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Source: *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 11 (1985), pp. 209-229

Published by: [Annual Reviews](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2083292>

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# SOCIAL PROBLEMS THEORY: THE CONSTRUCTIONIST VIEW

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## *Abstract*

This paper reviews and critiques the origin and development of a new specialty in sociology, the sociology of social problems. While social problems long has been a topic of sociological attention, it is only since the work of Blumer and, most especially, Spector & Kitsuse in the early 1970s, that a theoretically integrated and empirically viable tradition of writing and research has developed. The central proposition of this tradition is that social problems are the definitional activities of people around conditions and conduct they find troublesome, including others' definitional activities. In short, social problems are socially constructed, both in terms of the particular acts and interactions problem participants pursue, and in terms of the process of such activities through time. The founding theoretical statements are reviewed and the research is discussed in terms of the following categories: containing trouble and avoiding problems; the creation, ownership, and processing of problems; public regulatory bureaucracies and legal institutions; medicalizing problems and troubles; and social problems and the media. The paper closes with an overview of problems and insights of the perspective. There is a bibliography of 105 items.

## INTRODUCTION

The social constructionist perspective offers a way to define, understand, and study social problems that is decidedly distinct from previous perspectives. The past decade has witnessed considerable research that, in varying degree, uses or is relevant to the social constructionist or definitional view. In this essay, I review the core statements of this perspective, describe selected research relevant to it, and discuss some of the problems with and insights from using the perspective in research.

## PROGRAMMATIC STATEMENTS: MAJOR THEMES

The possibility of a research-based sociology of social problems integrated around a distinct theoretical perspective is not new. More than forty years ago, Waller (1936), Fuller & Myers (1941a, 1941b), and others pursued this goal under the banner of value-conflict theory. A renewed interest in this goal has developed in the past fifteen years (see Tallman & McGee 1971) along with a detailed critique of previous theory and a sharpened conceptualization of what such a sociology of social problems might look like.

While constructionist research and writing has not been the only sociological work on social problems, it arguably constitutes the only serious and sustained recent discussion of social problems theory—a theory *of* social problems distinct from sociological theory used *in* research on undesirable conditions. This latter accurately describes most previous sociological writing and research on social problems, whether it was guided by functionalist, Marxist, conflict theory, or other perspectives. While these latter constitute legitimate sociological work, none informs the question of whether a distinct theory of social problems is possible, what its subject matter might be, or how it might be developed in empirical research. These are precisely the questions Blumer (1971) and particularly Spector & Kitsuse (1973, 1977; Kitsuse & Spector 1973) address.

The question of just what “social problems” means as a sociological concept and how we might study such phenomena has been at the center of the dilemma surrounding this topic since its emergence in the last century. Given this long-lived confusion, Blumer (1971:298) called for a fundamental change in conceptualization to reflect a definition of social problems as “products of a process of collective definition” rather than “objective conditions and social arrangements.” Traditional work, he says, reflects a “gross misunderstanding of the nature of social problems” and is virtually useless as a basis for policy since it defines social problems as objective conditions harmful to society. Moreover, sociologists have identified such conditions based on public concern. This is problematic, Blumer says, since many ostensibly “harmful conditions” are not recognized as such by the public, and thus are ignored by sociologists.

Concepts such as “deviance,” “dysfunction,” and “structural strain” have been “impotent” as guides for research to identify social problems. They can not account for why some conditions fail to become social problems while others do. Sociologists instead “ought to study the process by which a society comes to recognize its social problems” (Blumer 1971:300).

Spector & Kitsuse have called for a similar change, claiming: “There is no adequate definition of social problems within sociology, and there is not and never has been a sociology of social problems” (1977:1). They, like Blumer,

critique the familiar functionalist perspective (e.g. Merton & Nisbet 1971) that concentrates on dysfunctional conditions and turns on abstractions such as "latent problems," "collective purposes," society as an "integrated social system," and so on. The sociologist here is a technical expert whose moral vision supersedes that of the people studied. Kitsuse & Spector say this view is empirically problematic, morally infused, and grossly presumptuous. It provides no distinctive subject matter for the sociology of social problems and no effective direction for research.

Kitsuse & Spector endorse the early value-conflict emphasis on the "subjective component" of social problems, but argue that these authors compromised a distinct theory of social problems by their continued attention to objective conditions as a necessary part of the conceptualization. This dualism and confusion as to what social problems are is also found in Blumer's essay, when he speaks of social problems as "products" of collective definitional process, as outcomes, and of objective conditions as a "corrective for ignorance and misinformation" about the "objective makeup of social problems" (Blumer 1971:305). Even Becker's (1966) view of social problems endorses this dualism. This is precisely what Spector & Kitsuse reject. Blumer also cites policy relevance as a criterion to evaluate theory, and implies that public definitions of social problems are somehow inadequate bases for sociological theory (cf. Manis 1984, on "public" definitions). Spector & Kitsuse say that these differences confound the value-conflict approach and thus make it a poor guide for empirical research.

