

Patrick Archer

St. Ambrose University, U.S.A.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.11.2.04>

Towards a Theory of Interest Claims in Constructing Social Problems

Abstract In *Constructing Social Problems*, Spector and Kitsuse initiated a constructionist approach to the study of social problems that would emphasize processes of definition over objective conditions. Despite this emphasis on a different subject matter, the social problems moniker was retained and continues to frame the constructionist study of claims-making. This paper contests the centrality of the social problems concept to the constructionist perspective and proposes a shift in theoretical emphasis from constructions of problematic conditions to constructions of actors' interests. I use the term "interest claims" to describe assertions of what is advantageous or beneficial to certain people or groups, and use a brief case study of claims made by a school board and a group of parents to delineate the difference between paternalistic ("their" best interests) and proprietary ("our" best interests) claims-making activities. Finally, I argue for the inclusion of claims-maker interests and motivations in the study of interest claims and claims-making.

Keywords Social Construction; Social Problems; Interests; Claims; Paternalism

For sociologists who study social problems from a constructionist perspective, claims are the primary unit of analysis. Claims can describe a problematic condition, justify the need to do something, or specify conclusions or calls

for action (Best 1987). What often goes unnoticed, overlooked, or taken for granted are the rationales for claims and claims-making. The purpose of this paper is to address two questions: what are claims and where do they come from? Answers to these apparently simple questions are complex and require a close examination of the basic assumptions of the constructionist perspective and the centrality of the social problems concept. It is also necessary to revisit the limited and often contentious relationship between objectivist and constructionist approaches to studying social problems. In doing so, I will propose and outline a shift in theoretical emphasis from constructions of problematic conditions to constructions of actors' interests.

Patrick Archer is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice at St. Ambrose University in Davenport, Iowa. He received his Ph.D. from Iowa State University. His research and teaching interests are in the areas of social psychology, social stratification, and the construction of social problems.

email address: archerpatrick@sau.edu

Why Call It Social Problems?

In critiquing the functionalist, positivist approach that had dominated the sociological study of social problems, Spector and Kitsuse (1987:1) stated that "there is no adequate definition of social problems within sociology, and there is not and never has been a sociology of social problems." Their main point of contention was that the concept of social problems operated more as a pedagogical crutch "for presenting sociological wisdom to undergraduates" (Spector and Kitsuse 1987:1) than as a distinct field of study grounded in theory and "amenable to empirical investigation" (Spector and Kitsuse 1987:39). Despite the tone of this criticism, and the decades of debate that would follow, they stated that their goal was not to develop a rival explanation for social problems. Instead, they proposed a "social definition perspective" with a different subject matter—claims-making activities—where "the process of definition and not the 'objective conditions' is the central concern" (Spector and Kitsuse 1987:7). However, by keeping social problems at the center of their perspective both in name and in practice, Spector and Kitsuse imposed limitations on what they proposed to be a social definition perspective.

In their reformulation of the constructionist approach to social problems, Ibarra and Kitsuse (1993:32, italics in original) argued that "[t]he term *social conditions*, with its connotations of objective and recurrent properties, misdirects our attention, leading us to miss the central question of how there can be social problems discourse in the first place." Instead, they developed the con-

cept of *condition-categories*—described as "units of language" (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993:30)—to replace social or putative conditions in constructionist analysis and theorizing. As units of language, condition-categories are *used* by social actors. The condition-category of abortion, for example, is defined by the activities that may be about the act of abortion, but may also be about moral decay, murder, reproductive rights, or gender inequality. This condition is situated in a "social problems language game" (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993:33) that is being played out by an ever-changing array of players throughout a multitude of diverse settings. While Ibarra and Kitsuse mention the ambiguity of the social problems concept due to its double duty as a practical concept for social actors and a theoretical concept for sociologists, they continue to use the term to shape the concept of condition-categories. I would like to extend this conceptual shift further and argue that the term social problem is similarly distracting. The constructionist approach remains primarily focused on claims-making about social problems, despite the possibility that not all claims-making activities are about social problems. Reconceptualizing claims-making as being about interests opens up many new arenas for constructionist analysis and clarifies the differences between constructionist and objectivist scholars.

Towards a Theory of Interest Claims in Constructing Social Problems

Instead of concentrating on the social problems concept, I propose that constructionists conceptualize claims-making as having two dimensions:

interest claims and *claims-maker interests*. Interests, in this context, refer to what may be advantageous or beneficial to a person or group. Interest claims can therefore be defined as *assertions of what is advantageous or beneficial to certain people or groups*. Constructionists, in studying interest claims, can document how actors understand and state their interests and the interests of others. Claims-maker interests, on the other hand, refer to the interests of claims-makers in making claims. Before I expand on each of these dimensions, it is important to address how interest claims differ from social problems claims and justify how studying the construction of interest claims can advance the constructionist study of claims-making. To do so, I will discuss the limitations of the social problems concept and the ways in which the interest claims concept can address these limitations.

