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**Constructionist Futures:
New Directions
in Social Problems Theory**

by

**Donileen R. Loseke
& Joel Best**

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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.

Donileen R. Loseke is a Professor of Sociology at the University of South Florida. Her books include *The Battered Woman and Shelters: The Social Construction of Wife Abuse*, *Thinking About Social Problems: An Introduction to Constructionist Perspectives*, and *Methodological Thinking: Basic Principles of Social Research Design*. She has served as chair of the Theory Division of the Society for the Study of Social Problems and President of the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction. Her long-term interests have been in exploring relationships among culture, narrative, and emotions from social constructionist perspectives.

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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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Expanding Studies of Claims-Making

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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 as-

pects 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

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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.

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 biomedicalization (Clarke et al. 2003) or femi-

nism 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 feeble-minded—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 dis-

cover 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 is-

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, link-

ing 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 gener-

al, 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	Alter a problem’s boundaries to encompass more (or fewer) cases
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Domain Expansion • Domain Contraction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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	Alter the geographic region covered by claims
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upward • Downward 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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	A problem reoccurs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cycle • Mess • Waves 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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	Effects of change on a problem
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Innovation • Cultural Change • Structural Change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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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Constructionism and the Textuality of Social Problems

Abstract Building on the work of Dorothy Smith and Bruno Latour, this article examines the textual mediation of social problems activities. Because of their materiality and/or digitality, texts preserve constructions of reality, rendering those constructions durable and mobile. This, in turn, allows claims-makers distant in time or space to access those constructions as interpretive resources for claims-making. Texts, then, help us account for how social problems spread and endure. We show how texts mediate claims-makers access to two resources for claims-making: the “reality” of problematic conditions and definitions of problems. We also consider how texts structure social problems work. We conclude by briefly considering how the contemporary technological environment may be altering the textual mediation of claims-making.

Keywords Knowledge; Organizations; Social Constructionism; Social Problems; Texts

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Constructionism and the Textuality of Social Problems

This is an article about paperwork—the manuals, forms, documents, reports, and files that constitute contemporary social life. These mundane things, we argue, have a special place in social problems activities that has yet to be fully recognized by theorists.

This is not to say that social problems research has neglected the textuality of problems. In fact, returning to the theory’s foundational work—Malcolm Spector and John I. Spector’s (1987) *Constructing Social Problems*—one finds references to all sorts of texts, including the American Psychology Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* and the Library of Congress’s classification system. Texts also show up in myriad case studies of problems. X-ray images figure in Stephen Pfohl’s (1977) study of the “discovery” of child abuse, a logbook in Donileen Loseke’s (1992) *The Battered Woman and Shelters*, an intake survey in Leslie Irvine’s (2003) study of an animal shelter, and forged documents in R.J. Marea’s (2008) study of claims-making on the Internet.

Despite the recurrent appearance of texts in social problems research, the textuality of social problems has yet to be adequately theorized. This article addresses this oversight. Drawing on work in the sociology of knowledge, particularly the work of Bruno Latour (1987; 2005) and Dorothy Smith (1990; 2001), we argue that texts make the resources of claims-making and social problems work durable and mobile. One can preserve and then pass along, distribute, mail or email accounts and definitions of problems when those accounts and definition

are given textual form. Texts, in other words, help us account for how claims about problems spread and endure.

We develop these arguments in four sections. We begin by reviewing social theory related to textuality and social organization. Drawing on the work of Smith and Latour, we offer a definition of texts and discuss how the materiality of texts gives them their special ability to preserve and move constructions of problems. Our second and third sections explore this ability in the context of social problems work and claims-making. We focus on the ways that texts make accounts of reality a resource for claims-makers and, then, on how texts preserve and move social problem definitions. The fourth section shows how textually-inscribed realities and categories may be mutually constitutive. We conclude by considering how the contemporary technological environment may be altering the textuality of problems.

Textuality and Materiality

“Text” is a simple word with a complex legacy in the social sciences. On the one hand, postmodernists, deconstructionists, and discursive theorists have tended towards a broad understanding of texts as “simply assemblages of discourse that are combined together to produce a dominant meaning” (Stevenson 2006). Understood in this way, virtually anything that signifies may be treated and studied as a text.

Dorothy Smith, who brings texts to the center of social theory, offers an alternative definition. Texts are, according to Smith (2001:164), “definite forms of words, numbers, or images that exist in a materially

replicable form.” Smith’s definition encompasses written documents of all sorts, also including such things as audio recordings, photographs, digital images, and video recordings. These are texts in the most literal, everyday of senses rather than the more abstracted “assemblages of discourses” noted above. Smith’s definition also emphasizes the materiality—and, we would add, digitality—of texts. Because texts possess these qualities, they can be fairly easily reproduced. This allows texts and, so, their content to have a temporal and geographic reach that they would otherwise lack.

Bruno Latour (1987; 2005) captures this by classifying texts as one type of “immutable mobile.” Texts are immutable—though we should say *relatively so*—and mobile in the sense that they *hold steady* their content even when accessed at times and places where they were not originally created. When social constructs—accounts of reality or definitions of problems, for instance—are put down into textual form, they may outlast their moment of construction. Claims-makers distant in time or place can then access the “recognizably the same” (Smith 2001:174) account or definition. The text and its content, in turn, can become a point of reference for claims-making, “against which any particular interpretation [of a problem] can be checked” (Smith 2001:175).

To be sure, we are not arguing that texts foreclose interpretive flexibility because they stabilize their content. Claims-makers contest the meaning of texts and that meaning is variable. But, as Smith (2001:174) puts it, even the “argument that the text is the reader’s production presupposes a text that can be treated as recognizably the same in the varieties

of readings that can be created.” It is the content of texts, not the meaning of that content that texts stabilize. While meaning may be the primary concern of constructionism, we argue that the recognition of the textual mediation of social problems enhances social problems theory. In the following three sections, we discuss the textual mediation of “reality,” definitions of social problems, and organizational constructions of problems.

Textual Realities and the Claims-Making Process

Claims-makers use grounds statements to establish the basic facts—or what they take as the reality—of a problem (Best 1990). These basic facts are themselves constructed. Accounts are given, descriptions offered, data compiled, analyzed, and cited.

The “reality” of problems that claims-makers encounter, interpret, and strategically deploy in their claims frequently takes the form of “textual realities” (Smith 1990). By textual realities we mean accounts and depictions of phenomena—for instance, a description, photograph, or video of an event—inscribed in a document. Social reality and the accounts people give of it are ephemeral; both would disappear into their own enactment if they were only made through face-to-face interaction. When given textual form, accounts of reality gain permanence; claims-makers distant in time and place—from both an event that might typify a problem and each other—are able to access, scrutinize, and make claims about the “same” event. We see, for instance, that releases of photographs and written accounts that documented abuse and torture tended to move

the U.S. media and Congress into action (Del Rosso 2011; 2014). In the case of Abu Ghraib, the public release of digital images taken by American soldiers at the facility in Iraq provoked a protracted scandal over detainee abuse and torture. In the case of Guantánamo, the public release of FBI emails about the facility in 2005 and, subsequently, a military interrogation log provoked media, military, and congressional responses. Claims about what occurred at the facilities oriented towards those documents, and U.S. politicians referred to and sometimes quoted the accounts inscribed in them.

Recognizing textual mediation of claims about the “reality” of problems offers advances for the study of social problems. First, it is of note that textual realities themselves take diverse forms. This has as much to do with the content of textual realities as it does with the material form that they may take. Reality can arrive at sites of claims-making in the form of written investigations, photographs, audio recordings, video records, and the like. Claims-makers “read through” (Smith 1990) and deploy each differently. Visual records of reality—photographs and video recordings, for instance—are generally treated by claims-makers as objective records of the events that they document (Becker 1995). So, too, are images produced by specialized, technologically-sophisticated “instruments of vision” (Haraway 1988:586), as Stephen Pfohl’s (1977) study of the discovery of child abuse and the role of x-ray images in that discovery suggests.

Claims-makers often assume, too, that the meanings of visual documents are straightforward; a photograph or video of an event may be asked to “speak

for itself” in a way that a written account would often not be (Sontag 2003). Photographs are also useful to claims-makers because they can be appropriated in ways that written accounts generally cannot. A photograph, for instance, can be prominently displayed in the media and incorporated into posters, signs, and pamphlets. Finally, visual records of reality have particular “scales.” Most photographs of events are like traditional photographs; they are taken by a photographer who is, more or less, level with and proximate to the action of an event. Such photographs bring one close to that action, displaying individual actors and moments. Aerial photos provide a broader view and “speak” about events in a different way. While most photographs used in claims-making probably offer a traditional, “near to the action” vantage, aerial photographs also can be useful: estimates of audience sizes, which is not an unimportant fact for claims-makers, are often based on aerial photographs (Martin and Lynch 2009). Aerial photographs can also be valuable by providing a claims-maker a seemingly direct, objective, bird’s eye view on reality, as when Colin Powell relied on them in his speech to the United Nations on Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction (Morris 2008).

Written accounts of the reality of problems can also take diverse forms. Some written accounts, like traditional photographs, dwell on the particular and the local, providing readers the sense of “being there,” alongside the event. Atrocity tales and horror stories are well-recognized in social problems theory and are an example of such local accounts (Best 1990; Johnson 1995). Human rights reports often highlight first (or third) person accounts of specific events; doing so, they bring audiences *nearer* to violence than

official, state discourse generally allows. But, other types of written accounts, namely, statistical representations, offer a differently textured reality. Statistical representations of the scope of problems are useful to claims-makers who want to build up a problem (Best 1990). Statistics can also be used to contain public conceptions of problems. *Relatively* small numbers can show that a problem is asystematic or well-contained (Potter 1996; Del Rosso 2011). Statistics help contain problems in another way. While human rights reports often focus on the particular, discrete, and local experiences of violence, state investigations might offer quantifications of more abstract *types* of events in turn (Cohen 2001; Del Rosso 2011). The states' descriptions are often sufficiently generic and bureaucratic as to render the account of reality a poor resource for those who wish to build up concern for human rights violations.

Textual realities offer unique vantages on problems; some are local, some zoom out to grander scales. And some, like the x-ray, offer wholly different vantages. Recognizing this adds richness to social problems theory's consideration of how "reality" figures in claims-making. We can consider how different sorts of textual realities are deployed by claims-makers and how audiences receive them. We can also consider whether and why some forms are assumed to represent the objective reality of problems better than other forms. Finally, we can consider how localized and zoomed out vantages work together or against each other to establish the size and scope of problems for claims-makers.

Second, textual realities have organizational histories. They are constructed things that circulate

from one site of claims-making to another. In theory, sociologists can follow the textual realities undergirding grounds-makers' claims back to their point of origin, the claims-makers and organizations that produced those texts. What we will find, in many instances, is that an individual document and its textual reality are merely links in what Bruno Latour (1999; 2013) refers to as chains of representations, a circulating set of texts that contain the representations that constitute reality and that link dispersed sites of social activity. By this, we mean that a single document on which a claims-maker relies to ground an argument about the reality of a problem may itself be made up of constituent documents and textual realities. The intertextuality of claims about problems suggests an inter-organizational network of textual reality construction. Tracing this network, we can reveal the paths and mediums by which textual realities spread and how claims-makers at one site may influence those at another by shaping the resources available for claims-making.

The Textuality of Social Problems Definitions

When thinking about how problem categories and definitions have a textual quality or may be said to be textually mediated, Spector and Kitsuse's example of claims-making around the *DSM* is enlightening. In the early 1970s, the American Psychiatric Association faced considerable pressure from the Gay Activist Alliance and other gay rights groups to remove homosexuality from the APA's listing of sexual deviations in its *DSM-II*. The change was eventually made and "sexual orientation distur-

bance" replaced "homosexuality" in the *DSM* (Spector and Kitsuse 1987:19; see also Kirk and Kutchins 1992:81-90). Subsequent, claims-making activities resulted in further changes to these categories. *DSM-III* distinguished between "ego-syntonic" and "ego-alien" homosexuality; those diagnosed with the former were not in need of treatment, while those diagnosed as the latter were (Silverstein 2009). A 1987 revision to the *DSM-III* subsequently removed the reference to homosexuality (Silverstein 2009). This process is not unique. Subsequent revisions of the *DSM*, including the revisions which led to the publication of the most recent, *DSM-V*, have spurred claims-making activities. Claims-makers, for instance, mobilized around the APA's decision to eliminate several autism spectrum diagnoses, including Asperger's in the *DSM-V* (Carey 2012; Lutz 2013). Certainly, the bulk of the action, for the analyst, concerns the claims that interested parties and activists make to the APA, as well as the APA's organizational response. But, the fact that all this claims-making leads to the alteration of a material document is also worthy of attention.

In fact, it is not unusual for categories that can be used in claims-making to be written down, textually inscribed. Laws, policies, authorizations, diagnostic categories—all types of formalized rules and categories—generally take textual form. This is the rudimentary foundation of bureaucratic and legal-rational authority (Smith 2001) and organizational agency (Cooren 2004). In the contemporary context, claims-makers may engage in what Michael Lynch and David Bogen (1996:214) refer to as the "documentary mode of interrogation," scruti-

nizing the categories, rules, authorizations, policies, and laws inscribed in texts to build a claim that a specific case, event, or behavior should or should not be understood as problematic.

For instance, a one-page document, "Interrogation Rules of Engagement" (see: Figure 1), was a point of reference for claims-making in congressional hearings about Abu Ghraib (Del Rosso 2014): Military officials argued that the events at Abu Ghraib, such as the hooding, stripping, and assault of detainees, were blatantly prohibited by the document, which included safeguards that affirmed the Geneva Conventions and prohibited Americans from touching detainees in a malicious manner. Congressional Democrats, on the other hand, tried to argue that the policy clearly authorized some practices—the use of stress positions, sensory deprivation, and the use of military dogs—that had been photographed at the prison. These practices appear in the upper-right quadrant of Figure 1, under the heading "Require CG's [Commanding General] Approval." Whether the Abu Ghraib practices would be viewed as an outcome of official policy put in place by the military and high-ranking members of the George W. Bush administration or as the result of the actions of a "few bad apples" depended, in part, on which claim about the policy prevailed.

By inscribing problem categories into texts, it becomes possible for social problems to possess relative stability over time and place. Definitions of problems can be shared by claims-makers distant in time and place simply because a text can be physically or digitally copied and transmitted

Figure 1. Interrogation Rules of Engagement Slide.*

INTERROGATION RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Approved approaches for All detainees:

- Direct
- Incentive
- Incentive Removal
- Emotional Love / Hate
- Fear Up Harsh
- Fear Up Mild
- Reduced Fear
- Pride & Ego Up
- Futility
- We Know All
- Establish Your Identity
- Repetition
- File & Dossier
- Rapid Fire
- Silence

Require CG's Approval:

- Change of scenery down
- Dietary Manip (monitored by med)
- Environmental Manipulation
- Sleep Adjustment (reverse sched)
- Isolation for longer than 30 days
- Presence of Mil Working Dogs
- Sleep Management (72 hrs max)
- Sensory Deprivation (72 hrs max)
- Stress Positions (no longer than 45 min)

Safeguards:

- ~ Techniques must be annotated in questioning strategy
- ~ Approaches must always be humane and lawful
- ~ Detainees will NEVER be touched in a malicious or unwanted manner
- ~ Wounded or medically burdened detainees must be medically cleared prior to interrogation
- ~ The Geneva Conventions apply within CJTF-7

EVERYONE IS RESPONSIBLE FOR ENSURING COMPLIANCE TO THE IROE. VIOLATIONS MUST BE REPORTED IMMEDIATELY TO THE OIC.

The use of the techniques are subject to the general safeguards as provided as well as specific guidelines implemented by the 205th MI Cdr. FM 34-52 and the Commanding General, CJTF-7

* Figure 1 is the first author's reproduction, using Microsoft Power Point, of the original document, which is not of sufficient quality for publication. The original document appears in several annexes of the U.S. Army's "Article 15-6 Investigation of the 800th Military Police Brigade" (Taguba 2004), including Annex 40. The report, including annexes, is available online at the University of Minnesota Human Rights Library (2014).

without deforming the literal definition of a problem, authorizations, laws, and policies that the text carries. The interpretive flexibility that actors inevitably employ around definitions, then, has a relatively stable reference—the problem category or definition—that it would otherwise lack if that reference had not been inscribed in a text.

Again, the *DSM* is instructive. The development of the *DSM* by the APA—especially the *DSM-III*—played a vital role in the restructuring of U.S. and global understandings of mental distress and approaches to managing mental distress. In part, this has to do with the *content* of the *DSM*, and the evolution of the classifications of disorder that it offers.

For our purposes, though, it is the very materiality of the document that makes it interesting. As a material (and digital) thing, the *Manual* is portable and its portability facilitates efforts to standardize mental health categories across the U.S. and, increasingly, the globe (Watters 2011). The *DSM*'s standardizing power is buttressed by powerful interests. Health insurance companies require clinicians to use the *Manual*'s categories to diagnose patients in order to be reimbursed for services (Watters 2011). Clinicians develop "workarounds" to this requirement, claiming some autonomy and interpretive flexibility from health insurance companies. But, these workarounds exist precisely because of the institutionalized power of the text and they orient to the *DSM*, as well as to the layers of documents clinicians are compelled to complete.

Institutional ethnographers have extensively documented the ways that organizational workers and clients interact with organizational documents, how those documents structure organizational behavior, and how they tend to override the everyday experiences of clients. Attunement to these processes, to some extent, also has been incorporated into studies of social problems work. James Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium (2000), for instance, refer to textual mediation in their study of narrative identity. Centering studies of social problems construction on textual mediation can illuminate how the resources that social problems workers use in their interactions with clients are produced by the organizations in which they work, as well as policy makers and federal organizations. Examining this permits us to consider both the power and the limits of collective definitions of problems. Do the texts that social problems work-

ers use attempt to determine the accounts they give of problems, as well as their behavior towards those who seek services? If so, do workers develop workarounds, as Owen Whooley (2010) shows clinicians do? Conversely, do texts open space for workers to exercise considerable interpretive flexibility? What, then, is the result of that interpretive flexibility?

The Interplay of "Reality" and Definitions in Texts

Accounts of the "reality" of a problem and collective representations or definitions of that problem are mutually constitutive—and texts, at times, are at the core of that mutual constitution. This is particularly true in organizations. When social problems workers give accounts of their work, they often do so on organizational documents. Those documents shape and structure how workers describe and report problems. In some cases, organizational texts are sufficiently powerful as to practically determine social problems workers' accounts of problems. In others, they are open-ended, making space for workers' interpretive flexibility.

Leslie Irvine (2003), for instance, documented how workers at an animal shelter ("The Shelter") completed a standardized, intake interview with clients who were abandoning pets. The interview, which was recorded in a specialized, computer survey, required that workers transform clients' accounts into a single reason—taken from a pre-established list—for abandoning their pets. Because of the "tyranny" of the software (Irvine 2003:563; see also Gubrium, Buckholdt, and Lynott 1989), intake workers had to reduce the complexity of

client reasons for abandoning a pet to a single, pre-established one. Here, texts powerfully structure workers' accounts of problems. Interpretive flexibility is minimal. Workers interpret clients' accounts only to figure out which of the shelters' pre-set categories they "best" reflect.

Compare what Irvine found to what Donileen Loseke (1992) documented at a shelter ("South Coast") for battered women. At South Coast, intake workers noted activities at the shelter, including intake work, in a logbook that consisted of blank pages in a binder "to be filled by workers in free-form writing. An entry could be a few words or a whole page, notes could contain profanity or poetry, commonsense or clinical reasoning" (Loseke 1992:168). Accounts in the logbook were often more nuanced and complex than those that Irvine documented at The Shelter. An account of a battered woman, for instance, might be built up over several, increasingly detailed, and multi-faceted entries.

The juxtaposition of these cases is useful because very different types of texts structure social problems work in different ways. Irvine's intake workers completed a computerized survey with pre-set categories to describe client motives for making use of the shelter. Loseke's intake workers wrote up their accounts on blank pages. We may observe, in the juxtaposition, both the power and limits of texts to influence human activity. In both cases, the textual inscription of intake workers' accounts preserves the social problems work in which they have engaged. These otherwise ephemeral interactions gain a permanence that they would otherwise lack if not for that textual inscription. We

see, too, how different textual forms produce different social problems work. The intake workers at Irvine's animal shelter were compelled, by the computerized survey they used, to produce a uni-dimensional account of clients' motives for pet abandonment. The log at South Coast promoted free, open-ended writing. It allowed for greater complexity of and varieties in writing. There are details and multisided accounts in South Coast's logs that would have been impossible to record and preserve had South Coast relied on the sort of computerized survey used at The Shelter. Even so, Loseke found that workers at South Coast produced accounts that tended to homogenize clients. We see, then, the limits of texts and the power of collective representations of problems, which, in the end, structured South Coast's accounts of clients nearly as powerfully as The Shelter's survey no matter the texts. Studies of social problems work might further highlight the texts relevant to that work. How do they structure what social problems workers do and say about problems? How much complexity and artfulness do they permit of those workers? And how are they subsequently used by organizations and those who study organizations as indicators of the "reality" of problems?

Conclusion

Texts, we have argued, make constructions of reality durable and mobile. Representations and definitions of problems become resources for claims-making and social problems work when inscribed in texts. Claims-makers cite, reference, or gesture to investigations and reports; organizations incorporate manuals, forms, surveys, and logs into their work. These

enable social problems activities and also potentially structure and constrain them. Claims-makers may check each other's arguments about problems against the accounts of those problems available in investigations, scholarly publications, and other documents. Organizational documents compel—or do not, as the case may be—workers to produce textual traces of their activities that take particular forms. Attuned to the textuality of problems, studies of social problems can further document the types of texts involved in problem construction, the ways that different types of texts structure social problems claims-making and work, and the different uses to which people put those different types of texts. We can also uncover the connections, forged by texts, between organizations, agencies, and claims-makers, providing one answer to the question of how claims spread.

Attunement to texts is especially vital in today's technological environment. This environment is substantially different from that which existed

when Smith and Latour made their initial contributions to social theory. Many, if not most, texts are now digital. The "means of producing" texts are, too, more dispersed, as virtually anyone with a smart phone may photograph or video record events and, with access to social media sites, publicize accounts of those events. While claims that digitality and social media have democratized claims-making may be overblown, the contemporary technological environment has, at a minimum, altered the carrying capacity, archivability, retrievability, modifiability, and dissemination of claims (Maratea 2008; 2013). As Irvine's work suggests, contemporary technologies may also have the capacity to "tyrannize"—compelling responses or preventing users from "going off text," so to speak—in ways that paper documents never could. Future research should consider the ways that technological changes alter texts and textually-mediated organizations and how these, in turn, shape social problems activities in organizational and other social contexts.

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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.

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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.

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Regulating Pornocomic Sales to Juveniles in Japan: Cycles and Path-Dependence of a Social Problem¹

Abstract The purpose of this paper is to develop a new constructionist perspective on path-dependence of a social problem by examining the process of constructing issues regarding the revisions of the Tokyo Youth Protection Ordinance from December 2008 to July 2010. I start with pointing out that a social problem has a cycle of concern and a unique past and background, in a word, path-dependence. Once a social problem process has started down a track, the costs of reversal are very high. Through investigating the revision process between pro-regulation and anti-regulation groups compared with the previous arguments, I found three characteristics of arguments: the limited use of statistics, shared grounds, and shared warrants. I interpret the features as an unintended consequence of path-dependence of the pornocomic problem. This context limits the course of claims-making activities and affects the following controversy. I conclude that the concept of path-dependence offers a better understanding of how and why claims-making activities sometimes lose their diversity and are lopsided over time.

Keywords Path-Dependence; Social Problems; Pornocomics; Youth Protection Ordinance; Tokyo

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Social Problems and Cycles of Concern

Sometimes, a social problem recurs as if it were on a cycle. Similar claims are made and similar policies are implemented every few years. Japanese examples include the revision of juvenile law, youth bashing, countermeasures for low birthrates, and regulation of sex comics for children (Goodman, Imoto, and Toivonen 2012). Best (2008:307) also suggests that social problems often are characterized by cycles of concern which increase until it reaches a peak, and then interest falls off.

¹ An earlier Japanese version of this paper was published in Akagawa (2012).

In Japanese local governments, concern arises every five or six years about the need to regulate the sale of comics to juveniles (under the age of 18) that include sexual depictions. This paper focuses on the controversies regarding the revision of a youth protection ordinance enacted by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG) that attracted nationwide attention in 2010. The youth protection ordinance in Tokyo, called "The Tokyo Juvenile Sound Upbringing Ordinance," was first enacted in 1964 "to prevent acts that damage the welfare of juveniles and to bring up sound children" (Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly 1992). It stipulates "harmful publications" which are defined as "material which stimulate sexual feelings of juveniles, promote cruelty, induce suicide or crimes, and prevent juveniles' sound upbringing" (Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly 1992). Once a book is categorized as a harmful publication by the authority, its sale for juveniles is strictly prohibited. This ordinance was revised in 1992, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2007, and 2010,² with the regulations becoming stricter with every revision. This paper investigates how the cycle of concerns developed in 2009 to 2010, and presents a theoretical idea for the constructionist theory of social problems, path-dependence of a social problem.

Each construction of a social problem has its own unique history and new developments. I will call this "path-dependence" of a social problem.

² Akagawa (1993), Nakagawa (1999) analyzed the debate on the revision of the ordinance in the early 1990s. In this period, "harmful comic" issues were heavily emphasized. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, this topic was framed as an "Enjo-Kosai" issue and analyzed by Yamamoto (2000), Suzuki (2001), and Kinsella (2012).

Path-dependence in general means that an institution or a mechanism is bound or locked in by past sequences of events or historical happenings. A political scientist, Levi (1997:28), argues that path-dependence does not simply mean "history matters" and that "path dependence has to mean, if it is to mean anything, that once a country or region has started down a track, the costs of reversal are very high. There will be other choice points, but the entrenchments of certain institutional arrangements obstruct an easy reversal of the initial choice" (see also Pierson 2000; 2004).

This paper adds other elements in path-dependence by arguing that as a controversy proceeds in the social problem process, its concerns become more specific, elaborated, and locked in by the past events or agreements. As a result, various possible arguments are excluded or neglected by claims-makers.

This paper examines the process of constructing issues regarding the revisions of the Tokyo Youth Protection Ordinance from December 2008 to July 2010.³ During this period, some bureaucrats in the TMG tried to add a new stipulation, "non-existent youths," to the definition of harmful publications to juveniles. This concept seems quite similar with "simulated or virtual child pornography" which was made illegal in the U.S. Child Pornography

³ My analysis is based on various materials, including: official records from the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly and the 28th Tokyo Youth Affairs Conference in the Tokyo Metro Government; media coverage in nationwide newspapers such as *Asahi Shimbun*, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, *Mainichi Shimbun*, and *Sankei Shimbun*; Nagayama and Hiruma (2010), which is the best collection of statements on the issue; Sato (2012), which thoroughly examined the "non-existent youths" issues; and my own participant observations and interviews.

Prevention Act of 1996: It included drawings, cartoons, sculptures, and paintings of minors in sexual situations. “Non-existent youths” were defined as *manga and anime characters who are expressed as if they appear to be under the age of 18, judged from voices or signs of age, clothing, belongings, school grades, backgrounds, or something that typically would symbolize how old they were*. Comics, anime, and video games that include sexual depictions with “non-existent youths” were to be designated as harmful publications to juveniles. The concept kindled controversy among the Assembly members, mass media, and social movement organizations nationwide. In the next section, I describe how pro-regulation and anti-regulation campaigns developed and what kind of claims-making activities became popular during the period.

