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Introduction to Constructionist Futures: New Directions in Social Problems Theory

I am delighted to introduce this special issue of *Qualitative Sociology Review* that Joel Best and I edited. Devoted to exploring opportunities for developing constructionist approaches to social problems, this issue contains articles representing the thoughts of a variety of both young and established scholars whose perspectives reflect academic and social environments in North America (Canada and the United States), Europe (Great Britain, Sweden, Denmark), and the East (Japan, Hong Kong, China). In this introduction, I will first locate constructionist perspectives on social problems within academ-

ic, theoretical, and social contexts, and then introduce the articles that follow.

Academic Contexts

Constructionist perspectives are found throughout the social sciences, natural sciences, and humanities. *The Handbook of Constructionist Research* (Holstein and Gubrium 2008), for example, contains chapters about constructionism in anthropology, communication, education, management, nursing, psychology, public policy, science and technology, and sociology. Constructionist perspectives also are found in the professions, including law (Amsterdam and Bruner 2000), medicine (Brown 1995), and psychotherapy (Miller 1997; Neimeyer and Raskin 2000). Yet, despite this presence across a range of academic disciplines and professions, it is most common for constructionists who are interested in the particular topic of social problems to write as sociologists. Tellingly, the beginnings of this volume were in the 2013 meetings of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP) in New York City, an organization that coordinates its annual meetings with those of the American Sociological Association, and whose journal, *Social Problems*, is promoted as a journal of sociology.

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Constructionist approaches to social problems tend to be dominated by sociologists, and, within sociology, there is further segregation. A section in the *Handbook of Constructionist Research* (Holstein and Gubrium 2008) titled “The Social Construction of What?” contains chapters on constructionist examinations of bodies, emotion, gender, sex, race/ethnicity, medical knowledge, therapy, and history. Despite this diversity of topics of interest to constructionists, those interested in social problems tend to draw insights primarily from others likewise engaged in the study of social problems.

The first context of the papers in this volume is therefore the academic world, where social constructionist perspectives on social problems tend to be dominated by sociologists who draw inspiration primarily from others who likewise explore constructionist questions about social problems. This context leads several of the contributors to this volume to argue there would be multiple advantages of drawing insights from disciplines outside sociology, as well as from a wider range of topics inside sociology.

Theoretical Contexts

Stretching back to Descartes, social construction has a long history as both a theoretical perspective and a methodological orientation (Moses and Knutsen 2007; Weinberg 2008; 2014). Sociologists, however, tend to ignore this long history and cite the beginning of constructionist perspectives as the 1966 publication of *The Social Construction of Reality* by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. Sociologists exploring the construction of social problems tend to cite an even more recent beginning,

the 1977 publication of *Constructing Social Problems* by Malcolm Spector and John Kitsuse.

There is no doubt that *Constructing Social Problems* is a masterful work. Produced in a time of near hegemony in sociology of Parsonian structural functionalism and a domination of natural science/positivist models of research, *Constructing Social Problems* was a forceful presentation of a new vision of how to think about social problems and how to do research with these new ways of thinking. As the statements on the back cover of the 1987 reissue testify, *Constructing Social Problems* became “the major and originating statement of the social constructionist perspective on social problems” (Joseph Gusfield), and the “seminal contribution to the study of social problems” (Dorothy Pawluch). Generations of constructionists working on questions about social problems continue such praise by referencing this book as the theoretical scaffolding for their empirical research.

Constructing Social Problems was a brilliant call for new ways to conceptualize social problems, it was not a development of a theoretical framework. While others since have demonstrated how elements from symbolic interaction, pragmatism, and ethnomethodology were foundational components in the framework of *Constructing Social Problems* (e.g., Schneider 1985; 2008; Miller and Holstein 1989; Holstein and Miller 1993a; 1993b; Best 2008; Weinberg 2008; 2014), this theoretical development was *not* a part of the book itself. Rather, just as “qualitative” sociology often justifies its value by dramatizing the failures of “quantitative” sociology, *Constructing Social Problems* justified

constructionism primarily as a corrective to the many problems of conceptualizing social problems as objective conditions in the environment. Yet, regardless of the lack of an explicit theoretical framework, it is not all that uncommon for *Constructing Social Problems* to be the sole theoretical citation in modern-day empirical work. In consequence, several manuscripts in this volume spotlight the importance of more explicit attention to elaborating theoretical frameworks underlying constructionist perspectives on social problems.