Separating Claims From Conditions

One of the most significant contributions of the constructionist perspective is the understanding that all social problems have in common the definitional processes of claims-making (Best 1995a). From this perspective, social problems are claims-making activities (Spector and Kitsuse 1987). However, one limitation is that the social problems concept makes it difficult to separate claims-making activities from the putative conditions they refer to. The social problems concept carries with it images of conditions that are “out there” and can be documented. Both Woolgar and Pawluch’s (1985) criticism of ontological gerrymandering and the split of constructionists into strict and contextual camps reflects how difficult it is to

divorce claims from conditions (Best 1993; Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993). One consequence of this continued focus on social problems has been the proliferation of constructionist case studies that center on a condition rather than comparative analysis (Best 2014). Because the study of claims-making is often confined to seemingly particular conditions, claims-making processes in different arenas and on different topics may appear to have little in common.

To facilitate the comparative analysis of claims-making, I argue that all types of claims-making have one thing in common: the interests of certain people or groups. While all social problems claims involve interests, not all interest claims concern social problems. As Best (1995b:350) has noted, “claims-making processes are complex, and a good deal of comparative research will be needed before they can be understood.” Focusing on the content of claims limits the comparisons across topics. If a study is framed as the social construction of college student drinking problems, for example, it is difficult to compare these claims-making activities to claims outside of alcohol, college culture, or young adults. This shift in focus from social problems to interests expands the territory of claims-making and encourages the comparison of interests without the restrictions of specific conditions.

Constructing Social Desirability and Non-Problematicity

A second limitation of the social problems concept is that not all interest claims concern social

problems. Specifically, activities that assert the existence of conditions and define them as desirable, or as non-problems, are often unnoticed, ignored, or seen as secondary to social problems claims. Constructionist research often examines counterclaims as being responses or rejections of original social problems claims. In most cases, these counterclaims are only examined in the context of their relationship to the social problems claims and the latter are prioritized. Take, for example, Ibarra and Kitsuse’s (1993:35) elaboration of “rhetorical idioms” as one dimension of claims-making discourse: “[c]laims-making activities are directed at problematizing specific condition-categories; rhetorical idioms refer to the distinctive ways in which their problematic status is elaborated.” They go on to describe and give examples of five different types of rhetorical idioms (loss, entitlement, endangerment, unreason, and calamity), all of which are ways in which claims-makers may “problematize” conditions. The rhetoric of entitlement, for example, can be found in claims of equality in the face of discrimination and tolerance in the face of intolerance. Discrimination and intolerance are problematized as violating an individual’s entitlement to equal treatment under the law, for example. Recent claims against the National Security Agency’s secret surveillance of phone records and Internet activity would fall under the entitlement to privacy.

Rhetorical idioms are useful analytic tools because they can “cut across ideological divisions like liberal and socialist and conservative, inter alia” (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993:37). However, the social problems concept limits such idioms to elabora-

tions of problematic condition-categories. By stepping back from the social problems concept it is possible to examine claims-making activities that idealize or support certain condition-categories. A *rhetoric of superiority* might emphasize the superior status of a person, group, institution, or organization. Many colleges and universities often claim to be top in the nation or region. Publications like *The Princeton Review* and *U.S. News & World Report* specialize in providing evidence for such claims (Best 2011). We are inundated by online reports of the “best places” to live, eat, and vacation. Diners will claim to have the best coffee in town, or in some cases, the world. Other examples could include the *rhetoric of congruousness* (“we are all in this together”), *prosperity* (“things are good”), and *stability* (“we are doing fine”).

Freudenburg (2000:106) has argued that this systematic attention to just the construction of problems has resulted in an “asymmetry of awareness” in constructionist analysis. He calls for a “fuller and better-balanced constructionism” (Freudenburg 2000:103) that examines not just the construction of problems, but also non-problems and privileges. He coins the term “non-problematicity” to refer to the definition of conditions as non-problematic. Building on Freudenburg (2000), McCright and Dunlap (2000) examined the development of a conservative response to the global warming debate. They found that conservative foundations, think tanks, and scientists worked to frame global warming as being a non-problem, or for some, beneficial. The asymmetry of the constructionist perspective thus labels these activities counterclaims because they run counter to claims

that construct global warming as a problem. As a result, all counterclaims are reactionary and exist only following the establishment of problems claims. This leads to an inattention to the actions, processes, or contexts that may have prevented or slowed the development of social problems claims in the first place. Expanding the constructionist focus beyond the social problems concept offers only a partial solution to this asymmetry. What is needed is an understanding of the potential interests and subsequent power relations that may give rise to social problems claims or claims of non-problematicity.