Revision of the Tokyo Youth Protection Ordinance

The movement for revision began on 24th November, 2009. The 28th Tokyo Youth Affairs Conference (TYAC) proposed a draft report recommending that Tokyo Governor revise the ordinance.⁴ It disclosed to the public a report titled “A Draft Report on the Issue of Raising Sound Juveniles in a Computer-Mediated Society” (hereafter, draft report).

The draft report consisted of three chapters: “Raising Sound Children in an Age Flooded With Mo-

⁴ The 28th commission consisted of six members of the Assembly, two mayors, fourteen experts, and thirteen bureaucrats. Its special committee included some activists who supported the regulation of comics. Usually, they might be on stage as outsider claims-makers, but they were insider claims-makers who were directly involved in policy-making (Best 2008:65).

bile Phones and Computer-Mediated Networks,” “On Mass Media That Treat Children as Sexual Objects,” and “On the Improvement of Environment for Children.” Of the draft report’s 52 pages, 32 were in the first chapter, which means that on the first stage of the revision, pro-regulation campaigns focused more on protecting children from harm in using mobile phones and computers than on child pornography issues.

When the draft report was disclosed on the website, public comments from Tokyoites were invited. Over 500 Tokyo residents and over 1,000 people from outside Tokyo responded, an unusually large response for common ordinances. Most of the comments voiced apprehension that regulating artistic expression in comics for juveniles would lead to regulating comics for adults as well.

On 10th December, Japan Book Publisher Association and Magazine Publisher Association announced their joint comments, which focused solely on the second chapter of the draft report. They criticized the tighter regulation of comics, anime, and video games that depicted fictional children’s sexual acts—which were not categorized as child pornography at that time—and expressed concern that it would possibly infringe on freedom of expression. They stated:

[t]he child pornography prevention law of 1999 was aimed at the protection of human rights of existent children, therefore regulation of creations which depict fictional characters in comics and anime is beyond the purpose of the law which defends living children’s rights. (Japan Book Publisher Association 2009)

The 28th TYAC revised the report responding to the public comments and claims made by the two associations, and submitted it to the Tokyo Governor on 14th January, 2010. They claimed that *malicious comics, which recklessly depict youths as sexual objects, are not different from child pornography which depicts real children as sexual objects, in that they promote child abuse and sexual exploitation of children and impair the dignity of children*.

The revised bill was submitted to the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly on 24th February, which included the idea of “non-existent youths” as one the definitions of harmful publications. On 18th March, the General Affairs Committee of Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly started discussions on the revision. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the New Komei Party, the coalition ruling parties, supported the Tokyo Governor and agreed with the bill. The stance in the largest opposition party, Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), was said to be divided, with some opposed, while others had no firm position.

The opposition campaign peaked on 17th May. Yukari Fujimoto of the Meiji University and a lawyer, Takashi Yamaguchi, who led anti-regulation campaigns held a meeting with an audience of 1,000 people. Virtually, all parties who opposed the bill were on the stage.⁵ Fujimoto said: “We should not question whether or not we are against the bill. We should concentrate more on the text of the bill *per*

⁵ The people or representatives of organizations who were on the stage included: some DPJ members, and representatives of the Society for Bookshops, the national liaison group of manga fans, an organization for inspection of mobile contents, and a labor union for the publishing industry, as well as a novelist, a translator of manga, comic writers, professors of law, and a sociologist, Shinji Miyadai.

se. Are there any problems in the text itself?” She tried to avoid the controversy of whether someone was for or against the bill and focus on whether the text had faults; if so, the bill should be abrogated regardless of their belief or position. The next day, Shinji Miyadai, a sociologist and intellectual leader in the opposition campaign, gave unsworn testimony before the special committee in the Assembly and emphasized how the text itself had serious faults. He claimed that the definition of “non-existent youths” was vague and the stipulation had many problems. Thereafter, his statements were frequently quoted in the Assembly.

The ruling and opposition parties posed questions to a bureaucrat who was in charge of the revised bill at the General Affairs Committee on 11th June. There were severe debates between him and opposition party members. Three days later, the ruling parties submitted a re-revised edition of the ordinance to the committee. However, on 16th June, members of the opposition parties voted against the revised bill and it was rejected by the Assembly.

Historical Backgrounds of the Revision

In the previous section, I briefly described which actors claimed what concerning the revision of the Tokyo Youth Protection Ordinance. This paper points out two policy outcomes from the 2007 revision.

The revision was a minor one of the previous 2005 revision. The 2005 revision recommended that Internet service providers develop filtering service for pornography and announce it to their consumers, and the 2007 revision urged cell phone retailers to do so.

One outcome is that topics on content filtering on the Internet were affected by the draft report in 2009, which stated: “[v]arious media and information technology have developed, especially the wide distribution of mobile phones among juveniles and the diversification of communication methods on the Internet and mobile phones, leading to a rise in the number of juvenile victims of crimes and offenders as well” (The 28th Tokyo Youths Affairs Conference 2009:1). Topics on content filtering accounted for 61.5% (thirty-two out of fifty-two pages) in the draft report. However, these points were not emphasized in the social problem process thereafter.

Another outcome was related to the nationwide Child Pornography Prevention Law of 1999, which merged the nationwide regulation of imaginary-child pornography into the context of the ordinance of raising sound children. The draft report mentioned that the law did not prohibit possession of child pornography, and claimed:

[a]wful child pornography is spreading on the Internet. There is no regulation for comics which depict rape and incest towards children or games that are realistic depictions of these acts using computer graphics and animation readily available at average bookshops and on the Internet. (The 28th Tokyo Youths Affairs Conference 2009:35)

In summary: regulating comics has gone through a series of cycles. The 2007 cycle focused on filtering, but later cycles barely mentioned it. At first, topics on content filtering seemed the main focus of the draft report, but virtually all claims-makers ignored the topic in the 2010 cycle. On the other hand,

the 2010 cycle also raised the topic of fictional depictions of children in sexual situations quoting the nationwide Child Pornography Prevention Law of 1999, and that became the focus of the 2010 debate.

2010 Compared With the 1990s Cycle

There are three unique rhetorics in the 1990s cycle. The first was “the rhetoric of entitlement” (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993:38). Both pro-regulation and anti-regulation groups relied on it. The former claimed that children had the right to be defended from harmful environments. The latter stated that children are subjects with right of self-determination to read sex comics and express their views on them. In short, the rhetoric of entitlement based on children’s rights was used by both parties but with different interpretations (Akagawa 1993).

The second was the rhetoric of “commercialization or objectification of women’s sex.” Some Japanese radical feminists who were influenced by Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, who led the campaign for the Minneapolis anti-pornography ordinance in 1982, had a great influence in the 1990s cycle. They claimed that pornography degraded women and reproduced discrimination against women, or that pornography objectified women’s sexuality. The rhetoric of “commercialization or objectification of women’s sex” was actively taken advantage of by pro-regulation groups as a rhetoric which supported the regulation.

The third rhetoric was about whether or not the so-called harmful pornocomics caused juvenile sex crimes. Some claimed that sex comics encouraged

juveniles to commit rape or juvenile delinquency. However, a psychiatrist claimed that the more comics were published, the less sex crimes were committed because sex comics were thought to be outlets for sexual frustration, thereby reducing the number of readers assaulting others (Fukushima 1990).

These were the obviously important and unique arguments in the 1990s cycle, but few of them were repeated in the 2010 cycle.

Theoretical Considerations

This paper uses the framework proposed by Best (1990; 2008) to examine what kinds of rhetoric were frequently used in the controversy. This framework has three components: grounds, warrants, and conclusions. A claim’s grounds are assertions of fact; that is, they argue that the condition exists, and offer supporting evidence (Best 2008:31). Typifying examples, names, and statistics are three major rhetorical forms of grounds.

In the pornographic controversy, few typifying examples were presented. As for naming, the concept of “non-existent youths” became a symbolic term representing the issue, for good or bad. The term was newly-coined by the authority, and new to most people in Tokyo. Therefore, anti-regulation and pro-regulation groups contested whether or not the concept was appropriate as a legal concept.

What is most interesting is that while several statistics and numbers were used to ground both sides of the claims, they were never the focal points of the argument. Pro-regulation claims-makers such as draft

report and officials in Security Measures for Juveniles made claims based on numbers and statistics, such as:

- The number of problems connected with the Internet and mobile phones is increasing. More and more juveniles are victimized.
- The average number of harmful publications has decreased from 57.6 volumes between 1965 and 1974 to 33.6 between 2005 and 2009.
- Only 68.3% of parents use some sort of Internet filter to control their kid’s access to unwanted content.

On the other hand, anti-regulation claims-makers refuted pro-regulation assumptions by using their own statistical grounds:

- There is no correlation between sex crime and the growth of sexual media. In fact, there is a negative correlation between them.
- The number of harmful publications is decreasing (the Council of Publication Ethics, Assembly members of the DPJ).
- The ratio of parent’s use of Internet filter is 95% when a new phone is purchased. It has risen by 12.7% in a year. Awareness of Internet filter for parents has become common (Assembly members of the DPJ).

These claims seem to contradict each other. For example, pro-regulation claims-makers often assume

that pornocomics cause juvenile sex crimes. On the other hand, anti-regulation claims-makers argue that sexual media have no causal relationship to juvenile sex crimes. However, an important thing is that the discrepancy does not seem to influence the total social problem process—because which grounds were valid and which interpretations were persuasive were never contested in the Assembly.

The question we should consider is: Why the grounds which focused on numbers and statistics were not the main focal point of the issue? There are three possible answers.

Is the Glass Half Full or Half Empty?

Just as optimists and pessimists can interpret the same facts differently, so did both sides in this policy debate interpret the same facts and grounds differently. For instance, anti-regulation groups claimed that the fact that fewer harmful publications were designated than before meant that self-regulation by the industry worked well and that stricter regulation was unnecessary. Pro-regulation groups, on the other hand, countered that the decreased number was simply measured in accordance with the current loose standards, which did not include the regulation of “non-existent youth.”

Similarly, when an Assembly member of the DPJ claimed that the ratio of parent’s use of Internet filter is 95% when they purchase a new cell phone, he meant that the current implementation for Internet filter was successful and more regulation was unnecessary. On the other hand, the draft report

and an official in Security Measures for Juveniles claimed that only 68.3% of parents use some sort of Internet filter to control their kid’s access to unwanted content. They assumed that all mobile phone users should use the Internet filtering, so the 68.3% meant that the current policy was ineffective.

These are illustrations of the “half full or half empty?” nature of social policy debates. Opposing points of view can lead to a stalemate. For example, no one can change the fact that fewer harmful publications were designated, or that the participation rate in content filtering was 68.3% in 2009. But, such facts lose their value as discursive resources for refuting opponents. When both sides realize this, they tend to avoid using the facts and/or grounds as tools to persuade others.

Rhetoric of Risk Prevention

Another explanation for the limited use of statistics is related to a new “rhetoric of risk prevention” by pro-regulation groups. Pro-regulation groups argued that the numbers of juvenile offenders caused by sex crimes or child prostitution were increasing; in contrast, anti-regulation activists counter-claimed that there were fewer and fewer sex crimes, murdered victims, and heinous juvenile crimes. However, there were no direct opportunities for arguing whether juvenile sex crimes or offenders/victims of sex crime were increasing or not. This meant that debates over the statistics were not the main rhetoric to mobilize and persuade third-party audiences.

How could this be true? At least pro-regulation claims-makers thought they could circumvent

controversies about whether the spread of harmful publications caused juvenile crimes. For instance, a lawyer, who was the chairperson of the special committee in the 28th TYAC, claimed that the regulation was constitutional without any scientific evidence of the causal relationship. Quoting a judge’s decision, “[e]ven though there is no strict scientific evidence that harmful publications lead to juvenile delinquencies and other vice, this does not mean that regulation of harmful publications violates freedom to access information and is unconstitutional” (December 17, 2009, at the committee). He also argued, “There is a causal discussion regarding whether designating child pornography reduces crimes, both discussions could be true. When it is the case, it is wrong to conclude that we should not regulate it until we have enough evidence” (May 18, 2010, comment at the special session at the Assembly). In short, he suggested that regulation is possible even when there is no evidence that legitimizes the regulation. Precautionary measures are acceptable even though academic proof of causal relationship is impossible.⁶ An analogous rhetoric of risk prevention often appears in environmental issues such as global warming and chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) regulations. This rhetoric can nullify “statistics wars” because even the smallest risk could, in principle, justify precautionary regulation against putative harm.

⁶ We can assume that there are some possible counter-rhetorics to the rhetoric of risk prevention, which includes questions to evaluate risk: (a) To what extent can we stand the risk? (b) Is the risk larger than other risks? (c) Is the cost for the risk reasonable? (d) Are other measures more appropriate? This counter-rhetoric could be more focused in future controversy, when a debate on grounds (numbers and statistics) or conclusions could occur.

Shared Grounds

The third possible reason for downplaying statistics was that both parties tended to share some grounds in the course of the arguments. Pro-regulation groups accepted some warrants proposed by anti-regulation activists; for instance, Miyadai Shinji proclaimed on 18th May that what he called “bad-influence theory”—that harmful comics hinder juvenile’s sound upbringing—was groundless. He claimed that only “specific effect theory” was academically reasonable. This theory implies that mass media’s influence depends on the audience’s circumstances of whether they receive it alone or with others, with family or friends or with strangers. He found it important to control circumstances under which the audience receives mass media’s message rather than to regulate it.

In response to this claim, an official in Security Measures for Juveniles did not reject the specific effect theory. Instead, he utilized the theory for the revision of the ordinance. The revision included a plan called “family e-mail-lecture” that encouraged parents and children to reach consensus about the use of the Internet, mobile phones, and video games at home. This official regarded the plan as a measure to control media circumstances based on the specific effect theory. On the other hand, he claimed, “Nowadays, pornocomics depicting malicious sexual acts against juveniles are being sold at bookshops where a juvenile can readily buy them ... there is a limit to what parents, schools, and local communities can do to create an environment for sound upbringing” (June 11, 2010, by the committee of general affairs). In short, once

he accepted the opposition's grounds, the specific effect theory, the importance of controlling media circumstances and control by ordinance were included in the measures suggested by the theory. By his discursive tactics, the theoretical controversy over the influence of harmful publications was suspended. According to his new discursive strategy, the regulation of sales of pornocomics became necessary just because it was based on the specific effect theory, which had been proposed by the opposing claims-maker. This means that pro-regulation groups realized that both groups shared some of the same grounds: the specific effect theory. This paper suggests that at this point, controversies over statistics and causal relations were nullified and did not work well as tools for stopping or promoting the regulation of the ordinance. This is one discursive factor of why the controversies over statistics and causal relations were not fully emphasized by both parties in the Assembly.

Shared Warrants

The basic claims of the pro-regulation groups called for protecting children from harmful publications, while anti-regulation groups called for protecting freedom of expression. Both lines of rhetoric can be categorized as a "rhetoric of loss" described by Ibarra and Kitsuse (1993:37) as basic in confrontations between the parties. This implies that pro-regulation movements are regarded as people who do not respect the freedom of expression, which is regarded as a fundamental value in democratic societies. On the other hand, anti-regulation movements risk being labeled as "enemies of children" who oppose any regulation of expression, including (real) child pornography.

Both parties were forced to reject these labels. Pro-regulation groups emphasized that the revised bill did not violate the freedom of expression or intend any harm to creative activity by comic writers. Typical discourse appeared in Q-As published by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government on 26th April, which stated that *the aim of revision is only to prevent children from buying the comics. It is acceptable for people over the age of eighteen to draw, create, and publish these comics. Therefore, the revised bill does not infringe on anyone's "freedom of expression."*

Anti-regulation groups often claimed that they did not oppose the idea of raising sound children and the regulation of (real) child pornography. For instance, an anti-regulation Assembly member of the DPJ repeatedly claimed that real child pornography should be eradicated. Also, a declaration by a representative of the Tokyo Bar Association reported that they accepted the idea that they would not leave unsolved the current state in which children were sexually exploited and exposed to harmful publications. Both statements can be categorized as *tactical criticism*, a counter-rhetorical strategy that "accepts the characterization of the condition-category being proffered, but demurs in the means the claimants employ" (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993:44; see also Nakagawa 1999). Both sides favored both basic values of "freedom of expression" and "protection of children." They shared basic warrants and revised claims based on tactical criticism.

Conclusion: Path-Dependence of a Social Problem

This paper finds a "path-dependence" of a social problem in the controversy. This means that the

controversy over harmful publications had its own unique past and background that shaped the construction of current issues. In the previous section, I pointed out three theoretical considerations: limited use of statistics, shared grounds, and shared warrants among opposing parties. All these features have the tendency that concerns have become specific and some focal points that had earlier been thought important were excluded or neglected. I also identified three rhetorics in the 1990 cycles that are not in the 2010 cycle: the rhetoric of entitlement, the rhetoric of commercialization or objectification of women's sex, and unlimited use of statistics.

The controversy over harmful comics in the 1990s had more diversity than in the 2010s. In the 2010 cycle, both parties in the social problem process focused mainly on the legitimacy of the text of the ordinance, in particular, on the concept of "non-existent youths." For instance, anti-regulation activists emphasized the sloppiness of the ordinance's text and the ambiguity of the definition of "non-existent youths." Therefore, pro-regulation lawmakers were forced to reconstruct their logic and rhetoric by excluding the term from the revised bill of the ordinance. As a result, many other focal points were neglected and there were few points to be argued in the controversy.

I also observed that over time the focus of arguments became narrower and more specific. In June 2010, both sides focused only on the ambiguity of "non-existent youths." When the revised bill was voted down by the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly on 16th June, the anti-regulation campaign seemed

to enjoy their victory. Their tactics of targeting only the concept "non-existent youths" seemed tentatively successful.

However, there were some side effects. Focusing on the faulty sentences lost the target when the pro-regulation groups corrected or removed the sentences. Once the ordinance was corrected in accordance with criticism from the anti-regulation groups, there was no big issue to be discussed. The anti-regulation group no longer had a good reason to oppose the revised bill.

This paper starts with the proposition that social problems have cycles of concern. In this case study, this means that the authority never gave up tightening the regulation of pornocomics for juveniles even after their bills were rejected by the Assembly in June 2010. Half a year later, the pro-regulation groups of the Assembly deleted the concept of "non-existent youths" from the bill, and submitted it to the Assembly again. The largest opposition party seemed to reluctantly agree with this version of the bill. The re-revised bill was enacted by the Assembly in December 2010.

What does this mean? Was it a "consensus building" between the ruling and opposition parties? For the pro-regulation groups, it might be true. They might claim that they had already shared basic grounds and warrants with their opponents, and if only they eliminate the concept of "non-existent youths" from the revised bill, there would be "consensus" between two groups. However, from the anti-regulation viewpoint, it was an awful political compromise because they could not

prevent the re-revision of the ordinance, which meant tighter regulation of pornocomics for juveniles was legalized. As Levi (1997) suggested, once a social problem process which focuses on a single issue has started down a track, the costs of reversal are very high or virtually impossible for the anti-regulation groups. This paper interprets that this was an unintended consequence of path-dependence of the pornocomic problem. Once the controversy over a political issue is bound by its unique past contexts, the focus of arguments becomes narrower and more specific, and many other focal points of argument are neglected. This context limits the course of claims-making activities and affects the following controversy. In this case, once the focal point, the concept of “non-existent youths”, disappeared, decisive opposition by both groups was lost, which formed the discursive contexts in favor of the re-revision of the ordinance in December 2010.

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This paper begins with investigating the cycle of concern in a social problem process, and finds the cycle is not just the repetition of the same kind of claims-making activities. It also has a history. This paper calls it “path-dependence” of a social problem and concludes that by using the concept, constructionist natural history models of the social problem process will give better understanding of how and why claims-making activities sometimes lose their diversity and are lopsided.

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Developing Understandings of Contexts

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Contextual Understanding in Constructionism: A Holistic, Dialogical Model

Abstract This paper seeks to develop contextual constructionism through elaboration of the concept of context and the articulation of an accompanying methodology for empirical research. I approach context as a construct involving awareness when: (1) claims-makers define contexts in social problem debates, and (2) academic analysts do likewise in studying those debates and their outcomes. Such constructions can either converge or diverge, both within and across groups of claims-makers and analysts, with significant consequences for understanding and interaction. Importantly, context is never singular, for it always presupposes at least two related settings, namely, an immediate situation involving claims that is embedded in a more distant or general one which has at least a short-term historical dimension. Both social problems claims-makers and constructionist analysts, moreover, engage in “context work,” that is, efforts to sustain an overarching sense of setting between periods of social problems claims-making and research on them. I suggest that analysts examine claims-makers’ discourse in order to identify their view of context, and then apply the same scrutiny to their own presuppositions. Analysts should also be alert to strategic uses of context as a resource (“context gaming”), they should map significant shifts in constructions of context and pay attention to unobtrusive factors that might not yet have entered awareness. Finally, analysts should avoid overly deterministic accounts. For although contexts, as constructed, do indeed impose constraints, they ought not to be seen as eliminating agency, but only as locating it in ways that facilitate sociological insight.

Keywords Context as Construction; Embeddedness of Contexts; Context Work; Context Gaming; Contextual Understanding

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Context, as an idea, is widely recognized and applied, with greater or lesser degrees of awareness, both on a common-sense level in everyday interaction and in sophisticated academic analyses. Generally speaking, it is not a controversial notion, but one that people of various ages, occupations, and political or religious preferences readily accept. Why then make this concept the focus of an extended discussion? As I will attempt to show, there are very good reasons for doing so, especially within the context of a set of papers devoted to developing the constructionist perspective on social problems.

I write from the perspective of a sociologist in the United States who has been influenced by the intellectual movements and political controversies in the field over the course of several decades. This is a key component of my own self-aware context: the professional setting in which I work. Consequently, I will draw mainly from the experience of the U.S. and its sociological profession in illustrating context and the interpretive issues involved in its understanding. I will, however, also touch on international events and I hope that colleagues in other lands will find the discussion useful in their own work.

The key issue is not the existence or non-existence of context, or the influence of particular types of context on social problem debates. Rather, the important question is how we can and should understand events contextually while doing constructionist scholarship.

Contextual understanding is arguably fundamental in our knowledge at all times. State-

ments and experiences only “make sense” within contexts, that is, in relation to selected reference points that provide spatio-temporal and socio-cultural locations. For example, each word in a scholarly book makes sense within the context of words in units recognized as sentences. These in turn acquire meaning within the context of paragraphs and sections of chapters, while chapters make sense within the overall context of the book, which in turn is understandable within a professional literature that is comprehensible within an academic profession. As this simple illustration indicates, contextual understanding is a basic heuristic strategy that pervades our lives; and we routinely take into account a diverse set of contexts, using each as a key for certain types of interpretation. The contexts we select in our sense-making practices, moreover, are often closely linked or embedded in one another like the painted figurines within Russian “matryushka” dolls.

Moreover, in the same way that we routinely engage in contextualized understanding in an intellectual sense, we also engage in contextualized valuation. For instance, the word “steal” and its accompanying action would have a negative significance in many settings, especially among generally law-abiding people. In other contexts, however, “stealing” can have positive value, as when a consumer gets a great deal on an automobile or when a baseball player races safely to second base from first while a pitch is being thrown to home plate. The same holds true for behavior. In the context of a wedding reception, for example, guests might be permitted—even encouraged—to kiss the bride;

but, if one of those guests were to kiss the same woman a week later at her place of employment, serious penalties might result. Meanings and values are thus inextricably linked, across diverse contexts.

Among sociologists of social problems, the most intensive discussions of context and contextual methodology within constructionist perspectives on social problems took place within the debate between proponents of “strict” and “contextual” constructionism. While the “strict” constructionist approach stuck closely to language (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993), that ultimately became a minority position. The “contextual constructionism” position emerged as the most common view (Best 1989). From this perspective, one can only make sociological sense of claims-making activities if these are located in terms of social and cultural reference points.¹

With this as background, I want to examine the concept of context, and consider why it matters, with particular attention to several features, including context categories, context as logical prerequisite and logical necessity, the simultaneous multiplicity of contexts, and the indexical nature of meaning in context. The next section will also consider how social problem claims-makers and analysts construct context, and the “context work” that both do as background and backstage activity.

¹ In retrospect, it seems strange that the debate occurred at all, for the simple reason that Spector and Kitsuse (1977) clearly conveyed a sense of acting in an intellectual and professional context. They were thus, arguably, contextual constructionists.

Conceptualizing Context

The term “context” has numerous abstract meanings, as well as many empirical referents, and is used in a wide variety of senses. The *Oxford Dictionary of American English*, for instance, defines context as “circumstances,” or, more specifically, “the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood and assessed” (see: www.oxford-dictionaries.com). *Webster’s Online Dictionary* notes that context is an important idea in both literary and historical studies. Thus, context sometimes refers to “the part or parts of something written or printed ... which precede or follow a text or quoted sentence”; and with regard to historical understanding, context means “the set of facts or circumstances that surround a situation or event” (see: www.webster-dictionary.org).

The synonyms of context also show a great deal of complexity. Context might be thought of as “background” or “conditions” or a “climate,” as well as a “landscape” or “frame of reference,” a “scene” or a “panorama” (see: www.thesaurus.com). Contextual understanding is thus “systemic,” insofar as it relates parts to a variety of wholes. It is likewise ecological, insofar as it locates events in relation to environments. And, as both of these metaphors indicate, it is always holistic.

Etymologically, the word “context” originates in the practice of weaving fibers into cloth. The Latin prefix “con” means “together,” and “text” is the linguistic root of “textiles,” that is, fabrics. So in its applications in constructionist work, knowledge

of context helps us to understand how events are “woven together” in ways that we would otherwise miss. The “fabric” of construction generally includes social problem claims and counter-claims, the presentation of those assertions in mass media and popular culture, and practical policies (both official and unofficial) designed to reduce or eliminate the problems as defined in the arenas of debate (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988).

Why Context Matters

As the discussion below will demonstrate, recognized contexts affect the who, what, when, where, how, and why of claims-making activities, as well as the responses to them. The same holds true, of course, for the actions of analysts and their contextualized choices of what to study, why and how, and where to place the products of their interpretive work. In particular:

1. **Context affects the content of claims:** Perceived contextual factors shape the specific messages that claims-makers deliver to audiences about alleged shared troubles that require remedies. Such influences are often evident in the specific vocabularies that claims-makers employ, including distinctive terms to designate specific troubling conditions. For example, public health claims-makers began to speak of cigarette smoking as an “addiction” (rather than merely a “bad habit” or, as the tobacco industry preferred, “an adult custom”) in a period when medical professionals and mass media organizations were increasingly applying the terminology of addiction to other issues, especially

drug use. In the same way, later claims-makers would speak of an “addiction” to pornography, and would apply the term “sex addiction” to behavior might previously have been described, in the language of a religious context, as “adultery.” Thus, context affects the “what” of claims.

2. **Context affects who becomes a claims-maker:** In the same way, context affects the probability of particular types of persons or groups becoming claims-makers. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, where women have not been allowed to drive automobiles (a context of custom and law), women have become claims-makers and activists about this issue, for they are the ones who experience in their daily lives the stress and suffering that occur when they cannot quickly get to a hospital for emergency medical care for a child, or to a store to purchase items needed in the home. Thus, context affects the “who” of claims.
3. **Context affects the tactics used in claims-making:** Claims, by definition, involve efforts to persuade audiences, and context influences the manner of persuasion. An interesting international case is Northern Ireland in the 1980s, where the Catholic minority chose to adopt tactics such as non-violent marches (White 2014) that had proven effective in the African-American civil rights movement in the U.S. two decades earlier (historical context). The Catholics in places like Derry and Belfast went so far as to use songs and slogans from the U.S. experience, such as “We Shall Overcome.” Thus,

because participants oriented themselves in terms of the American movement, that context affected the “how” of their claims-making.