Given the focus on criticizing “objective condition” approaches to examining social problems, it is expected that the central mandate in *Constructing Social Problems* is bracketing all attention to social problems as “objective conditions” in order to attend to the process of meaning-making activities leading to subjective definitions of conditions as morally troublesome and in need of repair. Yet, in 1985, Stephen Woolgar and Dorothy Pawluch advanced a persuasive argument, backed with considerable evidence, that actual social constructionist studies of social problems failed to do this. Because they cited multiple examples of explicit or implicit references to “objective reality” throughout constructionist work, they speculated that it was not possible to offer convincing constructionist arguments without referencing the realities of objective conditions underlying subjective definitions. This challenge coming from constructionist insiders yielded many lively sessions at SSSP meetings, as well as two edited volumes of manuscripts dedicated to theoretical debates about constructionism (Holstein and Miller 1993a; Miller and Holstein 1993). An important practical consequence of both

the Woolgar and Pawluch challenge, as well as the responses to it was that constructionism became partitioned into two types: While what came to be called “strict” constructionism forbade any reference—implicit or explicit—to objective reality (the foundational statement is Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993), by far, the most common variety of constructionism goes by the name of “contextual.” Contextual constructionism remains tightly focused on the process of meaning construction, yet careful references to objective reality can enter into the analysis (the foundational statement is Best 1993).

This, then, is the theoretical context of articles in this current volume. Constructionists continue to develop the theoretical framework for constructionist perspectives on social problems and have moved beyond attempting to ignore all questions and assumptions about “objective reality” (something that proved not possible to do). As articles in this volume demonstrate, there is considerable interest in the “objective realities” posed by the historical, social, political, and technological contexts of social problem construction.

Social Contexts

Social construction perspectives have been, and continue to be, very popular for many topics, inside and outside sociology. Observers have argued that constructionism has achieved “phenomenal success in capturing the imaginations of ... researchers throughout the social sciences” (Weinberg 2014:X), constructionism has been called a “triumph for sociological theory” (Best 2003:137). Likewise, constructionism is a very popular approach among

researchers studying social problems. An entry on “social problems” in the *Encyclopedia of Sociology*, for example, argues that the subjectivist, constructionist approach has “provided a robust alternative” to traditional objectivist approaches to social problems (Mauss and Jenness 2000:2760). Yet, regardless of this success, constructionist perspectives on social problems have faced—and continue to face—challenges that form another type of context for the authors of manuscripts in this volume. These challenges stem from methodological and political criticisms, as well as from unfortunate consequences from constructionism’s popularity.

One context of constructionist examinations of social problems is that of methodological criticisms. Spector and Kitsuse (1977) promoted constructionist methodology as *more* scientific than approaches examining social problems as objective conditions. Yet the primary interest in meaning-making has led, predictably, to an empirical orientation favoring a case study method and qualitative data—the types of data and method that often are criticized for not leading to the generalizable knowledge valued by those who mimic the methods of the natural sciences (see: Moses and Knutsen 2007 for the constructionist vs. naturalist philosophies of science). While most constructionists no longer feel obligated to engage in this tired “qualitative” versus “quantitative” debate, the importance of being reflective about methodology and striving for methodological excellence is very much evident in the manuscripts in this volume.

Far more troubling criticisms of constructionist approaches to social problems are political and ac-

cuse the perspective of not being relevant for, or even as being opposed to, the moral needs for social action and social change (see: Loseke 2003 for a review). The seeds of this criticism also are contained in *Constructing Social Problems*, which formulates constructionism as a route to build knowledge of how public worry is a human creation. By placing knowledge building rather than social action and social justice in the center of interest, it is true that Spector and Kitsuse formed constructionism as an academic rather than political enterprise (see: Gusfield 1984 for an early statement of the practical advantages of *not* taking sides in public debates; conversely, see: Becker 1966 for the necessity of taking sides). At the same time, several manuscripts in this volume demonstrate that while constructionist analyses *can* be done without attention to questions about social justice and social change, constructionism *in practice* often does examine topics and ask questions that are of immediate practical, political relevance. Furthermore, even if questions about social change are not driving empirical work, constructionist findings often have very practical implications for social action (see: Loseke 2003 for a review).