For objectivists, social problems are conditions. For constructionists, conditions are the subjects of claims (Best 1995a). From an interest claims perspective, claims are assertions of interests. I am not suggesting that all claims-making activities are universally comparable. Instead, I am arguing that all claims involve interests and that interest comparisons are not limited to conditions, as is often the case with the social problems concept. How interests are constructed may differ depending on the claims-maker, the intended audience of the claims, and the person or groups whose interests are at stake. Interest claims, as a result, can be examined and compared from each of these angles.

Interest Claims

Despite the limitations of the social problems concept, the social constructionist perspective on social problems remains the most useful theoretical framework for examining public claims-making.

This proposal to shift the focus of the constructionist perspective to interests, in place of problems, broadens the range of analysis and is more amenable to a comparative theory of claims-making. In order to avoid the tendency to prioritize conditions over the definitional aspects of claims, the interest claims perspective emphasizes what Best (1987) has called the warrants of claims. Best adapted Toulmin's (1958) model of argumentation to conceptualize the rhetoric of social problems claims as including statements of grounds, warrants, and conclusions. While grounds represent the facts or data used to support a claim, and conclusions are the specific calls for action, warrants represent the integral link between the two and serve as the justifications for action. However, as Best (1987:109) notes, "warrants may be oblique or implicit." Due to the implicit character of warrants, and because interest claims are assertions of what is advantageous or beneficial to certain people or groups, it is important to consider the relationships between claims-makers, the intended audience, and those whose interests are at stake.

The analysis of interest claims begins with similar questions that frame the study of social problems claims. The main difference is an emphasis on the social actors involved rather than claim content. Any study of claims-making must begin with those making claims. Who are the claims-makers and what is their position in relation to the claims being made? Are they making claims on their own behalf or on behalf of others? Through what means are they making claims? This last question is of practical importance for construc-

tionists who are looking to document and analyze these claims. Whether it is a meeting of a local school board or a segment on *The Today Show*, the methods influence the structure of claims and the ability of the researcher to document them. Who is the audience? Whose interests are at stake? While the content of claims may take the form of grounds, warrants, or conclusions, as Best (1987) noted, all claims are directed at an audience and concern a stakeholder. A stakeholder is a person, group, or organization with a presumed interest in a course of action or state of being. The audience refers to the intended target of interest claims. The persuasive element of interest claims involves convincing the audience of the interests of stakeholders. The potential combinations of claims-makers, stakeholders, and audience result in two general types of interest claims: *paternalistic* and *proprietary*.

Paternalistic and Proprietary Interest Claims

Paternalistic interest claims can be directed at a stakeholder/audience ("your" best interests) or to a separate audience ("their" best interests). Proprietary interest claims are made by claims-makers who are also stakeholders ("my" or "our" best interests). In addition to being paternalistic or proprietary, interest claims have other defining characteristics. First, claims—not claims-makers—are considered paternalistic or proprietary, and claims-makers may make use of one or both types in making claims. Pro-vaccination claims-makers, for example, may make paternalistic and proprietary claims that vaccinating children is beneficial to children (paternalistic), their parents (could

be framed as paternalistic or proprietary), and to the entire community (proprietary) through the establishment of herd immunity. Second, stakeholders may or may not be the intended audience of interest claims. In Oregon, for example, a State Senator sponsored a bill in 2013 to increase vaccination education efforts directed at non-vaccinating parents in the state. The audience, in this case, was the members of the State Senate, while the stakeholders were the parents. A third characteristic of interest claims is that stakeholders may not agree with the claims being made about their interests by other claims-makers. Thus, paternalistic interest claims of this type are potential sources of conflict between claims-makers and stakeholders. In order to tease out some of the characteristics of paternalistic and proprietary interest claims, I present a brief case study of the actions of a school board in Davenport, Iowa, in considering a change to the hours of the school day and the parents who opposed this change.

Interest Claims and School Start Times: A Brief Case Study

Local governance meetings, such as those held by a school board, are regularly recurring, so that participants have ongoing relationships with each other, and the meetings' scope extends beyond a single issue (Tracy and Durfy 2007). Because school boards exist primarily to attend to the interests of students, claims made and actions taken by these bodies are unsurprisingly paternalistic. At the same time, actions taken by school boards also affect the parents of students, who are also likely to be protective of their own children

and their own households' convenience. The following case study provides an example of how conflicting interests can give rise to competing interest claims.