- 4. Context affects the response to claims:** Perceived situations and circumstances also shape the likelihood of particular responses by audiences to social problem claims. In some cases, these involve rather dramatic changes in attitudes and reversals in policy. Thus, after the 1981 shooting of United States’ President Reagan, claims that the country needed tighter regulation of gun ownership gained a more favorable reception, and Congress passed the Brady Bill requiring background checks on applicants. Similarly, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, claims about the need for greater security at airports gathered support, and Congress created the Transportation Security Agency (TSA), despite the expressed desire of President George W. Bush to limit or cut the size of the federal government. Thus, perceived contexts affect remedial claims and their implementation.

Features of Social Problems Contexts

Context, of course, is contextualized. In this section, I will consider ideas that might contribute to a fuller understanding of the importance of context.

- 1) Context categories:** Social-problem claims-makers who apply common-sense assumptions, as well as academic analysts who work within disciplinary paradigms make use of typologies containing “context categories.” Such classifications

may be relatively simple or elaborate, informal or formal, but they are arguably consequential in the practical task of sense making with regard to social problems. Though in theory the set of categories might be indefinitely large, in practice, this is generally not the case, and both common-sense claims-makers and academic analysts apply a relatively limited vocabulary of acceptable categories, such as economic, political, social, and cultural contexts, and their various combinations (e.g., “race/class/gender”).

There are also filters and constraints—including self-censoring—that often go unnoticed. For instance, in a largely secular culture, very few claims-makers would locate events within the context of “an assault by demonic forces” or identify “extraterrestrial aliens” as a relevant context for action. From the vantage points of most contemporary claims-makers and analysts, such categories would seem nonsensical.

- 2) Context as logical prerequisite and logical necessity:** Discussions of certain social problems require that particular corresponding contexts be postulated. For instance, as Fine (1997) has observed, claims about “the problem of Hollywood” and the moral degeneracy of its celebrities could not appear, and would make no sense, until there was a movie-making center whose products were viewed around the country and which was the subject of much coverage in mass media. In the same way, claims about the problem of “Internet pornography” and its alleged injuries to women, children, and family life could not emerge without the presence of a searchable World Wide Web link-

ing personal computers and other devices to servers offering sexually explicit content. The alleged problems of Hollywood and Internet pornography, in other words, cannot be spoken without also speaking, simultaneously, of a directly corresponding context, which is the logical ground of meaning in each case.

Related to this are instances where it is difficult to discuss social problem debates without immediately referencing a particular factor or event. Although these are not prerequisites for the definition of problems as in the examples given above, they are nearly indispensable for purposes of analysis. Thus, the emergence of the social problem of “stalking” followed the 1989 murder of actress Rebecca Schaeffer, which became the most prominent example of “star-stalking.” This event seemed to transform interaction decisively when claims-makers “linked Schaeffer’s murder, the 1982 stabbing of Teresa Saldana ... and the deaths of four Orange County women ... These cases became typifying examples, evidence of the need for an anti-stalking law” (Lowney and Best 1995:41).

There are many other cases in which a similarly dramatic event occasioned actions through which alleged social problems “became real” in the sense of gaining formal recognition in law and policy. As Lowney and Best note, these are “contingencies,” but they are so closely linked to the recognition of problems that it is difficult to think of these problems without also immediately recalling the contingencies. Memorial laws and policies, such as “Megan’s Law” and “Amber Alerts,” the Brady Bill and the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety

Act (Surette 2011:3) all inscribe particular contexts into collective memory through naming practices.

- 3) The indexicality of meaning in context:** As some academics, especially ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts, have noted, the meaning of speech and behavior is highly dependent upon the settings in which it takes place. Thus, while the words of an utterance may have general meanings that can be found in standard dictionaries, the actual sense of a word or an utterance will vary a great deal according to the situations in which it occurs. For instance, the expression “to swipe a card” might refer simply to a routine transaction at the checkout counter of a retail store (in the economic context of shopping), or it might refer to the theft of a credit card (in the legal context of a criminal investigation).

The same contextual indexicality applies to behavioral moves and counter-moves occurring sequentially over periods of time. For instance, in the fall of 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri, a largely African-American suburb of St. Louis, a white police officer fatally shot an unarmed black teenager whom he claimed had attacked him. This led immediately to claims by community members of racist violence on the part of law enforcement and to both peaceful protests and episodes of violence. Throughout the process, interested parties interpreted the behavior of participants in terms of the emergent set of moves (i.e., the unfolding context) that conferred reciprocal meaning on one another. For example, the revelation that blood from the deceased was found in the police cruiser became “a cover-up” in the minds of local protesters, and

leaked testimony from grand jury proceedings became “a signal” from the authorities intended to prevent further violence.

4) The simultaneous multiplicity of contexts:

Because socio-cultural phenomena are complex, claims-makers and analysts may recognize multiple types of context as simultaneously present. Thus, a particular social problem debate, such as whether or not the federal government should rescue the American auto industry, can be understood in terms of a context that is both economic (e.g., the decline of the industry and the loss of many previously well paid jobs) and political (e.g., a divided Congress in which Democrats have ties to organized labor, and Republicans resist government interference with business). Other factors, such as the industrial policies of Germany, Japan, or South Korea, might also qualify as relevant components of a multiplex context that is useful for reading events.²

5) **Levels of context: micro, meso, macro:** Participants in social problem debates act with an orientation towards at least a double context. For example, while taking part in a public, non-violent protest (the micro context), they also presumably have some sense of participating in the process of “redress of grievances” permitted under the Constitution of the United States (the macro context). Their action is based on knowledge of both situational norms and a larger cultural framework with-

in which these are located. Therefore, as a rule, an adequate definition of the situation requires a stipulation of both types of context.

6) **Context as claims-makers’ construction:** Social problem claims-makers often make very explicit statements about perceived features of the contexts in which they see themselves acting, including both immediate and more distant aspects of settings. For example, claims-makers who point to alleged violations of Title IX of the federal civil rights code have stated their belief that an epidemic of sexual assaults has been underway for some time at colleges and universities around the nation, in which young women were the primary victims.

As they engage in such definitional work, claims-makers in the United States have a great deal of freedom, all the more so because most claims-making occurs informally (Nichols 2003) and is not closely monitored.³ They can draw upon a broad range of cultural resources that includes popular culture and folklore, as well as mass media programming and more respected scientific and technical information. At the same time, they can also employ more restricted resources, such as the teachings of particular religions. They can even make use of negative stereotypes and in-group

³ In my view, constructionists have tended to view claims-making as similar to a social movement, and thus to regard outcomes (e.g., “drunk driving”) as the achievements of issue-oriented organizations that seek maximum publicity (e.g., Mothers Against Drunk Driving). While there is much truth in this, such an approach overlooks informal claims-making (e.g., complaining about tax increases while sharing a beer) that is probably much more widespread. Most informal claims-making is probably simply “expressive,” but some helps to build a “climate of opinion” that leads to public claims-making. Such informal-formal linkages offer opportunities for research.

prejudices in ways that would not be permissible for academic analysts. All of this is protected by the constitutional guarantee of free speech, although some constraints exist, especially the risk of litigation when constructions seem to others to be libelous or defamatory.

7) **Analysts’ context work:** As they construe the contexts of social problems claims-making, academic analysts likewise enjoy much freedom, but their activities are also constrained by the norms of scholarship and science, and by codes of professional ethics. Whatever their personal beliefs, they cannot openly employ some stereotypes available to less regulated popular claims-makers without risking discipline from their peers and their employers. Nor can they draw upon personal religious beliefs and allege in professional publications that the context of social problem claims-making is, for instance, “the final days before the second coming of the Lord.”

In practice, academic analysts tend to define the contexts of social problem debates along conventionalized lines acceptable in sociology and related fields. Thus, most sociologists might cite “post-modernity” or globalization as relevant settings for a broad range of issues. Others, sharing the widespread but less extensive disciplinary culture of “conflict sociology,” would frequently construe context in terms such as “patriarchy” or “the world system.” Only a relative few would assert that sociologists should understand such apparently unrelated problems as sexually transmitted disease epidemics and corporate illegality via the context of “the over-ripe phase of Sensate culture” and

“the crisis of our age” (Sorokin 1982). But, sociologists have justified all of these approaches in terms of disciplinary standards.

When we examine the constructionist literature, however, we encounter a strange anomaly or inconsistency. While analysts take care to understand social problems as definitional activities and their outcomes, they frequently treat contexts as mere “conditions” and not as constructs that they, as well as social problem claims-makers, have defined. Economic systems, political administrations, social strata, racism, sexism, and so on are “simply there” to be referenced in a non-problematic way. Such treatments, however, gloss over the selective agency required to generate notions of relevant contexts (Woolgar and Pawluch 1985).

Needless to say, claims-makers operating on the basis of popular culture, common-sense, or folklore would often find the constructs of academic analysts largely incomprehensible, if indeed they considered them at all. Realizing this, many academics have called for the development of a “public sociology” along the lines advocated by Michael Burawoy (2005) that might initiate a dialogue and bridge the gulfs between at least some competing constructions of contemporary issues (Nichols 2003; 2007; Jeffries 2009).

Another complicating issue here is whether social scientific work can legitimately be done from an “advocacy” stance, an issue that has been debated in the U.S. at least since the publication of Howard Becker’s (1967) influential article, “Whose Side Are We On?” Recently, variants of a conflict

² The issue of simultaneous contexts brings to mind Patricia Hill Collins’s influential notion of “intersectionality.” For instance, in her *Black Sexual Politics* she examines race, gender, and sexuality together.

approach have become widespread to the point where this perspective might be considered sociological orthodoxy in the United States—or at least an approximation to it in a fragmented discipline (Turner 2006; Turner 2013). The question therefore arises whether sociologists of social problems tend to construct contexts of claims-making in the terms favored by groups they regard as oppressed and whose interests they hope to serve—especially if “liberation sociology” (Feagin and Vera 2008) or the struggle against inequality has indeed become a “sacred project” in the field (Smith 2014). Such constructions might be regarded as “alignment moves” that link the identities of analysts to those of selected others. Interestingly, while sociologists frequently criticize the use of “folk devils” by other claims-makers (Cohen 2004; Rothe and Muzzatti 2008), they themselves arguably tend to populate definitions of context with their own “sociological folk devils” (e.g., neoliberals, conservative Republicans, corporate lobbyists).

Of course, the question can be reversed to inquire whether analysts tend to construe contexts in the terms favored by dominant elites or other system-maintaining groups. Ultimately, it is the same question, namely, whether analysts can or must define context in partisan terms or whether a scientific stance offers an alternative that is both more intellectually autonomous and more encompassing, even more compassionate (Nichols 2012). Perhaps analysts could also adopt a holistic and dialogical stance, one that would be Integral (in Pitirim Sorokin’s sense [1964]) and which permits the recognition of truth in opposed viewpoints. Or, they might take the roles of all participants, in

George Herbert Mead’s sense (1967), and seek to act for the benefit of all concerned. In other words, in constructing contexts, we could opt to see truth as complex and even paradoxical rather than merely dichotomous and partisan.⁴

Convergent and Divergent Constructions of Context

Given the range of possibilities, it is highly unlikely that all participants in social problem debates will define contexts in the same way. In some cases, there may be a relatively high degree of consensus. For example, many would agree that a key context for the recent debate over the expansion of federal power and its dangers for civil liberties has been the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the U.S. In other cases, the degree of consensus about context may be very low. During the 1993 disaster in Waco, Texas, for instance, participants in law enforcement seem to have been influenced by a sense of context as a nationwide increase in anti-government paramilitary activity (e.g., the “militia movement”), whereas religious members of the Branch Davidian compound oriented their behavior in terms of a presumed context of “the final days” of the Earth. Indeed, these divergent senses of context

⁴ A famous example of non-dichotomous, paradoxical truth appears in the history of physics where opposed factions eventually agreed that light was both a particle and a wave—a phenomenon considered impossible within the dominant paradigm of the era. As regards sociology, I have elsewhere expressed concern (Nichols 2012) about the prevalence and harmful effects of an “enemies mentality” that is linked to otherwise worthwhile efforts to promote social justice. I believe that figures such as Lev Tolstoy, Jane Addams, Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar Chavez, and Mother Teresa have demonstrated the possibility of working for change without stereotyping, vilifying, and demonizing those with different views, even when they were arguably oppressors (Nichols 2014).

were probably an important factor leading to the tragic loss of more than seventy lives.

Consideration of these issues adds a dimension to constructionist analyses, at a level different from that of typical claims and counter-claims. For example, Planned Parenthood and the National Right to Life organizations differ not only about the values of “pro-choice” and “pro-life”; they differ as well in their understandings of the situation in which their debate is occurring. Those on the Planned Parenthood side would likely define context in terms of a historically patriarchal society and culture and a contemporary civil rights era. Right to Life advocates, by contrast, would likely see context as an age of increasingly materialistic and self-centered systems of ethics. In the Planned Parenthood notion of context, the option of terminating a pregnancy would be a step towards liberation comparable to the refusal of African-Americans to sit in the back of the bus in the segregated South, that is, a step towards progress and justice. For Right to Life activists, however, ending the life of a developing child would be another excess of permissiveness in a society already marked by the disintegration of families and an overarching “culture of death.” It might even be said that the real conflict here is not so much “about” abortion as it is about sharply opposed views of the larger situation.

“Context Work”

As the “pro-choice” versus “pro-life” debate indicates, social problem claims-makers and social science analysts invest much time and effort in a re-

lated process that might be called context work.⁵ The focus of these activities is the maintenance, with modifications over time, of a general image of context that can be applied across a range of social issues as these arise. This idea is similar to what functional sociologists liked to call “pattern maintenance” (Parsons 1951) in social systems, and the corresponding behavior is observable in diverse groups all across the ideological spectrum. Even the most liberal or “radical left” groups exhibit a profoundly conservative impulse in this regard, by “remaining true to core values.”

Generally speaking, context work occurs in the background and backstage (Goffman 1959). As such, it has less visibility than the related activities that take place in claims-making campaigns that seek attention from external audiences (Best 2013) or in highly publicized books, articles, and reports on current controversies. Most context work, in other words, is done by and for members of particular groups who share a certain outlook. Its orientation is primarily internal. When successful, context work maintains solidarity and also creates a tendency to see newly arising issues in a particular way, as well as a shared emotional state that might be loosely described as “readiness for battle.”

As they engage in context work, groups of all persuasions maintain a sense of shared identity that locates their collective selfhood in relation to selected reference points and reference groups (both friendly and antagonistic). Many social scientists in the U.S., for example, work hard to sustain a sense

⁵ Jim Holstein and Gale Miller’s writings on “social problems work” influenced the choice of this term.

of being “on the left” and engaging in resistance to an oppressive social order based on race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. The American Sociological Association arguably facilitates such context work by submitting a series of “progressive” *amicus curiae* briefs in controversial court cases, by passing resolutions attacking policies considered “on the right,” and by adopting left-oriented themes for its annual conferences (Smith 2014). Meanwhile, opposed groups invest much energy in maintaining a sense of themselves as American patriots surrounded by an expanding New World Order that threatens national sovereignty. Other, more optimistic groups—through academic courses, publications, speeches, conferences, professional associations, and so forth—maintain the contextual image of a new era of “conscious capitalism” (Aburdene 2007; Mackey and Sisodia 2014) in which the business sector will contribute to human flourishing on a global basis.

Importantly, such context work spills over into social problems claims-making. Thus, having reinforced among themselves the sense of acting in an overarching context of increasing right-wing power, activists and academics on the left were quick to perceive the 2010 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* as a disastrous policy that opened the gates to unlimited corporate spending in election campaigns. Liberals circulated proposals for a “People’s Amendment” to the Constitution that would overturn the decision (Clements 2012). Conservatives and libertarians, meanwhile, having sustained the sense of an out-of-control-government context, reacted very differently, and raised the alarm that the Federal Elec-

tion Commission had actually banned free speech (i.e., a critical documentary) in violation of the First Amendment. Thus, both sides understood *Citizens United* as a reflection of the generalized contextual images to which they were committed in advance.

If, as Shakespeare famously wrote, *all the world’s a stage*, and if particular social problem debates are dramas that have a temporary “run” in the theater, context work is the background effort to sustain shared definitions of “the type of stage on which we appear.”

Researching Context

I will offer several related suggestions for building a more fully developed contextual methodology.

Assessing the relative importance of contexts:

A basic challenge facing analysts seeking to understand how a particular social problem construct (and its consequences) emerged is to weigh the relative importance and impact of numerous, possibly relevant contexts of interaction. At present, there are no widely agreed upon procedures comparable to those of quantitative researchers who narrow down a set of predictors by examining bivariate correlations between independent and dependent variables, and then entering the stronger predictors into regression equations. As Holstein and Gubrium (2006:281) comment: “[s]ocial structure, social class, social integration, social disorganization, and other overarching constructs are commonly invoked without empirical specification or description of just what these social ‘things’ might amount to in the situation being examined.”

Thus, if contexts are keys to a deeper understanding of events, how many keys—and which ones—should analysts use? This question is extremely difficult to answer. Much seems to depend on an intuitive sense, which might also be influenced by the analyst’s ideological commitments, that relating claims-making activities to one or more specific reference points will illumine the process. Decisions might also depend on such situational factors as the space available to analysts. More, obviously, might be done in a book, where individual chapters might trace the influence of specific contexts, than is possible within the shorter compass of a journal article.

For example, Craig Reinerman and Harry G. Levine (2008:41-45) examine the federal “war on drugs” of the 1980s through the lens of “the political context of the ‘crack crisis.’” They further specify this context in terms of two components: (1) the recent rise of the political “New Right” and (2) the competition among political parties in a conservative climate of opinion. Having assumed this stance, they attempt to demonstrate ways in which the political context influenced how politicians adopted particular issues, how it affected the content of claims they made (e.g., about a drug “epidemic”), and how it affected the tactics they employed in claims-making arenas. Reinerman and Levine do not tell readers why other possibly relevant contexts did not receive comparable attention. A discussion of other, non-political situational factors, such as the dramatic increase in the availability of drugs, including the thousands of new compounds introduced each year by the pharmaceutical industry, might also have enriched the analysis. On the

other hand, one might ask: Is it really desirable to trace in detail the apparent effects of six or eight or ten contextual factors? Would readers find such analyses comprehensible? Would publishers agree to such research designs?

An examination of a range of constructionist studies suggests that researchers often apply from zero to three contexts in empirical work, and perhaps this provides a sense of what is practicable. For instance, Michael Lipsky and Steven Rathgeb Smith (1989) provide a non-contextualized analysis of the process of treating social problems as “emergencies.”

Other studies apply a single context as a key to understanding events. For example, John Johnson (1995) locates his analysis of the defining characteristics of social problem “horror stories” in the context of a nationwide recognition of the problem of “child abuse.”⁶ Similarly, my own analysis (Nichols 1995) of perceived problems in U.S.-Japanese relations relied primarily on a single context, namely, fluctuations in the Cold War between the U.S. and the former Soviet Union. A number of studies use a dual-contextual key. Donileen Loseke (1995) approached efforts to construct the “homeless mentally ill” in terms of two contexts, namely, the community mental health movement and the increasing trend of homelessness (with briefer mentions of other contextual factors). Jun Ayukawa (2001)

⁶ Johnson’s discussion of decontextualization as a basic feature of published horror stories underscores again the indispensability of context for meaningfulness. In other words, the absence of context in published accounts of violence against children makes the violence seem senseless and maximizes stories’ shock value.

likewise identified the governmental structure of Japan (where the Ministry of Finance was deeply involved with the nation's tobacco business), along with U.S.-Japan trade relations as a dual context for understanding constructions of "the smoking problem" in Japan.

Still, other studies apply three contextual keys. Thus, Philip Jenkins (1995), in his analysis of the construction of clergy sexual abuse, points to three significant contexts: changing practices within mass media organizations, an increasingly litigious climate, and political factors. In the same way, Kristin Luker (2008) examines claims about "babies having babies" within a tripartite context consisting of a sexual revolution, a reproductive revolution, and economic transformations in the U.S.

Noticing unobtrusive contexts: Constructionists, it seems fair to say, have cultivated the skill of "noticing what gets noticed" and "noticing what does not get noticed" in the definition of social problems and in responses to them. Therefore, in undertaking contextual analysis, constructionists should be careful not to limit themselves to factors that are especially evident or dramatic, such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the U.S. or a landslide electoral victory. Some of the most significant factors may be relatively unobtrusive or unnoticed.

A good example is differential fluctuations in the birth rates in particular nations. In the cases of both Northern Ireland and Israel, the relatively higher birth rates of historically subordinate groups (Catholics and Arabs) will very likely prove to be "game changers." Unless present trends are

reversed, within the next several decades Catholics will constitute a majority of the population in Northern Ireland, and Arabs will be the majority within Israel. As this process moves forward, we can anticipate claims in both nations on the part of groups currently in the majority, who will very likely begin to feel endangered.

Mapping significant shifts in contexts: During a period of social problems claims-making, relevant contexts may remain relatively stable or they may change in important ways. For example, as I pointed out in an earlier study (Nichols 1995), when the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union ended, claims by government officials about "the problem of Japan" changed rather dramatically. During the Cold War period, federal officials had tended to downplay complaints about Japan's alleged unfair trading practices, and to emphasize Japan's crucial role as an American ally. When the Soviet Union collapsed, however, the same officials escalated their claims about problems with Japan, and went so far as to characterize that nation in terms of the negative stigmas previously applied to the Soviet "evil empire."

Examining claims-makers' strategic uses of context: James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium (2006) call for a rather counter-intuitive approach to the study of context in which context is not simply a setting but is also something that interacting persons can "take into their own hands" and turn to their own purposes. Focusing on conversational interaction, they state, "[i]n our view, context is best treated as an interpretive resource rather than a deterministic condition" (Holstein and Gubrium 2006:269).

This might be termed an "instrumental" and agency-oriented reading of context.

Philip Jenkins has also contributed analyses of this type, which are based on the idea of interest groups. For instance, in his study of the social construction of serial killing, *Using Murder* (Jenkins 1994), he notes how a number of parties sought to exploit ongoing claims-making about the issue in order to further pre-existing agendas. Prominent among these were feminists who tended to view serial murder as "femicide" and who used this issue to push for recognition of the more general problem of violence against women. Similarly, in work on constructions of clergy sexual abuse and "pedophile priests," Jenkins points to efforts by Catholic reformers to turn this issue to their advantage.

Such exemplars indicate a potentially fruitful direction for future constructionist work. Jenkins's research also suggests that the issue of legitimacy is likely to be a key consideration in empirical studies. In both of the cases he examined, a claims-maker group appealed to an emergent social problem context as evidence of the legitimacy of its own views and as a means of discrediting its opponents' views. Constructionist analysts might explore such uses of context as "strategic interaction," in Erving Goffman's (1970) sense, and perhaps think in terms of "context gaming."

The same issue applies to analysts who might "game" context by constructing it with an eye towards professional rewards. As game-wise players, they will realize that their interpretive work in-

volves risks and has consequences. If, for instance, they define the context of social problems in terms of currently hegemonic paradigms in their field (whether functional analysis several decades ago, or conflict theory more recently), they may gain professional benefits, including academic appointments, election to high offices in national associations, coverage in mass media—perhaps even paid speaking engagements. If, on the other hand, they define social problem contexts in terms of marginal perspectives (e.g., evolutionary biology) or discredited approaches (e.g., Herrnstein and Murray's [1994] "bell curve" of social class, race, and intelligence), their work may meet with rejection from peers, journal editors, and book publishers. Putting it another way, when analysts construct context in their practice of "normal science" (Kuhn 2012), they tend to produce "normalized" contexts that peers will respect and to ignore other factors—however relevant from a more detached intellectual perspective—whose application might lead to penalties. All of this is grounded in a continuous stream of cues that people entering the field receive from the time of their earliest coursework in sociology.

Avoiding contextual determinism: Knowledge of relevant contexts provides valuable insight into processes of social problem construction. But, this should not be taken to mean that contexts fully determine those dynamics in the sense that they had to take the particular forms they did. As Holstein and Gubrium (2006:280) put it, "[r]esearchers should be wary of conferring determinative powers upon aspects of context." In other words, contextualization should not be confused with

causation. For example, it would be wrong to conclude that claims about a post-9/11 “war on terror” had to take the particular shape they acquired, that there had to be a Patriot Act, or that “waterboarding” had to be implemented as a technique for “intensive interrogation” that evaded the legal standard for “torture.” Participants in social problem debates act with a sense of context, but the choices they make are not deducible from contextual parameters in any mechanical way.

Conclusion

I have offered reflections on how constructionist scholars might benefit by developing more fully the concept of context, as well as that of contextual understanding, and also by building up a more complete accompanying methodology for empirical research.

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I make no pretense of offering complete treatise on the issue of contextual understanding, but perhaps this is one small step in the right direction. My hope is that colleagues engaged in constructionist analysis will draw on some of the ideas presented here and thereby contribute to an invigorated future for the perspective. No matter what that future holds, I am confident that the interpretive tradition in sociology will endure. As part of that living tradition, which focuses on how human persons create meaning and then apply it in interaction, the constructionist approach to social problems has much to offer.

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Bringing Historical Dimensions Into the Study of Social Problems: The Social Construction of Authority

Abstract Appeals to authority have always played a key role in the construction of social problems. Authority legitimates claims, which is why claim-makers have always sought its validation. An exploration into the historical dimension of the social construction of authority provides insight into changing foundations on which claims about social problems are made. In contrast to the Middle Ages, the modern era has found it difficult to gain consensus on the meaning of authority. This historical shift in the status of authority provides the context for contemporary competitive claims-making about social problems.

Keywords Authority; Legitimacy; Social Problems; Claims; Tradition

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Whether implicitly or explicitly, the social constructionist sociology of knowledge has always been oriented towards the problem of authority. For Emile Durkheim, the constitution of moral authority represented the fundamental question facing sociology. In his classic, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, he noted that the “problem of sociology—if we can speak of a sociological problem—consists in seeking among the different forms of external constraint, the different forms of moral authority corresponding to them, and in discovering the causes which have determined these latter” (Durkheim 1968:208). Today, even if by its absence, the problem of moral authority dominates the landscape of social problem construction and claims-making.

Claims-making always has been a competitive enterprise; but, this competition has become complicated by the fact that the authority or authorities it appeals to are also intensely contested. Who speaks on behalf of the child or the victim? Whose account of global warming is authoritative? Those in authority look for the authorization of others to validate their claims. Scientists and advocacy organizations seek alliances with authoritative celebrities. Governments appeal to the evidence of experts to justify their policies, and their initiatives appeal to “new research” for legitimation. As Giddens (1991:194) notes, in the absence of “determinant authorities,” there “exist plenty of claimants to authority—far more than was true of pre-modern cultures.”

Authority has never been entirely a taken-for-granted institution. Even during the Middle Ages, often described as an epoch of tradition and religion, competing claims to authority often disrupted public life. Yet the demands raised by medieval claims-makers appealed to a shared religious and cultural legacy and did not fundamentally query the authority of authority. In the centuries to follow, the range of issues subjected to competing claims has both expanded and assumed a more profound quality. The proliferation of competing claims-making today is a symptom of the difficulty that society has in elaborating a shared narrative of validation. Historically, the question of how to validate and give meaning to authority has been posed and answered in different ways.

It is widely recognized that claim-making involves socially constructing an issue or a problem.

What is less frequently discussed is the way that claim-making involves both an appeal to and the construction of authority. The aim of this essay is to explore the social construction of authority in a historical perspective in order to draw out some of its distinctive features in the contemporary era.

