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Beyond Case Studies: Expanding the Constructionist Framework for Social Problems Research

Abstract Most constructionist analyses of social problems are case studies; these focus attention on the particulars of the case at hand. Analysts have devoted less attention to the ways cases can be connected. This paper presents a typology of such connections, based on five elements: the problem, the frame, the claims-makers, place, and time. The typology identifies ways each of these elements can serve as a basis for connecting different campaigns to construct social problems.

Keywords Case Studies; Domain Expansion; Social Constructionism; Social Problems; Social Problems Cluster; Waves

In *Constructing Social Problems*, Spector and Kitsuse (1977:158) recommended that researchers advance constructionism by conducting case studies: "[d]etailed analyses of individual cases should shed light on how future cases should be analyzed." Nearly forty years later, we have hundreds of case studies of a wide range of social problems, detailed examinations of particular aspects of the social problems process—examining the rhetoric of claims here, media coverage there, and so on.

Case studies necessarily draw our attention to specifics, which tends to discourage generalization. To be sure, analysts do not imagine that each case is completely divorced from all others. At a minimum, there is an assumption—rooted in the natural history models of Blumer (1971) and Spector and Kitsuse (1977)—that many social problems develop in fundamentally similar ways. It is the rare case study that assumes its problem was constructed completely independently, without any ties to other claims-makers or claims. And the logic of grounded theory—the rationale most often used by qualitative sociologists to justify the larger value of their research—is that the findings from cases can be integrated to develop more general theoretical propositions (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2013). Still, this analytic step—devising more general theories—rarely occurs in the sociology of social problems. The result is that the perspective has not developed a framework for thinking systematically about the connections among claims.

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This paper seeks to classify ways in which social problems claims can be linked. It offers a small set of relatively straightforward elements, and uses them to develop a typology of ways social problems may be linked to one another. These elements are:

- *The Problem*. By definition, social problems claims argue that some putative social condition ought to be recognized as troubling, as a social problem.

- *The Frame*. Social problems claims involve making particular arguments about how the problem should be understood. This is the problem's frame, the way the condition is presented as problematic. The same problem may be framed in multiple ways, and essentially similar frames may be applied to different problems.

- *The Claims-Makers*. Claims are made by particular people or groups. These range from people with first-hand experience with the problem (e.g., victims or the relatives of victims), to those with little or no direct experience. The more distant the claims-makers' connections to the problem, the more likely their claims will be grounded in particular ideological perspectives, be they professional, religious, philosophical, or political.

- *Place*. Claims have geographic ranges; we can speak of local, regional, national, even global problems. Often, problems that are identified in one locale spread to others.

- *Time*. Claims also have histories. They often begin, endure for some period, and then fade; some may later be revived. Claims are also influenced by larger social changes that affect the context within which they are made.

In theory, a social problems claim might emerge independently, without any connections to other claims. However, a glance at this list should make it apparent that, particularly in large, complex societies, the vast majority of claims will have one or more connections to other claims. However novel a grievance, however naive a claims-maker, it is difficult to construct a social problem in isolation, without the claim being shaped by understandings of other social problems. These elements provide webs of connections, which are key elements in the contexts for virtually all claims.

This paper catalogs the ways these elements offer bases for connections among claims. In general, the analysis proceeds from simple to more complex, with each section focusing on particular elements, beginning with problems and frames.

Problems and Frames

The *problem* and the *frame* are constructionism's most fundamental elements. Constructionist studies begin with the insight that social problems involve an interpretive process, that every problem involves naming and framing.

Categorization: Connecting a New Case to a Familiar Problem

The simplest form of claims-making is categorization: identifying a new case as an instance of a familiar problem. This is a routine practice: the media are accustomed to classifying current events as cases of well-established social problems, such as the latest school shooting; it is also the central form of social problems work, as when prosecutors decide which charges to file in criminal cases (Miller and Holstein 1997). Categorization can be also retroactive, as when the historical record is reinterpreted to show that some famous individual had symptoms suggestive of a diagnosis that was not available at the time (e.g., Macalpine and Hunter 1966).

Categorization is often straightforward. However, there may be disputes about whether a particular case truly belongs in a given category, with critics arguing that some cases that should be included have been overlooked, or that other cases have been mistakenly classified as belonging to the category. Still, the logic is clear: cases are linked by their similarities, so that they are understood to belong to the same category.