The Davenport Community School District (DCSD) is a 15,000-student district that is composed of over twenty schools in four communities in Eastern Iowa. The issue surrounding the school day was instigated by a legislative change in the state of Iowa that required school districts in the state to choose a calendar of 180 days or 1080 hours. Key to this decision was that a school day must last at least six hours to count. Early closings due to inclement weather or any other reason would result in an extra day and potentially extra expenses for faculty and staff pay, transportation, and so on. As a result, many of the districts in the state, including the DCSD, considered moving to the 1080 hours calendar. As the board of the DCSD debated the calendar change, they also considered the recommendations of a Bell Time Study Group to look at other scheduling scenarios that could benefit students. According to minutes taken at the March 03, 2014, meeting of the board, the committee cited research on the sleep patterns of teenagers as suggesting the benefits of later start times: "[a]t least 27 districts nationwide now have later start times for high schools and positive outcomes include increased student attendance, decreased tardiness, and better grades" (Davenport Community School District 2014a:3). At the March 10th meeting of the board, Dr. Arthur Tate, the Superintendent of the DCSD, presented three recommendations from the Bell Time Study Group: (1) equalize the school day for all

schools; (2) maximize instructional time; and (3) start high school at a later time (Davenport Community School District 2014b).

While the justification for the later start times focused on the interests of students in high school, the DCSD approved later start times for elementary schools as well, with some starting after 9am. This was due to bus transportation, with some elementary schools needing to share routes with the local high schools. Members of the board anticipated a negative response from parents, but justified that "this change is in the best interest of students and that the board's number one priority is improving student achievement" (Davenport Community School District 2014c:7). Parent responses to the proposed changes allow examining conflicting interests in the construction of claims. Parents are not only paternalistic in their concerns for the interests of their children, but they have proprietary interests as well for themselves. The following is a petition created on the website www.change.org by one of the parents in this city (Stepanek 2014):

[w]e as parents find it important to reconsider the 2014-2015 school start times as the current decision made will cause a substantial inconvenience for students and parents. Some of our concerns would be safety, additional child care expenses, and transportation issues. In some cases, school for elementary students will be starting well after parents need to be at work. These young children depend on an adult to take them to school as they are too young to be home alone or drive themselves. During the Winter months some of the schools will be getting out just before dark. This will also mean that children

riding the bus might not get home until 4:30pm or later. Extracurricular activities will be a challenge as well. It is our hope that the school board will reconsider the start time given the reasons above.

While it would be possible to examine the claims of the parents and the school board from a social problems perspective, emphasizing the interests involved makes it possible to identify subtleties in these claims. The above petition includes paternalistic interest claims that emphasize the threats to student safety and proprietary interest claims that focus on the economic and logistic complications for parents. In addition to signing the online petition, the website also allows supporters to make comments to explain the reason for signing. Echoing the claims made in the petition, transportation, costs of child care, and child safety were the most mentioned topics in these comments.

Following the parents' objection to the school day schedule, the DCSD voted to rescind the changes. Parent interests dominated the discussion that preceded this vote, but instead of fully taking on the specific concerns of the parents, the board emphasized that a lack of input led to the objections. One of the directors on the board noted that "elementary school parents did not have adequate input of the new start times...we need an adequate public hand shake with this decision in order to see the benefits" (Davenport Community School District 2014d:1). By using the phrase "public hand shake," this director has framed the interactions between the board and the parents as a negotiation rather than a competition. A school board may encounter many issues and make many claims that could easily be exam-

ined from a social problems perspective, but it is threatened interests that make a problematic condition worth worrying about. The parents in this case study found the school time changes to be problematic for their interests and the interests of their children. In response, the school board chose to rescind these changes. From an interest claims perspective, the next question to ask is "why?"

This brief case study introduces a few questions that can frame the study of interest claims. First, what people or groups are likely to make paternalistic interest claims about others? As this case study shows, some claims-makers are in positions to make claims about the interests of others. In this case, it was a school board of elected officers, but other positions and organizations operate under similar circumstances. A comparison of claims-makers of this type could contribute to a theory of interest claims. For instance, it would be interesting to compare how school boards representing different socio-economic regions consider the interests of students and parents. Are boards in lower-income communities more or less likely to take into consideration the interest claims of parents? If this argument is extended to include the notion that the interests of some people might be considered more important or valid than others, at least by those in the position to make claims, it becomes possible to examine why social problems claims emerge at certain times about certain types of people. Are these parents more or less likely to make interest claims in the first place? As the next section will address, the absence of claims-making can tell us a lot about power and the ability to make claims.