Conventional usage of the term social problems makes it difficult to distinguish what Spector & Kitsuse see as crucial, namely, that it refers to a social process of definition and to the activities that move this process along. For Kitsuse & Spector, participants' definitional activities *constitute* the social problem (Rains 1975, Woolgar 1983), rather than leading to social problems as a product or outcome (cf. Mauss 1975).

Social problems are "*the activities of groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions*" (Kitsuse & Spector 1973:415, emphasis in original). Social problems sociology, so defined, should "account for the *emergence and maintenance of claim-making and responding activities*" (Kitsuse & Spector, 1973:415, emphasis in original). Claims making includes: "demanding services, filling out forms, lodging complaints, filing lawsuits, calling press conferences, writing letters of protest, passing resolutions, publishing exposes, placing ads in newspapers, supporting or opposing some governmental practice or policy, setting up picket lines or boycotts. . . ." (Spector & Kitsuse 1977:79). To study the causes of social problems is to examine how such activities come about and how they have been sustained. Toward this end, Spector & Kitsuse, like Fuller & Myers, Blumer, and others, suggest an heuristic, four-stage natural history model.

*Stage one* comprises “collective attempts to remedy a condition that some group perceives and judges offensive and undesirable. . . . Initial social problems activities consist of attempts to transform private troubles into public issues . . . and . . . the contingencies of this transformation process” (Spector & Kitsuse 1973:148). How claims and grievances are formed and presented, the varieties and nature of the claims and grievances, strategies to press these claims and gain wider attention and support, the power of the group(s) making claims, and the creation of a public controversy are important issues.

*Stage two* begins with recognition of these claims by “governmental agencies or other official and influential institutions.” To continue beyond stage two a social problem must involve “an institution . . . to deal with the claims and complaints concerning the condition in question” (Spector & Kitsuse 1973:154). Social problems thus become routinized in an organization charged with doing something about the putative conditions.

Spector & Kitsuse say that whereas past natural history models end with legitimation and implementation, theirs is open-ended and takes official acceptance as possible grounds for a “new generation” of definitional activities around this official response. When participants claim such response is problematic, *stage three* begins. *Stage four* is marked by claimants’ “contention that it is no longer possible to ‘work within the system’ . . .” and their attempts to develop alternative institutions (Spector & Kitsuse 1973:156).

In their view, sociologists who act as experts on problematic conditions are social problems participants. They become part of the problem rather than analysts of it. Whether he or she “will be treated as a scientist by other participants in the process and accorded the special status of a disinterested and unbiased expert is a problematic empirical question” (Spector & Kitsuse 1977:70). This means sociologists of social problems should not concern themselves with the validity of participants’ (their colleagues included) claims about conditions, but with how such claims and definitions are created, documented, pressed, and kept alive. Documenting claims or definitions about conditions constitutes participation. The point is to account for the viability of these claims, not to judge whether they are true. And while social problems participants attribute values to their own and others’ activities, sociologists of social problems should not. Gusfield (1984) has characterized this stance as being “on the side” or neutral, rather than choosing “whose side” we are on (Becker 1967).

Besides crediting Fuller & Myers, Becker, and Blumer as important resources in developing their constructionist view, Spector & Kitsuse cite Mauss (1975) and his attention to definitions in his analysis of social problems as social movements. They endorse Ross & Staines’s (1971) emphasis on the politics of the definitional process, and they cite as particularly relevant the Hewitt & Hall (1973) analysis of how participants use “quasi-theories” to order problematic situations.

## RELEVANT RESEARCH

### *Containing Trouble and Avoiding Problems*

Logically prior to but thus far relatively ignored in research are those diverse definitional activities that occur before professional, bureaucratic, and media categories and personnel become involved. Emerson & Messinger (1977) see such informal reactions as “trouble” and as forerunners of official labeling.

Most research on this informal activity examines how normal others use vernacular categories of mental illness to define troublesome persons. Before Emerson & Messinger (1977) are the well-known studies by Yarrow et al (1955), Sampson et al (1962), Lemert (1962), and Goffman (1959, 1969). Goldner (1982) continues this tradition in a study of how others react to “pronoids” in various bureaucratic settings, and Lynch (1983) studied how normals respond to and manage “crazies” in everyday settings.

Research on the origins and development of trouble is not limited to craziness and mental illness. Shearing & Stenning’s (1983) study of private security in Canada and the United States shows how owners of mass private property (e.g. shopping malls, apartment complexes, college campuses) define threats to security in precisely such a prebureaucratic, prepublic (in this case precrime) way. Public labeling and processing is something owners usually want to avoid. Private security agents are hired to control anything the owners do not like. This can include behaviors not in violation of the law (e.g. absenteeism, breaches of confidentiality), as well as those that are in violation but not troublesome to owners (e.g. victimless crimes are ignored). By making prevention more important than retribution or restitution, owners and their security forces create a new kind of offender—the employee who allows the theft, damage, or breach to occur. The ultimate wrong is to be nonvigilant in loyalty to owners’ interests (see also, Ghezzi 1983, on private control of insurance fraud).