Domain Alteration: Connections via Changing a Problem's Definition

A problem's definition can change. A category's domain—the range of phenomena that it encompasses—can shift, so that it expands to include more cases, or contracts to encompass fewer. *Domain expansion* involves redefining a social problem by extending the category's boundaries, thereby increasing what is considered part of the problem (Best 1990). Part of the attraction of domain expansion may be its relative simplicity. Once a category gains broad acceptance, it is probably easier to argue that its domain should be expanded to encompass other troubling conditions, than it would be to successfully mount a campaign to arouse concern for a new social problem. If people understand that child abuse is bad, and if X is understood to harm children, then why not agree that X, too, is a form of child abuse?

Domains can also shrink, through a process of *domain contraction*. Sociologists of social problems have not addressed this process explicitly. However, the concept is familiar in popular discourse: Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1993) famously worried about "defining deviancy down," by which he meant that phenomena once considered serious social problems come to be taken for granted, and no longer considered problematic. As with domain expansion, domain contraction is an attractive claims-making strategy because it is relatively straightforward. The larger problem is not challenged; rather, claims-makers propose that some phenomenon has been mistakenly classified as belonging to the problematic category, and that simply altering the domain's boundaries can correct matters.

Domain alteration need not be controversial; it does not seem to threaten the underlying categories used to define problems, even as their domains are modified a bit. The possibility of incrementally expanding or contracting a problem's domain may form the basis for a long-term strategy, in which advocates initially define the problem in terms calculated to attract widespread support, so that the campaign's success may, in turn, create an opening for later claims that the domain should be expanded. Opponents, as well as advocates, may be aware of this strategic possibility, and they may warn that a claim under consideration will turn out to be a foot in the door or a slippery slope leading to more controversial claims.

Frame Extension: Connecting an Existing Frame to a New Problem

Also called *piggybacking*, frame extension takes an existing frame, but applies it to what is understood to be a different social problem (Loseke 2003). Often this is apparent in the similarities of the names assigned to various problems, so that conditions are framed as forms of abuse, discrimination, and so on. Such social problems frames encompass ideas about the nature of the problem, its causes and harms, and so on (Best 1990). To claim that some newly recognized troubling condition ought to be understood as a form of, say, discrimination invites people to apply what they already know about other forms of discrimination to interpreting this additional troubling condition, to envision similarities in causes and remedies. Thus, campaigns based on frame extension seek to build upon the acceptance of prior social problems claims.

Advocates who have developed a frame to address one problem may find themselves applying that frame to other conditions. Frames such as biomoedicalization (Clarke et al. 2003) or feminism can be brought to bear on broad ranges of social conditions. As these perspectives gain adherents, and as audiences become familiar with these frames, frame extension becomes easier. Nor is it necessary that claims-makers have first-hand experience using some frame. There are many opportunities for people to be exposed to frames in the news media, in popular culture, and so on, so that even people with no prior claims-making experience may understand how a familiar frame might be extended to some other troubling condition.

Frame Disputes: Connecting a Problem to Multiple Frames

Just as it is possible to apply the same frame to new conditions, it is possible to invoke alternative frames for the same problem. Claims-makers may share a concern about a particular problem, but construct that problem in very different ways. It is not uncommon for larger social movements that attract broad support to feature frame disputes (Benford 1993; Lofland 1993). Sometimes, these are disputes between moderates and radicals—the former framing the problem as one that can be addressed through relatively modest reforms, while the latter insist that solving the problem requires fundamental social change. But, frame disputes are often more complex; large movements featuring a variety of social movement organizations may produce any number of competing frames. Frame disputes are likely to emerge when a claims-making campaign runs into resistance: when an existing frame seems to lose traction, alternative frames emerge.

In theory, claims-makers might abandon the old frame and substitute the new one, but this seems less likely to occur in practice. The old frame may continue to have some adherents, so there seems to be little point in completely rejecting a rationale that has had some success. Rather, many claims-making campaigns offer multiple frames, and people hearing these claims may find one, or some, or even all convincing. However, a cause that seems to be stalled, or even to be losing ground, may be ripe for *frame replacement*, and the old frame may be abandoned. Thus, histories of social problems may recall older frames—such as the designation of individuals who might now be classified as having an intellectual disability as feebleminded—that now seem dated, wrong-headed, even offensive (Trent 1994).

Thus far, we have restricted our focus to language, to the categories and frames used to construct social problems. These are constructionism's most fundamental elements, but there are other possible bases for connections among claims.