Second, how do people and groups navigate situations where their interests and the interest of others come into conflict? For some, this conflict is not a problem and an “us versus them” outlook can shape the claims-making process. For example, members of a school board may not agree on a particular course of action. This could lead to competitive claims-making, where each member seeks to influence the other members of the board to support his or her side on the issue. On the other hand, the case study presented an alternative to competitive claims-making when the board acquiesced to the claims made by the parents. In order to understand interest claims, and the manner of interactions between interest claims-makers, we need to also consider the potential interests of claims-makers.

Third, how do people and groups handle their own conflicting interests? The position of the parents in the case study indicates that people and groups may have interests that conflict in ways that do not have a simple rhetorical path. It is possible that parents may understand that later start times can benefit their children, but also have negative economic and logistical consequences for their own lives. How do people balance paternalistic and proprietary interests in situations such as these? This was not an exhaustive case study, but the petition indicates an attempt to redefine the interests of students to include concerns over safety, which also happen to coincide with the interests of the parents. Further analysis into claims-maker interests would increase our understanding of why people make claims for themselves and for others.

Claims-Maker Interests

Whether constructionists study the definitions of social problems or interests, several important questions remain: Where do claims come from? Why do some people and groups make claims while others do not? Ignoring such questions has resulted in a growing number of criticisms aimed at the constructionist perspective. Fine (1997:298), for instance, argues that “scholars in social problems theory and collective behavior routinely ignore structural conditions of a social order.” The result is the impression that social problem claims “are created from ‘thin air’” (Fine 1997:299). Nichols (2003) has criticized the constructionist framework for decontextualizing claims-makers:

[t]he logical distinction between “conditions” and “claims” had the important implication of placing claims-makers outside the category of conditions. Like the free and spontaneous “I” within G. H. Mead’s famous model of the self, claims-makers would not reside in conditions, but would somehow stand apart and make judgments about putative conditions. (p. 128)

As a way around this image of a free-floating claims-maker, Nichols suggests that constructionists examine claims-makers as being a speaker and an audience, a subject and an object. Ibarra (2009), taking a less critical stance, argues that the study of social problems is limited by “readily assembled” problem categories. His point is that claims-makers, and thus constructionist theorists, focus on established social problem categories (crime, poverty, racism, etc.) in favor of problematic areas of social life that are “opaque, provisional, or elliptical”

(Ibarra 2009:87). All of these criticisms suggest that the origins of claims-making have been overlooked or disregarded in social constructionist theory.

Does it matter what motivates claims-makers? Schisms within social constructionist theory make it difficult to answer this question. Woolgar and Pawluch’s (1985) criticism that constructionist research was plagued by ontological gerrymandering led to a critical reassessment of social constructionist objectives and methodology. Much like Kemp’s (2012) later criticisms of objectivity in the social sciences, they charged constructionists with placing their own assumptions about objective reality above those of their subjects. In response, Ibarra and Kitsuse (1993) argued that a closer reading of Spector and Kitsuse’s *Constructing Social Problems* makes it clear that claims-making is the focus of the theory, not the relationship between claims and the putative conditions to which they relate. Ontological gerrymandering, they contend, is the result of constructionists who have been seduced into “going native” (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993:31), meaning many constructionist studies have focused on what claims-making is about (drunk driving, obesity, child abuse, etc.) rather than “the conventional features of the claims-making process itself” (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993:29). In an attempt to clarify the mission of social constructionism, they propose that constructionists focus on the rhetoric of social problems discourse. The result is that “the strict constructionist never leaves the language” (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993:31).

Is it possible to analyze the origins of claims-making from a constructionist perspective? If we can

never leave the language, the answer is no. Weinberg (2009:72) argued that this sort of “agnosticism regarding the structural contexts of human action comes at the cost of rendering that action normatively unaccountable or, in other words, unintelligible.” If constructionist analysis is confined to discourse, it is impossible to account for the existence of claims. Returning to the school board case study, a strict constructionist could examine the claims made by the board and the parents, but the motivation for these claims, and the contexts and structures that shape them, would be off limits.