The Problem of Authority

Authority is a relational concept, and its study inevitably touches on the question of what makes people perceive commands and institutions as authoritative. Genuine authority possesses a compelling power to motivate and gain obedience. It is closely associated with power and particularly the power to persuade, yet remains distinct from it. As Arendt (2006) and others have argued, persuasion through the use of argument is alien to the concept of authority. The very need to persuade is usually a testimony to authority’s absence (Lincoln 1994:5). Authority’s capacity to guide people’s behavior is an outcome of a moral influence which, when allied to the power to compel, can gain obedience without either having to argue or to threaten.

Authority should not be equated with, or reduced to, the act of justification. It already contains a warrant for influencing and directing behavior and does not have to continually justify itself: Once authority has to be self-consciously justified, it is well on the way to losing its unquestioned status. Authority rests on a foundation that warrants its exercise and for the right to expect obedience. Throughout history, such foundational norms—divine authority, tradition and customs, reason and science, popular consent—provided the resources

for narratives of validation. Weber (1978) appeared less than certain whether political rule in his time could be underpinned by a form of foundational authority, and as we note elsewhere, the absence of any explicit engagement with this question represents a conspicuous gap in his sociology of domination (Furedi 2013).

Since the beginning of modernity, authority has invariably been deemed problematic. Hannah Arendt (2006:91) put matters most starkly when she declared that “authority has vanished.” She took it for granted “that most will agree that a constant, ever-widening, and deepening crisis of authority has accompanied the development of the modern world in our century” (Arendt 2006:91). In her account, the crisis of authority is not confined to the domain of the political—she suggests that it exercises great significance in every dimension of social experience. As she observes in a passage of great interest to sociologists:

the most significant symptom of the crisis, indicating its depth and seriousness, is that it has spread to such pre-political areas as child-rearing and education, where authority in the widest sense has always been accepted as a natural necessity, obviously required as much by natural needs, the helplessness of the child, as by political necessity, the continuity of an established civilization which can be assured only if those who are newcomers by birth are guided through a pre-established world into which they are born as strangers. (Arendt 2006:91-92)

That the contestation of authority pervades the pre-political spheres of everyday life is shown by

today’s acrimonious debates over issues of marriage, child-rearing, health, lifestyles, and the conduct of personal relationships.

In contemporary times where authority has to continually justify itself and is continually contested, the authority of authority requires reflection. Authority is not a taken-for-granted institution. Concern with “crisis of authority” has expanded and encompasses questions such as “trust,” “confidence,” and “competing knowledge claims” (Furedi 2013). Lack of certainty about the authority of authority is both an encouragement to social problems claims-making and to its contestation.

Claims about social problems are “connected through the great inventory of cultural resources” argues Joel Best (1999:164). Such resources are created through a common understanding of what a community values, fears, and trusts. Foundational norms that serve to authorize a claim are among the most important cultural resources available for claims-makers. Historically competing visions of authority have drawn on foundational norms such as the authority of the past, the authority of religion, the authority of the people/nation/public opinion, the authority of the Great (charismatic) Leader, the authority of the law, or the authority of science and the expert (Furedi 2013:279-298).

Today, as in the past, every claim about a social problem seeks validation from one or more foundational norms. As Hannigan (2006:35) wrote, warrants, which are “justifications for demanding that action be taken,” are central to the rhetoric of claims making—yet warrants must be linked to

some form of authority for legitimating the claim. As Driedger and Eyles (2003:478) state, “it is primarily in the warrants where the greatest challenge lies to any claim.” Challenging the values and interests motivating a claim invariably targets its legitimacy. From this perspective, the contemporary controversies surrounding the authority of science and of the expert represent the latest phase in the quest for foundational authority.

Conceptualizing the Problem of Foundational Authority

Max Weber’s sociology of domination exercises a powerful influence on the conceptualization of authority in the social sciences: a point illustrated by the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre’s (2007:109) statement that “we know of no justifications for authority which are not Weberian in form.” Weber’s writings indicate that he was profoundly interested in, but also deeply troubled by, the problem of authority. Weber argued that in the modern world legal-rational rules constituted the foundation for authority. But, he also was aware of the limited potential that legal-rational rules have to inspire belief in the legitimacy of the political order. Turner (1992:185) observed that in “Weber’s sociology of law and in his political writings, the disenchantment of capitalist society precludes the possibility of any normative legitimation of the state.”

The question of “normative legitimation” constitutes what I characterize as the historical problem of foundation. Rules, procedures, and laws possess no intrinsic authority; as the legal scholar Harold Berman (1983:16) states, the law “in all societies...

derives its authority from something outside itself.” That “something” which is separate from, and logically prior to, the formulation of a rule or the codification of a law is the *source* or the *foundation* of its authority. When “a legal system undergoes rapid change,” notes Berman (1983:16), “questions are inevitably raised concerning the legitimacy of the sources of its authority.”

The social theorist, David Beetham, provides an important insight into the problem of foundation in his discussion of the relationship between legitimacy and the law. He contends that legality, on its own, “cannot provide a fully adequate or self-sufficient criterion of legitimacy” (Beetham 1991:67). Conflicts of interpretation about the meaning of law invariably attempt to justify their claims by “reference to a basic principle,” which refers to “norms or an authoritative source that lies beyond existing rules” (Beetham 1991:67). Beetham (1991:67) asserts that the compelling power of rules, their moral authority, requires that they are “normatively binding” and based upon a “common framework of belief.” The problem of foundational norms constitutes one of the fundamental questions facing public life:

[w]hat is the ultimate source of law and social rules, from whence do they derive their authority, what provides the guarantee of their authenticity or validity—these are questions that concern the most fundamental of a society’s beliefs, its metaphysical basis...which cannot itself be questioned. (Beetham 1991:69-79)

The “ultimate source” that validates society’s laws and conventions has been subject to historical

variations. In the past, it has been served by tradition and custom, divine command, popular will and consent, and the doctrine of science.

Weber's sociology of domination attempts to analyze the foundation of authority as consisting of different sources of legitimation. He argues that it is "rare" for rulers to rely merely on "one or other" of the pure types, and reminds us "that the basis of every authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey, is a *belief*, a belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige" (Weber 1978:263). This focus on belief raises the question of "belief in what?" It is evident that Weber is referring to some kind of foundational norm. Weber (1978:263) states that "the composition of this belief is seldom altogether simple," and that in the case of "legal authority" it is never purely legal. Moreover, "belief in legality comes to be established and habitual, and this means that it is partly traditional"; and consequently, "violation of the tradition may be fatal to it" (Weber 1978:263). Weber also asserts that authority even has a charismatic dimension, "at least in the negative sense that persistent and striking lack of success may be sufficient to ruin any government, to undermine its prestige, and to prepare the way for charismatic revolution." At the same time, "entirely pure charismatic authority is rare" (Weber 1978:263-264).

The problem of foundation demands an engagement with history. As Quentin Skinner (1998:105), the pre-eminent historian of political concepts, observed, political theory and action continually draw on the legitimation of the past since "what

is possible to do in politics, is generally limited by what is possible to legitimize." In turn, "what you can hope to legitimize" depends on "what courses of action you can plausibly range under existing normative principles" (Skinner 1998:105). Historically, the imperative to legitimate claims has provided an invitation to social construction.

The Emergence of Authority

The idea of political authority gained shape and definition during the evolution of the Roman republic. Although the meaning of sociological concepts are subject to historical variations, it is in Rome that many of the themes and problems associated with the modern understanding of authority—tradition, religion, morality, competing visions of the past—emerged with force. As one of the most insightful reviews of the history of this idea concluded:

[t]here is common agreement that the idea of authority, in the full range of meanings that have given it an integral intellectual life to the present, has its origins during the Roman Republic with the coinage of the distinctive term, *auctoritas*, to cover several kinds of primarily, albeit not exclusively legal relationships. (Krieger 1968:163)

The Romans expressly attempted to consolidate a powerful sense of tradition and continuity. They self-consciously went about the business of constructing tradition as a solution to social problem. The Emperor Augustus was an inventor of traditions and the constructor of social problems such as the loss of moral standards and traditional virtues

(Furedi 2013:63-66). The affirmation of continuity with its connotations of a thriving and living tradition played an important role in the construction of a unique Roman sensibility towards authority. As Rawson (1985:322) remarked, the Romans continually wrote about their past and were self-consciously devoted to their ancestors, traditions, and customs. It is at this point in time that the social construction of the problem of tradition and claims based on it gained a self-conscious expression.

The Roman constitution or, to put it more accurately, constitutional arrangement, expressed a powerful sense of continuity with the past, as well as an open orientation towards further development in the future. It offered a synthesis of tradition with a willingness to adapt to new experience. It was a product of social construction engineered through successive generations. It codified a myth of common origin as the foundation for authority and the making of claims based upon it. Cicero (2008:35) noted that since "no collection of able people at a single point of time could have sufficient foresight to take into account of everything; there had to be practical experience over a long period of history."

The emphasis which Cicero and others placed on foundation as a sacred moment in the constitution of the community was motivated by the understanding that a consensus on common origins and a way of life was essential if the city was to cope with the internal tensions and external pressures that confronted it. From 250 B.C. onwards, a series of major foreign wars and imperial expansion irrevocably transformed the Roman world in a way

that began to expose the "weakness of a governmental system that relied upon respect for authority and adherence to tradition" (Shotter 2005:10). In such circumstances, tradition needed be nurtured and cultivated.

As one overview of this period noted, "constant expansion required a basic consensus at home" (Flower 2004:9). That is why arguably the Romans were not simply traditionalists but also self-consciously traditionalists! For Cicero, the foundation for belief, including religious belief, was tradition. The founding of Rome was presented as the culmination of historical events that could never be recreated. It was an authoritative event that contained within itself the potential to authorize. In her reflections on this process, Arendt (2006) posits the act of foundation as the source of authority. The act of foundation represents a unique experience which Roman tradition developed to authorize belief and behavior.

The Latin term *auctoritas*, from which the word "authority" is derived, expresses the Roman orientation towards origins and tradition. Its meaning is captured by phrases such as "being in authority," "speaking with authority," or "moral authority." The root of *auctoritas* is *augere*—to initiate, set in motion, to found something, or to make something to grow. This usage of the term communicates the ideal of a foundational authority which someone develops (augments) and moves forward into the present. According to Hopfl (1999:219), *auctoritas* "is a capacity to initiate and to inspire respect," and in this respect the moral quality of authority is emphasized.

It is useful to remind ourselves of the historical relationship between *auctoritas* and authority for it helps highlight its foundational aspiration. As Friedman (1990:74-75) points out, from the perspective of *auctoritas*, “a person with authority has been understood to be someone to whom a decision or opinion can be traced back as the source of that decision or opinion or else, as someone who carries forward into the present, continues or ‘augments’ some founding act or line of action started in the past.” The Founding Fathers of the America’s revolutionary generation provide a paradigmatic example of the working of *auctoritas*.

Authority in Question

The disintegration of Roman civilization in the fifth century had a devastating impact on European societies. The unified system of administration institutionalized during the Roman Empire gave way to fragmentation and a highly unstable form of rule. In the absence of a recognized ethos of authority, no stable institutions of governance emerged to provide a focus for cultural unity. Latin Christianity was the only institution that could contain or at least minimize the tendency towards political fragmentation. The Church itself lacked unity and it took centuries for the establishment of an effective papal monarchy which could serve as a focus for spiritual unity. The pope served as a symbol of religious authority of a medieval Europe that shared a common religion.

One of the principal questions confronting Europe in the Early Middle Ages was how to establish and give meaning to authority. The Church

of Rome sought to claim authority on the grounds that it was responsible for the spiritual guidance of Christendom. Although the Church was militarily weak, the “[p]opes were enormously influential as custodians of ideational bonds that continued to hold medieval society (*populous christianus*) together” (Damaska 1985:1813). Despite the absence of order, medieval Christian culture could draw upon the legacy of the Roman past, and possessed an idealized version of how authority worked in previous times.

The distinctive feature of medieval authority was the idea of divided lordship. This idea was based on the principle “that human society was controlled by two authorities, a spiritual, as well as a temporal, represents the development of what is one of the most characteristic differences between the ancient and the modern world” (Parsons 1963:42). Unlike other religions, Christianity accepted what sociologist Talcott Parsons (1963:42-43) has characterized as a “fundamental *differentiation* between church and state” and between secular and religious authority.

Medieval Europe was continually preoccupied with the fragility of authoritative institutions, and consequently drawn towards constructing, elaborating, and innovating ideas about authority. All the main doctrinal and political disputes of the Middle Age were expressions of the impulse to seek a resolution to this problem. “Twelfth-century political thought was preoccupied with the legitimacy of political institutions and of governing authority,” states one study of this period (Benson 1991:339). Throughout this period the relationship

between religious and secular institutions was one of tension; but, it was a form of tension that contained the potential for both conflict and harmony.

This tension was immanent in the uneasy relationship between spiritual and temporal authority, and expressed through a ceaseless attempt to assert, claim, and contest authority. As a result, every assertion of supreme authority was challenged by counter-claims. Arguments about authority from the past were continually rehearsed and elaborated by medieval claims-makers, who most often were lawyers. Typically, competing claims about the nature of social problems were based on either Roman or Canon Law.

Parsons (1963:49) noted that the “differentiation of the church *from* secular society” and its institutionalization was one of the distinct features of Western socio-cultural development. For Weber, the differentiation of society into two independent spheres represented a significant contrast with the workings of other cultures. He wrote that “at least from a sociological viewpoint, the Occidental Middle Ages were much less of a *unified culture* than those of other societies” and was particularly struck by the remarkable tendency to contest authority (Weber 1978:1193). His statement—“in the Occident, authority was set against authority, legitimacy against legitimacy”—recognized one of the defining features of this era (Weber 1978:1193). In an embryonic form, it also anticipated the kind of conflicts that were to crystallize in modern societies. The competing claims based on sacred or secular authority anticipated disputes between those founded on traditional or scientific authority in modern society.

The differentiation of the two spheres was underwritten by Christian doctrine, which placed great emphasis on the Church’s institutional autonomy and moral authority. This led to the development of what has been described as a “Christian dimension of authority,” which, based on the separation of the Church from temporal rule, introduced a “source of authority independent of political power” (Krieger 1968:146).

The very institutionalization of Church independence created an actual or potential source of alternative authority to that of the feudal ruler. Institutional differentiation between the religious and the secular created the condition for the proliferation of claims-making activities. During the 12th and 13th centuries, secular and religious scholars and thinkers—usually with legal training—were mobilized to provide precedents and arguments to legitimate competing claims to authority.

Old dynasties searched for a new foundation for their authority, papal officials sought to expand the role of Rome in Europe’s temporal affairs, and advocates of city-state autonomy were busy constructing arguments for their independence. In his fascinating account of the contestation of authority within medieval urban centers, Weber (1978:7) noted that “numerous claims to authority stand side by side, overlapping and often conflicting with each other.” The authority of Roman law competed with that of feudal Germanic custom and Christian doctrine. Medieval lawyers had to integrate these “three systems of thought” and reconcile their potentially contradictory claim to authority (Pennington 1991:434).

During the Middle Ages, tradition was constantly tested through acts of interpretation and innovation, and it is difficult to disagree with Ziolkowski's (2009:439) verdict that "the long twelfth century is also a phase of extensive forgery and misattribution," where laws and customs were sometimes invented, and in some cases, directly challenged. But, nevertheless, even in the course of constructing new customs, medieval thinkers and claims-makers believed that they were acting in accordance with tradition. "They believed themselves to believing within a tradition, but actually were in the extended process of constructing one" (Coleman 2000:3).

In the prosperous commercial centers of Italy, rapid social and economic change created a condition of fluidity and instability that tested the influence of traditional authority. In such "relatively unstable circumstances with competing authority claims" (Weber 1978:1254), the traditional rulers authority was often displaced or "usurped" by popular associations led by a new class of prosperous merchants. This urban revolution was frequently legitimized by the construction of legal precedents and procedures (Weber 1978:1254).

Despite the intensity of the contestation of authority, all sides more or less accepted the foundational norms that validated rulership. McCready's (1975:273) study of the doctrinal positions of competing claim-makers concludes that "the major papal theorists and at least some of the antipapalists had much in common." Figgis (1960:26) reminds his readers of "the permanence of fundamental notions amid the most varying forms of expression

and argument." The coexistence of bitter conflict with a shared source of foundational norms meant that debates about authority were conducted within a common moral framework. Gray (2007:197) writes that "in the medieval period, the two centers faced one another as enemies, and yet both claimed authority from the same source, both acknowledged some force behind the enemy's claim of legitimacy, and both governed subjects who maintained loyalty to both."

In the end, the normative foundational unity on which medieval authority was based was tested by territorial fragmentation and the rise of nation states. What finally led to its demise was the expression of territorial divisions through the medium of religious conflict. The religious wars unleashed by the Reformation had grave consequence for the standing of tradition and authority. In the early modern era, foundational unity gave way to fragmentation. Protestant and Catholic claims-makers no longer appealed to the same authority and increasingly drew on different sources of legitimation.

The Demise of Authority

The 16th century Reformation Movement helped to create the conditions for the final unraveling of medieval authority. This movement can be interpreted as at once a cause, a response, and an expression of the moral crisis of the Roman Church. That Luther's break with the Roman Church coincided with the emergence of soon-to-be nation states ensured that controversies over religious doctrines would intersect with secular political conflicts. The ferocity of

theological conflict forced European society to look for an authoritative solution to the problem of endemic disorder and insecurity. Since violent conflicts of interests were expressed through religious disputes, the search for order was drawn towards secular solutions. This encouraged secularity. As a result, authority gradually divested itself of its outward religious appearance and assumed a political form. In the post-Reformation era, authority became increasingly politicized and gradually attached itself to the sovereign nation state.

The detachment of religious validation from power lent authority an increasingly secular character. This desacralization of authority stood in stark contrast to the previous medieval model. Authority was now perceived as conventional and frequently represented as the voluntary creation of consenting individuals. The validation of authority on the basis of ancient origins and tradition also weakened.

Through challenging the moral integrity of the Roman Church, Luther set into motion a chain of events that would lead to fundamental questions being asked about the workings of all forms of authority. "Do I obey my conscience, the established religious creed, my government, or the larger claims of mankind" were the kind of queries raised by Luther's actions (Hurstfield 1965:6). *Here I stand, so help me God, I can no other* was how Luther responded to the demand that he recant his views at the Diet of Worms in April 1521. His statement that he could do no other but act in accordance with his conscience gave voice to a sentiment that would eventually provide legitimation for the act of dis-

obeying authority. The English historian, Christopher Hill (1986:38), went so far as to insist that the "essence of Protestantism—the priesthood of all believers—was logically a doctrine of individualist anarchy." Writing more than three centuries after Luther's remarkable statement, Marx (1975:182) observed that in effect Luther had "shattered faith in authority." What Marx implied was that the sensitizing of European society to the sanctity of individual conscience would inevitably render problematic an unquestioned obedience to external authority. The idea that individual conscience could stand in opposition to authority or at least diverge from it often led to the view that these were principles that were potentially or actually antithetical.

Ideas about the right to resist despotic authority converged with those of the freedom of the inner-person and the acknowledgment of consent as the source of sovereignty to forge a cultural sensibility towards valuation of the authority of the self. This trend was more widely reflected in the rising influence of the conceptual distinction between subject and object and between the internal and external world. The political theorist, Kenneth Minogue (1963:33-34), claims that this reorientation towards psychology constituted a "fundamental blow to authority" since it "freed the inward-oriented individual from the duty to obey external rule."

As the English Civil War demonstrated, the tension between individual protestant conscience and prevailing forms of secular authority proved to be explosive. These dramatic events in England proved to be the precursor of a series of clashes over the constitution of authority. And unlike the

pre-modern disputes, these clashes came to directly involve and affect an ever-widening constituency of the public. In effect, the unraveling of authority, which “expressed itself with peculiar fervor of entrenched religious dogma” mutated into the modern problem of order (Hurstfield 1965:2).

Claim-Makers in Search of Foundational Norms

Situating authority in history is essential for understanding its distinct modern features. A review of the different ways in which the problem of authority has been conceptualized in the past shows an attempt to answer very different questions at different times. So whereas in the post-Reformation era, the demand for authority was fuelled by conflict and rivalry among the European secular and religious elites, in the nineteenth century it was activated by the imperative of containing the threat from below. Consequently, questions about the relation of religious to political authority, obedience, individual conscience, and resistance gave way to concerns about the status of public opinion and the role of democratic consent. In the sixteenth century, debates and conflicts were fuelled by competing visions of what constituted the source of authority; by the nineteenth and especially the twentieth centuries, the very possibility of constructing a normative foundation for authority was put to question.

Authority based on a normative foundation has become very weak; and the very modest role that contemporary social thought has assigned to authority is testimony to its diminishing significance.

Weber (1946:139, 144) believed that rationalization and scientific advance lacked the capacity to generate “ultimate” values. His analysis indicated that capitalist modernization had unleashed a process of rationalization that undermined custom and habit. Implicitly, Weber also understood that the erosion of tradition was not paralleled by the emergence of a mental outlook disposed towards accepting values that bound them to the prevailing order. According to his theory of domination, belief in the legitimacy of the political order grounded in legal and rational norms displaced the justification provided by tradition. However, he had little faith in capacity of rationally-devised rules to influence and inspire the public—which is why he tended to bank on the charismatic and inspirational potential of leaders to legitimate order (Weber 2008:312-313).

Weber’s discovery that the process of modernization and rationalization has tended to diminish authority’s foundation has not stopped social and political thinkers from searching for new ways of validating authority. However, rationalized forms of authority—legal, bureaucratic, scientific—often lacked the moral depth necessary for legitimating the exercise of power.

The progressive rationalization of society meant that science and expertise always had a presence and could be called upon to authorize decisions and actions. Moreover, as older forms of legitimation lose their salience, society becomes increasingly dependent on expert guidance. In his prescient study, *Toward a Rational Society*, Habermas (1987:53) observed that in the post-war period, technology and science worked as a quasi-ideology: he wrote

of the “scientization of political power” and argued that politicians had become increasingly dependent on professionals.

In policy debates about social and public issues, evidence provided by experts is used by all parties to validate their arguments, and even constituencies who are motivated by moral, religious, and political concerns adopt a technocratic, rationalized, and scientific narrative. In recent decades, environmentalists who were formerly suspicious of science and anti-abortion activists who were inspired by a religious ethos have embraced the authority of scientific expertise to justify their cause. This pragmatic, arguably opportunistic, embrace of the authority of science has been pointed out by Steve Yearley (1992:511) in relation to the environmental movement that “has a profound dependence on scientific evidence and scientific expertise,” but “at the same time, many within the green movement are distrustful of scientific authority and fruits of technology.”

That moral discourse is frequently communicated through the language of science, is testimony to the authoritative status of the latter. As one American commentator observes, arguments framed in the language of science trump those expressed through a grammar of morality:

[i]t is especially interesting that both religious and environmentalist voices—voices that in the United States culture often adopt similar rhetoric regarding the inherent wrongness of altering the natural or God-given order—tend to be quieted, especially in comparison to voices that make explicit reference to science or to its use and effects, bad or good. This

makes sense in light of the observation that in the United States culture, science is a very special form of authority. (Priest 2006:210)

The authority of science has become an indispensable resource for claims-making. Nevertheless, the authority of science and expertise is inherently unstable and ambivalent. It possesses the power and authority to weaken traditional attitudes and beliefs, but as Habermas (1976:84) argued, also sets the very standards by which its own claims can be undermined. The open-ended and provisional quality of scientific claims means that they can be adapted and used to support competing and conflicting interests.

A major limitation of science is that it cannot endow human experience with meaning. However, this limitation has not stopped advocates of specific causes from framing their appeals to the authority of science through a normative narrative: Robert Lackey points out that policy and scientific preferences often blend together, and that the moralization of scientific claims has become a regular feature of public life. He noted that in the U.S. “the use of normative science cuts across the ideological spectrum”; “it seems no less common coming from the political Left or Right, from the Greens or the Libertarians” (Lackey 2007:15).

Despite its pre-eminent role as an all-purpose source of authorization, the authority of science constantly invites its contestation. Its authority is continually scrutinized and sometimes subject to a powerful moral anti-scientific critique. So-called scientific advice is frequently questioned and attacked for

allegedly serving a nefarious agenda. Vitriolic moral denunciation is frequently present in discussions about stem cell research, GM food and technology, climate change, fracking, and a variety of other topics. Nevertheless, as Hilgartner (2000:4) argues, “science advice is a ubiquitous source of authority in contemporary Western societies.” The mantra “research shows” has displaced the dogma “for it is written.”

From the standpoint of our investigation of authority in history, we would conclude that the current ascendancy of scientific authority has far less to do with its intrinsic attributes than with the discrediting of other forms of authorization. It is the one form of authorization that is still left standing. That is why even movements that are profoundly suspicious of science seek to appropriate its authority. The embrace of creation science by some fundamentalist religious groups is symptomatic of this trend. As an author of a text on the politicization of science noted, “where religious conservatives may once have advanced their pro-life and socially traditionalist views through moral arguments, they now increasingly adopt the veneer of scientific and technical expertise” (Mooney 2006:75).

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The formidable influence of scientific authority encourages claim-makers on all sides to embrace it “with the ironic outcome that the demand for legitimation results in the process of delegitimation” (Liftin 2000:122). Liftin (2000:122) adds that “once science enters the political fray, especially for a high-stakes issue like global climate change, it risks being perceived as contaminated and thereby losing its authority.” Attempts to moralize science represent an often unstated and unrecognized search for authority. As I have discussed elsewhere, there are powerful cultural pressures towards transforming scientific claims into non-negotiable truths (Furedi 2011:186-188). Terms such as “scientific consensus” are used to acclaim the “truth,” and the recently constructed term “The Science” is a deeply moralized and politicized category. Those who claim to wield the authority of The Science are demanding the kind of submission historically associated with Papal Infallibility. However, we are no longer living in the Medieval Era. Such claims lack the normative foundations to prevent the inevitable rise of counter-claims. Ultimately, science lacks the unquestioned moral status needed to restrain the expansion of claims-making.

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Claims-Making and Human Rights in Domestic and International Spheres

Abstract While the concept of human rights may seem basic, it is important for social constructionists to understand that the meaning of the term can vary from country to country. In this paper, I will examine the translation and meaning of human rights and human rights lawyer in Japanese. I show how the vagueness of the term is important and I demonstrate the dialectical relationship between domestic social issues and international organizations concerning human rights. I also demonstrate how the combination of powerful international organizations and domestic claims can sometimes be successful in changing a country's policy.

Keywords Human Rights; Translation; Meaning; Claims-Making; Social Constructionism

The social constructionist study of social problems focuses on claims-making activities (e.g., Best 1990; Loseke 1999; Ayukawa 2011). Many social problem claims are concerned with human rights. Although some people argue that human

rights are basic and natural to all men and women, it is a relatively recent concept that originated in seventeenth-century England. The idea spread and evolved around the world, albeit not to the same degree.

In 1948, after World War II, the United Nations (UN) assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was the first global expression of rights to which all human beings are inherently entitled, including rights of freedom, political rights, and social rights. Over the years, the UN has ratified several conventions to promote rights. At present, it continues to deal with treaties, basic rules, guidelines, and protocols concerning rights.

Although the idea of rights is a common element in social problems claims, it has not been explored in the social constructionist study of social problems.

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The differences in the connotation and meaning of the word *rights* in different countries have been ignored. As social constructionism draws attention to the importance of language, we should examine the differences in the meaning of words in various languages. A word can change meanings according to its usage in different environments.

Rights in Japanese

In Japan, the term *rights* was imported in the latter part of the 19th century, when it was translated into the Japanese language. In Japanese, rights is pronounced *ken-ri* and written by using two Chinese characters, each of which has its own meaning (Wheaton 1871). The first character, *ken*, can be read as "power to control." The second character, *ri*, can be read as "reward" or "reason." Various Japanese authorities debated which meaning—and which characters—ought to be used to convey the meaning of rights (Iwatani 2008).

