THINKING ABOUT SOCIAL PROBLEMS

AN INTRODUCTION TO CONSTRUCTIONIST PERSPECTIVES

Donileen R. Loseke

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An Introduction to Constructionist Perspectives

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About the Author

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Preface

While social constructionist approaches to social problems are popular among academic researchers in Sociology, Communication, Public Policy, and Criminology, this perspective tends to be not adequately covered in popular social problems texts. There are several likely reasons why students often aren't introduced to this perspective until they reach advanced undergraduate or even graduate work. For example, student interest often lies in understanding the very real problems in our world, but social constructionist perspectives ignore that interest in order to focus on questions about how humans create meaning in our world. At first glance, the questions of constructionists seem downright esoteric and perhaps even a waste of time in our world of very real want and pain. In addition, social constructionism historically was posed as an alternative to other theoretical approaches that look at social problems as objective conditions in the environment. This has led some people to argue that *either* you believe that social problems exist outside human awareness, *or* you believe that social problems are constructed (the constructionist approach). When given such a choice, many people choose to examine social problems as objective conditions because it seems more immediate and important. Finally, at least part of the reason why social constructionist perspectives haven't become generally popular is because it's difficult to find readings or books offering an overview. The classic statement of this perspective, *Constructing Social Problems,* by Malcolm Spector and John Kitsuse, now is over twenty years old. Its examples seem dated and the debates inspiring this statement now seem old and don't reflect the past twenty years of empirical research and theoretical development. The more current literature also isn't much help in offering an overview: It's not obvious how the case studies in the empirical literature relate to one another to form a coherent research agenda; theoretical writings in this perspective most often assume audiences of readers already familiar with constructionist perspectives.

That is why I wanted to write this book. In the course of teaching classes such as Social Problems, Introduction to Sociology, Family Violence, Deviance, and Women's Lives, I've become increasingly convinced that social construction perspectives help us make sense of our lives. The ques-

tions of constructionism—how do humans create, sustain, change meaning—only sound esoteric. I believe in the power of social constructionism; I think it encourages a way of thinking that is distinctly sociological and, to use a trendy word, empowering, to those who use it. And I've learned that the insights of constructionism don't depend on suspending all belief that a real world exists outside our understandings of it. I don't see constructionism as an alternative to other theoretical frameworks: I see it as an important addition. Different frameworks simply pose questions about different aspects of life—to deny the importance of any theoretical framework is to limit our understandings. We can't afford to do this if we want to understand the perplexity and complexity of the human condition. I think social constructionism can help us do this.

Rather than writing for an audience of insiders who already are convinced that social constructionist perspectives are important, I wanted to write for an audience of intelligent people who know nothing about the perspective. What I wanted to do was to encourage readers to think about social problems and, along the way, to offer a general introduction to social construction perspectives.

I ended up writing two books contained within one cover. The first is the chapters themselves, which tell a quite breezy story in conversational prose with lots of examples to demonstrate. The first chapters focus on how social problems come to public attention through the activity of people who convince us that a morally troublesome condition exists and that something must be done about it. The final chapters examine what happens to our world when we are convinced that social problems exist. Readers interested only in the outlines of constructionist perspectives on social problems can read these chapters and not feel bogged down in theory talk and references. My goal here is to spark interest and encourage readers to think about how social problems are constructed. I hope these casual readers will see the value of understanding the process by which social problems come to public attention and will see how this affects their lives.

I think of the second book as contained in the footnotes to each chapter and in the theoretical appendix. This is a shadow book of the academic underpinnings for what I gloss over in the chapters. I hope that readers wanting to pursue constructionist perspectives will take the time to read the footnotes, check the references, and ponder the questions and theoretical options posed in the appendix. My goal is to offer these interested readers a road map into a further study of social constructionism.

As always, I start my list of people to thank with Spencer. For too many years he has heard me talk about how I wanted to do this project; he'll be grateful that it's finally done so perhaps I'll start talking about something else. High on my list of acknowledgments also are my former students at Skidmore College and my current students at the University of South

Florida. In this book I've passed off many of their insights about social problems as my own; it is their questions and comments that have led me to believe in the very real power of constructionist perspectives. When I turn to debts owed to my social constructionist colleagues, I should simply direct readers to the reference list—all I've done is attempt to interpret and synthesize the works of many people who have developed this perspective. Some colleagues, though, have been particular sources of encouragement and advice in this project. Although I fear I've taken far too much of their time and done far too little with their comments and suggestions, I owe debts of gratitude to Joel Best, Spencer Cahill, James Holstein, Kathleen Lowney, Gale Miller, and J. William Spencer. Richard Koffler of Aldine de Gruyter and Joel Best, series editor, also have been remarkable in their support of this project and it has been my pleasure working with them. The people at Aldine de Gruyter have been a joy to work with.