Claims-Makers

Claims require claims-makers. Social problems case studies often explain why particular sorts of people made particular claims by focusing on the claims-makers' values that lead some people to make claims; more critical treatments center on the claims-makers' interests. Whatever their motivations, claims-makers' experiences and ideologies often lead them to extend their activities to other social problems.

Experience: Fostering a Claims-Maker's Connection to a New Problem

Some claims-makers may be involved in a single claims-making campaign, but others—who may become known for their careers in claims-making—may participate in multiple campaigns. This is the simplest way for claims-makers to create connections across social problems: individuals who gain experience in one campaign join another claims-making effort. In part, this reflects the acquisition of skills and knowledge; individuals learn how to organize a demonstration, issue a press release, and perform other tasks associated with claims-making. Such practical skills gained in one campaign tend to be transferable to other causes.

Claims-making experience may also encourage individuals to adopt a more critical orientation towards social conditions. Participating in a campaign to address one problem may make it easier to evaluate other social conditions as also troubling. In part, this may be because individuals who become claims-makers are predisposed to be more interested in social arrangements and more willing to view them as subject to change. But, claims-making also places individuals in a social network of likeminded people: they may find themselves interacting with others who share their concern, and generally becoming immersed in the campaign. It is a small step from becoming aware of other issues, to beginning to consider another issue as similar to, essentially the same as, or just like one's current cause. Even an individual who begins with a narrowly focused concern may discover other claims that prove attractive. This is especially likely when claims-making is grounded in coherent worldviews.

Ideology: Another Basis for Promoting a Claims-Maker's Connection to a New Problem

Obviously, different groups have their own cultures, values, and beliefs. In some cases, these may constitute ideologies—reasonably elaborate and more-or-less coherent frames for understanding the world. Examples include: professional orientations, such as medicalization; political and social philosophies; and religious theologies. Someone well versed in an ideology may find it easy to apply it to a very wide range of problems; the ideology offers a model that may explain the workings of society, the nature of human behavior, the causes of social conditions, preferred remedies, and the like.

An ideology, then, offers a more-or-less standard frame that can be applied to many different problems. People who acquire a particular belief system have the ability to apply that ideology in constructing a variety of social problems in ways likely to convince those who share their perspective, as well as access to specialized forums for reaching those who share their ideology. Thus, doctors medicalize social problems in the pages of medical journals. Addressing those who share an ideology within a homogeneous arena of fellow-adherents—preaching to the choir—makes claims likely to seem persuasive.

At times, particular ideologies, especially those rooted in professional knowledge, may be granted a certain authority, and receive deference even from broad audiences that may not share or fully understand the ideology. The ideologies that have this authority vary across time. Thus, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Protestant clergy acted as arbiters for many social problems; during the century's middle years, psychotherapists pontificated on a wide range of issues; whereas economists, evolutionary psychologists, and neuroscientists have all become active claims-makers more recently.

Note that ideologies contain divisions. Sociologists sometimes speak of medicalization in monolithic terms, but medical authorities disagree with one another. Within medicine, there may be struggles between different specialties (internists favoring medication vs. surgeons calling for operations), or specialists who favor different procedures. Similarly, religions can be subdivided by denominations, and academic disciplines by schools of thought. Time provides another basis for differentiation. Feminists, for example, speak of first-, second-, and third-wave feminism to note important shifts in their ideology (Bailey 1997). Intramural ideological differences may be treated as minor matters, with people choosing to emphasize areas of agreement, but other disputes can become bitter. Any of these ideological distinctions may affect the frames used by claims-makers to construct social problems.

Obviously, no ideology is universally appealing. Some ideologies have direct rivals, alternative belief systems with contradictory key elements. In the case of social problems, rival ideologies may engage in frame disputes over a problem's nature, causes, remedies, and so on. The audience for these

claims will contain a range of people: those who share and are committed to the claims-maker's ideology and who may be predisposed to find the claims convincing; those who are willing to grant the claims-maker—or the ideology represented by that claims-maker—some degree of authority; those who are indifferent to or suspicious of the claims-maker's ideology; and adherents to rival ideologies who are likely to be critical of—or even reject—the claims. No doubt, the composition of the audience shifts across time (as ideologies gain or lose adherents and authority) and among issues (with people willing to accept an ideology's claims about some social problems, yet questioning its value in framing other issues).