The word, *kenri*, does not have all of the same connotations that the word "right" has in major European languages. In English, *right* is a synonym for correct (the French *droit* and the German *recht* have the same dual meanings). But, in Japanese, there is only a hint that the first character of the translated word, "rights," may have something to do with law, and this allusion is weak and not at all explicit. In Japanese, there is no direct reference or explicit connotation that right also means *correct*.

The Japanese word for human rights is *jinken*, and it is composed of two Chinese characters. *Jin* means "human," and *ken* means "power to con-

trol." There is no linguistic implication that *jinken* (human rights) is connected with the idea of correctness. Both Japanese terms are ambiguous and their meanings unclear, therefore they are easy to criticize and misunderstand.

In general, Japanese people do not take the concepts of rights or human rights for granted as do English-, French-, and German-speaking people. Perhaps this is an advantage for Japanese people in that they can have a critical perspective towards the idea of rights. They may objectively study and precisely define these concepts without being influenced by emotional associations. But, at times, the results of these considerations can cause profound misunderstanding. We can see criticisms, malicious words, and hatred towards *jinken* (human rights) at anonymous sites on the Internet. Many of these assertions are made by disaffected people when they express their hatred against some ethnic minorities, the socially disadvantaged, or stigmatized people. Also, they criticize lawyers who proclaim the rights of those minorities and who try to protect the rights of the people who are discredited, such as offenders, the arrested, the prosecuted, the sentenced, and prisoners.

When the word *lawyer* is connected with human rights in Japanese, there is an additional connotation. *Human rights lawyer* is usually expressed in Japanese as *jinken-ha benghoshi* or *jinken-ya-bengosh*. *Jinken-ha bengoshi* has connotations such as a "lawyer who belongs to a human rights school," or a "lawyer who is identified as belonging to a human rights faction." The term *jinken-ha bengoshi* (human rights lawyer) has a positive meaning when

it appears in ordinary newspaper stories in Japan. These *jinken-ha bengoshi* are depicted as concerned with domestic or foreign human rights issues.

There is another word which is pronounced in a similar way to *jinken-ha*, but the meaning is totally different. It is *jinken-ya*. Only the last consonant is different. In Japanese, *ya* generally refers to a person who runs an enterprise. When *ya* is used in connection with human rights (*jinken*) instead of *ha*, then the word's connotation is very negative. *Jinken-ya bengoshi* is used to revile people, including lawyers who are criticized for excessively and overzealously striving for human rights. This criticism is especially aimed at human rights lawyers who defend a criminal with excessive favor and ignore the rights of the victims, or even the interests of the society as a whole. In that case, the lawyer may be referred to as *jinken-ya*.

In online sites where anonymous people gather to chat and exchange messages, contributors can express cynicism about human rights lawyers and strongly criticize them. This often occurs when lawyers demand the abolition of the death penalty, or when they defend a criminal suspected of committing a brutal crime. These critics feel that the human rights lawyers are only interested in the rights of the alleged criminal, and use clever legal arguments to protect the guilty party, while completely ignoring the rights of the victims.

Japanese society does not appreciate the concept of human rights in the same way as Western countries, especially when we compare the role of the human rights lawyers in Japan to those in Western

societies. In the United States, the terms of human rights lawyer and civil rights lawyer are synonymous (although it seems that there is some cynicism and skepticism towards civil rights lawyers) and held in esteem. In Japan, there is no verbal differentiation between a civil rights lawyer or a human rights lawyer nor are there legal categories of class action or punitive compensation. Most Japanese human rights lawyers are idealists and quite poor, living on low incomes.

In the Japanese Constitution, there are several articles that refer to human rights. Article eleven states: *The people shall not be prevented from enjoying any of the fundamental human rights. These fundamental human rights guaranteed to the people by this Constitution shall be conferred upon the people of this and future generations as eternal and inviolate rights.*

The words *human rights* function as authentic warrants for claims, and it is ironic that cynical contributors to the Internet attack and blame professionals who work to protect the Constitution. However, it is because of the ambiguity of the language that people are able to interpret or misinterpret the human rights concept. Japanese people have the advantage of an abstract language and can take a phenomenological perspective, but it is perverse when they put human rights in negative terms.

Just as in the Japanese language, important concepts and words, such as human rights, can be misunderstood; it is important to be careful of the usage of the key concepts in other societies and languages. While researching the connotations of other important notions such as justice, social, or

claim, the social constructionist researcher must be conscious of their various meanings and subtleties in different languages.

Rights in Japanese Claims-Making

The Council of Europe is very influential in terms of human rights in the world beyond Europe. It tries to establish standards for human rights, democracy, and rules of law, and attempts to execute the conventions, principles, and rules it established, and to promote and instill these values. Although it is not a member of the Council of Europe, Japan is an observer nation, and has participated in and ratified some treaties of the Council of Europe.

One important institution of the Council of Europe is the European Court of Human Rights. The rulings of that court are influential not only for member countries but also for other non-member countries around the world. The European Court of Human Rights takes cases in which actions or situations are considered to have broken the rules of the European Convention of Human Rights. The European Court of Human Rights has a monitoring system to confirm that the court's decision is implemented in the relevant party nations and in countries with ratified conventions.

The status of observer gives the Japanese government access to information on the issues the committees of Council of Europe are discussing and processing (Tonami et al. 2008). The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs knew that the European Court of Human Rights found that discrimination against children born out of wedlock who seek her-

itage rights was against European Convention of Human Rights as early as 1979. The Council of Europe recommended that the Japanese government end such discrimination. Other information concerning this issue was also known by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Convention of the Rights of the Child was adopted at the General Assembly of United Nations in 1989. It became effective in 1990, and the Japanese government ratified it in 1994. However, the law in Japan did not change immediately. In 2009, a claim was denied when only one Japanese Supreme Court judge argued that inheritance law was unconstitutional. It was not until 2013, when the next case was brought before the Supreme Court, that there was a unanimous decision that the article of the heritage law, which denied a child born out of wedlock his or her inheritance, was unconstitutional (Saiko Saibansho 2013).

This inheritance law which gave all children the same rights to inherit was considered unremarkable in Western countries. This is due to the fact that there was a high number of children, up to one third, who were born outside of marriage and the laws concerning their legal status had been revised to adapt to the situation.

Historically, the rates of children born outside marriage were high in the Western world. For example, in 1980, the rate was almost 40% in Sweden, over 30% in Denmark, almost 20% in the United States, and well over 10% in Canada, the United Kingdom, and France. However, Japan has continually had a small number of children born out of wedlock: less than 1% in 1980, and just over 2% in 2010. Given this low number, it is to be expected that

there would be few groups in Japan making claims about the inheritance rights of children born out of wedlock. Their main sources of publicity were to publish a few books and have home pages on the Internet, and their main strategy was to sue their cases at civil law court. Even though the number of claim-making groups was still quite small, by 2013, they succeeded in winning their case. This is no doubt due to the influence and power of the international authority's warrant of human rights.

From this case, we can see how powerful and influential the international authority's warrant of human rights can be and how it can sway and change a country's domestic law. Although most people in Japan were not interested in the situation of illegitimate children and their inheritance, the government was motivated to alter its attitude and legal decision under the influence of the international community.

The Example of Smoking

Claims framed using the concept of rights can have a strong impact on a society. Even stronger are claims associated with rights assured by the Constitution of a country. In Japan, the claims concerned with public health, specifically, the protection of the health of citizens, were guaranteed by the Constitution. They were also affiliated with international organizations and this combination proved hugely successful in changing not only laws but the society itself. In a country of heavy smokers, Japan has created smoking laws to protect non-smokers and also influenced the society to the extent that fewer people are smoking today.

In the early history of the Japanese smoking problem, anti-smoking groups appealed to the right of *ken-en-ken*. If we translate *ken-en-ken* word by word, it signifies the rights to dislike smoking, and means the right to not breathe in the air polluted by the tobacco smoked in public spaces such as inside trains. In 1980, anti-smoking groups sued the Japanese Government, the Japanese National Railways, and the Japan Monopoly, which later became Japan Tobacco, and they called the lawsuit *Ken-en-ken*. The lawsuit demanded that people not be forced to breathe environmental tobacco smoke in the coaches of the super rapid express trains of the Japan National Railways (which later became privatized and renamed Japan Railways). At that time, smoking was permitted in all super express train coaches. The claimants were clever to use the slogan, *ken-en-ken*, as it implies a strong feeling of dislike or hate of smoking, as well as clearly proclaiming rights to not breath smoke (Ayukawa 2001). Although they failed to win the lawsuit, the public became aware of the situation, and circumstances changed so that there are now only non-smoking coaches in the super express and very small, isolated smoking areas.

The Example of Girl's Rights to Education and International Support

The support of international human rights organizations seems to be effective, and in some cases, the only way to sustain claims-making activities concerning human rights that are being suppressed. When claims-making is suppressed by a strong power, international human rights organizations may alert the world to the claims concerning hu-

man rights, and in some cases, they are able to alter the state of the oppressed. For example, when a claimant is vulnerable or oppressed, and jeopardized for their very claims-making, then it is only international NPOs and NGOs, and also established international agencies and organizations of authenticity, which can and should give support. International criticism of the governments which are interfering with human rights through oppression can be effective in protecting the helpless.

For example, showing the importance of international intervention for human rights, I shall refer to situations concerning the rights of women (the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) and the child's right to education (the Convention of the Rights of the Child, Article 28).

In October 2012, a 15-year-old girl in Pakistan was shot on her way home by members of the Taliban. When the Taliban took control of the region where Malala Yousafzai lived, they prohibited education for girls. At only 11 years of age, Malala started making claims that girls should be given the right to education by writing a blog in Urdu, for the BBC, under a pseudonym. She criticized the Islamic fundamentalism of the Taliban, and they retaliated by attempting to kill her. Soon after the attack, there was worldwide criticism against the Taliban for trying to murder the 15-year-old girl. Yousafzai was treated at a military hospital and then moved to a hospital in the UK. After recovering, she was received by President Obama at the White House and by the Secretary General of United Nations in New York. She was awarded the Sakharov Prize

by the parliament of the European Union in Strasbourg, and the Nobel Peace Prize, which she shared with the Indian child activist, Kailash Satyarthi.

According to several conventions, one basic human right is that a person can receive an education regardless of sex. Women should have the same opportunity for education as men, just as all children should be given the right to be educated. Yet fundamentalist Islamists believe that women should not receive a secondary or higher education. In April 2014, approximately 200 school girls were kidnapped at Chibok in Nigeria by Boko Haram, a group of Islamic extremists opposed to Western education, especially the education of girls. The group attacked and destroyed a secondary school and abducted the girls. The group demanded the government of Nigeria release detained soldiers of their group in exchange for the release of the school girls. Malala Yousafzai went to Nigeria to support and meet the victims' families and speak with the president of Nigeria.

When social problems claims are concerned with the fundamental principles of human rights, those problems can no longer remain simple national domestic matters but become larger considerations for humanity. Where there is gender inequality and authoritarian laws that limit women's rights and refute their status as "human," then international opposition can be an effective way to change the domestic situation. When the nations that have humanitarian problems are brought to the attention of international communities, in many cases, these communities are able to improve the situation and the system and bring about international norms.

It is important to remember that in order to achieve the goal of improving people's rights, both the international groups and claims-makers that hope to bring about change need to be sensitive to the language and customs of the society.

The Example of the Right for Life (and the Death Penalty)

Some people in America accept and even approve of the death penalty as part of the legal system. They feel that certain crimes require the death penalty and that the convicted criminal no longer has the right to live. However, there are also strong claims-making groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and others that make claims for the abolition of the death penalty. Their fundamental idea is that among the claims for human rights, the right to live is the most important. They feel that all humans have rights, including convicted criminals.

Amnesty International, for example, clearly declares that the death penalty:

is the premeditated and cold-blooded killing of a human being by the state. This cruel, inhuman, and degrading punishment is done in the name of justice. It violates the right to life as proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases without exception regardless of the nature of the crime, the characteristics of the offender, or the method used by the state to kill the prisoner. (see: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/death-penalty>)

Amnesty International, Japan also proclaims as following:

[w]e, Amnesty International, think that the death penalty is a problem of human rights. And, we think that the death penalty is the punishment that denies the most basic human right, that is, to live. (see: http://www.amnesty.or.jp/human-rights/topic/death_penalty/)

I will discuss the principles and opinions of the United Nation's Council of Human Rights on the death penalty later. Now, I would like to mention that in one article of the United Nations conventions concerning human rights, defendants should be given the right to be examined at least twice before being sentenced to death. From the viewpoint of this worldwide standard and the human rights for life, the Japanese criminal justice system is in a condemnatory situation, and seems to be going backward. On the other hand, the Japanese Federation of Bar Associations is promoting the claim for the abolition of death penalty more seriously and aggressively than before.

In 1946, after World War II, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In 1966, two covenants were adopted. One is the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the other is the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. They were ratified by more than 160 countries in the world. Japan ratified them in 1979.

All nations that ratified these conventions are required to give a report every four years on how the

convention is being carried out in their country. This report is examined by the UN council of human rights situated in Geneva, Switzerland. Below are segments taken from the evaluation made by the United Nations' Human Rights Committee issued in response to the Japanese government's 2008 report:

[w]hile noting that in practice the death penalty is only imposed for offenses involving murder, the Committee reiterates its concern that the number of crimes punishable by the death penalty has still not been reduced and that the number of executions has steadily increased in recent years ... It is also concerned that death row inmates are kept in solitary confinement, often for protracted periods, and are executed without prior notice before the day of execution and, in some cases, at an advanced age or despite the fact that they have mental disabilities ... Regardless of opinion polls, the State party should favorably consider abolishing the death penalty and inform the public, as necessary, about the desirability of abolition ... The Committee notes with concern that an increasing number of defendants are convicted and sentenced to death without exercising their right of appeal ... The State party should introduce a mandatory system of review in capital cases and ensure the suspensive effect of requests for retrial or pardon in such cases. (United Nations, Human Rights Committee 2008)

These are strong recommendations made to the Japanese government to promote the abolition of the death penalty. There also are two Optional Protocols concerning the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that Japan has not signed. The first protocol is an individual procedure that allows people to complain to the United Nations

organization when a decision of the government or court may violate the covenants (Kinki bengoshi rengokai jinken yogo iinkai kokusai jinken bukai and Osaka bengoshi kai sentakugiteisho hijun suishin kyogikai 2012). The second protocol is the abolition of the death penalty.

In December, 2012, there was a vote at the General Assembly of the United Nations on the motion called "The Moratorium on the Death Penalty." In all, 111 nations voted for it and 34 nations abstained. While the majority of the 41 nations voting against the moratorium were Islamic countries, no votes included the United States, China, North Korea, and Japan.

The European Convention of Human Rights also includes the abolition of the death penalty. The Council of Europe is aggrieved that Japan and the United States are not willing to end the death penalty and it has suggested that it might expel both countries from the status of observers of Council of Europe.

The Japan Federation of Bar Associations (JFBA) is concerned with human rights matters and proposed the moratorium of the death penalty in 1970s. Also, claims for the abolition of the death penalty have been made by human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, Japan, Human Rights Now, Centre for Prisoners' Rights, and other groups.

The JFBA has been discussing the death penalty for a long time, and recently explicitly declared that they are in favor of abolishing it and will promote research into the best way to do this. Although there are several positions and proposals about how to abolish the death penalty, so far, there has

not been a consensus on what kind of strategy would be best.

Amnesty International is prominent in the movement for abolishing the death penalty. The Centre for Prisoners' Rights has also been an active claims-making group in this matter. Recently, not only these organizations but also a number of new NPOs support abolishing the death penalty. It is notable that most human rights organizations, including NGOs and NPOs, have strong ties with international organizations. All of these groups have been influential and helpful to the JFBA in their attempt to change the Japanese legal system in regards to the death penalty.

We can find a dialectical relationship between domestic claims-making groups and international organizations concerning social issues. This connection is relevant to rights in an international context. When we examine large humanitarian issues such as the right for life, which is expressed as the abolition of the death penalty, the international organizations are essential for guidance and help. This is also true concerning domestic issues, for example, rights for public health, which is exemplified with the smoking problem, human rights concerning equality between men and women, and women's rights against oppression, be they conventional or religious matters which control all facets of everyday life.

U.S.A. and Human Rights

In the era of globalization, social domestic problems often concern international human rights or-

ganizations. At times, claimants or claims-making groups make efforts to promote and ratify treaties in order to solve social problems in various countries. However, there are some occasions when some claimants, claims-making groups, organizations, and members of governments consider international treaties concerning human rights to be intrusions on their nations' domestic policies. These need to be very powerful groups or have strong beliefs in order to ignore or refuse treaties accepted internationally by the majority of nations. Perhaps countries like the United States and Japan are reluctant to ratify certain treaties because they would give an authority beyond the sovereignty of the state. In other words, they are cautious and do not want to be controlled by what some people criticize as a "world government."

When we look at human rights in the United States, there are some unusual issues. Although the United States is greatly advanced in some ways, some basic social problems remain problematic and unsolved. For example, among all technologically advanced countries, the United States has ratified the fewest conventions concerning human rights, especially concerning children's rights, economic, social and cultural rights, and the rights of people with disabilities.

Some of the conventions the U.S.A. has ratified include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and the protocol relating to the status of refugees.

However, the United States did not fully ratify each of these. For example, there are five reservations, five understandings, and three declarations. Among the five reservations there is one reservation concerning capital punishment of persons of all of ages. The United States Senate announced the reservation:

the United States reserves the right, subject to its Constitutional constraints, to impose capital punishment on any person (other than a pregnant woman) duly convicted under existing or future laws permitting the imposition of capital punishment, including such punishment for crimes committed by persons below eighteen years of age. (see: <http://www.internationaljusticeproject.org/juvICCPR.cfm>)

In addition, the United States has signed, but not ratified, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a convention that has been ratified by all the nations in the world with the exception of the Federal Republic of Somalia and the United States. In the case of Somalia, one of the poorest countries in the world, considerations of human rights of the child may be superficial since the government is overwhelmed and powerless due to the conflicts within the country.

The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights was adopted in 1966 and became effective in 1978. It is one of the two main covenants that realize the universal declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations. It was ratified by more than 160 nations around the world. Of the countries which have not yet ratified it are the United States and the Republic of South Africa.

The United States also has not yet ratified the convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities, although more than 140 nations ratified this convention, including China, India, and the Islamic nations of Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. The United States is against the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People, a covenant that became effective in 2007 when it was ratified by 143 nations, including the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Russia, China, and Japan. Only 4 nations voted against it at the General Assembly.

There are many claims-making groups, such as the American Bar Association (ABA), Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the U.S. Campaign for Ratification of Convention of Child's Rights, and the former President Carter that have called for ratifying the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in which are included articles for the abolition of the death penalty and the abolition of life imprisonment of juveniles.

In 2005, the U.S.A. became the last country to abolish the death penalty for juveniles (a person under the age of 18 when committing the crime). In 2012, the United States Supreme Court decided the sentence of mandatory life imprisonment without the possibility of parole for juvenile offenders was cruel and unusual punishment and against the Constitution.

Although the U.S.A. ambassador to the United Nations signed the Conventions for the Rights of the Child, American presidents have not yet submitted this convention to the Senate. Influential senators on the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee refused to examine the convention, saying it would interfere

with parental authority. Interestingly, even Islamic countries, where a father has the right to strictly discipline and severely punish his child, ratified this convention.

The two crucial issues that stopped the U.S.A. from ratifying the Convention of the Rights of the Child were the death penalty for juveniles, and the sentence of life imprisonment without parole to a person under the age of 18. Although these two main problems seem to have been solved, it is not clear when the U.S.A. will ratify the convention, which was adopted at the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1989.

When a nation refuses to ratify an international treaty that is recognized as crucially important for human rights and already has been ratified by almost 99% of the countries in the world, the people of that nation may lack the vocabulary of warrants and grounds. This means the people are not aware of their potential rights in the international communities.

Concluding Remarks

Social constructionism's aim should not be only the accumulation of research. It should also con-

sider complex issues, assess them, and offer their results in order that those in power may review domestic problems. In this paper, I pointed out the complexities in the language of some basic humanistic concepts. There is a need for sensitivity considering these difficulties when looking at different countries' social problems. Also, I suggested the dialectical relationship between domestic social problems and international organizations concerning human rights.

I pointed out the influence that international human rights institutions and groups can have on changing the domestic situation in a country. On the other hand, there are countries which are still powerful enough, like Japan and the United States, which can refuse the recommendations.

Social constructionist approaches to social problems have great potential for examining and understanding social problems relevant to human rights. Since social constructionists see problems in a worldwide perspective, they are able to offer new conclusions and insights in social problems. In the future, as the world gets smaller, their contribution will be more and more valuable.

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Claims-Makers Versus Non-Issue-Makers: Media and the Social Construction of Motorcycle Ban Problems in China

Abstract In the past decade, more and more cities in China have adopted policies to ban motorcycles in the name of crime prevention or modernization. This paper examines the differential role of mass media in the construction of motorcycle ban policies in Southern China in general, and in the city of Guangzhou in particular. Although Guangzhou was neither the first city to ban motorcycles nor the city adopting the most radical means of implementing this policy, the media have successfully constructed a social problem of banning motorcycles in Guangzhou. Using content analysis of newspaper articles, I found that from 2000 to 2009 nearly two thirds of newspaper reports on motorcycle ban policy in China were published by newspapers based in Guangzhou. I argue that the relatively liberal media in Guangzhou played a vital role in constructing the ban policy as a social problem. In addition, I examine media discourse in constructing the problem of motorcycle ban policy and argue that although the mass media are still under strict control and serve as mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party-State, their increasing commercialization has made it possible to work as claim-makers for a social problem in China.

Keywords Social Construction; Mass Media; Content Analysis; Motorcycle Ban; China

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It is widely recognized that media play an important role as claims-makers in the construction of social problems (Best 1989). While much research has examined how the media construct social reality in general, and social problems in particular in Western countries, where media freedom is largely guaranteed (Spector and Kitsuse 1973; Best and Horiuchi 1985; Loseke and Best 2003), media's role in reporting and constructing social problems in authoritarian China remains underexplored. China's media have been regarded as among the most

restrictive in the world. In 2013, China was ranked 183 out of 197 and 173 out of 179 countries and territories by Freedom House (2014) and Reporters Without Borders (2013) respectively in terms of press freedom. Indeed, media in China have long been regarded as the mouthpiece of the Chinese authoritarian Party-State. Censorship instructions are issued to journalists and editors by state authorities on nearly a daily basis; censorship departments have been sarcastically called the "Ministry of Truth" (the term coined by George Orwell in his classic novel *1984*) by international observers (see: chinadigitaltimes.net).

Using the case study of banning two-wheel motorcycles in Southern China cities in the first decade of 21st century, this paper explores the dual roles of Chinese media as both claims-makers and non-issue-makers in the construction of social problems. On the one hand, due to the Chinese government's strict control and censorship, the media defend the government policy by constructing the motorcycle as a social problem. It condemned motorcycles as a subject with "seven sins" and claimed positive consequences from banning motorcycles in crime fighting, reducing pollution and social disorder. Borrowing the term of "non-issue" making from white collar crime research, I argue that by constructing the motorcycle as a social problem, the media actually work as non-issue-makers for the problem caused by banning motorcycles.

On the other hand, some market-oriented media have worked actively to expand the boundary of press freedom. To some extent, they become claims-makers for some local level, non-politically

sensitive social problems. In banning motorcycles, the media resort to a variety of rhetoric in identifying problems related to banning motorcycles by criticizing the reasons for the motorcycle ban policy, the process of policy making, and the method of policy implementation. Media can also challenge the government's insufficient concern for citizens and even call for eliminating the policy. In the construction of banning motorcycles as a social problem in China, the controlled but commercialized media play a unique role as both non-issue-makers and claims-makers.

Claims-Makers or Non-Issue-Makers: Media's Role in the Construction of Social Problems

Since its inception in the 1970s, social constructionism has been the dominant theoretical perspective on social problems. Different from previous theories that emphasize social conditions of certain problems, social constructionism takes a radical and sharp turn by focusing on the definition of social problems (Best 2001:1; Loseke 2003). Constructionist research views the media as playing a key role of claims-makers in social problems construction. However, most of these studies are from the United States and the United Kingdom, where media freedom is protected by law. Media's role as claims-makers for social problems in authoritarian societies like China, where media are subject to strict control and censorship, may provide a different story about the importance and process of claims-making.

Theoretically, in authoritarian societies, media's primary role is to defend the regime and support

the state's policies (He 2006; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011; Stockmann 2013). While media in democracies may be in the business of making grievances about putative social conditions, the media in authoritarian countries are more often engaged in constructing these putative social conditions as "non-issues" through either active propaganda or through simply ignoring claims about problems. Borrowing the term of "non-issue" making from the study of white collar crimes, where the term is used to describe how elite white collar and corporate crimes are not prosecuted and remain "non-issues" for the criminal justice system (Goetz 1997; Ghazi-Tehrani et al. 2013), this study explores media's complex role in the construction of social problems in authoritarian China. Using the example of banning two-wheel motorcycles, I will explore the following questions. First, how do Chinese media work as both non-issue-makers and claims-makers in constructing banning motorcycles as a social problem in China? Second, why can Chinese media work as claims-makers given strict control and censorship from the authoritarian Chinese Party-State?

Data and Method

I did a content analysis of media in order to examine media's role in the construction of motorcycle ban problems in China. I tried to collect all newspaper articles published in Mainland China about the motorcycle ban policy in the first decade of 21st century. I used "motorcycle ban" (*jinmo*) as the keyword to search newspaper articles in the WiseNews database, a full-text newspaper clippings database with search capabilities. It includes news

from more than 1,500 newspapers, magazines, and websites in the Greater China area (Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and Singapore). Nearly all newspapers published within Mainland China are included in this database. The search scope was restricted to within Mainland China and search time scope is from January 01, 2000 to December 31, 2009. All in all, 6,462 newspaper articles related to "motorcycle ban" were identified from 168 different newspapers, varying from the national level (e.g., *People's Daily*, *China Youth Daily*) to local level (e.g., *Southern Metropolis Daily*, *Guangzhou Daily*). I downloaded and read these 6,462 articles to explore Chinese media's role in the construction of motorcycle ban problems.

The Social Condition of Motorcycle Ban Problems

A motorcycle has different meanings for different people in China. In the 1980s, it was a status symbol for the rich, but it became a common transportation vehicle in the 1990s for ordinary people. Guangzhou banned all motorcycles in January 2007. An examination of the brief history of motorcycles in Guangzhou can help us to understand the process by which the motorcycle became regarded first as a fashion symbol, before becoming an object of "evil" in China's march towards a consumption society, in which yesterday's fashion becomes today's waste (Bauman 2005). According to Guangzhou's records, the history of motorcycles in Guangzhou starts in 1927, when there were 12 motorcycles in the city, increasing to 249 by 1937. From the 1950s to 1970s, motorcycles were mainly used for military and sports purposes and were rarely

used for personal transportation. Since the start of the "reform and opening-up policy" in 1978, the motorcycle became the "magic weapon for getting rich" for individual business operators as they can use it for fast delivery in the 1980s. In 1983, Guangzhou had 70,000 motorcycles, more than any other Chinese city, and this number increased to more than 100,000 in 1988. In the 1990s, motorcycles became the most fashionable transportation vehicle, and one fifth (700,000) of Guangzhou households owned one. During the period of "constant traffic jams" in Guangzhou since the 1990s, motorcycles served as the "fast horse" (*kuaima*) of transportation (Xu, Wu, and Wang 2006). After 2000, motorcycle snatch theft¹ started to become rampant. As a drive-away policing strategy to solve the problem of motorcycle snatch theft (Xu 2012), in January 2007, the Guangzhou government implemented a full motorcycle ban policy banning all motorcycles (except for police use) from the streets. The history of Guangzhou's motorcycles represented a typical development track of motorcycles in urban China and by 2009 as many as 168 cities had implemented different motorcycle ban policies (Zuo 2009), from issuing no new motorcycle licenses to banning motorcycles from main streets, to banning non-local licensed motorcycles, to a full ban of all motorcycles.