Finally, I dedicate this book to Lynnette. It is people like her who try to resolve social problems in the daily lives of those around them who are the true experts. Academics studying social problems should listen more to those experiencing problems and to those trying to do something about them.

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PART III.   FROM SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS
TO SOCIAL ACTIONS

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Issues in Studying Social Problems

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The Problem with Social Problems

I'm driving home, and a helicopter overhead sprays a brown liquid on my car. A voice on the radio tells me it's Malathion, a pesticide to kill the Mediterranean fruit flies (medflies) ruining the Florida citrus crop. But the voices on a radio call-in show say Malathion is a poison killing medflies, bees, butterflies, and humans alike. The news in the local paper, as usual, is grim: A newborn infant is abandoned in a garbage can; the local school system once again produces failing students; a hideous crime is committed by a fourteen-year old; there aren't enough jobs for single, poor mothers no longer qualifying for welfare. The national news is no better: Crack cocaine continues to devastate urban ghettos; elderly people are protesting plans to increase their insurance premiums; sexual harassment is common in the military. An advertisement tells me an upcoming "20/20" will feature the graphic truth about teen violence in the wealthy suburbs. "America's Most Wanted" follows the news. I respond to a knock on my door and I buy a candy bar from a child. I can feel good about myself as I eat the candy because my money will help a local school survive recent budget cuts. The phone rings and it's a pollster wanting my opinions on President Clinton's policies on the violations of human rights in China. I check my notes for my next day's lecture on the problems of poverty; I fall asleep on the couch while watching a movie, Against Their Will: Women in Prison.

In this last decade of the twentieth century, the American landscape is littered with social problems. That is our topic here. I'll begin simply with a question for you, a reader of these lines: What do you think are the ten most important social problems in the United States today?

What is on your list? Perhaps poverty, AIDS, abortion, crime. Your list might include problems of "abuse" (child abuse, wife abuse, alcohol abuse, drug abuse). It could include problems of "rights" (homosexual rights, ability-impaired peoples' rights, laboratory animal rights); it could include "isms" (racism, sexism, ageism, anti-Semitism), or problems from solutions to other problems (welfare, affirmative action, busing of school children). Your list might include institutional problems, such as problems of the economy (factory shutdowns, a lack of well-paying jobs, unem-

ployed Black teenagers), politics (illegal campaign contributions, politi-
cians accused of sexual harassment), family (divorce, men who don't pay
child support, single mothers, teenage pregnancy), education (schools that
don't teach), or medicine (lack of affordable medical care, medical mal-
practice). Your list might include problems of individual behavior (smok-
ing, drinking, drugs, Satanic cults, teens who gun down classmates); it
might include problems of the environment (acid rain, deforestation, loss
of the ozone layer).

There are three important lessons in this small exercise of naming social
problems. First, there seemingly is no end to conditions in the United
States that might be called social problems.[1] Granted, the problems of
crime and poverty tend to remain on the public's and policymakers' lists
of problems, and racial inequality often is called this country's most
enduring social problem. But after these, the list is all but endless. If given
time, you could think of more than ten problems confronting the United
States today. If you compared your own list to lists made by others, the
number of items would grow. What we call social problems range from
conditions isolated within one or another community (a specific manufac-
turing plant closing down, polluted water in a particular community, UFO
sightings in another), to those affecting particular regions of the country
(homelessness in the Midwest because of floods, the many problems of
migrant workers in California, Texas, and Florida), to problems found
throughout the entire nation (AIDS, inequalities, lack of low-cost day care
for children), to those that cross international borders (human rights,
world hunger, overpopulation, Pakistan and India testing nuclear bombs).
The list is all but endless; the list is ever changing.