Ball & Lilly (1984) analyze data from a study of a motel used for clandestine sexual encounters to see how motel owners and their staff work to deflect problem-defining activities by three relevant publics: the morally concerned citizenry, the police, and the patrons. The authors show how motel staff attempt to take the role of these three others toward their operations so as to prevent or modify conditions that might become grounds for claims making. They demonstrate that just as conditions are not inherently problematic, neither are they inherently normal. The staff worked hard to create and sustain definitions of the motel as a tolerated and even desirable part of what they saw as a potentially critical environment.

Schneider (1984) studied moral vocabularies used by antismoking and smoking respondents to see how they defined and dealt with trouble around smoking in various public and private settings. He details how antismoke people made claims (or did not) against smokers. While respondents used many negative

words to describe smoking and smokers in the interviews, they found confronting bothersome smokers considerably more difficult. The best values to ground their claims were their own health interests and their rights. These claimants and responders were sensitive to the importance of the words they used. Personal dislike alone was considered insufficient grounds for claims.

The language of claims is also important in a study by Cohn & Gallagher (1984) of a social problem involving a gay student group at the University of Maine, a proposed gay conference, a local newspaper, and a group of fundamentalist ministers. Initial claims by the ministers against the University and the gay student group were couched in Biblical terms of sin and immorality. They claimed that the University was condoning such conduct. The University defended itself with a Constitutional and civil rights vocabulary, without mentioning homosexuality or gays. This was strategic. The University thus assured that the issue would not be joined, that they and their critics would not communicate in the ministers' more perilous moral rhetoric. Various sympathetic yet conventional audiences could then support the University while leaving their private opinions about homosexuality unspoken. The case demonstrates how responses are contingent upon, but not determined by initial claims. It also shows that respondents may want not to debate the issue as framed by those initiating claims, particularly if these claims are in unfriendly or difficult vocabularies. Smokers, for instance, felt there was virtually no effective defense against others' health claims.

### *The Creation, Ownership, and Processing of Problems*

The most popular topic for constructionist research has been the creation of bureaucratic and professional categories for problematic conditions, conduct, and persons. Coincidental to Spector & Kitsuse's work, Gusfield (1975, 1976, 1981), pursuing past interests in the nature of symbolic action (Gusfield 1963, 1967), has raised these questions in research on public definitions and policy toward drinking, driving, and accidents in the United States.

Gusfield begins by noting the dominance of one view of this problem: accidents are caused by a category of drivers, "the drunk driver," and their careless and dangerous conduct. Much official data that detail characteristics of the driver, the presence of alcohol, and degree of intoxication have been produced to support this view (cf Kitsuse & Cicourel 1963). Policy has followed accordingly: make drunk drivers control themselves and/or keep them from driving. The laws and public programs that reflect this dominant view, Gusfield argues, contribute to our sense of social order.

To underscore the selective quality of this construction, he details some of what the dominant view omits. Where are such systematic data on vehicle design, the roadway, age and condition of the car, weather, and available emergency assistance as related to "accidents involving alcohol"? How dif-



ferent would definitions and solutions of the problem be were they built on these data?

Gusfield emphasizes connections between the organizational ownership of the problem—a concept he aligns with Becker's (1963) concept, "moral entrepreneur," the construction of supportive scientific facts and causal explanations—and the attribution of political responsibility to "do something about" the problematic condition. This affirms the sociology of knowledge theme in the constructionist approach (see also Aronson 1984) and shows how scientists and experts participate in social problems they purport to analyze. Champions and owners of this favored view of drinking and driving have been The National Safety Council, major auto and life insurance companies, the legal system, the alcoholism industry, and the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA). Only recently have they been challenged by other groups offering alternate definitions, explanations, and interventions.

Gusfield shows how social context—an important element in constructionist analysis (Woolgar & Pawluch 1985)—facilitates these drunk driver-centered definitions and claims. These favored definitions and explanations allow social drinkers to continue to drive unperturbed and are resources for the alcohol and alcoholism industries to portray the problem of drinking as due to certain sick drinkers rather than the drink. Wiener (1981) examines this social world of alcoholism treatment, policy, and research, and the connections between its participants and their diverse, shifting definitions and claims.

The study of organizational ownership and management of social problems directs attention to how people do this work, to how they handle various kinds of problems and troubles. This parallels earlier work on the organizational processing of deviants and deviance. Recent studies examine how various workers, clients, and others negotiate these definitions. Schwartz & Kahne (1983, Kahne & Schwartz 1978) studied how professionals and clients in a college psychiatric unit negotiated the nature and treatment of students' troubles. Maynard (1982) studied plea bargaining sessions to uncover how court officials use defendants' personal attributes to make sentencing decisions. Miller (1983) examined how workers in a work incentive program used conciliation sessions to reaffirm program morality about responsibility and encourage conformity among troublesome clients. Spencer (1983) examined the familiar probation officer-client relationship and how probation officers negotiate a moral character for their clients to fit the sentencing recommendations they make.