However, the motorcycle ban policy caused many problems for their users. First, motorcycle users are forced to abandon this convenient transportation vehicle in urban China where public transportation is insufficient and inconvenient. Second, over 250

¹ Thieves riding motorcycles snatching purses or whatever from pedestrians.

million Chinese migrant workers are second-class citizens in urban China because of China's *hukou* (household registration) system and its related social welfare policy (Chan and Buckingham 2008). These migrant workers feel further discrimination in cities banning non-local licensed motorcycles as they are required to register motorcycles in the places which they come from (Xu 2009; Xu, Laidler, and Lee 2013). Third, a full ban on all motorcycles affects the urban poor who rely on motorcycle taxi driving to make a living. Despite these problems, 168 cities have adopted various policies to ban motorcycles. The most controversial one is the full ban policy adopted by Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Dongguan in Southern China. Let me now examine how the Chinese media make the problems of banning motorcycles a "non-issue" by condemning "seven sins" of motorcycles and highlighting achievement when ban policies were implemented.

Media as Non-Issue-Makers for Problems of Banning Motorcycles

Much research has explored media's role as claims-makers in the construction of social problems, while their role as potential non-issue-makers has been largely ignored. This is particularly the case in authoritarian China where media's main function is to defend the Chinese Party-State and its policy. In their role as party defender, media serve to make the problems caused by the ban policy a "non-issue" by emphasizing problems related to motorcycles. The most comprehensive accusation of the problems of motorcycles occurred in Guangzhou when the local government planned to ban all motorcycles in 2004. *Yangcheng Evening*

News, the official newspaper controlled by Guangdong Provincial Communist Party Committee, condemned motorcycles as implicated in “seven sins” (*qi zong zui*), in order to defend banning motorcycles (Yan and Sun 2004).

The first sin of motorcycles was noise pollution. It was claimed that according to noise monitors in one residential community, the noise level could reach up to 80.4 decibels when a motorcycle passed by, and it could be as high as 90-100 decibels when starting an engine. The second sin of the motorcycle was air pollution. The newspaper claimed that motorcycles accounted for 15.2 percent of carbon monoxide in air pollution, as well as 30.4 percent of hydrocarbon pollution, and that this percentage surpassed that of trucks and buses combined. The third sin was the motorcycle’s role in traffic accidents. Using the data from the first half of 2003, the newspaper argued that there had been 3,044 motorcycle related traffic accidents, causing 363 casualties, with an average of two people losing their lives every day. The fourth sin was that motorcycles were used by criminals for snatch theft. It was claimed that there were 9,320 motorcycle snatch theft cases in Guangzhou from January to October 2003. This made up 47.1 percent of all snatch theft cases. The fifth sin was that there were many illegal motorcycle taxis. It was argued that illegal motorcycle taxis not only disturbed the normal transportation order, but also caused severe safety and public security problems. The sixth sin was that motorcycle drivers always broke traffic regulations. It was claimed that many motorcycles did not have a license and drivers drove motorcycles without proper certificates, drove against the flow of traffic,

drove through crowds, and wore no crash helmets. The seventh sin was that motorcycles were signals of underdevelopment. It was claimed that the more motorcycles a city had, the lower the city’s modernization level. It was argued that motorcycles not only affected Guangzhou’s transportation, but also damaged its image as an international metropolis. Although much of these accusations cannot be well defended, they were further widely circulated in other newspapers. Two days after *Yangcheng Evening News* accused motorcycles of these “seven sins,” both *People’s Daily*, the official mouthpiece of Chinese Communist Party, and *Yangcheng Evening News* further reiterated these “seven sins” and concluded that a “motorcycle ban was absolutely necessary” (Rijing 2004). By condemning motorcycles, the media justified the policy to ban them.

Another way the media worked as non-issue-makers for problems caused by banning motorcycles was to dramatize to the public the “achievements” of the policy. For example, Guangzhou started to ban motorcycles from some main streets on May 01, 2004. On the second day, the *South China Daily*, another official newspaper controlled by the Guangdong Provincial Communist Party, argued that “it is much safer” after the implementation of this policy (Bi and Yang 2004). After Shenzhen banned motorcycles from the main roads in November 2003, *South China Daily* claimed that motorcycle related traffic accidents declined by 41 percent by April 2004 (Chen, Yang, and Wang 2004). Crime reduction also has been repeatedly cited to defend the policy. *Shenzhen Special Zone News*, the official newspaper controlled by Shenzhen Municipal Communist Party, claimed Shenzhen public

security continued to get better by presenting the achievement of banning motorcycles in 2007:

[s]ince lots of non-local license motorcycles and no-license-no-certificate motorcycles have been used in our city for a long time, many problems were caused, such as motorcycle snatch theft, motorcycle theft and robbery, illegal business operations, et cetera. From November 2003, our police became the first in Guangdong to make the decision to ban motorcycles in a big way. We enlarged the scope of the ban gradually and continued to make efforts in searching for illegal motorcycles. Until now, we have identified 795,000 illegal motorcycles and 335,000 of them were demolished in public destruction campaigns. These actions achieved immediate effects in reducing street crimes, traffic accidents, and pollution. According to our statistics, motorcycle snatch theft cases have been reduced from 29 cases per day in 2003 to 1.4 cases in 2007. In 2004, 2005, and 2006, such crimes declined by 32.3 percent, 61.0 percent, and 41.4 percent respectively. No such case has happened this year in the former “hotspot” areas of Luohu and Futian. (Hu 2007a)

In Dongguan, the *South China Daily* defended banning motorcycles as “the good cat which can catch mice” as it was a “successful” crime prevention strategy in Dongguan in May 2007 (Liu et al. 2007).

In a nutshell, by emphasizing “seven sins” of motorcycles, as well as claiming positive achievements of the ban, the Chinese media defended local governments’ policies banning motorcycles. In doing so, the media have also worked as non-issue-makers by ignoring the problems caused by

banning motorcycles. For instance, there were as many as 100,000 migrant workers relying on driving motorcycle taxis for making a living in Guangzhou. These migrant workers became unemployed after the ban. Many local residents, particularly the poor, had to rely on motorcycles for their daily transportation. In addition, there are 138 urban villages in Guangzhou where a public transportation system nearly does not exist. Motorcycles are the most common vehicles for people to get around. The official media have largely ignored these problems when they defend the government’s policy. In authoritarian China, it is nothing new to explore how media defend the Party-State and its policy, but the conceptualization of media’s coverage as non-issue-making in the construction of social problems enriches our understanding of media’s complex roles. Let me now turn to the other side of media’s role: claims-making.

Media as Claims-Makers for Problems of Banning Motorcycles

In constructing the motorcycle ban as a social problem, Chinese media adopted five different types of discourses in their claims: unjustified reasons for banning motorcycles, incompetent and arbitrary administration in policy making, problematic method in policy implementation, insufficient concerns on citizens, and even calling for abolishing the policy.

Unjustified Reasons for Banning Motorcycles

The first and foremost discourse of media claims about the problems of banning motorcycles is that

the government's reasons for the ban could not be well defended. While some media accused motorcycles of leading to "seven sins," other media challenged these accusations as unproven in general, and to the "sins" related to crime prevention and traffic jams in particular. First, the media widely challenged the strategy of banning motorcycles to reduce crimes. In December 2005, three newspapers, including *Youth Daily*, the *Information Daily*, and the *Shanxi Evening News*, published the same article entitled "It Is Ridiculous to Crack Down on Snatch Theft and Robbery by Banning Motorcycles." The article argued that crime had its social roots, that high crime rates might indicate serious social problems, such as poverty, unemployment, and corruption. Only when these social problems were solved could crime rates be reduced (Hanshan 2005). After banning motorcycles, motorcycle snatch theft declined as offenders could not use motorcycles to flee. However, crime displacement occurred and burglary increased dramatically in Guangzhou (Xu 2012). An article in the *Southern Metropolis Daily* expressed the citizens' concern about the increasing burglary rates. The article pointed out that although snatch theft and robbery had declined, burglary had increased. As a result, many residential communities had to adopt new security measures such as anti-theft doors, anti-theft nets, and anti-theft alarms, and people had to be very vigilant for strangers (Zhanghui 2007). Indeed, the displacement of crime type from motorcycle snatch theft to burglary makes the effectiveness of the motorcycle ban policy in reducing crime questionable.

Second, the media also challenged the government's reasons of reducing traffic jams by banning motor-

cycles. They argued that the ban actually forced motorcycles off the streets and encouraged more people to use cars, which caused more traffic jams. In January 2007, an article from the *Yangtze Evening News* criticized Guangzhou's motorcycle ban policy and argued that it would be a disaster if cars were to dominate the city's transportation system (Yin 2007). Another article from the *Straits News* cited traditional Chinese medical philosophy that "what is good for the liver, may be bad for the spleen" (*zhi yi jing sun yi jing*) and argued that what the government banned, could actually play a positive role in an efficient urban transportation system (Ruiyuan 2007). Third, some criticisms went further to question the local government's initiatives. An article in the *China Insurance News* criticized the policy of banning motorcycles as being plotted by the local governments and the car industry together and the purpose was to increase market demand for the car industry. The article assumed that, on the one hand, Guangzhou had already set up the car industry as its pillar industry and, on the other, car companies had donated thousands of cars to the Guangzhou government and the Guangzhou police in the past years. The purpose was quite obviously to encourage the government to ban motorcycles (Zhang 2007). From this claim, the banning motorcycles is another example of the symbiotic relations between state power and economic capital in China's crony capitalism (Xu 2013).

Incompetent and Arbitrary Administration in Policy Making

The second type of claims constructing the motorcycle ban as a problem centered on how the gov-

ernment administered the ban. This type of claims started in 2000, when Xi'an banned motorcycles from its central district. An article from the *Southern Metropolis Daily* claimed this reflected the Xi'an government's incompetence in administration. According to such claims, the city government was unwilling to do the difficult work of regulating motorcycles, and simply resorted to a general ban (Yizhou Zhizheng 2000). However, the ban in Xi'an did not work well, and motorcycles could be found everywhere. Two years later, another *Southern Metropolis Daily* article pointed out that the fundamental reasons for the failed ban policy lay in the fact that the government did not listen to people's voices and had banned motorcycles arbitrarily without deliberation (Yiling 2002). Beginning in 2004, cities in the Pearl River Delta started to ban motorcycles and this triggered another round of media's criticism of the local government's arbitrary way of administration. An article from the *China Economic Times* argued that the reason for people's resistance was because local governments were keen on achieving their wills by arbitrary methods, neglecting the effects on relevant interest groups (Yang 2005). *South China Daily* also supported the same argument, and assumed that only by recognizing the cost of policy change and compensating for it can a win-win game be achieved (Zonghe 2005).

In November 2007, the Zhengzhou police announced that all motorcycles would be banned within the fourth ring road within ten days. This abrupt policy incurred wide criticism of the government's arbitrary way of administration again. *Information Daily* commented that the government should not issue an order condescendingly. They

should remain humble and learn to negotiate with people (Sun 2007). An editorial from the *Beijing News* remarked that by failing to take people's voices into consideration, even if the policy was implemented by force, its value and effectiveness would be seriously hampered due to people's everyday resistance. In addition, this abrupt ban policy destroyed people's trust in the local government and showed there was a long way to go in building a regulated, coordinated, fair, clean, effective, and service-oriented government (Editorial 2007a). The *Daily Sunshine* also supported such claim and commented that public policymakers should abandon the idea of simply resorting to a ban, and should instead use fair, just, and legal ways to distribute city resources and coordinate conflicts between different interest groups (Hu 2007b). Even the *People's Daily* worked as a claim-maker in criticizing Zhengzhou's motorcycle ban policy and argued that the government should listen to people's voices and minimize the losses for relevant interest groups (Cao 2007).

Media's claim of the local government's incompetent and arbitrary administration can also be seen in the case of Dongguan. Dongguan banned motorcycles from its central city during rush hours in September 2007, and it planned to ban raising pigs in December 2007 as the later was regarded as one of the major pollutants by the Dongguan government. In December 2007, an editorial from the *Southern Metropolis Daily* remarked that the policy of a "complete ban" (*jingjue*), no matter if it was about banning motorcycles or banning raising pigs, entailed "social violence" in public administration. The result of these public policies with "social violence"

(or soft violence) was a lose-lose rather than a win-win situation. It worked like a two-edged sword, cutting off two forces: on the one hand, the social forces became weaker and weaker, and on the other, the government repeatedly caused injustice in administration and went too far in the wrong direction (Editorial 2007b). Later, both the *South China Daily* and the *Oriental Morning Post* published articles to support this editorial, and further pointed out that administrative arbitrariness had been a problem for a long time. The social violence would become concrete violent behavior when the implementation of these policies was resisted as the basis for administrative arbitrariness was the state's dictatorship rather than people's support (Yan 2007). While some claims focused on the general situation of local governments' incompetence and arbitrariness, others questioned the concrete method of policy implementation.

Problematic Method of Policy Implementation

The third way that media claimed the motorcycle ban was a problem focused on the methods used by local governments to implement the policy. In 2006, The Shenzhen Bao'an district decided that Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members, civil servants, and cadres would be punished through public criticism and even through the Party and government disciplinary measures if they were found using motorcycles. This policy incurred widespread criticism. An article from the *New Express Daily* argued that both laws and the CCP Charter did not ban civil servants from driving motorcycles. It was deemed ridiculous that the Shenzhen government used CCP discipline to

punish those who used motorcycles. The article criticized the Shenzhen government for retreating to the simple and brutal administration style of the past (Li 2006). On the same day, another article in the *Southern Metropolis Daily* argued that Shenzhen's new regulation was unnecessary, being equated with the Chinese idiom "draw a snake and add feet to it" (*huashe tianzhu*). The government was emphasizing an idea that civil servants were a group with special power (Liu 2006). The problematic method involved other dimensions. When the Shenzhen Longgang government used the so-called strategy of "banning motorcycles from the source" and sent security guards to gas stations in the hope of stopping motorcycle riders from getting gasoline, this method was also widely criticized. The *China Insurance News* critically argued that because of the difficulty in banning motorcycles, the local government had resorted to "comprehensive management" by asking gas stations to stop selling gasoline to motorcycle users. It was deemed ridiculous to ask gas stations to join the campaign to ban motorcycles (Yang 2007). Some problematic methods even involved the local government's clear violation of laws. In March 2009, Shenzhen police broke into migrant workers' houses to confiscate motorcycles when the owners were absent (Xu 2014). An editorial from the *Southern Metropolis Daily* commented that motorcycles were blamed for too many sins and so were banned. We were not talking about whether the ban was contradictory to China's laws or not. Even according to the ban policy, it only banned motorcycles from the road. The author questioned: "Is it illegal to buy a motorcycle as a collection? Is it illegal if somebody invested in a motorcycle facto-

ry in Shenzhen?" (Ruiyuan 2009). Another article from the *Southern Metropolis Daily* commented that a house is part of a person's private rights. Even children would know it was illegal to enter others' homes without permission. No matter what excuses the police might have, the public power encroached on people's private rights in this case (Comments 2009).

Challenging the Government's Insufficient Concern for Citizens

This fourth type of claims constructing the motorcycle ban as a problem goes beyond simply challenging the rationales for the ban and the ways of making public policy. It escalated to question the government's failure to care about the livelihood of the lower classes as they have to rely on motorcycles for daily transportation or making a living.

In November 2006, before Guangzhou implemented the ban, the *Southern Metropolis Daily* published its first editorial regarding this policy. The editorial remarked, "please feel concern for the powerless," and argued that although the government showed some kindness in form, the lower classes' interests had been harmed and the poor had to face this brutal reality. The debate about the ban not only reflected the conflict of interest between government and people, it also reflected the widening wealth gap between the rich and the poor. The editorial argued that the debate of the ban reached its climax in the powerless cry of the weak, which might reflect both the arrogance of the powerful and the pains of the lower class. The editorial called for those who wished for no traffic

jams and a safe city through a ban to show sympathy rather than boast as if triumphant (*ai jin wu xi*). Since no matter how solid the reasons the government had, the ban indicated that the government had given up on the interests of the weak (Editorial 2006). An article in the *China Youth Daily* supported this claim and argued that although many people called on the government to "save some sunlight for the poor," it ignored the interests of the weak in the name of creating smooth traffic (Shi 2006). The *China Youth Daily* also questioned why the Guangzhou administration was against transportation tools used by the lower classes and pointed out that the true reason was that policymakers did not use those means of transport themselves (Xiaoshu 2006). The *China Insurance News* also claimed that ordinary Guangzhou residents actually suffered a lot from this so-called "development" of the city without motorcycles (Yang 2007). After the motorcycle ban, many former motorcyclists resorted to other rickshaws and manpowered tricycles to make a living. However, Guangzhou police also started to ban these rickshaws and manpowered tricycles in April 2008, which triggered another round of media's claim of the local government's insufficient concern on the poor. An article from the *Straits News* criticized that each transportation vehicle has its own value to meet different groups' needs and the government should not abandon the so-called "outdated transportation means" (Zhao 2008).

Calling for Abolishing the Ban

The fifth claim constructing the motorcycle ban as a problem calls for abolishing the ban. Although

motorcycles have been banned in Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Dongguan, some media have actively advocated the abolishment of the policy. 25 September, 2007 was the Mid-Autumn Festival in China and Guangzhou experienced five hours of a traffic jam. The *Southern Metropolis Daily* commented that the big traffic jam had put no one in a festive mood to eat moon-cakes at all. Many people were filled with nostalgia for motorcycles as motorcycle taxis could go freely around during traffic jams. The author claimed the fact that the increasing number of cars after banning motorcycles had contributed heavily to the big traffic jam (Sanjiao 2007). While some media called for the abolishment of the ban policy implicitly, others did so explicitly. In December 2007, *Guangzhou Daily* published an article entitled "It Is Time to Call Motorcycles Back." The article argued that motorcycles had many advantages such as low emission, small volume, flexibility, requiring minimal parking place, and being environmentally friendly. These advantages became more valuable with the rising problem of traffic jams, pollution, and car parking. Even in big European cities such as London and Paris motorcycles could be used freely. The mayor of London even restricted the use of cars and encouraged people to use motorcycles, it was stated. The author argued that although motorcycles caused crime and traffic problems, banning motorcycles should only be a temporary method. The article concluded that we simply could not deny the advantages of the motorcycle. The article further proposed that in the near future the government should call the motorcycle back (Zhou 2007). The calling for a lift of the ban policy from the mass media reached its climax in March 2009, when

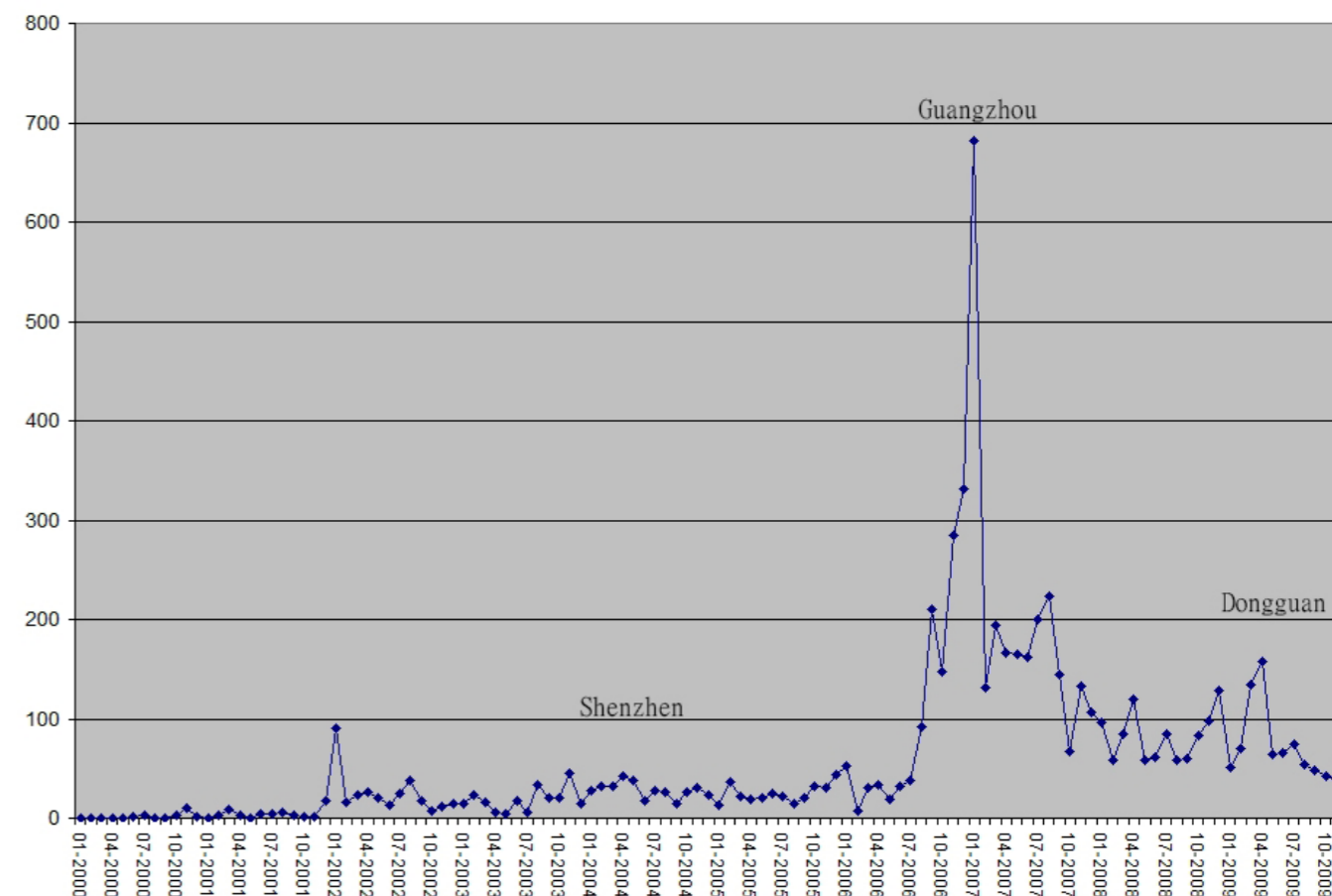
a member of Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Zuo Zongsheng, used his political influence to submit a formal proposal to lift the ban policy at the 2009 national Two Meetings. Although abolishment advocacy did not succeed, some media continuously reminded audiences of the problems of banning motorcycles.

Media Commercialization and Claims-Making

This study of how the Chinese media responded to issues surrounding motorcycles and the banning of motorcycles shows how, although media are under strict control and serve as mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party-State, Chinese media are not monolithic. On the one hand, media did defend local governments' policy banning motorcycles, and therefore they become non-issue-makers in the construction of motorcycle ban problems. On the other hand, they also worked actively to criticize the ban by constructing problems with policy making and policy implementation, they criticized incompetent and arbitrary administration, as well as the government's insufficient concern on citizens. In the construction of motorcycle ban problems, Chinese media played a unique role of both claims-makers and non-issue-makers.

The question that remains unanswered is how Chinese media can work as claims-makers given Chinese Party-State's strict control and censorship on media. Let me address this question by examining the pattern of media coverage on banning motorcycles from 2000 to 2009.

Figure 1. Monthly media coverage of banning motorcycles in Chinese newspapers from 2000 to 2009 (n=6,462).



Source: Self-elaboration.

Figure 1 shows the number of articles related to banning motorcycles in Chinese newspapers. The frequency indicates when banning motorcycles became a heated issue and when there was less interest. I will particularly compare media coverage intensity (measured by frequency of monthly published newspaper articles in China) when Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Dongguan started to ban motorcycles. From Figure 1, it is clear there was no significant change in media coverage when Shenzhen and Dongguan started their full ban policy in 2004 and 2009 respectively. However, the media coverage of banning motorcycles sky-rocketed with nearly 700 articles when

Guangzhou started to ban all motorcycles in January 2007. In other words, when Guangzhou banned motorcycles, Chinese media successfully constructed the issue as a social problem, evidenced by skyrocketing media coverage. When other cities banned motorcycles, the intensity was much less.

How can we explain the sky-rocketing media coverage when Guangzhou started to ban motorcycles? Why did Chinese media become claims-makers when Guangzhou started the ban, but they failed (at least not at the same level) to do so when other cities banned motorcycles?

Table 1. A selected list of top 10 newspapers that published articles about motorcycle bans from 2000 to 2009 (n=6,462).

Title	Newspaper Base	Number	Percentage	Accumulative Percentage
<i>Southern Metropolis Daily</i>	Guangzhou	1414	21.88	21.88
<i>South China Daily</i>	Guangzhou	863	13.35	35.23
<i>Guangzhou Daily</i>	Guangzhou	663	10.26	45.49
<i>Yangcheng Evening News</i>	Guangzhou	582	9.006	54.496
<i>Information Times</i>	Guangzhou	391	6.051	60.547
<i>New Express Daily</i>	Guangzhou	314	4.859	65.406
<i>Shenzhen Special Zone Daily</i>	Shenzhen	151	2.337	67.743
<i>Changsha Evening Newspaper</i>	Changsha	138	2.136	69.879
<i>Modern Life Daily</i>	Nanning	126	1.95	71.829
<i>Nan Guo Morning Post</i>	Nanning	124	1.919	73.748

Source: Self-elaboration.

In order to examine this puzzle, I looked at which newspapers are main claims-makers on banning motorcycles and where they are based. Table 1 shows a selected list of the top 10 out of 168 Chinese newspapers that published articles on banning motorcycles from 2000 to 2009. Among all 168 newspapers, all of the top six newspapers are based in Guangzhou. In constructing the problems of banning motorcycles, *Southern Metropolis Daily* took the lead and published 1,414 articles, accounted for 21.88 percent in all newspaper coverage in China. The next top five claims-makers included *South China Daily*, *Guangzhou Daily*, *Yangcheng Evening News* (national version), *Information Times*, and *New Express Daily*. All together, these six Guang-

zhou-based newspapers published nearly two-thirds (65.41%) of articles on the issue of banning motorcycles in China.

Put the above two sets of data together, and it is not surprising that media coverage sky-rocketed when Guangzhou started the policy because Guangzhou-based newspapers were dominant claims-makers on the issue. It is safe to draw the conclusion that the reason for why the motorcycle ban successfully became the most heatedly debated social problem in Guangzhou, while they failed to do so in other cities, lies in Guangzhou-based newspapers' role in claims-making. But, why can newspapers in Guangzhou work as claims-maker,

while they failed to do so in other cities given the Chinese government's strict control and censorship on media? To answer this question, we need to understand the transformation of Chinese society in general, and the government's strategies in controlling media in particular.