Another context of social constructionist examinations of social problems results from constructionism’s popularity. As measured by how often it is referenced in academic work, constructionism is very popular; yet, for two reasons, academic mention of constructionism is a very cursory indication of its importance. First, there are concerns that the popularity of constructionist perspectives on social problems is limited to scholars: Observers note that constructionist perspectives are not important

outside academia (Best 2003), and indeed, have not even found their way into undergraduate social problems textbooks (Mauss and Jenness 2010).

Second, the sheer popularity of the perspective leads to questions about what, specifically, is being cited. Hacking (1999:VII), for example, complains that the term constructionism is both “obscure and over-used” and that this leads to a great deal of vague thinking; Maines (2001) describes constructionism as an “empty rhetorical device.” In the introductory chapter of the *Handbook of Constructionist Research*, Holstein and Gubrium (2008:5) maintain that the term constructionism has come to “virtually mean both everything and nothing at the same time.” They maintain that constructionism all too often is “thoughtlessly adopted and carelessly applied,” that manuscripts referencing constructionism too often “display...either a profound ignorance of or a disregard for the epistemological, ontological, methodological, and practical foundations of constructionism that distinguish it from other approaches” (Holstein and Gubrium 2008:5).

This, then, is another social context for manuscripts in this volume: Constructionism is a very popular theoretical approach to social life in general, social problems in particular. However, it is not certain that those citing the perspective know much about it. This was most obvious in sessions at the 2013 SSSP meetings, which were organized around the theme “Re-Imagining Social Problems: Moving Beyond Social Construction.” Thematic sessions included several speakers who felt comfortable criticizing constructionism, although they freely and explicitly admitted being not familiar with

the perspective. All too often it seemed that those criticizing constructionism knew little other than the mandate to “bracket objective definitions.” Further, some speakers seemed to not apprehend the meaning of that directive: Rather than understanding the mandate for what it is—a methodological tool allowing researchers to focus on examining the processes of meaning making—they seemed to believe the mandate was to deny the realities of harmful conditions. Such a misunderstanding, of course, yields the evaluation that the theoretical perspective of social constructionism—and, by implication—social constructionists, are immoral. This, then, is another context of constructionist examinations of social problems: Yes, the perspective is very popular, yet it is not always clear what, specifically, people understand.

The theme of the 2013 meetings, “moving beyond” constructionism, therefore contained multiple occasions where constructionism was criticized. While much of this criticism was superficial and primarily reflected the ignorance of those making the criticisms, this meeting theme gave constructionists a good reason to organize. With the help of 2013 Theory Division Chair, John Barnshaw, we organized a series of gatherings dedicated to exploring the current state of constructionist theory. Our questions were quite practical: In what ways should/could *Constructing Social Problems*, published in 1977, remain the foundational theoretical statement of constructionist perspectives on social problems? In what ways has our computerized, mass mediated, globalized world changed the processes and tasks of meaning-making? What kinds of assumptions associated with North American, democratic social

environments are buried within constructionist theory? Can we move beyond the limitations of single case study approaches? In brief, while constructionists attending these meetings certainly did *not* believe it was time to “move beyond” constructionism, our conversations led us to realize that it *was* time to do some thinking about theory. This volume began with those conversations.

Organization of This Volume

We cast a wide net in soliciting papers for this volume and asked only that manuscripts be focused on theory, relatively short, and written in ways making them accessible to a wide audience. We were most impressed by both the quality of papers we received, as well as by how these authors met deadlines and graciously responded to suggestions. Deciding how to present papers, of course, is a challenge because, as constructionists, Joel and I are well aware of the arbitrary nature of categorization systems. In this case, many papers cover similar themes such as the importance of context and the need to expand constructionist horizons, so “sorting” them into one or another category can be misleading. Hence, although we categorize these 14 papers into one of four themes, other sortings would make just as much sense.

Part I, “Expanding Studies of Claims-Making,” is a logical place to start because most constructionist empirical examinations are case studies of claims-making. Each of the four papers in this section suggest ways that traditional case study methods profitably can be extended. Joel Best begins with calling attention to the practical problem: We

need to move beyond case studies of individual social problems. He proposes a meta-analytic framework for thinking systematically about making connections among claims about different conditions. Next, Jared Del Rosso and Jennifer Esala offer a different sort of suggestion: Claims-making often depends upon enduring texts—and these texts are a “reality” of claims-making. Using a variety of examples, Del Rosso and Esala demonstrate how examining textual realities offers unique vantage points on social problems. This is followed by Patrick Archer who advances yet a different agenda. According to him, constructionists would benefit by redirecting our attention from the traditional focus on constructions of problematic *conditions* to constructions of actors’ *interests*. Finally, Manabu Akagawa uses a case study of pornographic sales to juveniles in Japan to develop a model of how social problem claims are path dependent: What claims can be made depends, on part, on what claims were made in the past, on how publics responded to similar issues in the past.