Some studies have focused on how workers, clients, and others use official categories or rules so work can proceed. Joffe (1978) studied how lay abortion counselors balance their ideological support of abortion services with their revulsion at clients who refuse to acknowledge the moral aspects of abortion. McCleary et al (1982) examined how workers in police departments code



officers' observations using Uniform Crime Report codes. Pontell et al (1982) studied how California State government reviewed possible fraud and abuse by physicians who used the public medical insurance program. Lynxwiler et al (1983) show how mine inspectors, working for the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement, use discretion in making and processing claims against mining companies. Peyrot (1982) analyzed how community mental health workers used discretion to categorize clients so as to make the best use of scarce resources.

Routinizing and managing people's problems is the essence of the "public interest state"—that complex of federal and state administrative rules, regulations, and personnel that define eligibility for various public endorsements and support (Reich 1964). Spector (1981) says that personnel in these public bureaucracies and programs define troublesome people as "ineligible" to receive benefits (rather than criminal, deviant, or sick) and manage them accordingly.

### *Public Regulatory Bureaucracies and Legal Institutions*

Public regulatory bureaucracies both initiate and receive social problems claims (Chauncey 1980, Randall & Short 1983). Several studies show government agencies as social problems entrepreneurs. Becker's (1963) analysis of how the Treasury Department's Bureau of Narcotics defined the "marijuana problem" is well known (see also Galliher & Walker 1977). Gusfield (1981) and Wiener (1981) point to the NIAAA as a central participant in the world of alcoholism. Nuehring & Markle (1974) and Troyer & Markle (1983, Markle & Troyer 1979) identify the Public Health Service, the Federal Trade Commission, the Civil Aeronautics Board, the Surgeon General, and former Health Education and Welfare Secretary Joseph Califano as important entrepreneurs against smoking.

Chauncey (1980) studied how NIAAA officials tried to convince the nation of the seriousness of teenage drinking. These attempts largely failed because NIAAA was unable to secure endorsement from various private and nonofficial public groups. Public reception ranged from minimal to confused. Specific local teenage drinking programs were few, parents did not buy the definition, doctors did not support it, it had to compete with the drug problem, school officials did not see the problem, and it was rarely reported to police, who, in any case, had little access to special programs. Troyer & Markle (1983) show that antismoking claims made by government agencies have fared considerably better in terms of such grass roots and organization support (see also Ball & Lilly 1982, on the shifting fate of margarine).

When bureaucracies receive citizens' complaints, these claims are transformed by a language that is created and controlled by experts or bureaucrats (cf Latour 1983). Citizens' complaints become part of a system of proper proce-

dures. Murray's (1982) study of the abolition of the short-handled hoe in California farm work makes this clear. While workers and their attorney won the case against managers and the hoe, Murray asks what they did not and could not win, namely, attention to the hazards of all corporate production and to power differences between workers and management. Where claims are made, that is, to whom, can constrain subsequent definitional activities in loosely predictable ways—if one has detailed and current knowledge of the bureaucracy (see also Randall & Short 1983). Without the counsel of legal experts, claimants usually do not possess this knowledge. Murray describes how these experts can control and even change the problem.

Randall & Short (1983) studied a controversy over an Idaho mining company's policy requiring women workers to be sterilized to continue work in an area declared a risk for genetic damage. OSHA initiated claims against the company's policy on behalf of these women. OSHA ultimately lost this case because it could not marshal the necessary external power resources. A court rejected its claims to jurisdiction in such cases, and the Ford Administration was explicitly hostile to all OSHA actions (see also Calavita 1983, and Murray 1982 for similar views of the larger political context and such agencies' claims). The company's claims, definitions, and policy remained intact.

Calavita's (1983) study of the dismantling of OSHA, especially by the Reagan Administration, uncovers the paradox of one part of government making claims against another. By replacing the heads of OSHA (and the FTC) with antiregulators, the Administration was able not only to undermine these agencies and their claims, but to discredit the agency's past work publicly through media stories. Randall & Short say such public agencies are able to make claims, propose general remedies, and gain legitimacy all in one set of activities, effectively collapsing Spector & Kitsuse's first and second stages.

Kitsuse et al (1984) studied the *kikokushijo mondai*—returning student problem—in Japan. In contrast to the Randall & Short case, their study shows how a receptive context—the highly stratified educational system that is considered an essential prerequisite to career success in Japan as a Japanese—can be used to enhance the viability of claims made to a government bureaucracy. This problem consisted of definitional activities by diplomatic, academic, and corporate parents about the educational deficiencies they felt their school-age children experienced upon returning to Japan from foreign residence and education. The authors detail the many and varied ways this problem has become institutionalized, both in the Japanese educational system and in the larger society, while alternative, positive definitions of the returning students' situation (they are “broadened” and “internationalized”) have foundered.

Filing a law suit is a common form of claims making today. People, groups, and institutions, including the state, attempt to transform various troubles into

legal issues. Such claims making allows us to observe how social problems participants use social structure as a resource.

One topic of study is how various devalued people and their lawyers have challenged owners by invoking the Constitution. Kitsuse (1980) describes how these people have "come out" to demand their civil rights and integrity. Spector (1981) describes these claims as demands to government for "entitlements." These deviants have gone beyond deviance to create new social problems, sometimes with radical social and political implications (see Weitz 1984).