Since the 1980s, when China started economic reform and opened-up to the outside world, marketization and commercialization have spread to every corner of Chinese society. Although economic liberalization has not yet caused political democratization, the transformation of Chinese society from hard authoritarianism to soft authoritarianism has been widely observed (Pei 2000; Xu 2014). The relationship between the state and media is also changing and the market becomes an important player in shaping state-media relation. Before the economic reform, all media are state-owned and financed by the state. The budgetary constraints in 1980s forced the Party-State to cut off media subsidies and nearly all media (except a few such as *People's Daily*) had to become financially autonomous. The commercialization of media further accelerated after 2000, when China joined the World Trade Organization as the Party-State sought to strengthen media organizations to withstand future competition from foreign media. In order to seek profit, the media have to face market pressures and provide useful information to audiences instead of purely working as a propaganda machine for the Party-State as before. As widely acknowledged, the current Chinese media have two masters: the Party-State and the public (Sukosd and Wang 2013). In terms of newspapers, the two goals of propaganda and profit-making are achieved by division of labor in

the same media group. While the "parent" papers are oriented towards the wishes of Party-State, the "offspring" papers are oriented towards the public. For example, in Guangzhou, *South China Daily* is an official party newspaper of Guangdong Provincial Communist Party. While *South China Daily* mainly serves the propaganda function, its commercial spin-off, *Southern Metropolis Daily*, mainly serves the market. Despite editors and journalists being sanctioned, fired, and even imprisoned for its aggressive reporting, *Southern Metropolis Daily* remains one of the most liberal commercial newspapers in China. In constructing motorcycle ban problems, *Southern Metropolis Daily* took the lead. It not only published the most articles on the issue, but also published many editorials exclusively in making claims. Its aggressive reporting doctrine can be vividly seen from an advertisement for the newspaper in which it swears to be different (see: Figure 2).

Commercial newspaper's aggressive reporting is also supported and protected by the media group as they are the source of profit. For instance, while the party paper *South China Daily* suffered a 14 percent drop in its daily print run from 876,000 in 1993 to 750,000 in 2003, the commercial paper increased from 41,000 in 1997 to an astonishing 1.4 million copies in 2003 (Qian and Bandurski 2011:42). The editors and journalists also play the game of cat and mouse with censorship authorities to report before censorship orders reach them (Qian and Bandurski 2011:64). In addition, national leaders also need media to work as a watchdog to monitor subordinate officials, and particularly at local level, and therefore they can identify and fix problems before they

Figure 2. An advertisement of *Southern Metropolis Daily* (SMD) on Guangzhou street.

It reads: "SMD, omnipresent; We don't take the old road, nor do we take only one road; We are not tunnel-visioned, nor are we rule-abiding and obedient; We always want to try something new and do something different; Now, it is our time to show our talent; SMD, omnipresent, attacking, with razor sharp sword."

Source: Photo by the author.

provoke popular unrest (Shirk 2011:5). In Guangzhou, besides South China Daily Group, the Guangzhou Daily Group and the Yangcheng Evening News Group are another two newspaper giants fiercely competing for audiences (He 2006). By contrast, newspapers in Shenzhen and Dongguan face

much less competition. Much research has shown newspapers in Guangzhou are taking the leading role in China in commercialization and pushing the boundary of press freedom (Shirk 2011). To a large extent, the successful construction of banning motorcycles as a social problem in Guangzhou lies in

the commercialization of Guangzhou media, which provides strong motivation and space for the media to become claim-makers. While Chinese Party-State still holds strict control on media through complicated mechanisms such as monetary control, coercion, and self-censorship (Hassid 2008), the commercialization of media creates strong motivation for the press to push the boundary of press freedom in order to attract audiences and therefore become claim-makers for certain local social problems.

Conclusion

Zygmunt Bauman (2004; 2005) once argued that the production of waste of all kinds is an inevitable outcome of modernization and an inescapable accompaniment of modernity. In China, we see a visible hand from the authoritarian Party-State to construct the meaning of the motorcycle as a waste, a sinful subject (Xu 2014). Indeed, with China's march towards modernization, the fate and value of motorcycles have experienced dramatic ups and downs. In urban China, a motorcycle was regarded as a magic tool of getting rich for individual business operators in 1980s, a fashionable transportation vehicle for local residents in 1990s, and a tool of making a living for migrant workers and local poor in 2000s. Nowadays, however, it becomes a subject associated with "sins," and motorcycle users are regarded either as dangerous criminals or troublemakers who damage China's image of modernization.

In the construction of social problems, the media play a vital role as claims-makers (Best 1989). Extant literature has widely documented how mass media work as claims-makers in democratic society where

freedom of speech is largely guaranteed. To what extent can mass media in authoritarian China play such a role is underexplored. In addressing these questions, this study contributes to the existing literature in the following ways. First, while most of existing research on the construction of social problems is conducted in the Western democratic countries, a case study of China will contribute to examine to what extent social constructionism can be applied in authoritarian countries. Second, in bringing the concept of non-issue-making from criminology into social constructionism analysis, this study also contributes to the toolkit of constructionists. Third, an understanding of how Chinese media make claims for certain social problems in a highly restrictive media environment will also help the media in other authoritarian regimes to expand their space of press freedom.

In this current research, I have explored the dual roles of Chinese mass media as both non-issue-makers and claims-makers. On the one hand, Chinese media suffer from severe censorship from the Party-State. They are required to defend the government and serve as mouthpiece of the authoritarian regime. By condemning the motorcycle as a subject of "seven sins," as well as dramatizing the "achievement" of the policy, the media worked as non-issue-makers for problems related to their policy of banning motorcycles. On the other hand, the commercialization of mass media provides strong motivation and limited space for media to become claims-makers for certain interests of the poor and underclass. In its construction of banning motorcycles as a social problem, various rhetorics have been used by the media in their claims. An examination

of media reporting patterns further reveals that commercialization of Chinese media provides the ground for media to become possible claims-makers for social problems. However, to what extent can Chinese media's role as claim-makers facilitate their transformation towards democracy remains to be seen. Some scholars even argue that media's commercialization actually strengthens Chinese authoritarian regime rather than weaken it (Stockmann 2013). But, a solid understanding of Chinese media's role as both non-issue-makers and claim-makers provides a basis for any prediction.

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Exploring Technology in Claims-Making

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.11.2.10>**Online Claims-Making: The NRA and Gun Advocacy in Cyberspace**

Abstract This article examines the Internet's emergent role in the claims-making process. My central premise is while Internet technology provides lay citizens with a mass mediated platform to distribute claims publically, power dynamics in the public sphere have remained relatively stable: Insiders and lobbyists continue to be powerful cultural voices; the press still functions as a cultural gatekeeper of newsworthiness; most people continue to have relatively little social authority; and the least powerful risk being completely left out of a digital society. Using the National Rifle Association (NRA) web presence as a case study, I describe the Internet as a vast collection of interconnected public *cyber-arenas* where problem claims are continuously disseminated, global communication is facilitated via online advocacy networks, and claimants utilize novel cyber-strategies to mobilize supporters. In doing so, I examine how cyber-arenas fundamentally differ from more static traditional claims-making arenas like television, radio, and print publication. I conclude by considering the extent to which historically powerful *insider* claims-making groups like the NRA are actually best positioned to succeed in a supposedly democratized new media world.

Keywords Claims-Making; Activism; Internet; Online; Cyberspace; Gun Control

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When James Holmes opened fire in a crowded Aurora, Colorado theater during a midnight screening of *The Dark Knight Rises* on July 20, 2012, major news outlets were quick to report the details of his crime and speculate on possible reasons why something so tragic could happen. Yet prior to the first news report being aired, the story was already unfolding online: Victims' final tweets and Facebook posts chronicled the moments immediately before the shooting; cell phone videos taken inside the theater offered glimpses of the car-

nage; and survivors offered real time updates from the scene. Social media and user-generated news websites offered a minute-by-minute timeline of events, responding so quickly that readers were actually notified when local and national news channels finally posted online their first stories about the shooting. Soon thereafter an array of activists ranging from powerful lobbyists to amateur citizen journalists began bombarding mass media with claims about the causes of mass shootings and what can be done to prevent horrors like these from happening in the future. On television news-casts, in print media, and online, the National Rifle Association (NRA) called for a more heavily armed population in order to better protect citizens, while anti-gun activists demanded legislative reform to restrict firearm availability and access.

In this article, I use gun control activism to examine the degree to which online technology has fostered a dynamic public sphere where claimants with varying degrees of social power have a voice in the social problems process. Specifically, I focus on the Internet's emergent role in shaping how the National Rifle Association (NRA) uses cyberspace to publish claims, shape public opinion, and rally popular support to their causes. Extending Hilgartner and Bosk's (1988) public arenas model of social problem construction, I conceptualize the Internet as a vast collection of interconnected *cyber-arenas* where problem claims are continuously disseminated to audiences and social reality is in a perpetual state of negotiation. I argue the cyber-arenas framework helps contextualize online claims-making by clarifying the shape social problems take in virtual settings, the cyber-tactics used

by claims-makers to attract audiences, acquire resources, and mobilize support, and the ways that claims generated in online environments become part of "real world" offline dialogues. By focusing on how cyber-arenas intersect with these core issues, we may begin to better comprehend the extent to which Internet technology is transforming the social problem process.

Claims-Making in an Online World

Within the constructionist perspective, mass media's role is to expand the scope of claims so that they can reach the broader population and provide activists with needed public recognition, thereby rallying supporters and mobilizing policymakers into action to rectify the presumed social harm (Blumer 1971; Spector and Kitsuse 1987; Best 2008). Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) explain that claims-makers compete for public attention by promoting their claims in a variety of public arenas, including mainstream news reports. Because each arena's carrying capacity limits the number of claims that can be addressed at any given time (e.g., newspaper column space, TV airtime), relatively few issues ever become widely recognized as social problems (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988; Benford and Hunt 2003). This is particularly consequential for *outsider* claims-makers who lack sufficient entrée into both media and government. Whereas insiders, such as pressure groups and lobbyists, often deal directly with policymakers, allowing them to broker deals and manipulate outcomes without first having to pique social interest by attracting media attention to their claims, outsiders have traditionally relied on the press to raise awareness and marshal support for their agendas.

The Internet, however, appears to be transforming the claims-making process because information in cyberspace flows at incredibly fast speeds, has not *yet* been restricted by corporate or governmental structures, and is not hindered by the stringent editorial and budgetary restraints associated with mainstream news production. Claimants with varying degrees of social power and institutional access can therefore bypass traditional media gatekeeping and communicate directly to a global audience of prospective supporters. Consequently, people are no longer restricted to watching a television newscast or reading the morning paper to learn about the issues and claims they deem socially relevant. Today, the Internet facilitates real time communication, and the rapid transfer of large volumes of information can be accomplished at all times and from almost anywhere. The sheer ubiquity of cyberspace is reflected in the seemingly infinite number of access points for all manner of online information. This is because the Internet functions as an interconnected collection of *cyber-arenas*, such as web sites, blogs, and message boards, that are perpetually accessible and in a continuous state of information flux (see: Maratea 2014 for an elaboration). Unlike more traditional modes of news distribution that are fundamentally rigid in nature—print publications have finite column space; television and radio broadcasts have restricted airtime—cyber-arenas are malleable and can fluctuate as needed to accommodate additional claims, data, news reports, and any other relevant content.

Part of the dynamism of cyber-arenas is they can be updated with fresh material in real time and there-

fore offer a greater breadth of information availability while affording audiences more options for locating content. Cyber-arenas are also relatively egalitarian claims-making and protest venues as compared to traditional mass media formats, such as corporatized television, radio, and print publication: Anyone with a computer and an online connection can operate their own web space to publish information, ideas, and opinions in a variety of online settings. While this does not mean Internet users have unfettered access to every cyber-arena found online, the Internet nonetheless allows average citizens and fledgling claimants who have previously been excluded from traditional news cycles to more actively participate in the public sphere and attempt to draw attention to their claims.

Specifically, cyber-arenas allow claimants to shift (or develop entirely new) claims-making, networking, and mobilization structures online where they can be accomplished more efficiently and for less cost (Vegh 2003). Historically, activists have relied on time-consuming tactics, such as cold-calling, direct mailing, staging high-profile public events, and coordinating letter-writing campaigns, to communicate with supporters and mobilize them into action. While sometimes effective, these strategies require extensive resources, intensive planning, and determined public relations work. Web spaces, by contrast, require minimal effort: Claims can easily be posted online and then efficiently updated around the clock. This capacity to function simultaneously as an information sharing and communication structure that is global in scope renders the Internet a powerful yet relatively inexpensive claims-making platform.

At the same time, online technology affords audiences greater control in searching for information. The Internet is replete with millions of readily accessible websites that are independent of the mainline press (Fallows and Rainie 2004). Although it is unreasonable to assume most people have the time or capacity to peruse everything available online, it suggests users can more actively locate materials at their choosing, including content not covered by professional journalists. For example, the Internet has made it possible to view graphic photos and videos deemed inappropriate by network news standards, such as the execution footage of former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein and the beheading of journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff by Islamic militants. This sort of uncensored information availability is sufficiently profound that it has forced the mainstream media to alter their reporting practices, as evidenced when news outlets elected to air virtually unedited video of Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi's corpse being defiled by a mob of civilian rebels on broadcast television newscasts and their websites. To the extent that individuals and groups outside the professional press can use the Internet to influence news coverage and reporting patterns, it stands to reason that online technology can revolutionize the social problems process by providing claimants with unfettered access to mass media on a global scale. Consequently, scholars need to expand their understanding of social problem construction to accommodate the emergent *Internet effect* on claims-making and ways that changes in the availability and consumption of information affect popular understandings of social issues and the distribution of cultural authority in an increasingly interconnected digital world.

Methodology

Data were acquired from the NRA's primary website, affiliate web pages, and various social media sites, and analyzed using qualitative document analysis (QDA). For QDA to be an appropriate methodological choice, all acquired data—in this case, web pages and all content contained therein—were approached as documents that could be analyzed for both manifest and interpretive content (see: Berg 2006:242). Typically, QDA involves the completion of five research stages: document identification, data collection and protocol design, data coding, data analysis, and integration of findings into a final report (Altheide 1996:23). For this study, data collection involved copying images of every web page on NRA affiliated sites and select social media venues (Facebook and YouTube) into a Microsoft Word file using the print screen function. A round of coding was then completed in order to construct a preliminary list of relevant claims and website features. A protocol design (see: Altheide 1996) was then employed for the second round of coding, when initial coding categories were refined and collapsed into three primary categories: claim distribution, advocacy networking, and mobilization tactics. A final review of each document helped ensure the accuracy of identified claims-making, networking, and mobilization components found on NRA associated web pages.

The NRA and Gun Advocacy

To better understand how the Internet intersects with the social problems process, consider the renewed calls from anti-gun activists for stronger

federal and state regulations on the public availability of firearms and ammunition following high-profile school and mass shootings. In those moments when public attention is redirected towards the graphic details of seemingly senseless crimes and the fact that gun crime is disproportionately high in the U.S. compared to other westernized nations, activists who both support and oppose gun control are mobilized into action. After the Sandy Hook school shooting in 2012, for example, rallies, demonstrations, and other protest efforts were organized around the country by gun control advocates who suddenly had an audience of concerned citizens whose attention was again focused on the issue of gun violence thanks to widespread media coverage of the latest shocking crime. They also mobilized in cyberspace: anti-gun activist organizations such as the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence and the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence used their websites to publicize claims about the social harms caused by firearms, offer prospective supporters opportunities to participate in various online protest campaigns, and fundraise via donations and merchandising.

Of course, the tale of gun violence is not only being told by claims-makers seeking to restrict access to firearms. In response to Sandy Hook and other high-profile mass shootings, the National Rifle Association (NRA) quickly mobilized in an effort to stunt the burgeoning momentum of gun control advocates by publically campaigning and lobbying politicians in defense of “the Second Amendment rights of all law-abiding Americans” (The NRA Foundation 2014). Established in 1871, the NRA is a nonprofit organization that promotes responsi-

ble gun ownership, as well as firearm education and safety training. With membership exceeding 4.5 million people (U.S. Senate 2013), the NRA flexes considerable political and economic muscle through highly funded advertising campaigns and lobbying of policymakers, which allows them to broker deals and manipulate outcomes without first having to pique social interest by attracting media attention to their claims.

Even the most prominent gun control activist groups have significantly fewer resources and smaller bases of support than the NRA; the Brady Campaign, for example, had just over 600,000 members in 2010 (Spitzer 2012). That same year, the NRA and its affiliates spent approximately \$278 million on lobbying, campaigning, and other firearm-related expenditures; in contrast, three leading anti-gun organizations had budgets totaling less than \$6 million (Cillizza 2012). These disparities help the NRA to influence legislative outcomes even when there may appear to be little opportunity to do so, in part, because its large and stable membership donations fund claims-making operations and the group’s extensive infrastructure.

Much of the group’s influence stems from a relentless lobbying effort, in Washington and throughout the country, driven by a staff of 80 and a huge and well-organized grassroots base. In 2012, it spent nearly \$81 million on member communication and mailings ... at the same time, gun control advocacy groups have struggled to match the NRA in finances in influence. The Brady Campaign spends a little more than \$3 million per year. (Gold, Tanfani, and Mascaro 2012)

The NRA’s economic power is in many ways part and parcel of its political clout. Public officials who fear electoral wrath may acquiesce on the issue of gun rights, particularly given that they cannot rely on similar economic support or voter mobilization from the anti-gun lobby. Success for the NRA therefore hinges on compelling supporters and other contributors to donate money to fund claims-making operations and maintain the group’s teams of lobbyists, lawyers, and public relation specialists, who often do their work out of the public spotlight, but nonetheless draw their legitimacy with policymakers from the more than four million members who provide the NRA with tremendous political sway.

Claims-Making on Gun Rights in Cyberspace

Traditionally, activist groups like the NRA have coaxed supporters into championing their cause using techniques like cold-calling, pamphlet distribution, and holding public rallies. These tactics, however, can be rather time-consuming and expensive to organize; many claimants lack the necessary infrastructure and available assets needed to coordinate them and consistently make their claims available to prospective supporters. Online technology, by contrast, allows claims-makers to facilitate perpetual resource acquisition by providing a powerful networking structure that enables claim distribution, membership drives, fundraising, merchandising, and new forms of cyber-protest action at all hours of the day and for relatively little cost. Simply put, the networking and mobilization capabilities made possible by the Internet

may help sustain (and advance) the claims-making campaigns advanced by both fledgling activist organizations that struggle to remain solvent and more established claimants like the NRA.

When put into practice, the Internet does *not* function for claimants as a mechanism for traditional grassroots activism nor are websites necessarily designed to draw media attention to activists and their claims. Instead, online technology provides a publically available web presence with global reach that allows claims-makers to advertise themselves and disseminate claims via a variety of media formats, create advocacy networks both in cyberspace (by hyperlinking with other likeminded web spaces) and with prospective supporters in the real world, and by developing new and unique mobilization tactics in cyber settings.

Dissemination of Claims

The primary and most visibly striking aspect of NRA websites is the abundance of available information related to the group and its firearms-related agenda: This not only includes efforts to frame the NRA as a “civil rights organization” (NRA 2014), but also prominently advertise the numerous benefits of being an NRA member, along with a plethora of claims that espouse the advantages of responsible gun ownership and disparage the policies and practices of political opponents seeking to restrict gun rights. For example, the NRA grades political candidates’ voting records on gun issues from A to F and publishes those scores on its Political Victory Fund website (NRA Political Victory Fund 2014); these evaluations are then used to

endorse public officials who consistently support NRA-backed mandates and “penalize lawmakers who vote for what it deems ‘anti-gun’ measures by giving them poor grades in their rating system” (Hunt 2013). In doing so, the NRA uses its web presence to direct audiences towards preferred politicians whose campaigns they then subsidize with substantial monetary donations. To this point, in 2012, the NRA spent nearly \$700,000 on direct contributions to political candidates, with greater than 80% of NRA-backed candidates winning their House or Senate races. Furthermore, approximately 60% of congressional members have received more than \$4.3 million in total NRA contributions since 1990; the top recipients of those funds have the highest overall grades and the longest average tenure in Congress (Cillizza 2012; 2013).

The correlation between NRA approval ratings and the number of years that politicians serve in office is likely related more to the money funneled to those candidates than the availability of online endorsements posted on NRA websites. Nonetheless, claims-making practices in cyberspace have real world implications to the extent they help mobilize a voting constituency in support of the NRA’s social agenda. This may partly explain why NRA websites employ dynamic multimedia presentations that bombard viewers with claims about the group, its goals, and the urgent need for supporters to take action against those who seek to restrict gun availability because they “don’t agree with the freedoms that [NRA members] cherish” (Mungin 2013). Often these claims are replete with emotionally gripping tales about how real life gun owners performed heroic actions or saved them-

selves from being victimized, the unconstitutional efforts made by public officials seeking to restrict firearms, and the important role played by individual members in the larger success of the NRA.

This latter point is particularly important because presenting claims that are likely to resonate as relevant to prospective supporters’ life experiences may cultivate a veneer of personal connectedness, thereby allowing the NRA to establish “social ties,” which are then continually reinforced as meaningful through heartfelt claims that pressure members and casual observers alike to get more actively involved in the NRA (see: McAdam 2003). While the actual content of claims and the emotional appeals contained therein are not entirely dissimilar to what is found in a more traditional print newsletter or pamphlet, the multimedia presentation found on NRA websites is far more dynamic, can be updated with fresh content far more efficiently, and is published in real time to a much larger audience than print media. To this end, the NRA litters its sites with emotional symbolism, such as images of American flags, snow capped mountains, bald eagles, and the faces of everyday people who, as NRA supporters, are “proud defenders of history’s patriots and diligent protectors of the Second Amendment” (NRA 2014). The NRA also attempts to personalize claims towards specific demographic audiences, such as the NRA Women website, which chronicles the benefits of gun ownership, usage, and safety from a more feminine perspective. Additionally, NRA websites also display celebrities like actors Chuck Norris and R. Lee Ermey advocating for gun rights.

The purpose of celebrity endorsements is similar to the backing of experts: They have the ability to validate claims among audiences. While famous people may lack the proficiency of an expert, their public visibility provides a measure of credibility among people who recognize them and admire their status. Hence, celebrities help claimants legitimize their causes while simultaneously increasing the possibility that issues will stand out as important among potential supporters (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Meyer and Gamson 1995; Street 2002; Brubaker 2008). When taken collectively, these claims-making tactics and goals are not fundamentally different from traditional offline techniques: the recruitment and preservation of membership, connecting the group’s political agenda to the salient identities of supporters, and actively discrediting the positions of political opponents whose words and actions may weaken the bond between the NRA and its adherents (see: McAdam and Paulsen 1993). The difference, however, is the dynamic multimedia presentation, the constant availability of unfiltered claims, and the ability to connect claims-making with networking and mobilization functions in online settings.

Cyber-Networking and Online Advocacy Networks

Just as the claims presented on NRA websites are designed to connect with prospective allies, social networks are essential to the process by which people identify the shared norms and values that influence their decisions to participate in collective action (Passy 2003). Cyberspace provides claimants with an additional setting in which to establish,

cultivate, and reinforce supporters’ identification and commitment to their cause, along with the opportunities to do so on a sustained basis and with minimal effort as compared to more traditional forms of communication. In particular, online networking structures have two important functions for the NRA. First, facilitating communication with and among supporters in disparate geographic locations; and, second, expanding the organization’s carrying capacity via hyperlinking to social media (YouTube, Facebook), satellite (NRA affiliated), and external (pro-gun but not NRA affiliated) websites. Each of these tasks reflects a movement towards *organizational hybridity*, which simply means that claims-makers are incorporating a combination of online and real world operations into their organizational models (Chadwick 2006), thereby fashioning a cyber-presence dedicated to the social agenda and ideological discourse shared by claimants and their supporters (Keck and Sikkink 1998).

Victor Perez (2013:76) notes that hyperlinked websites cultivate working partnerships even when those “sites do not explicitly endorse each other or necessarily accept the information contained on [those] sites.” In other words, networking structures expand the scope and reach of their claims beyond the boundaries of their own web spaces, while also serving to funnel audiences to other areas of the Internet that are congenial to the NRA and the larger issue of gun rights. Hyperlinking, therefore, allows claimants to prompt individuals on where to proceed for additional information in order to encapsulate them in a self-contained bubble that only directs them to sympathetic content and claims. Of course, no single entity can entirely

control where and how people search the Internet for information. Rather, the idea is to create a funneling mechanism that allows the NRA to maintain an element of control over where viewers of their websites proceed for additional information and sway them into digesting as many pro-gun claims as possible.

Online networking, however, does not simply enhance the NRA's ability to circulate claims, it also facilitates communication with and among backers from remote locations across the globe. Whether via interactive elements found on NRA websites or the use of social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, users can post messages, share experiences, and, more generally, interact with others at their choosing. For instance, the NRA provides a "Near You" service that connects people to NRA sponsored events in their region, including safety seminars, training classes, and "friends of the NRA" events, which purports to offer fellowship with gun enthusiasts in local communities (see: Friends of NRA 2014). Additionally, users are prompted to "get involved locally" on the NRA-ILA activism website (see: <https://www.nraila.org/take-action/volunteer/>), and provided with information on how to coordinate with other "dedicated volunteers who work vigorously at the local, state, and federal levels to defend our Second Amendment rights."

Regardless of whether NRA members take advantage of these opportunities made available online to participate in real world grassroots activism, their presence, and the extent to which the NRA makes a visible effort to *connect the web with the street* (see:

Clark and Themudo 2006), reflects the fundamental importance of social networks to the process by which people identify their shared values and decide whether to engage in collective action (Passy 2003). Cyber-networking, therefore, can provide claimants and their supporters with a vehicle to establish, cultivate, and reinforce their allegiance to a chosen cause. Thus, to the extent that successful claims-making campaigns convince supporters to "become personally involved in collective action," the networking capacity of the Internet might be an important tool for providing the "opportunities to do so on a sustained basis" (Diani 2003:7).

Mobilizing Resources in Cyberspace

Getting advocates into the fold is only half of the battle for any set of claims-makers. Once people identify themselves with groups such as the NRA, they must be kept engaged through continued ideological reinforcement. In cyberspace, the NRA focuses on four core elements of participant mobilization: fundraising, voter registration, grassroots involvement, and online activism. The first component deals with financial (membership fees, gifts, merchandising, and so forth) resource acquisition. The remaining three are intended to rally people towards actions that help the NRA accomplish its political goals (see: McCarthy and Zald 1977), and reflect how the NRA attempts to integrate e-mobilization "for political recruitment, organization, and campaigning" (Chadwick 2006:144).

Although conventional, real world tactics remain integral to claimants' efforts, these emergent forms of e-mobilization (see: Chadwick 2006) are not nec-

essarily designed to cultivate dramatic street-level responses that pique public interest and attract media attention. Instead, the Internet primarily appears to foster *armchair* activism, wherein supporters engage in more passive forms of protest action from the comforts of home. For example, the NRA provides online petitions and e-mail campaigns that urge people to send prewritten statements about protecting gun rights to congressional representatives and media organizations. Similarly, the NRA's "Trigger the Vote" movement encourages supporters to send electronic messages in hopes of ensuring "gun owners across the country are registered to vote" so their voices will be heard during election season (NRA Trigger the Vote 2014).

It is important to note these forms of cyber-activism are not fundamentally new to the social problems process. McCarthy and Zald (1977), for example, wrote about social movement organizations employing cadres, identifying donor networks, and promoting passive forms of activism, such as letter writing campaigns, long before the Internet. The difference, however, is the ease with which mobilized action can be completed in cyberspace, and the sheer scope of potential supporters who can be targeted at any given time using the Internet. While grassroots protest is time and place specific, online activism allows people to simultaneously fight for gun rights in Connecticut, school safety in Florida, and tax reform in Washington D.C., all without leaving their home. Consequently, it is possible to participate in hundreds, if not thousands, of cyber-events in the amount of time it would take to attend a single NRA rally. E-mobilization, then, may facilitate a greater consistency

of participation among a broader number of supporters whose efforts require minimal labor to successfully complete, yet are presented as essential to advancing the NRA's core mission. Furthermore, encouraging citizens to take part in even the most docile types of e-mobilization may encourage more regular NRA engagement by creating a sense of active involvement with the organization. In other words, the reduced intensity of cyber-activism may actually yield a greater consistency of participation among NRA supporters.