As frames for claims-making, ideologies package claims in particular forms. To the degree that claims-makers and their audiences accept the ideology's usefulness in constructing one problem, they may be more willing to apply it to another. This means ideology provides a natural basis for frame extension.

Social Problems Clusters: Connections Among Sets of Claims-Makers Across Problems

A particular problem may lead to claims from several claims-makers. When a set of claims-makers find themselves engaged in campaigns about multiple problems, they form a social problems cluster. Clusters involve campaigns that include many of the same people, groups, and organizations as advocates, opponents, or policymakers, and that are recognized by those participants as being related in terms of the principles or substantive issues that they raise. For instance, when a new drug problem emerges, it is likely to attract many potential claims-makers such as: those opposed to the abuse of drugs (likely to favor criminalizing the new drug); policymakers favoring tough drug policies (likely to propose cracking down on the new drug); drug enforcement officials (likely to call for expanding their mandate to encompass the new drug); advocates of drug prevention and drug treatment (likely to favor incorporating the new drug within their work); and critics of current drug policy (likely to warn against repeating what they view as the mistakes of past drug policies in the case of the new drug). Other sorts of issues display the same tendency to engage what we might think of as the usual suspects.

Social problems clusters display patterns of interaction; for example, anti-drug claims-makers, anti-drug policymakers, and drug enforcement officials often find themselves allied against drug policy critics and advocates of prevention and treatment. In turn, these interactions lead to relationships based on familiarity with the other members of the cluster that, in turn, affect how the new social issue evolves. There is no need for cluster members to assemble a position on a new drug from scratch; rather, each claims-maker's ideologies and interests make it relatively easy to construct a more-or-less familiar approach to what is considered a new issue.

The various parties in a cluster are likely to be familiar with one another, with each other's frames, and with each other's past actions on other issues. They have a sense of who is likely to engage a new issue, and which parties are likely to become allies, rivals, or opponents. They probably have a sense of each other's interests, so that they may be able to predict who will become engaged with the issue and why, and they may also be able to assess the resources other parties might mobilize for the campaign, including budgets, frames, and such. They may be able to recall how other parties behaved in interactions during previous claims-making campaigns—were they flexible or intractable, did they keep their promises, and so on.

Further, the various parties in a cluster may be able to place a new issue into a larger temporal framework. They can remember past campaigns, and judge the degree to which that history is relevant to the current situation, allowing them to anticipate how other parties in the cluster are likely to anticipate the past's relevance. And they may envision trends (e.g., our perspective is gradually gaining—or losing—ground) and have a sense of what the future holds, and these understandings may influence the choices they make in the current campaign.

Parties in a cluster come to know other actors, and this knowledge may allow them to make judgments that affect their own actions. A cluster's social networks may make it easier for individuals to follow career paths, shifting from one party in a cluster to another (e.g., a politician may leave office and take a position in an advocacy organization). And parties may be involved in multiple social problems clusters (e.g., individuals or organizations may participate in debates about various kinds of social issues, and each of these may have its own cluster). These function as weak ties, linking diverse claims-making campaigns and clusters with a broader web of advocates for all manner of causes (Granovetter 1973).

Experience, ideology, and involvement in social problems clusters make it easy for claims-makers to connect to different campaigns. These connections are further mitigated by our remaining elements—place and time.

Place

Social problems claims-making occurs in particular places. Some campaigns are local, others extend to regions, or entire countries. In a few cases, there are efforts to speak of universal, global problems, although these are usually understood to raise different concerns in different locales. Claims often diffuse, traveling across space over time.

Scale and Scope: Connecting Claims Upward and Downward

Many constructionist case studies adopt a national focus. In part, this is a matter of analytic convenience, scholars have found it easiest to locate claims in well-indexed national media: major newspapers, network news broadcasts, and so on. National campaigns are easier to study, and they seem more important.

But, claims-making is often local. When we recall the national civil rights movement, we risk forgetting its foundation of hundreds of local campaigns and demonstrations; some of these, such as Montgomery and Birmingham, achieved international

notoriety, but most remained small-scale struggles. Such local claims can spread *upward*, with their concerns becoming redefined as regional or national issues.

In addition, efforts to address social problems by implementing social policies often spread *downward*, to be carried out by local actors working in particular settings, so that claims shift from broad statements of general principles, to the narrower, local practice of social problems work (Mann 2000). Similarly, local claims-makers can draw upon the rhetoric of national movements, as when ideas about the importance of historical preservation are invoked in a campaign to preserve a particular building (Lofland 2003).