Part II, “Developing Understandings of Contexts,” engages the topic that was most salient among constructionists in our conversations during the 2013 SSSP meetings: In broad strokes, while the primary constructionist mandate is to bracket questions about objective conditions in order to focus on subjective definitions, claims-making can be understood only if it is placed within the historical, social, and political contexts within which it occurs.

Each of the four manuscripts in this section explore how more attention to the contexts of claims-making can enrich constructionist understandings

of the social problems process. The manuscript by Lawrence Nichols is first in this section because it offers a theoretical overview of how we should think about contexts. Arguing that contexts are themselves social constructions, he demonstrates how “context work” is done by both claims-makers and analysts and must be examined dialogically. Frank Furedi then turns our attention to the importance of locating central concepts—in this case, the concept of authority—in history. Arguing that the problem of authority dominates the discipline of sociology, as well as the terrain of social problem construction, he shows how locating claims-making within various epochs of authority will more securely situate our understandings of why some claims likely will be evaluated as both believable and important. The next paper, by Jun Ayukawa, offers a moral tale: When constructionists do cross-cultural studies, we must be particularly attentive to language because concepts regularly entering into social problems claims—such as the central concept of “human rights”—can have far different meanings in different languages. Ayukawa’s manuscript also is a demonstration of why it is necessary for constructionists to extend our visions beyond national borders: Because international communities can have power in shaping domestic policy, domestic claims-making must be situated within international perspectives. This section concludes with Jianhua Xu’s case study of media constructions of a state policy to ban motorcycles in China. While media in Western, democratic countries typically enjoy considerable freedom in making claims, in China, many media are state controlled. Rather than acting as claims-makers, Xu argues, they act as “non-issue”

makers, neutralizing the negative consequences of state-imposed policies. Yet some media do circumvent this state control and become claims-makers, criticizing state policy, and Xu explores how this is.

Part III contains three manuscripts that each explore the consequences of technologies that did not exist when Spector and Kitsuse published *Constructing Social Problems* in 1977. First, R.J. Maratea explores relationships between social problems claims-making and the Internet. Using the example of the National Rifle Association and gun advocacy in cyberspace, he shows how the Internet *has* revolutionized the ways claims can be made, yet has *not* been the great democratizer it is often assumed to be. While Maratea challenges the revolutionary potential of the Internet in claims-making, Michael Adorjan and Ho Lun Yau show how social media—Facebook—was remarkably effective in student groups in Hong Kong fighting a proposed national education curriculum. The last manuscript in this section, by Carrie Sanders, Tony Christensen, and Crystal Weston, looks at “big data,” in this case, crime data generated by police. In examining the interplay between social problem construction and technology, they show how technology can transform the social problems process: Police use these data to predict future problems, and construct and implement solutions.

Manuscripts in the final section, “Enlarging Constructionist Agendas,” each offer testimony about why constructionists should extend our interests beyond that of initial claims-making about social problems. The manuscript by Margaretha Järvinen and Gale Miller is first in this section because it offers a strong argument about the benefits of taking

constructionism outside the halls of academia into professional practice. Demonstrating how narrative therapists in drug treatment centers in Copenhagen are “applied constructionists,” they show a practical application of constructionism. Following this is Maria Nissen’s work examining the construction of images of social problems in the everyday work of social workers. In focusing on how Danish social workers perceive problems, she shows differences between the practical world of social workers and the academic world of social problem analysts. Last, but certainly not least, Katarina Jacobsson and Malin Åkerström examine the world of the deaf in Sweden and show how the idea of “crisis,” a Westernized,

psychologically oriented concept, is used in a variety of imaginative and inventive ways by parents of deaf children, as well as by professionals offering services.

During the 2013 SSSP meetings, many constructionists convened to consider the current health of constructionist perspectives on social problems. As repeatedly demonstrated by the vibrancy of ideas in these manuscripts, it is most obviously *not* the time to “move beyond constructionism,” as directed by the meeting theme. It is, rather, time for constructionism to move into the future. The manuscripts in this volume offer a wealth of ideas about routes to doing precisely that.

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