also that even with the best of intentions, the dynamics of bureaucratic processes are likely to generate new sources of complaints.[4] Agencies set up to consider all complaints equally and universalistically may later be charged with insensitivity or ritualism. Clients may claim that the agency is indifferent to the details of their particular case, and that they have become "just a number."

Our conception of Stage Three, then, makes a distinction between claims about conditions that characterize social problems activities in Stage One, and claims about the manner in which the procedures negotiated in Stage Two function to deal with those imputed conditions. Thus, the establishment of procedures in Stage Two provide for the routinization of claims; complaints about pollution are directed to the environmental control agency; claims about unfair business practices might be referred to the Better Business Bureau; complaints about suspected phone taps might be taken to the phone company or police. But Stage Three claims are generated when the environmental control agency itself is accused of licensing polluters of the environment, the Better Business Bureau is said to be in league with the local businessmen against consumers, or the phone taps asserted to be monitored by the phone company or police. That is, the complaints are against the very agencies that have been established to

[4] For a stimulating formulation of the bureaucratic problems attending the creation and development of regulatory agencies, see Bernstein (1955: Ch. 3) in which he presents a "life cycle" of regulatory commis-

process the complaints in question. Stage Three activities may be intensified when responsibility for handling such claims are distributed among several agencies, creating a system of passing such claimants from one office to another, each of them denying responsibility for "that kind of problem."

The outcome of Stage Three social problem activity may be a re-negotiation of procedures, reform of existing practices, dismissal of a high level administrator, possibly the establishment of a new, more specialized agency. Such outcomes may effectively routinize Stage Three claims, but possibly with explicit "watch-dog" provisions to monitor the effectiveness of the claim-processing procedures. Alternatively, Stage Three activities may generate an atmosphere of fundamental distrust of institutionalized procedures, an attitude of cynicism, resignation, and despair, and a lack of confidence in established institutions in general. This distrust of various institutional attempts to deal with complaints may in fact be characteristic of contemporary social problems activities. The lag between the creation of a regulatory agency and the sense of doubt and cynicism among social problems groups about the intention as well as effectiveness of agency efforts is becoming progressively narrow. Classic problems associated with bureaucratic procedures and charges about unresponsiveness of "establishment" agencies generally to the clients they presume to serve has created a militancy in social problems activities that explicitly questions the good faith of those agencies. If this lack of confidence in institutional processes is indeed an historical trend, Stage Three social problems may increasingly move into Stage Four activities.

STAGE FOUR

A new stage in the development of social problems occurs when groups organize their activities on the contention that it is no longer possible to "work within the system." Their focus shifts from complaints and protests against the established procedures to creating and developing alternative solutions for their perceived problems. Such attempts are typically characterized by their focus on a local community and its problems—activities that appear in every area of social life. Minority groups who claim lack of police protection form vigilante patrols for their own communities. Underground newspapers emerge to provide news for and about populations ignored by the conventional press. Food co-ops are formed to fill the demand for specialized products at reasonable prices. Independent political parties are formed to express opinions rejected by the major parties.

These activities are organized by claims that challenge the *legitimacy* of established institutions and the procedures they organize for the processing of claims. The challenges may be generated by a group's experience of having been "given the runaround," of being mollified by "smooth PR types," outright dismissal of complaints as clients of control agencies, *etc.* Or they may be more direct expressions of the generalized lack of confidence in and distrust of "solutions" that established institutions are willing to consider and implement.

We suggest that social problems in Stage Four develop in two directions: (1) the creation of alternative institutions as a means of developing a social and political base for radically changing the existing procedures or (2) disaffiliation and withdrawal from the institutional system to create alternative institutions as limited solutions for group members. Both of these developments are contingent on the definition of established institutions as "hopeless," the rejection or disaffiliation from the established system, and the decision to "work outside the system."

The two lines of development, however, are consequences of a major difference in orientation. The first might be characterized as "value-oriented," the second "interest-oriented" social problems. The alternative institutions created by value-oriented social problems seek to establish those institutions not only for their members, but for the society at large. The primary concern of "interest-oriented" activity is to create a viable solution for the members of the group, requiring only a negative relation to the established system, i.e., to be allowed to pursue, without hassle or harrassment, the group's own solution.

The "free school" movement provides examples of the two types of orientation. One faction of the movement is engaged in radical criticism of the educational establishment through publications, manifestos, articles, and books, as well as by practicing new forms of educational methods with a view toward transforming the conventional system. The other faction is attempting to form free schools in rural as well as urban settings, taking their primary task to be one of providing alternative educational systems for its members.[5]

The "free school" movement also provides us with an example of one of the major hazards of Stage Four social problems—i.e., the possibilities of co-optation. Attempts to create alternative institutions outside the system may produce a new set of experts in the given field. They may be the leaders of various experiments in creating and running new kinds of institutions. Their experience may bring them credentials acceptable to establishment organizations, even though they are developed outside their jurisdiction. Successful and workable alternative institutions may stimulate the interest of the established institutions as they attempt to come up with answers to their critics. They may attempt to take over or to co-opt the alternatives developed and may make attractive offers to the leaders and experts of social problems groups.

For example, the government may invite leaders of the "free school" movement to participate in conferences, compile bibliographic references, accept grants to evaluate the alternative methods of education, *etc.* These invitations may serve the established systems in a number of ways: it can drain off leadership from groups that threaten its institutional dominance; co-opt leadership into its structure, enabling it to claim the innovations as well as to control its effects on the system; insulate that leadership from the members of the group, thus discrediting it and reducing its future effectiveness in organizing social problems activities.