Civil rights, public interest, and consumer law have grown apace. The law here becomes a set of official symbolic categories for making claims to effect social change (cf Gusfield 1981). Using this law, attorneys for black people, the poor, consumers, juveniles, mental patients, prisoners, and others, have attacked a variety of traditional definitions and practices in our public life.

Feminists have been one such challenging group, and rape a particularly important object of their attention. Rose (1977) calls the social problem of rape "a by-product of the feminist movement" and details how women's groups have attacked traditional rape laws and police and court treatment of rape victims. These feminist criticisms offer new definitions of rape (e.g. Brown-miller 1975) and an analysis of its source in traditional gender roles. Alternate institutions run for women by women, some who are themselves rape victims, have grown. As with gay activists and reformed alcoholics, these claimants have taken ownership of the problem away from traditional experts and bureaucrats and made it the object of their and others' routine work (see also Tierney 1982, on the battered women problem).

Spector (1981) and Spector & Batt (1983) compare criminal and civil court procedures concerning rape. These two legal institutions offer victims distinct experiences and opportunities. To define rape as a crime makes the conflict one between the state and the accused. Rape victims sometimes do not even participate in the state's case, which is controlled by lawyers and the judge. If they do, they act as witnesses for the state rather than in their own interests. Spector & Batt use Christie's (1977) idea of conflicts as property to argue that criminal categories, procedures, and professionals steal this conflict from rape victims and transform it into a legal case that seems little related to the victim's experience. By contrast, civil law defines rape as a wrong done to an individual. The state provides the formal setting, judge, and rules to guide the claims-making process. Lawyers (ideally) advise rather than manipulate clients. Rape victims can own their conflicts and express moral outrage against offenders. Spector & Batt examined 31 civil rape cases since the turn of the century and found evidence that rape victims' experiences, compared with those of victims in criminal proceedings, support their analysis.

In another study of legal change, Frank (1983) shows how civil law has replaced criminal law in problems of health and safety in the workplace and the

environment since the turn of the century. Through detailed attention to major participants, definitions, and contests in this history, Frank effectively challenges “‘knee-jerk’ applications of conflict theory” that portray this change as a simple function of corporate capitalist power (see also Donnelly’s 1982 study of the origins of the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970).

### *Medicalizing Problems and Troubles*

Much recent research on the medicalization of deviance draws on the constructionist perspective. This work examines the implications of these new medical meanings and personnel for participants and the society, and the ownership struggles between professional and lay claims makers. In an early paper, Conrad (1975) draws on Becker (1963), Freidson (1970), and Zola (1972) to describe the origins, rise, and legitimacy of the medical diagnosis hyperkinesis at the hands of a small number of medical researchers, two drug companies, a Congressional Subcommittee on Privacy, and the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities. Conrad contrasts the implications of these medical definitions and interventions around children’s troublesome behavior with those contained in the deviant labels “bad” or “problem” child. These new definitions solve problems for teachers and parents responsible for children’s difficult behavior, and displace social contextual explanations potentially critical of the educational status quo.

Pfohl’s (1977) analysis of child abuse also identifies professional moral entrepreneurs: a few pediatric radiologists who created the new diagnosis, “Battered Child Syndrome.” Context is again important in that these radiologists saw this “discovery,” says Pfohl, as a welcome opportunity to do significant, career-enhancing work.

The Conrad and Pfohl studies highlight an important kind of professional claims making: scientific publication in a respected professional journal. Such publication is usually not seen as relevant social problems data. These studies also show that those outside medicine can use medical definitions to their own ends, which experts may see as contrary to their own. When professionals become social problems participants, they often must share definitional prerogatives with diverse individuals and groups (see Wiener 1981). Ownership does not always ensure complete control.

Schneider (1978) studied the viability of the “humanitarian” disease concept of alcoholism and found that medical experts in fact were not the primary entrepreneurs. Alcoholics Anonymous, a few scientists and “recovered alcoholics,” research centers at Yale and Rutgers Universities, the National Council on Alcoholism, and the NIAAA were the most active political champions of this disease definition (cf Wiener 1981). Similarly, Johnson & Hufbauer (1982) found parents of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) victims were the most active claimants behind new scientific and Congressional awareness and re-

search support for SIDS. These lay champions used scientific research, official medical statements, and public sympathy as important contextual resources to establish the viability of their claims. Troyer & Markle (1983, 1984) reiterate this kind of lay participation around problems of smoking and coffee drinking.

Conrad & Schneider (1980; Schneider & Conrad 1980) studied mental illness, alcoholism, opiate addiction, children's deviant behavior, and homosexuality as prime cases where medical definitions and technology have been championed over sin and crime designations. They used medical journals, professional speeches, editorials, news stories, popular magazines, autobiographies, historical studies, and court cases as sources of data. They identified the actors behind these historic changes and how this definitional work was done. Those who could establish their prerogatives to define the problem and designate who should be responsible for it were powerful figures in these social dramas (cf Gusfield 1975, Latour 1983, Peyrot 1984).