The ultimate extension of claims-making's geographic scale involves claims about global social problems. In a time when transportation, communication, and economic networks link people around the world, it is possible to imagine catastrophes—the usual list includes nuclear war, pandemic diseases, economic collapse, and ecological problems—that could have worldwide, devastating effects. Other troubling conditions with less severe consequences span national borders, such as human trafficking and other forbidden forms of trade. Increasingly, activists mount claims-making campaigns that transcend national boundaries.

Diffusion: Outward Connections Among Claims

Claims are just one of the things that spread by diffusion (Best 2001). Analysts can track the channels by which social problems claims spread. In general, diffusion is easiest when there is a shared language and culture. But, diffusion need not involve straightforward copying of claims; efforts by international campaigns to try to arouse concern about social problems in many countries often run into localized resistance, which requires that frames be altered, even rejected.

Aside from occasional studies comparing the construction of social problems in two or three locations, place has received far less attention from analysts than frames and claims-makers. Criticisms that the constructionist stance has been shaped by its North American origins, that it has become unwittingly ethnocentric, seem well taken, but they need to be addressed, not simply by case studies in different countries, but by work that explicitly addresses how cultural and social structural differences shape social problems construction.

Time

All social problems claims have histories. Note that time has already figured into some of the discussions above: frames evolve, claims-makers have careers, and the geography of claims-making often shifts over time. Time's centrality is explicit in the classic natural history models of Blumer (1971) and Spector and Kitsuse (1977), although the simple sequences of stages depicted in those models ignored a good deal of complexity.

Although all claims evolve, this involves different patterns: many claims die out when they fail to attract adherents; others wind up overlooked when attention focuses on some other claim; while yet others fail to overcome opposition or resistance. Relatively few claims successfully inspire some sort of policy intended to address the social problem, and even that is not the end of the story. Social policies rarely work as envisioned: they have ironic consequences, attract criticism, and often lead to new rounds of claims-making. Any of the connections discussed in this paper's earlier sections may occur during a problem's evolution. This section has a different focus: the sorts of specifically temporal connections claims can have. It will address two themes: ways in which problems reoccur, and the impacts of social change.

Reoccurrence: Connections Among Campaigns About a Problem

Social problems often have long and complicated histories, featuring a series of claims-making campaigns. Claims can reoccur in a variety of ways.

Cycles: Natural history models often imply that claims experience a sort of life cycle, in which they gain attention and then fall out of favor (e.g., Downs 1972). The tendency for issues to fade is exacerbated by the constant efforts of other claims-makers to mount campaigns for their issues—to command attention in the social problems marketplace (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988; Best 2013). There is always competition for the attention of the press, public, and policymakers, so that it is difficult for a social problem to remain in the spotlight. Ownership—claims-makers who become widely acknowledged as a claim's principal advocate (Gusfield 1981)—makes it easier to manage concern over an issue; owners can introduce new slogans, initiatives, and other ways of making an established problem seem fresh.

Messes: If claims inevitably frame problems in particular ways, then virtually all problems lend themselves to multiple frames. Often, over time, the dominant frame shifts, perhaps because claims-makers reframe the problem to keep their claims fresh, perhaps because new claims-makers emerge, or new ideologies attract adherents. One way that claims can evolve is to refocus attention on different, specific aspects of a problem—a "mess" (Best and Best 2014). Thus, Parsons (2014) traces the history of methamphetamine as a series of claims (which he calls "scares") about different populations of users abusing the drug in somewhat different ways.

New messes can reflect the participation of different claims-makers who have somewhat different ideologies or interests, or awareness of events that draw attention to a previously neglected aspect of a problem. In some cases, new terminology (such as "speed," "ice," and "meth" as successive terms for methamphetamine) may help make an old problem seem fresh, even completely new. Of course, a new mess offers a way out of the issue-attention cycle; if interest in one aspect of a problem is diminishing, focusing on a different aspect can be a way of reviving concern.

Waves: The histories of many social problems are marked by a series of claims-making cycles in which attention rises and then falls, followed by a period of abeyance (Taylor 1989) before a new cycle begins. Jenkins has documented such wave-like

patterns for several issues, including child molestation (1998) and cults (2000). Periods of abeyance may last decades, so that the new claims-makers may not recall—or at least find no need to mention—their predecessors.