The two types of orientations to Stage Four activities, then, are diametrically opposed with reference to relations with the established system. And insofar as each of them are "successful," they have markedly different consequences for that system. A successful value-oriented alternative would press for the establishment of that alternative as *the* institutional form and, thus,

[5] Kozol (1970) presents a lively discussion of the ideological bases of these alternative orientations within the "free school" movement.

radically transform the existing system. In contrast, a successful interest-oriented alternative would remain an alternative, always vulnerable to the possibility of the revocation of the tolerance of indifference on the part of the established system that is a condition of maintaining the alternative.

CONCLUSION

Building on a critique of previous formulations, we have tried to justify the conceptual category "social problems" as a generic phenomenon, independent of the concepts upon which it has historically depended. As a first attempt to build a theory of this phenomenon, we have proposed a natural history model of social problems in which we attempt to identify the "raw materials" for the sociology of social problems. We differ with previous formulations which spend the greatest part of their statement on the distribution and etiology of the rates or amounts of such "problem" phenomena as crime, divorce, drug use, or poverty. From our point of view, the evidence that there is, for example, a crime problem is not that there is a high rate of crime or that the rate is higher than it used to be. Rather the evidence is that there are many individuals and groups complaining about various aspects of crime—violence in the streets, burglaries in the suburbs, corruption in the police force, *etc.*—and the activities of the myriad agencies that are mandated to do something about those complaints. The so-called "crime problem" as a social problem, like that of the "generation gap," "pollution," "disadvantaged child," and others, is generated and sustained by the activities of complaining groups

REFERENCES

Bain, Read
1935 "Our schizoid culture." Sociology and Social Research 19(Jan.-Feb.): 266-276.

Becker, Howard S.
1966 "Introduction," in Social Problems: A Modern Approach, New York: John Wiley.

Bentley, Arthur F.
1908 The Process of Government: A Study of Social Pressures. Bloomington, Indiana: Principia Press.

Bernstein, Marvin H.
1955 Regulating Business by Independent Commission. Chap. 3. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Case, Clarence Marsh
1924 "What is a social problem?" Journal of Applied Sociology 3:268-273.

Edelman, Murray
1967 The Symbolic Use of Politics. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Frank, L. K.
1925 "Social problems." American Journal of Sociology 30:462-473.

Fuller, Richard C.
1937 "Sociological theory and social problems." Social Forces 4:496-502.
1938 "The problem of teaching social problems." American Journal of Sociology 44:415-435.
1939 "Social problems," pp. 3-59 in Robert E. Park (ed.) An Outline of the Principles of Sociology. New York: Barnes and Nobles.
1942 "Morals and the criminal law." Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology 32:624-630.

Fuller, Richard and Richard Myers
1941a "Some aspects of a theory of social problems." American Sociological Review 6:24-32.
1941b "The natural history of a social problem." American Sociological Review 3:320-328.

Hanser, Charles J.
1965 Guide to Decision: The Royal Commission. Ottowa, New Jersey: Bedminster Press.

Kitsuse, John I. and Malcolm Spector
1973 "Toward a sociology of social problems: Social conditions, value-

Social Problems 20 (Spring): 407-419.

Kozol, Jonathan
1972 Free Schools. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin.

Lemert, Edwin
1951 "Is there a natural history of social problems?" American Sociological Review 16:217-253.

Marcy, Carl
1945 Presidential Commissions. Morningside Heights: King's Crown Press.

Merton, Robert K. and Robert A. Nisbet
1961 Contemporary Social Problems. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World.
1966 Contemporary Social Problems, 2nd ed. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World.
1971 Contemporary Social Problems, 3rd ed. New York: Harcourt, Brace World.

Mills, C. Wright
1959 The Sociological Imagination. New York: Oxford University Press.

Park, Robert E.
1970 "Introduction," in Edwards, Lyford P., Natural History of Revolution, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Heritage of Sociology Edition.

Popper, Frank
1970 The Presidents' Commissions. New York: Twentieth Century Fund.

Rubington, Earl and Martin S. Weinberg
1971 The Study of Social Problems: Five Perspectives. New York: Oxford University Press.

PROCEDURAL RULES AND THE STUDY OF DEVIANT BEHAVIOR*

TRAVIS HIRSCHI
University of California, Davis

This paper examines a set of extra-theoretical rules that has for some time dominated the field of deviance:

Avoid the evil-causes-evil fallacy.
Seek good explanations of evil phenomena.
Seek evil explanations of good phenomena.
Avoid id arguments.
Do not try to explain one thing by the absence of something else.
Steer clear of kinds-of-people theories.
Do not assume the values of the group making the rules.
Appreciate deviance.

These rules are a central part of the oral traditions of the field; they frequently appear in print; and they have molded several important theories of deviance. Each of them is criticized from an empiricist point of view. A new set of procedural rules is not proposed.

When Durkheim (1958:31-32) enunciated his famous dictum, "all preconceptions must be eradicated," he had in mind conceptions "originating outside of science for totally unscientific needs." He, of course, did not con-

* This is an expanded and much revised version of a paper entitled "Dead End Trails in Methodology" presented at a symposium on methodology sponsored by the American Sociological Association at Loyola University, Chicago, in June 1970. A recent version was presented at the meetings of the American Sociological Association in New Orleans. I am grateful for