Lay persons can be critics as well as champions of professional owners' definitions and can even win this ownership. The demedicalization of homosexuality illustrates this. Following Spector (1977), Conrad & Schneider (1980) show how gay liberation advocates, with the support of a few insider psychiatrists, challenged the medical disease diagnosis of homosexuality. Using the psychiatrists' own medical, scientific culture, these lay challengers scored a definitional victory that led ultimately to gays themselves becoming the new owner-experts of homosexuality as a "lifestyle." McCrea (1983) studied how a few doctors championed the "deficiency disease" of menopause and a treatment of estrogen replacement. They were effectively challenged by feminists, who used independent scientific research on the link between cancer and estrogen therapy, who defined menopause as a natural part of women's lives, and who claimed that the disease view was sexist. Troyer & Markle's (1984) study of the definition of coffee reiterates the importance of sympathetic professionals and/or supportive research for such challenge. This research enlightens us about how stage three claims are made and successfully pursued.

Studies of the medicalization of deviance also illustrate how professionals create the problems they own and treat (see Hughes 1971, Freidson 1970). In doing this, they make moral judgments both in the technical language of the profession and in the popular moral meanings so far as this language often incorporates popular moral meanings. This second kind of morality seems to be a useful resource for critics, as McCrea's (1983) study demonstrates. Billings & Urban's (1982) analysis of the medical construction of transsexualism and the transsexual shows how doctors became dupes of well-schooled patients who effected key diagnostic criteria to gain treatment, which they later criticized. Loseke & Cahill (1984) describe and criticize—that is, participate in the social problem of—the way experts on battered women label the women who remain in such relationships as unable to control their lives and in need of experts' counsel.

Pawluch's (1983) analysis of the history of pediatrics shifts attention from problematic individuals to how some pediatricians responded to a declining professional market. As childhood diseases and problems of baby feeding were controlled, pediatricians had both less work and less medically worthwhile work to do. Some began to champion new definitions of the baby doctor's role to include, as one advocate said, "shades of difference between health and disease, conditions whereby the child is not invalidated, but his social and individual efficacy is decreased" (Pawluch 1983:457; see also Riessman 1983, on women as vulnerable to such medical definitions).

Such professional claims making about problematic conditions in the society is found in science more generally. Aronson's (1982) study of the origins and institutionalization of nutrition research shows how conditions outside science that were seen to threaten powerful interests provided an opportunity for scientist-entrepreneurs to gain financial support and legitimacy by defining themselves and their science as a solution to those "problems." Nutrition's leading late nineteenth-century advocate, Wilbur Atwater, argued he could solve the problem of labor unrest over wages by teaching workers to buy and prepare food in a more economical and healthy way. Such claims appealed to capitalist owners, who sought a productive and cooperative workforce without raising wages. Nutrition advocates finally won official endorsement from Congress, with an appropriation to support their research in US Agricultural Experiment Stations.

Aronson says this case shows some of the conditions under which scientists will make such activist, "social problems interpretive claims" (Aronson 1984) to groups and organizations outside science. When resources to support research are scarce and the opportunity for public funding exists, such enterprising activities might be expected. Johnson & Hufbauer's (1982) study of SIDS shows a contrasting situation in which demands from parents for more research were important as both a direct and indirect impetus to a new medical research community (see also Wiener 1981, on alcoholism research). Latour (1983) makes the most bold argument here, citing the history of Pasteur's capture of the anthrax problem in late nineteenth century France to show how distinctions between science and society, upon close scrutiny, virtually disappeared in the face of compelling scientific facts. Clearly, problems in the larger society and problems in science are often linked, with significant consequences for social organization.

### *Social Problems and the News Media*

Social problems participants usually hope the news media will help them publicize claims and thus enhance their legitimacy. Research shows, however, that the media do not function simply as mirrors claimants can use to reflect "what is really going on." Rather, they decidedly shape the images they convey. Newswriters are, in short, the true "newsmakers" (Glasgow Universi-



ty Media Group 1980, Fishman 1980), and relevant questions include the following: What happens to claims and definitions that go to media organizations? How do they emerge? What is the place of the media in the social problems process? Do media communicate claims and definitions of their own, quite aside from what other claims makers say?

Fishman (1978) shows that a crime wave against the elderly reported by three New York City media organizations was, in fact, a growing, overlapping media coverage. He details how editors created this news theme to solve routine problems of news work. The theme became a media wave when it was reiterated in other news reports. Fishman calls crime news ideological because it reports crime as the police see it (e.g. street crimes and violent crimes) and because routine newswork produces stories that convey meanings all their own. For instance, news workers recognize good and newsworthy stories by using criteria that systematically filter out things that are not (see also Wiener, 1981:207–211, discussion of media coverage of the Rand Report).

News reporters' routine dependence for information on official owners of problems effectively discourages interpretations foreign to or in conflict with those interpretations on which owner organizations rest. This is what Randall & Short (1983) suggest about the link between OSHA and other official bureaucracies and the media. These agencies are a news beat; they regularly provide the information reporters use to do their work.