Although claims-makers typically point to some recent, notorious example to justify their campaigns, it is difficult to argue that claims-making is simply a response to conditions getting worse. To be sure, campaigns against child molesting can point to terrible crimes, but quite similar crimes occur during periods of abeyance. It seems more likely that there are essentially intractable troubling conditions, and that waves of attention are just that—shifts in the amount of attention these conditions receive rather than reflections of changes in the conditions themselves.

It is also worth noting that, while waves of attention for different issues are not synchronized with one another, there is some evidence that there are periods of relatively intense claims-making. Thus, in American history, we find considerable social movement activity during: the three decades leading up to the Civil; the late nineteenth-early twentieth century Progressive era; and the period that began in the 1960s. Each of these periods featured campaigns related to the intractable issues of race, immigration, drugs, and gender. The periods between these waves of intense claims-making activity often featured major national distractions—the Civil War and its aftermath, and the Great Depression and World War II—when claims-makers would have had an especially difficult time attracting attention. Not all claims-making waves follow exactly the same rhythm, but there do seem to be periods that support many claims.

Social Change: Shaping Claims-Making and Fostering Connections

Social change can alter the structural and cultural environment within which claims-making occurs. Three types of change seem particularly relevant for constructionist analysts: technological change, cultural change, and structural change.

Innovations: New technological developments—the Internet, cell phones, and the like affect the construction of social problems. Innovations are very often greeted with suspicion, arguments that they will make things worse, and they can become defined as problems—subjects for social problems claims in their own right. Even the most widely adopted innovations can attract social problems claims; consider claims about cell phones as endangering health (Burgess 2004), causing traffic accidents (Parilla 2013), and encouraging sexual misbehavior among the young (Best and Bogle 2014).

Innovations in communication and transportation technology deserve particular attention. Both tend to increase the ease and speed with which ideas can spread, which means that they allow social problems claims to travel farther and faster. Thus, a growing body of research examines the impact of the Internet as a forum for claims-makers and a means for mobilizing support for social movements (Maratea 2014). The Internet has also become the subject for social problems claims, not just worries about cyber-porn, cyber-bullying, and the like, but for fostering communities with troubling interests, a place where child pornographers and self-mutilators can find and encourage one another (Jenkins 2001; Adler and Adler 2011).

Even if innovations do not become subjects of claims, they can result in larger cultural and structural changes that transform the ways claims can be made and heard. It is easiest to observe these processes from a distance; consider the effects of developments in communication and transportation such as the telegraph, the railroad, the telephone, or the automobile, all once recognized as revolutionary, but now taken for granted. Increasing transportation and communication speeds fundamentally alters social networks, and in the process shapes claims-making.

Cultural Changes: Sociology originated to study the social transformations brought on by industrialization, and both cultural and structural changes have remained central topics for researchers. Cultural change affects the sociology of social problems because claims are cultural artifacts. What both claims-makers and their audiences consider a reasonable subject for claims-making can shift over time. Post-World War II America has experienced dramatic changes in public attitudes about race, the rights of women and sexual minorities, and so on. Cultural changes offer claims-makers new ways of framing claims, they invite the emergence of new ideologies that claims-makers can adopt, and alter the ways audiences are likely to interpret and respond to claims. Cultural changes affect all of the actors in the social problems process, not just claims-makers.

Structural Changes: Changes in social structure also alter the context within which claims can be made. Such changes include shifts in major institutions, including the organization of a society's economy, and its distribution of power. On the scale of grand social changes, we might think about the transformations from an agrarian social structure, to one based on manufacturing, to information societies. But, social change is often experienced as smaller-scale trends such as shifts in employment patterns, living arrangements, and the like. All of these offer fodder for claims-making because they are new phenomena that people may define as social problems, and they also shape the context within which claims emerge, and the reactions to them.

The Importance of Connections Among Cases for Extending Social Problems Theory

The paper offers a typology of ways cases of social problems construction can be connected (see: Table 1).

Of course, the great bulk of constructionist work consists of case studies that examine the construction of a particular problem (and often only particular aspects of that problem's construction) in a particular place at a particular historical moment. Constructionists have been slow to move beyond case studies. There are a few instances where analysts have chosen to compare constructions of some problem in two or three places, but these are relatively rare (Boyle, Songora, and Foss 2001; Bogard 2003; Saguy 2003; 2013; Benson 2014). There are also studies that trace successive constructions of a problem over time (Jenkins 1998; 2000; 2001; Best and Best 2014; Parsons 2014).