A second lesson in this simple exercise of naming social problems is that
social problems are about disagreements. You might believe that some of
the problems I offered are not social problems at all; you might believe that
I failed to mention others that are far more important. Or, you and I might
be thinking about very different things even if we did agree to include
something on a list of important problems. If there is a problem called
"homosexual rights," for example, is this a problem of too many rights or
too few? If there is a problem of "school prayer," is this a problem of too
much prayer or too little? Or, we might disagree on what, particularly,
should be included in the problem. Is it "date rape" if a woman says yes
but means no? If a married couple who can't afford their own home must
live with the wife's parents, is that an example of "homelessness?" Or, we
might agree that something is a problem of a particular type and we might
agree on what is included in the problem, but still we might not agree
about what should be done to resolve it. So, even if we agreed that
"teenage pregnancy" is a social problem, do you think we should promote
sexual abstinence or provide birth control? Should we try to make life eas-

ier for teen parents so that they can remain in school, or should we make life more difficult for them in order to show others that there are negative costs to teen pregnancy? As another example, even if we agree that there is a problem of teens who take guns to school and open fire on their classmates and teachers, what causes this problem? Is it a problem of schools, of parents, of mentally unbalanced teens? Is it a problem of guns? What we should do depends on what we think causes the problem. Social problems are about disagreements.

A third lesson from this simple exercise of naming social problems is that social problems are about conditions *and* they are about people in those conditions. A social problem called crime contains two types of people: criminals and victims of crime. A social problem called poverty contains poor people. Likewise we can talk about pollution and polluters, welfare and welfare recipients, a lack of civility and uncivil people. Whether explicit and obvious (the condition of unemployment and the people who are unemployed) or implicit and subtle (the deindustrialization of America, which implies unemployed or underemployed workers), social problems include both conditions (something) and people (somebody).

Let me ask another question: Think of your list of the top ten U.S. social problems. What do all of these conditions have in common? What *is* a social problem? My guess is that when I asked you to name ten social problems you didn't think to yourself, "What does she mean?" In daily life, social problems are something like "pornography" in that few people can define the meaning of the term itself but most folks say they know it when they see it. So it goes with social problems. We rarely (if ever) in daily life think about what the term itself means but we have little trouble knowing a social problem when we see one. Our first task, then, is to define "social problem."

WHAT IS A SOCIAL PROBLEM?

While writers of social problems textbooks can offer complex definitions of their topic matter, I want to focus on *public perceptions* where there seem to be general agreements. There are four parts to this most basic definition of social problems.[2]

First, we use the term "social problem" to indicate that something is *wrong*. This is common sense. The name is social *problem* so the topic matter includes those conditions that are negative. In popular understanding, a social problem is *not* something like happy families, good health, or schools that succeed in educating children. "Social problem" is a term we use to note *trouble*.

The second part of the definition of social problems sounds harsh and uncaring: To be given the status of a social problem the condition must be

widespread, which means that more than a few people must be hurt. If I lose my job, that is a *personal trouble*.[3] It's sad for me but not, necessarily, for you or for anyone else. But if something causes many of us to lose our jobs, then it is a social problem that wasn't created by (and therefore can't be resolved by) individuals. I like to talk about Jeffrey Dahmer to illustrate this. Jeffrey Dahmer was a man who killed—and ate—young boys. He showed Americans that there could be cannibals among us. I don't know about you, but I think that's certainly wrong. But Americans never mention the problem of cannibalism when we talk to people doing public opinion polls; cannibalism isn't mentioned in social problems texts; it's not debated in the halls of Congress; there aren't any social services to reform cannibals; we aren't asked to donate money for the cause of stopping cannibalism, and so forth. Why not? Because as hideous as it was that Jeffrey Dahmer killed and ate young boys, one cannibal among us is not enough to make cannibalism a social problem. Social problems are those troublesome conditions affecting a *significant number of people.*

Third, the definition of social problem includes a dose of optimism. Conditions called social problems share the characteristic that we think it's possible they can be *changed*. They are conditions we think are caused by humans and therefore can be changed by humans. Consider the condition of death. This certainly is a troublesome and widespread condition. But humans will die and that can't be changed. So, death isn't a social problem. At the same time, think about the many other conditions surrounding death that *could* be changed: We could possibly change *when* people die (using medical technology to extend life or assisted suicide to end life) and *how* people die (care in nursing homes for elderly people, automobile or airplane crashes that cause early death). Likewise, earthquakes or tornadoes aren't social problems because nothing can be done to stop them. But we could talk about social problems surrounding natural disasters—there are potential social problems such as the cost of insurance, failures of early-warning systems for disasters, or the response of officials to such disasters. "Social problems" is a term we use when we believe the troublesome condition *can be fixed by humans.*

A social problem is a condition defined as wrong, widespread, and changeable. The fourth and final component of the definition is that "social problem" is a name for conditions we believe *should* be changed. This is very logical. If the condition is troublesome and if it occurs frequently and if it can be changed, then it follows it should be changed. Americans tend to use the name "social problems" for conditions we believe are so troublesome that they can't be ignored. To say that something is a social problem is to take a stand that *something needs to be done.*