Gitlin's (1980) study of how the media covered the New Left and the antiwar movement of the 1960s describes how claims makers who challenge dominant institutions fare in encounters with the media. He studied coverage of antiwar activity by the *New York Times* and CBS News in 1965. When movement spokespersons sought to use the media to convey their views of American society and the war, they found to their dismay that what came out usually gave short shrift to important ideas, but gave full play to conflict, the dramatic, and the bizarre. Individuals in action were important to reporters, who are taught that objectivity and balance are produced by quoting spokespersons for various sides. Gitlin shows how the media created these spokespersons, how they made them "movement leaders" and then celebrities who, overwhelmed by the spotlight, became less concerned with conveying movement claims. The agendas that shape rudimentary news work, then, augur poorly for seriously conveying protest arguments.

Tierney's (1982) research on wife beating reiterates Gitlin's point about what media cover. Wife beating was a topic that was new and controversial, contained violence, was timely and serious, and touched on the familiar themes of feminism, equality, and family life; all of these could still be handled in an entertaining way. Tierney argues that as definitions of wife beating were publicized, social service agencies responded to the conditions described.

Cohn & Gallagher (1984), in the study noted above, detail an incident in



which a “conservative” Maine newspaper was involved in a social problem concerning a homosexual group and a planned gay conference at the University of Maine. Fundamentalist ministers attacked the University for allowing the student group on campus and for hosting the conference, after they read about it in the paper (one wonders if a Regents’ board meeting was a news beat). The newspaper became a forum for and reporter of the controversy. The editors pursued a delicate balance between their sense of the paper’s responsibility to the community, good journalism, and local definitions of the kind of paper theirs was (it did not cause news or stir up trouble). Once the problem developed, it had to be covered, but in a way that would not harm the University and its elite trustees—important figures in the community. By reporting the University’s Constitutional defense and the ministers’ demands that the University be punished by a legislative budget cut, the paper helped channel the problem. The ministers became the threat against whom the University and community had to be protected.

It is particularly revealing, Cohn & Gallagher say, that, coincidental to this controversy, a major revision of the Maine Criminal Code that decriminalized homosexual intercourse was being voted into law. A second gay conference was planned at the University for a year later. There was no coverage of and virtually no public attention directed to either. Asked about this lack of coverage, editors said that good news stories were about conflict and controversy. There were none around either event; they were not newsworthy. By using these journalistic criteria and their sense of being a responsible paper, editors precluded more social problems concerning homosexuality.

## PROBLEMS WITH AND INSIGHTS OF THE PERSPECTIVE

### *Problems*

**CONDITIONS AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS** An important source of both confusion and disagreement among those using the constructionist perspective is the question of how conditions should figure in social problems analysis. As Rains (1975) focused attention on the “deviant behavior” that societal reaction theory keeps in the background, there has been much comment on Spector & Kitsuse’s argument that conditions, as regarded by the sociologist, are irrelevant to a definitional analysis. That these difficulties beset both the labeling and constructionist perspectives suggests that the confusion is perhaps in part a product of the perspective’s requirements.

Woolgar (1983), and Woolgar & Pawluch (1985) appropriately note the tension in some constructionist research between a view that sees the natural world, especially in the form of social context, giving rise to various or alternative accounts of what *is* (the “mediative” position), and the view that

these accounts, definitions, and claims are “constitutive” of reality (cf Berger & Luckmann 1966). This is the same tension Rains (1975) identifies in labeling work. The criticism is justified for many of the studies identified as constructionist and discussed here.

Sociologists are members of the society they study. The perspective requires them as analysts to suspend both commonsense commitments about what social problems are—e.g. undesirable conditions—and their own scientific judgments about which claims and definitions about these putative conditions are true. The latter proves to be especially difficult (see Gusfield 1984; Aronson 1984). Moreover, as Gusfield (1984) notes, being on the side (that is, standing aside) in the study of social controversies (especially involving differentially powerful participants) has become professionally unpopular as well as personally unsatisfying.

Social problems participants, however, typically neither treat conditions as putative nor suspend their moral convictions, although the perspective does not preclude this possibility. Instead, they see social problems definitions as reflective of the objective reality (Woolgar 1983) in which the problem resides. The sociologist’s problem is to avoid participation and, especially, to avoid defending or challenging claims and definitions about putative conditions. This includes avoiding an ironic stance toward some participants’ definitions. Few of the authors considered here maintain this distinction consistently in their research. Some make no attempt to do so, even though they call their work definitional.

**CLAIMS, DEFINITIONS, AND VIABILITY** Spector & Kitsuse’s emphasis on claims and claims making has been broadened. They encourage this in their examples (how “floods” and “morons” are products of the social problems process) and by use of the word definitional. Clearly, some of the activities studied fit the definition of claim the authors cite (Spector & Kitsuse 1977:78), but much is described more accurately as definitional. Researchers should consider as data all verbal and nonverbal behavior that conveys meaning about the problematic condition or object of attention. The import of language and how it shapes interpretations and conduct is here enormous. Definitional activities should be treated as an inclusive but carefully grounded concept.

The concept *viability*, important to judging social problems development, should be clarified. Spector & Kitsuse say that viable claims and definitions are those that “live” and that claimants can “get away with.” A clear definition of viability is necessary for accurate data collection and to compare the development of various problems. Viability is evident when participants give credibility to claims and definitions, when they treat them as valid. Viability is often produced by media coverage. It is produced when officials and professionals warrant definitions, implement them, and accept responsibility for problematic

conditions. We need a clearer understanding of precisely how participants' activities affect the viability of claims and definitions.