Table 1: Typology of Connections Among Social Problems Claims.

Connections Based on Problems	
Categorization	Add a case (or cases) to an existing problem
Domain Alteration • Domain Expansion • Domain Contraction	Alter a problem's boundaries to encompass more (or fewer) cases • Expand a problem's boundaries to encompass more cases • Contract a problem's boundaries to encompass fewer cases
Connections Based on Frames	
Frame Extension	Construct an additional problem using an existing frame (piggybacking)
Frame Dispute	Apply an additional frame to an existing problem
Connections Based on Claims-Makers	
Experience	Draw upon experience to engage with an additional problem
Ideology	Draw upon ideology to engage with an additional problem
Social Problems Clusters	A set of claims-makers engages with an additional problem
Connections Based on Place	
Scale and Scope • Upward • Downward	Alter the geographic region covered by claims • Expand the geographic region of claims-making (e.g., from local to national) • Narrow the geographic region of claims-making (e.g., from national to local)
Diffusion	Spread claims outward to new geographic regions (e.g., from one nation to another)
Connections Based on Time	
Reoccurrence • Cycle • Mess • Waves	A problem reoccurs • One iteration of a problem's life course (i.e., from attracting attention to fading from view) • Focusing on different aspects of an existing problem • More than one cycle of an existing problem
Social Change • Innovation • Cultural Change • Structural Change	Effects of change on a problem • Effects of introducing novel elements (often technological changes) on/for a problem • Effects of changes in the culture for a problem • Effects of changes in the social structure for a problem

Source: Self-elaboration.

Still, constructionist work that goes beyond case studies is not all that common. Nor is it difficult to understand why these projects are rare; mastering enough information to compare just two or three cases may require fluency in more than one language, or considerable historical knowledge.

Still, scholarship advances primarily through new theoretical or methodological insights. When the constructionist enterprise was new, an article explaining that a particular social problem had indeed been socially constructed could get published. But, thirty years later, an editor is unlikely to accept a case study unless its focus is some unusual or neglected aspect of social construction. Constructionist research has enriched our understanding to the processes by which social problems emerge and evolve, but, in the process, it has raised the bar for what counts as a publishable contribution: What once seemed remarkable is no longer good enough.

Where can we go from here? My suggestion is that we begin to think of our vast collection of constructionist work as a resource—as data for meta-analytic studies on the connections among social problems. Three examples:

- There must be hundreds of ethnographies of police and other social problems workers engaged in what I have called classification. Why not compare the findings of these works, and search for patterns in how individuals become instances of social problems?

- We also have hundreds of studies of claims-makers' roles in social problems construction. Social movements scholars—much of whose work parallels constructionist work on social problems—are calling for more research on the connections among social movements (Whittier 2014). Similarly, exploring links among claims-makers—how individuals' careers in claims-making evolve, how claims-makers influence one another, and so on—offers a promising way for social problems analysts to move beyond case studies.

- I know of at least a dozen English-language analyses of social problems construction in Japan; no doubt there must be many more written in Japanese. Just from the work I am able to read, it seems clear that, however Westernized Japan has become, there are cultural and social structural differences that shape how social problems emerge there. Constructionist research from Canada, the UK, and Australia also reveals such differences. I suspect that there must be substantial bodies of foreign-language works from various Northern European countries. These are just some places where there seems to be a good deal of interest in the constructionist approach. Thoughtful examinations (by scholars able to read the various languages involved) that compare these literatures to the mother lode of U.S. research might challenge us to understand the sorts of ethnocentric assumptions that creep into our work.

Obviously, there must be many analogous opportunities to think more deeply about what we think we already know. Nor is this a dead end. Meta-analyses of ethnographies have found favor in sociology's most elite journals (e.g., Roscigno

and Hodson 2004). This is a potentially powerful tool, a way to synthesize what we know, with the potential to help us to identify and frame useful research questions about topics about which we seem to know less.

Case studies are not going to vanish, nor should they. In fact, while I was writing this piece, I was also working on a case study with one colleague, and planning to start collecting material for a second case study with another collaborator. But, the case study should not be the only arrow in our quiver. Presumably the most important contribution of constructionist case studies is to help develop an inductive theory of social problems. For them to be used in that way, we need to take the next step, to make explicit efforts to understand the connections among our case studies.

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