Much of the debate within social constructionism centers on the existence of conditions and to what extent constructionists can allude to the objective world. As Best (1993) has pointed out, Spector, Kitsuse, and others associated with a strict constructionism were not as critical in regards to assumptions about objective reality in their earlier writings (Kitsuse and Spector 1973; Spector and Kitsuse 1973). At the time, constructionists considered how motives, experiences, and power influenced the kinds of claims made. The message sent in these earlier writings more closely resembles what is now called contextual constructionism, which focuses on “claims-making within its context of culture and social structure” (Best 1993:139). Despite this acceptance of context, however, a theoretical analysis of the origins of social problems claims has been conspicuously absent. This is due, in part, to the limitations of the social problems concept addressed earlier. Also, since most constructionist research begins with claims, there is often little need to establish what it means to be a claims-maker. One approach is to argue that

we are all claims-makers (Loseke 2005). Holstein and Miller (1993:155), for example, have called for greater attention to “social problems work,” which they consider to be “a potential aspect of all social relationships and interactions where dissatisfaction with a putative condition might emerge.” As a result, they emphasize how people apply established social problems categories to “candidate circumstances” (Holstein and Miller 1993:153). This is problematic when considering how social problems arise as social problems work centers on social problem categories that have already been publicly established, not the public establishment of social problems categories. One of the criticisms of the objectivist perspective on social problems has been the inability to explain why some conditions become problems and others do not. This criticism can equally be applied to the work of constructionist scholars and can call into question the future of the constructionist perspective.

To account for the existence of claims, claims-maker interests must be incorporated into constructionist analysis. To talk of claims-maker interests is to consider the stakes a claims-maker has in a claim’s outcome. Implied in this statement is the existence of a relationship of some kind between claims-makers and the stakeholders of interest claims. For both paternalistic and proprietary interest claims, it would be easy to assume that the claims speak to the claims-maker’s interests. It would be a rare case, however, for a claims-maker’s interests to align simply with the claims being made. Returning to the school board case study, the members of this board are elected and may

be interested in being reelected. They also may find themselves responsible over conflicting interests (children, parents, teachers, fiscal resources, etc.), which must be negotiated. Also, some claims might be made in exchange for the claims of others in support of an entirely different issue. Staying close to the language makes it impossible to tease out such distinctions. In order to understand claims-maker interests, it is important to understand the claims-maker’s position in relation to their own potential interests and the potential interests of others. In addition, as many have pointed out, a strict constructionist perspective is not capable of examining non-claims-making (Agger 1993; Gordon 1993; Miller 1993). The fact that claims-makers often focus on the interests of others implies that some people are not making claims for themselves. It is important that constructionists not only explore the claims made for others, but also consider why certain people and groups make claims for the interests of others and why these others do not or cannot defend their own interests.

Potential Interests and Conflicting Interests

There are many possible motivations behind public claims-making: political or economic gain, prestige or ownership of an issue, the power to influence public policy, shape social change, or maintain the *status quo*. However, unless the researcher is skilled in ESP, imputing such motivations would be simple speculation. Instead of attributing specific interests to claims-makers, another option is to emphasize the place of claims-makers in relation to stakeholders and the

potential interests that could follow. Interest claims are constructed around stakeholders, directed at an audience, but originate from claims-makers with interests of their own. Identifying potential interests involves examining the contextual and structural position of claims-makers in relation to others and drawing distinctions between different types of claims-makers.

Claims-makers can be elected, appointed, hired, recruited, or self-anointed. Depending on the nature of these positions, a claims-making individual or group may be expected to protect and defend the interests of others. It should not be surprising, for example, that a school board is making claims about the interests of students. Interests, however, are rarely so narrowly defined, and even in this example potential claims-makers find themselves having to protect *conflicting interests*. The school board in the case study was not only protecting the interests of students, but the whole community through the stewardship of the district’s fiscal resources. The parents found themselves split between the interests of their children and their household. Both groups found themselves in the position of having to negotiate conflicting interests in order to make interest claims about the times for the start of the school day. From a social problems perspective, claims-making is often described as a competition where claims-makers fight for access to a claims-making arena (Loseke 2005). Emphasizing the importance of claims-maker interests enables constructionists to examine how claims-makers negotiate conflicting interests along with competing interests. The school board

prioritizes the district’s fiscal resources, while parents prioritize household convenience. The conflicting interest claims of the school board and the parents can be seen as the result of two groups prioritizing different sets of negotiated interests due to their different locations in social space.

The potential interests of claims-makers may be narrowly or broadly defined, depending on their position. While complicated, a school board’s potential interests are likely easier to define than the interests of the House of Representatives. To advance the constructionist perspective, we need to know more about how claims-maker interests influence the claims that are being made and their interactions with other claims-makers. We need to examine how claims-makers negotiate their own conflicting interests along with competing interests from others. We also need to examine how shared interests can result in collaborative rather than competitive claims-making. Finally, we need to understand why some people or groups are in the position to make interest claims, and others are not.