**NATURAL HISTORY** The concept *natural history* is heuristic and directs attention to loose similarities across cases. It leads easily, however, to premature generalization and prediction (R. J. Troyer 1983, unpublished manuscript). Since generalizing is an essential part of scientific work, a cautious strategy would be to examine case studies from similar settings (see Peyrot 1984). One might study problems involving public regulatory bureaucracies. What generalizations might be made about how the news media figure in social problems? What casts of characters emerge at various points in this process? One pitfall to avoid here is the ad hoc, overly topical quality of so much past social problems writing. By using comparative, analytic categories defined by their effects on viability, or examining how the definitional process is moved along by the activities in question (J. I. Kitsuse 1984, personal communication), this might be avoided.

Wiener (1981), in her study of the politics of alcoholism, argues that the sequential aspect of natural history models probably misleads us about the definitional process. She believes a more accurate view is one of "overlapping," simultaneous, "continuously ricocheting interaction" (Wiener 1981:7). A natural history model may encourage us to overstate the extent to which kinds of activities occur only at certain points. This seems likely for Spector & Kitsuse's stage one and stage three activities. Wiener's view reinforces Spector & Kitsuse's argument that the social problems process is open-ended rather than moving to some logical end point (see also Peyrot 1984).

**SOCIAL MOVEMENTS SOCIOLOGY VS SOCIAL PROBLEMS SOCIOLOGY?** A recent question is whether or not the definitional perspective on social problems is sufficiently distinct from social movements theory to warrant continued attention. Mauss (1984 and unpublished observations) argues it is not, and that social problems are always outcomes of social movements. To study the latter is to study the former.

R. Troyer (1984, unpublished manuscript) uses both definitional and social movements theory and notes the similarities and differences between the definitional approach, the standard structural social movements view, and the more recent resource mobilization perspective on social movements. A traditional social movements approach (e.g. Smelser 1963), with its emphasis on structural strain (to explain grievances) and on organizational considerations and membership recruitment, is contrasted by Troyer with the constructionist view of social problems. Troyer sees the differences as substantial. He also compares the latter with the resource mobilization view (Oberschall 1973, McCarthy & Zald 1973, 1977). While there are general similarities, resource

mobilization's emphasis on structural conditions, social movement organizations, and successful outcomes, and its neglect of meaning lead to research agendas quite distinct from those described here. Rather than argue, as Mauss does, that social problems theory should be subsumed by social movements theory, we might better argue that social movements are an example of the social problems process. Moreover, the topics and data of the research cited here seem to challenge the conclusion that the definitional view simply reproduces social movements research.

### *Insights*

The insights of the constructionist perspective as detailed by Spector & Kitsuse appear intact, criticisms notwithstanding. We can still ask, where is a theoretically integrated, empirically based, original research tradition in social problems sociology prior to the work cited here? Have researchers used the core statements and subsequent research to form new and promising questions, as a sociology of social problems? The work described here seems to support an affirmative reply—quite aside from how this or that study could be improved, or whether elements of the core statements are vague or undeveloped. On the other hand, research based ostensibly on a condition-focused approach, or even on a subjective/objective elements approach to social problems has given us few distinct insights. Like the modest claims made by the founders of labeling theory, the definitional view should be judged more by what it has called for and stimulated than what it ignores. Unlike the labeling tradition, Spector & Kitsuse have proposed bold changes. Rather than offering merely another view of social problems sociology, they and others have launched a new speciality and stimulated a sizeable body of work. Whether or not this work would have been done as social movements, Marxist, or conflict sociology we cannot say.

New questions have been asked about what social problems are and how they should be studied. This approach avoids, moreover, some of the major criticisms of labeling by giving attention to the political and historical quality of collective definitional process, and by rejecting an oversocialized view of deviants as “helpless, hapless” victims (see Conrad & Schneider 1980, Kitsuse 1980; Spector 1981). One who carefully reviews this and similar work can hardly reiterate these familiar criticisms (but see Piven 1981).

The perspective and much of the research reaffirms a major strength of labeling, namely, the independence of meaning from the objects to which it is or may be attached by sentient actors as they create, recreate, and are created by social life (cf Matza, 1969, Giddens 1976). Quite contrary to Piven's critique (1981), actors' agency is the source of social action in the constructionist's world.

Finally, this and future work may breathe new life into deviance sociology,

particularly as it breaks down old divisions and creates new, more theoretically coherent ones. What might a sociology of trouble or a sociology of morality look like, distinct from theory and research that concentrate on why people behave in ways that happen to break rules or on the social distribution of this behavior and how to control and punish it? I do not say this pejoratively but rather on the assumption that success in these diverse endeavors might be enhanced if we concentrate on the questions our theories ask and on where these theories are incomplete rather than attacking each other because we pursue different questions.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

This review benefited from conversations with John Kitsuse, Malcolm Spector, and Ronald Troyer. Thanks to them. They of course bear no responsibility for my interpretations.

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