We use the term "social problem" to categorize troublesome conditions that are prevalent, that can be changed, that should be changed. When I

write "social problem" from now on this is what I mean. With this basic definition in hand we can go on to the next question: What should we study about social problems? This question doesn't have a simple answer because social problems are about two quite different aspects of social life: They are about *objective* conditions and people (things and people that exist in the physical world) and they are about *subjective definitions* (how we understand our world and the people in it). Because it isn't immediately and obviously apparent why the objective and subjective aspects of social problems can be separated, I'll discuss each of them.

I begin with the commonsense framework of a type of person I'll call a *practical actor*. I'll use this term when I want to refer to a type of person like you or me in our daily lives. As practical actors, we aren't academics studying something, we're simply citizens living in this country. We have jobs and/or we go to school; we're concerned with getting through our days the best ways possible. We might not have the education of a nuclear scientist, but we're not stupid; we think, we use common sense. Practical actors most often are concerned with social problems as objective conditions.

SOCIAL PROBLEMS AS OBJECTIVE CONDITIONS AND PEOPLE IN THE SOCIAL WORLD

When members of the American public use the term "social problems" we are most frequently interested in these as *objective* characteristics of the social environment. "Objective" means real, tangible, measurable. Within this perspective, social problems are about things we can see; they are about measurable and widespread conditions in the environment and they are about the living, breathing people who are hurt by these conditions or who create these conditions. Within this perspective, poverty is a condition where people don't have enough money to live a decent life, and poor people are people living in this condition. Or, drunk driving is a condition where people with a high blood alcohol count drive cars, and drunk drivers are the people who do this. When we think about social problems as objective characteristics of the social environment, a series of very practical questions emerge: Who or what causes the condition? What harm is created? What types of people are harmed? What can we do to stop this harm?

When experts study social problems in this way, they rely on *objective indicators* of social problems conditions, causes, and consequences. These indicators include statistics such as those showing the numbers of school children who can't read, the numbers of crimes committed, or the number of babies born addicted to crack. There also are objective indicators of types of people who cause social problems or who are harmed by social problems. These are measures such as age, ethnicity, or gender. There also

can be more complex psychological profiles: people who commit crimes are given various psychological tests and a profile of "criminals" is constructed; tests are given to heterosexuals to measure their "homophobia"; women victims of "wife abuse" are given tests and psychological profiles of "battered women" are constructed from them, and so on.

Such objective indicators are the basis of arguments in many social problems textbooks. Such texts most often are arranged in a series of chapters with titles such as "Problems in the Economy," "Problems in Government," "Problems of Inequality" (poverty, ethnicity, age, gender), "Problems of Deviance" (sexual behavior, drug use, crime), and so on. Each chapter in these texts tends to contain a more or less standardized treatment of the problem at hand. Readers see objective indicators describing the extent of the problem (how widespread it is), what people are involved in it, and the consequences of the problem for the people. Various sociological theories are used to explain the causes of the problem and this leads to statements about what can be done to resolve it.

This makes sense because practical actors are concerned with social problems as objective conditions. But now I'm going to say that while it makes practical sense to examine social problems as objective (real, tangible) conditions involving real people, we can't stop there because it's *not enough*. Social problems are about things and people that we *worry* about and when we talk about "worry" we go beyond objectivity into the topic of *subjective definitions*. But you might ask, So what? Don't Americans worry about things we should worry about? Aren't experts qualified to tell us what we should worry about? To answer these questions we must leave the world of a commonsense practical actor in order to examine the confusions in this thing we're calling social problems. Let's look at why it's not good to simply assume that we worry about those things we should worry about.

Objective Characteristics and Subjective Worry

We can't simply assume that we worry about things we should worry about, because there is *no necessary relationship* between any objective indicators (statistics, results of tests) of social problem conditions and what Americans worry about, what politicians focus on, or what television, newspapers, or magazines present to us. This means there's no necessary relationship between the measurable characteristics of any given condition or the people in it and a definition of that condition as troublesome. [4] So, sometimes Americans start to worry about a condition when objective indicators could be used to show that the *condition is not new.* For example, the historical record (an objective indicator) shows that what we now call "child abuse" always has been a part of human existence. Indeed, I could make a case that children in the past were much more likely to be brutally treated by their parents than are children now. Yet the term "child abuse"