Non-Claims-Making

Potential interests do not necessarily cause interest claims and interests may be served through inaction or by silencing the claims of others. However, with non-claims-making there is not an easily identifiable unit of analysis. Proprietary and paternalistic interest claims can therefore provide a framework for situating non-claims-making in its social and historical context. With paternalistic interest claims, the stakeholders of the claim are often themselves non-

claims-makers. This is not the case with proprietary interest claims, but there is the question of who gets to speak for “our” interests. Thus, the characteristics of claims-makers may call attention to competing or related non-claims-makers. Lukes (1974) included a similar concept, non-decision-making, as a key characteristic of his three-dimensional view of power. As an example of this view in practice, he drew on Crenson’s (1971) work on non-decision-making in American cities on the issue of air pollution. Air pollution, Crenson argues, had become an issue in some cities, and not an issue in others, irrespective of the amount of measurable air pollution. He focuses on Gary, Indiana, and the inability of anti-pollution activists to get U.S. Steel—the company that had essentially built the town—to take a stance on the issue. U.S. Steel, through inaction, was able to “exercise considerable control over what people choose to care about and how forcefully they articulate their cares” (Crenson 1971:27). Therefore, some people or groups have the power to: (1) make claims that are more likely to be heard; (2) avoid making claims that may not be in their best interests; and (3) suppress the claims-making of others.

On the other side of the powerful are the powerless that may, as Lukes (1974) argued, accept the *status quo* because they see it as beneficial, see no alternatives or possibility of influencing change, or do not see anything at all. What might be an important issue or concern for some, might be invisible or unnoticed by others for many reasons. For powerless non-claims-makers, there may also be numerous structural, historical, or cultural factors that inhibit public claims-making. Admittedly, staying close to the language is much easier than identifying those

that are silent. That being said, interest claims can be influenced as much by those who do not or cannot make their interests known as they are by those making claims. Returning back to the example of parents and school boards, parents in some districts may not be vocal or organized in stating their interests. Also, some school boards may not be as active in providing venues for parents to state their interests. In both situations, the actions of the school board are less likely to be shaped by the interests of the parents. Consequently, the study of interest claims should ask: (1) why might these people or groups be making these claims, and (2) who is not a part of this conversation who could be?

Conclusion

In this paper, I have contested the centrality of the social problems concept to the constructionist perspective. In its place I have argued for a constructionist focus on interest claims and proprietary (my or our best interests) and paternalistic (your or their best interests) claims-making activities. I have also argued for the inclusion of claims-maker interests in the study of interest claims. As Best (1987:117) has argued, “[c]laims do not emerge from a social and historical vacuum.” Where Best emphasizes the influence of social context on the rhetorical strategies of claims-makers, claims-maker interests are also shaped by this context. Taking into account the interests of claims-makers requires a break from strict constructionist theorizing, which will be a non-starter for some. However, considering claims-maker interests allows for a more nuanced comparison of interest accounts, which includes those of objectivist scholars.

References

- Agger, Ben. 1993. “The Problem With Social Problems: From Social Constructionism to Critical Theory.” Pp. 281-299 in *Reconsidering Social Constructionism*, edited by J. A. Holstein and G. Miller. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Best, Joel. 1987. “Rhetoric in Claims-Making: Constructing the Missing Children Problem.” *Social Problems* 34:101-121.
- Best, Joel. 1993. “But Seriously Folks: The Limitations of the Strict Constructionist Interpretation of Social Problems.” Pp. 129-147 in *Reconsidering Social Constructionism*, edited by J. A. Holstein and G. Miller. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Best, Joel. 1995a. “Typification and Social Problems Construction.” Pp. 3-10 in *Images of Issues: Typifying Contemporary Social Problems*, edited by J. Best. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Best, Joel. 1995b. “Afterward: Constructionism in Context.” Pp. 335-354 in *Images of Issues: Typifying Contemporary Social Problems*, edited by J. Best. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Best, Joel. 2011. *Everyone’s a Winner: Life in Our Congratulatory Culture*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Best, Joel. 2014. “Social Security, Climate Change, and the Mayan Calendar: The Role of Different Sorts of Evidence in Constructing Future Problems.” Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Sociological Society, April 05, Omaha, NE.
- Crenson, Matthew A. 1971. *The Un-Politics of Air Pollution: A Study of Non-Decisionmaking in the Cities*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press.
- Davenport Community School District. 2014a. “Committee of the Whole Meeting, March 3.” Davenport, IA: Davenport Community School District. Retrieved May 20, 2014 (<http://www.davenportschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/3-14-COW-.pdf>).
- Davenport Community School District. 2014b. “Regular Board Meeting, March 10.” Davenport, IA: Davenport Community School District. Retrieved October 10, 2014 (<http://www.davenportschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/3-10-14-Regular2.pdf>).
- Davenport Community School District. 2014c. “Regular Board Meeting, April 14.” Davenport, IA: Davenport Community School District. Retrieved May 20, 2014 (<http://www.davenportschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/4-28-14-Regular1.pdf>).
- Davenport Community School District. 2014d. “Regular Board Meeting, May 12.” Davenport, IA: Davenport Community School District. Retrieved May 20, 2014 (<http://www.davenportschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/5-12-14-Regular-.pdf>).
- Fine, Gary Alan. 1997. “Scandal, Social Conditions, and the Creation of Public Attention: Fatty Arbuckle and the ‘Problem of Hollywood.’” *Social Problems* 44:297-323.
- Freudenburg, William R. 2000. “Social Constructions and Social Constrictions: Toward Analyzing the Social Construction of ‘the Naturalized’ As Well As ‘the Natural.’” Pp. 103-119 in *Environment and Global Modernity*, edited by G. Spaargaren, A. Mol, and F. H. Buttel. London: Sage.
- Gordon, Avery F. 1993. “Twenty-Two Theses on Social Constructionism: A Feminist Response to Ibarra and Kitsuse’s ‘Proposal for the Study of Social Problems.’” Pp. 301-326 in *Reconsidering Social Constructionism*, edited by J. A. Holstein and G. Miller. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Holstein, James A. and Gale Miller. 1993. “Social Constructionism and Social Problems Work.” Pp. 151-172 in *Reconsidering Social Constructionism*, edited by J. A. Holstein and G. Miller. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Ibarra, Peter R. 2009. “Problematic Sociality: Uncertainty and the Study of Social Problems.” *American Sociologist* 40:79-88.
- Ibarra, Peter R. and John I. Kitsuse. 1993. “Vernacular Constituents of Moral Discourse: An Interactionist Proposal for the Study of Social Problems.” Pp. 25-58 in *Reconsidering Social*

Constructionism, edited by J. A. Holstein and G. Miller. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

Kemp, Stephen. 2012. "Evaluating Interests in Social Science: Beyond Objectivist Evaluation and the Non-Judgemental Stance." *Sociology* 46:664-679.

Kitsuse, John I. and Malcolm Spector. 1973. "Toward a Sociology of Social Problems: Social Conditions, Value Judgments, and Social Problems." *Social Problems* 20:407-419.

Loseke, Donileen R. 2005. *Thinking About Social Problems*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.

Lukes, Steven. 1974. *Power: A Radical View*. London: Macmillan.

McCright, Aaron M. and Riley E. Dunlap. 2000. "Challenging Global Warming as a Social Problem: An Analysis of the Conservative Movement's Counter-Claims." *Social Problems* 47:499-522.

Miller, Leslie. 1993. "Claims-Making From the Underside: Marginalization and Social Problems Analysis." Pp. 349-376 in *Reconsidering Social Constructionism*, edited by J. A. Holstein and G. Miller. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

Nichols, Lawrence T. 2003. "Rethinking Constructionist Agency: Claimsmakers as Conditions, Audiences, Types, and Symbols." *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* 26:125-145.

Spector, Malcolm and John I. Kitsuse. 1973. "Social Problems: A Re-Formulation." *Social Problems* 21:145-159.

Spector, Malcolm and John I. Kitsuse. 1987. *Constructing Social Problems*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Stepanek, Trisha. 2014. "Petitioned Davenport Community Schools: Revise the Final 2014-2015 School Start Times." Change.org website. Retrieved May 20, 2014 (http://www.change.org/petitions/davenport-community-schools-revise-the-final-2014-2015-school-start-times?utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=facebook&utm_campaign=share_facebook_mobile&recruiter=10536349).

Toulmin, Stephen Edelston. 1958. *The Uses of Argument*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tracy, Karen and Margaret Durfy. 2007. "Speaking Out in Public: Citizen Participation in Contentious School Board Meetings." *Discourse & Communication* 1:223-249.

Weinberg, Darin. 2009. "On the Social Construction of Social Problems and Social Problems Theory: A Contribution to the Legacy of John Kitsuse." *American Sociologist* 40:61-78.

Woolgar, Steve and Dorothy Pawluch. 1985. "Ontological Gerymandering: The Anatomy of Social Problems Explanations." *Social Problems* 32:214-227.

Archer, Patrick. 2015. "Towards a Theory of Interest Claims in Constructing Social Problems." *Qualitative Sociology Review* 11(2):46-60. Retrieved Month, Year (http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php).