Assessing the Internet Effect

We may reasonably assume the sheer ease with which people can engage with claims-makers in online environments may compel a larger number of prospective supporters to participate in e-mobilization than might have the time, energy, or interest to involve themselves in real world actions such as marches or rallies. The problem for many claims-makers, however, is that armchair activism may cultivate only superficial commitments from participants willing to take part in mobilized action that requires little or no effort. Large and established pressure groups like the NRA that primarily seek to mobilize resources in cyber-space can benefit by drawing upon their large support bases and name recognition when attempting to coax supporters to the claims and activism opportunities available on their websites. Less established claimants, however, may find it much more difficult to realize the true benefits of e-mobilization and armchair activism. Potential contributors may remain unaware of more obscure claims-makers because online technology requires people to actively search for

information and is therefore not as effective as mainstream news coverage of a protest event in spreading the message to the uninitiated. Simply put, the Internet is an important tactical resource because it directly links claimants to the general public, but it may not offer sufficient exposure without corresponding media attention to benefit fledgling activists in a manner similar to established pressure groups with vast resources and stable membership.

There are, of course, examples of people and groups with little political power using the Internet to successfully disseminate claims and mobilize people. For example, in 2012, 13-year-old McKenna Pope started a petition on the Change.org website to urge toy maker Hasbro to manufacture its Easy-Bake Oven in gender-neutral colors that would also appeal to boys. More than 44,000 signatures later, Pope and her family delivered the signatures to Hasbro's corporate headquarters; the company responded by introducing new colors like black and silver to the product line (Grinberg 2012). It undoubtedly speaks to the power of the Internet when a young girl can start a petition that garners so much public attention it compels a corporate reaction. Yet we may wonder whether Pope would have been successful had Hasbro not been presented with a good public relations opportunity and the press not picked up on the compelling human-interest story of a girl taking on a large corporation and made the public aware of her fight, which surely led many more people to take a few seconds and add their names to the petition.

Her achievements notwithstanding, there is an undeniable difference between McKenna Pope,

whose feel-good story masks the fact that millions of online petitions go virtually unnoticed every day, and the NRA, which has a ready-made base of 4 million members ready to visit its website, donate money, and remind legislators of the NRA's political power regardless of whether mainline news workers direct public attention to those efforts. Considering activists' goal to distribute claims to the largest possible audience in hopes of raising public attention to their issues, the sheer glut of information available online might actually make fledgling claimants more obscure and less likely to receive media coverage by comparison to pressure groups like the NRA. The Internet could therefore have a watering down effect by providing the press and larger public with a trove of readily available claims, most of which will never receive any widespread recognition. As a result, the Internet may actually exacerbate power differentials, leaving more established claims-makers that are less reliant on media coverage better positioned to succeed in an online world.

Drawing on this point, e-mobilization appears to facilitate more passive forms of activism that lack the dramatic value of grassroots protest and more visible forms of public street-level activism. Online claims-making and advocacy might therefore prove less effective at luring new supporters to the cause, limiting their long-term value to outsider claimants who are constantly struggling to obtain a sufficiently stable membership base. This is not to suggest that outsiders do not benefit from e-mobilization. To the contrary, simply being online increases the public visibility of even the most obscure claimants because the Internet is a global

mass medium by which information can be shared and supporters can contribute the symbolic and material resources needed to sustain claims-making campaigns. The problem, however, is that simply having an online presence does not guarantee that anyone will pay attention to activists if they are unable to direct widespread public attention to their claims, a task traditionally accomplished through mainstream media coverage. This places outsiders at a distinct disadvantage in cyberspace as compared to powerful lobbying and pressure groups, like the NRA, which can maximize the benefits of online claims-making and e-mobilization knowing they already receive sufficient public and media exposure, acquire needed assets from their large membership bases, and facilitate back-room deals with policymakers.

Conclusion

The growing presence of online claims-making and cyber-activism offers a fertile area of study, in part, because they beget a fundamental paradox in social problem construction: While the Internet allows claims to spread without coverage from traditional media, Internet exposure does not guarantee they will be recognized without the general public first being informed by journalists about the relevance of specific claims to their lives. Consider the tragic oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico that devastated wetlands across the coast of Louisiana and the Gulf Coast during the spring and summer of 2010. In the immediate aftermath, Tony Heyward, the CEO of British Petroleum (BP, the company whose rig exploded thereby producing the spill), held a press conference during which he mitigated

both the effects of the disaster and his own company's liability, as well as offered solutions for "capping" the leaking well. In these highly publicized moments, Heyward had a Big Media platform to spread claims promoting the view that his company had limited culpability in the disaster.

Heyward's framing of the Gulf oil spill instantly spread across the Internet and was available at all times and from almost anywhere. Although environmentalists, citizen journalists, and others critics of BP had also mobilized and were posting counter-claims online (which, in rare cases, also received scattered news coverage), they were advocating from a disadvantaged position because collectively they have less power to influence news cycles and the legislative process than a corporate behemoth like BP.

As BP continues to try to stop the oil gushing into the Gulf of Mexico, the energy giant is also dealing with a public relations nightmare. That's why the company is snapping up search phrases like "oil spill" and "oil spill claims" on Google and Yahoo. The strategy, says a company spokeswoman, aims to "assist those who are most impacted and help them find the right forms and the right people quickly and effectively." (Friedman 2010)

BP effectively used its considerable economic might to ensure "its own website would rank higher or even top in the list of advertisements that appear alongside search results when Internet users search on terms such as 'oil spill,' 'volunteer,' and 'claims'" (Reuters 2010). At the very least, this indicates that claimants with sufficient

resources, or those who are web-savvy, can manipulate cyber-arenas to their benefit. Although further research is needed to determine whether the comparably powerless are able to implement parallel methods to compete in online environments, cyber-arenas, such as search engines and mainstream news websites, appear to most effectively function as funneling mechanisms that direct users to other areas of the Internet that are congenial to positions, claims, and issues espoused by insiders, such as the NRA.

There is little disputing that bloggers, citizen journalists, and other outsider claimants have used the Internet to obtain social recognition by appearing in search engine results, breaking news stories, and out-scooping mainstream journalists. Yet their influence is diluted considerably to the extent that insiders can establish themselves as the primary framers of media narratives by having the ability to ensure their claims are most visible in cyberspace. Furthermore, using cyber-arenas to disseminate claims appears to have added legitimacy when performed in conjunction with insider status. Whereas social movements derive their power from media coverage, insiders have perpetual entrée to policymakers. Online claims-making, then, is not needed to bring attention to the NRA, but rather mobilize needed material (e.g., money) and nonmaterial (e.g., members participating in online activism) resources from its stable advocacy base. Furthermore, there is an inherent *credibility gap* that must be considered when evaluating the long-term viability of citizen journalism and other forms of outsider claims-making in cyberspace. News consumption has been trending away from

traditional television broadcasts and print media and towards digital sources via computers and mobile phones; this does not necessarily correlate to audiences accessing sites for alternative citizen journalism with greater frequency, and the social issues being discussed at any given time on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter are usually driven by mainstream media coverage.

Research conducted by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism has found "that the reputation or brand of a news organization, a very traditional idea, is the most important factor in determining where consumers go for news, and that is even truer on mobile devices than on laptops or desktops" (Mitchell, Rosentiel, and Christian 2012). These figures may someday change, but the fact that most people tend to frequent larger, trusted news websites may also reflect the credibility gap associated with outsider claims-making: There is a host of concerns about whether standards of journalistic integrity can be upheld for amateur claimants, and whether there can be accountability for misleading or falsified reporting when audiences cannot definitively identify the source of the information being presented to them. So long as outsiders are wholly contingent on competing for mainstream media attention in order for their claims to receive public attention, and news coverage continues to be framed primarily according to the claims made by political and corporate insiders, then the power disparities inherent to the social problems process are likely to remain unchanged regardless of whether cyber-arenas allow a broader spectrum of citizens to participate in mass media. This is ultimately the

crucial weakness of cyber-arenas in their present form for outsider claims-makers: Social change often requires a sustained public response that mobilizes political forces into action. While the NRA is undoubtedly expanding its scope and global reach

in cyberspace, it is still unclear whether outsider claimants can use the Internet to consistently generate sufficient public interest needed to compel policymakers to take action and have a meaningful long-term effect on the social problems process.

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Resinicization and Digital Citizenship in Hong Kong: Youth, Cyberspace, and Claims-Making

Abstract Under the “one country, two systems” model fashioned after its handover to China in 1997, Hong Kong, a Special Administrative Region of China, is to retain its rule of law, capitalist system, and accompanying political and ideological independence. However, tensions remain centered on concerns held by many Hong Kong citizens over the “resinicization” of Hong Kong, related to anxieties regarding the putative erosion of political and ideological freedoms. This paper examines the claims-making of the student activist group Scholarism, who effectively used Facebook to raise awareness of and successfully resist a government proposal to introduce a national education curriculum into Hong Kong schools. Scholarism’s resistance and ability to mobilize mass demonstrations against the government is significant considering the lack of democratic channels in Hong Kong. Implications are explored for the examination of how claims-making in cyberspace impacts the social problems process, especially in non-democratic and post-colonial contexts.

Keywords Hong Kong; Scholarism; Political Activism; Cyberspace; Facebook; Post-Colonialism; Social Constructionism; Post-80s Youth; Netizenship; Resinicization

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Digital citizenship is a relatively new term capturing the active political awareness and organizational activities of youth online. The “net generation”—those who have grown up with the Internet and alongside the advent of online social media and social networks, including Facebook and Twitter—are not, contrary to some public opinion, disinterested, apathetic, and egocentric brats. They are politically engaged *netizens* who, through the medium of cyberspace, flip consumption practices on their heads as engaged *prosumers* (Tapscott 2009; Ritzer, Dean, and Jurgenson 2012). This paper centers on how youth in Hong Kong, especially those raised since the 1990s, are becoming the vanguard of political activism against a post-colonial government widely perceived to be under the control of the mainland Chinese government. We focus on the events surrounding a recent government proposal to introduce a curriculum of national education (NEC) in Hong Kong schools. Scholarism, a particular group mostly comprising youth born in the 1990s, took to the web, especially Facebook, to organize mass protests against this policy, and successfully overturned it. We focus on Scholarism’s Facebook claims-making as a case study to examine wider tensions in Hong Kong regarding its *resinicization* (discussed below), and to contribute to a dialogue regarding how to expand social constructionist scholarship internationally, especially in post-colonial regions that lack democratic processes. The paper begins by situating its analysis within the historical context of social constructionist scholarship, and then provides a brief background on Hong Kong’s recent history and political situation in relation to mainland China. The case study on Scholarism and the NEC cam-

aign follows, with a discussion and conclusion raising questions about how constructionist scholarship can benefit from a global and comparative constructionist imagination.

Social Constructionist Theory: Historical Roots and New Directions

Social constructionism emerged in the United States during the 1970s, as a response to sociological theory which ignored or disqualified the interpretive processes through which people perceive and react to social problems (Kitsuse and Spector 1973; Spector and Kitsuse 1973; 1977; see: Loseke 1999, chapter one). Kitsuse and Spector’s (1973:418) formulation of a sociology of social problems is geared “to account for the emergence, maintenance, and history of claims-making and responding activities.” By claims-making, they referred to “the activities of groups making assertions of grievances and claims to organizations, agencies, and institutions about some putative conditions” (Spector and Kitsuse 1973:146). Claims-making is geared to spark outrage, mobilize supporters, and lead authorities to take the necessary steps to fix the problem. Claims-making may be conducted through marches and street demonstrations, as well as through the Internet, in forms such as citizen journalism (Maratea 2014:5).

Constructionists examine claims related to youth, especially those caught up in crime and deviance, that reflect wider issues related to social order and citizenship (Spencer 2005; 2011; Adorjan 2011). How societies respond to *problem youth* illuminates much regarding salient socio-political issues and exigencies,

as well as whether youth are brought into the fold of society or rejected as outcasts. This paper will examine claims-making related to a particular group of politically active, troublesome (from the perspective of authorities) youth in Hong Kong: Scholarism. This case study focuses on how the process of claims-making in Hong Kong's social context differs from claims made in liberal democracies.

To date, the majority of constructionist studies examine liberal democracies, usually in North America or other "Western" nations, in particular, Anglophone nations with retracted welfare states (Lippert and Stenson 2010:475). Constructionist studies in non-Western regions tend to examine how social problems claims spread and diffuse internationally, usually from North American and European origins (Best 2001; see also Best 2008, chapter 10). Moreover, even when addressing non-Western nations, such comparisons are based exclusively on liberal democracies (typically Japan; but see: Xu [in this issue of QSR]). A consistent pattern of comparative analysis and theoretical development has thus been lacking in constructionist scholarship. We turn now to Hong Kong, tracing its recent history and developing political tensions related largely to its geopolitical relation to mainland China.

Resinicization Anxieties: Hong Kong's Tenuous Post Colonial Status With Mainland China

On July 01, 1997, Hong Kong ceased to be a British colony, becoming a Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of China. Deng Xiaoping (former Paramount Leader of the People's Republic of China

[PRC]) formalized his policy of "one country, two systems" under the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration, which was implemented under Hong Kong's Basic Law following the handover. This policy meant that, in theory, Hong Kong would be able to preserve its rule of law and capitalist system without interference from mainland China for 50 years.

However, discord and distrust over Beijing's intentions for Hong Kong grew among Hong Kong citizens during the 1980s in the years leading up to the 1997 handover, leading to a crisis of legitimacy for the British colonial government (Scott 1989; Ma 2007). Anxieties were expressed about the potential interference of the mainland Chinese government in the affairs of Hong Kong. What some have dubbed the *resinicization* or *mainlandization* of Hong Kong refers to the "policy of making Hong Kong politically more dependent on Beijing, economically more reliant on the Mainland's support, socially more patriotic towards the motherland, and legally more reliant on the interpretation of [1997's] Basic Law by the PRC National People's Congress" (Lo 2007:186). Hong Kong's post-colonial governments are perceived by many sectors in society as "more illiberal and less tolerant of dissent" than the former colonial authorities (Jones and Vagg 2007:574). For instance, concerns have been increasing regarding mainland China's "interference" with the introduction of democratic processes in Hong Kong (Estes 2005:208). Recent reports indicate Hong Kong citizens' levels of dissatisfaction with governmental performance and life in Hong Kong has reached a "10-year high," with the highest levels of dissatisfaction coming from students

and people under 30 (Radio Television Hong Kong, April 30, 2014).

Young people in Hong Kong feel especially excluded from the ability to afford an education and housing, but particularly in relation to a sense of citizenship and identification with Hong Kong (Chiu and Lui 2004; Shek and Lee 2004). Some youth, especially the more socio-economically marginalized *young night drifters* and psychotropic drug abusers, are effectively outsiders from Hong Kong society. They are perpetual outcasts who count little in a region where success is equated with financial capital and contribution (Groves, Ho, and Siu 2012; Adorjan and Chui 2014, chapter 9; Groves, Siu, and Ho 2014). Shek (2007:2024-2025) has reported on the "high social stress" and "morbid emphasis on achievement" in Hong Kong that lead some youth to feel a sense of "lack of life meaning" and pessimism about social mobility. This anomie is amplified by rising levels of income disparity in Hong Kong, with the Gini Coefficient worsening from 0.451 in 1981 to 0.533 in 2007 (Government of Hong Kong 1992; Central Intelligence Agency 2014). While some are driven to drugs by such feelings of exclusion, others, especially the politically active Post-80s generation, are able to promulgate and mobilize social movements against the government. It is the latter group that we focus on in this paper.

Young people feel particularly disaffected by the lack of an audience among officials in Hong Kong. They feel there is no one listening to them, especially given the lack of democracy and putative reticence of the government to move towards uni-

versal suffrage. Presently, half of the seats in the Legislative Council (LegCo) are selected by a few elite persons and corporations, with under 10,000 business voters holding the power to usurp the wishes of Hong Kong's seven million residents, with less than 200,000 voters electing half of LegCo seats (DeGolyer 2010:2). Youth have expressed acutely their anxieties growing up under this context. For instance, one survey conducted by the Hong Kong Transition Project (which tracks public opinion of the post-colonial government and developments in Hong Kong) found that half of the 160 respondents (18-29 years old) felt that the government "always holds fake consultations" (Lee 2010). About 72% of the sample felt the government makes policy unfairly, placing the interests of others (such as citizens of mainland China) over Hong Kong citizens. In sum, many youth in Hong Kong are not optimistic about the prospect for democracy and ideological freedom.

Despite these persisting problems, optimism for change has recently been culled from particular segments of the population the Hong Kong media have dubbed *Post-80s*. Post-80s youth, who are under 30 years old, have drawn widespread media attention for their active protests against post-colonial government policies and initiatives, especially those related to the mainland Chinese government. A recent study on Post-80s youth in Hong Kong revealed that, between October 2009 and mid-January 2010, young people were three times more likely than older people to report being "very dissatisfied with life in Hong Kong" (DeGolyer 2010:11). Findings suggest, however, that young protestors are optimistic about the effectiveness of

raising awareness and taking action to combat social problems such as poverty and to fight for universal suffrage (DeGolyer 2010:43; see also Adorjan and Chui 2014, chapter 9). Sociologists often highlight the media's fascination with the deviant behavior of working class and marginal youth, and trace accompanying moral panics and escalated responses by politicians and criminal justice officials (e.g., Schissel 1997; Cohen 2002). However, while youth crime and delinquency are perhaps perennial concerns for any modern society, in Hong Kong, media and governmental attention have gravitated instead towards the educated and technologically savvy young people who use their skills to speak their truth to governmental power. Those interviewed in the media are usually college-educated, with some pursuing graduate degrees or careers in journalism, and are portrayed as technologically astute, well organized, and having a strong presence in cyberspace (Groves, Siu, and Ho 2014:835).

It is in this context that we examine the events surrounding the Hong Kong government's formal proposal, in the spring of 2012, to introduce an NEC by 2015 to replace the older curriculum on moral and civic education. Hong Kong citizens expressed concerns related to ideological encroachment, for instance, through putatively coercive governmental attempts to enforce patriotism towards mainland China; to "love China" as distinct from the onus to "love Hong Kong" (Lo 2007:186). Many groups, including the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union, pan-Democratic politicians, and parents, viewed the proposals as an attempt to "brainwash" young students (Groves, Siu, and Ho 2014). A Chinese University of Hong Kong telephone poll

of 863 Hong Kong citizens revealed 47% had their confidence in the Chief Executive of Hong Kong weakened by its handling of the NEC proposal (Kang-chung and Chong 2012). In July, 2012, the National Education Parents' Concern Group was established, encouraging citizens to attend protest marches and in one instance mobilizing 1000 Hong Kong citizens to sign a petition sent to the government against the proposal (Chong 2012; Tang 2012). At least 115 schools refused to implement the curriculum, which was set to become mandatory by 2015. The Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union reported up to 40% of 528 primary schools considered opting out of teaching the curriculum for the first year (Chong 2012). The Union also organized a strike against the proposal (Kang-chung and Chong 2012). Other groups, such as the Hong Kong Christian Institute, also organized protests held in front of the government offices (Wei and Cheung 2012).

While there were a fair number of groups organizing claims against the government, arguably the most influential was a group of Post-90s student activists who helped galvanize the public and bring focus to the various dissident groups. This group, Scholarism, came to symbolize a new type of revolutionary class: educated, middle class netizens, who inspire others to action through Facebook. While a number of groups helped organize petitions and marches, none except Scholarism were able to sway the government's resolve to implement the mandatory NEC by 2015. This was accomplished in large part through Scholarism's ability to mobilize activism through Facebook. If the government is not willing to listen to claims-making

through normal channels, cyberspace offers a new frontier for challenging post-colonial hegemony.

The Rise of Scholarism

Scholarism was founded in 2011 by Joshua Wong Chi-fung and other secondary school students. The formation of Scholarism was directly related to the Hong Kong government's 2010 Policy Address, which "suggested a multi-staged plan to introduce National Education in Primary and Secondary Schools of HK, through teaching more information of the state and developing students' affection towards the country, so to make students self-consciously to develop a sense of thankfulness towards the Motherland" (from Facebook, May 29, 2011). Scholarism distinguished itself as the first group to pressure the government about its formal proposal in 2012 to push through the NEC. The group grew from 150 core members in 2012 to 400 by July 2013, with thousands more inspired to join in protests organized through Facebook. Many students first found out about the group through Facebook, after becoming inspired by Post-80s activists who first gained media and political attention for protests organized against a proposed rail link connecting Hong Kong with Guangzhou, China (Yeung 2013). Protestors criticized the cost of the project and argued that it would make life more difficult for Hong Kongers (Kang-chung 2010).

Scholarism's Chinese name is 學民. The group explains on its Facebook site that the first half of their Chinese name indicates their identity both as students and world citizens; Chinese citizens and Hong Kong citizens simultaneously. This conver-

gence of identities inspired Scholarism to participate, they state, in the consultations regarding the NEC. The second half of their Chinese name refers to the abandoning of "old Chinese thought" in favor of the ideas of democracy, science, and freedom of speech. Scholarism state "we decided ... to fight for freedom of speech and not brainwashing ideology of Patriotism" (from Facebook, May 29, 2011).

In the spring and summer of 2012, Scholarism was involved in a number of demonstrations alongside other groups. During the annual pro-democracy marches held on July 01, 2012, marking the anniversary of the founding of the HKSAR, Scholarism took over roadways in front of the High Court, leading protestors from the government headquarters to the Central Government of China's Liaison Office. The Liaison Office is where protests by various groups are often located, as the building is seen as a symbol of Chinese authoritarianism and a perch from which mainland officials can disseminate propaganda to Hong Kong. During the July 01, 2012 rally, Scholarism was accompanied by League of Social Democrats members and an estimated 10,000 protestors from the group People Power—both pro-democracy groups actively campaigning in Hong Kong for universal suffrage (Lee et al. 2012).

With existing groups (e.g., People Power, League of Social Democrats) supportive of their activities and coordinating mass demonstrations alongside Scholarism, Scholarism quickly brought attention to itself in media and especially through social network sites. While media coverage no doubt played a role, Scholarism's success in reversing the

government's position on national education was fueled by the audience it attracted and inspired through its Facebook site in particular. As of July 2014, Scholarism has 205,957 "fans" following the group on their Facebook page. 85% of Scholarism's fans are based in Hong Kong (174,882), with 4.5% in Taiwan (9,350), with the rest based in the United States (1.7%), Australia (1.4%), and mainland China (1.2%), presumably by supporters able to access Facebook despite the mainland Chinese government blocking the website. On average, the group gains a little over 300 fans a day and 14,000 fans per month (see: socialbakers.com). The strong connection between Scholarism and its supporters can be found in the prologue to a documentary, *Lessons in Dissent* (see: <http://vimeo.com/81571263>).

While media reports only began to track the activities of Scholarism in earnest as of late June 2012 in relation to protests the group began to organize around the proposed NEC, Scholarism was already actively using Facebook in 2011 to release statements and raise public support. They posted frequent references to the proposal as a governmental attempt at brainwashing, criticizing how teachers would have to assess students based on their emotional identification with their "motherland": "students' answers are required to be same as the government's stance" (from Facebook, May 29, 2011). Public support for Scholarism and antagonism towards the government were evident in the protests organized by Scholarism against the NEC in August 2012. At one point, an estimated 8000 protestors, from all sectors of society, including parents and their children, camped out in front of the government headquarters. Some core mem-

bers of Scholarism and supporters, including academics, engaged in a hunger strike, chanting "Dialogue! Dialogue! Dialogue!" (Chan 2012). The spirit of the event was captured by journalist Alex Lo, who wrote:

[w]ow, what a display of people's power over the weekend? What started as a debate over the new subject of national education has become a full-blown political crisis. For the government, it's no longer merely a matter of whether or when to introduce the subject, but how to ditch it without losing too much face and credibility.

You're in serious trouble if tens of thousands of protesters bring their children to occupy the government headquarters. National education becomes a lost cause as soon as thousands of parents and teachers start accusing the government of brainwashing our children. ... Officials should recognize a political defeat for what it is and quickly cut their losses. (Lo 2012; see also Adorjan and Chui 2014, chapter 9)

Victory was finally achieved when Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying capitulated to public opinion and withdrew the government's plans to impose mandatory implementation of the NEC. Schools would be able to decide whether to teach the curriculum independently (Lau and Nip 2012). Subsequent to its success, Scholarism has shifted its focus to campaign for democracy in Hong Kong. It has advocated for a civil nomination process by 2017 (in 2007 the National People's Congress Standing Committee in China pledged direct elections would be held for Hong Kong's Chief Executive by 2017) (The Standard 2013).

By analyzing how Scholarism used Facebook as a tool to attract public support and galvanize various groups to collectively protest against the government, we seek in this paper to advance social constructionist theory. We do so by offering a case study set in a region which differs from those usually examined in constructionist studies to date. The illiberal, post-colonial context of Hong Kong challenges what Western constructionists dub the "natural history" of social problems claims-making salient in Western, liberal democracies. Natural histories within constructionism aim to track a "temporal course of development in which different phases [of claims-making] can be distinguished" (Fuller and Myers 1941:322) in relation to a social problem. In other words, constructionists pay attention to the pathways traveled by claims about social problems—how they are taken up or rejected, become policy or boomerang back with unintended consequences.

The most recent iteration of a natural history model is offered by Best (2008:17), who suggests following social problems debates and outcomes based on the following sequence: claims-making, media coverage, public reaction, policymaking, social problems work, and policy outcomes. Best argues this process is not necessarily linear, but the model serves as a useful framework for understanding the processes involved in social problems debates. This model is salient in liberal democratic societies where, for instance, public reaction to social problems, when combined with claims-making underscoring fear (e.g., from the media, academics, government and non-governmental organizations), results in political responses "cashing in" on the

concerns of a voting electorate (Altheide 1997; Simon 2007). Yet in Hong Kong, where a small circle of officials make decisions regarding how to respond to social problems, public consultation and dialogue is perceived by many sectors of Hong Kong society to be chimerical (see: Ma 2007; Adorjan and Chui 2013; 2014). Those concerned with Hong Kong's resinicization feel that the government disregards its own public given the pressure from mainland Chinese authorities to maintain social order and economic harmony. For the government, this elitist style of governance stems from a lack of political legitimacy, with roots extending back before 1997. Aware of the watchful (and often disapproving) eye of Beijing, the Chief Executive is behooved to maintain order and performative stability (cf. Alagappa 1995). A full comparative analysis of how claims-making operates in Hong Kong is beyond our scope here. However, the case study of Scholarism suggests that it is politically active youth with access to social media that can garner a creative and efficacious mode of claims-making in an illiberal, undemocratic region.

Further Context and Methodology

Hong Kong is a highly advanced global financial center and "global city," with one of the world's highest rates of household Internet connection (67%) in the world (Chan and Fang 2007:245). Recent research reveals most youth in Hong Kong, as elsewhere, go online when searching for information or doing school work, and use the Internet most frequently for music and entertainment (Chan and Fang 2007:251-252). Yet Chu's (2010) survey of Hong Kong secondary school students, referring to

netizenship among youth, revealed “little support for popular claims that celebrate the active role of participants in the new media culture.” Although some infrequently posted to blogs or uploaded videos to YouTube, the students sampled remained “passive consumers in most cases” (Chu 2010).

We would suggest, however, that there is evidence of a groundswell of political activism among youth in Hong Kong, who make use of social media, not only to raise awareness of social problems, but to promote social movement activity that leads, in some cases, to mass protests mobilized against the government. Evidence of consumption of entertainment and fun online must not be considered as mutually exclusive to active netizenship and political participation. As Chu (2010) herself notes, “future research should aim at recruiting young people who do engage in [prosumption] for more contextualized perspectives.”

By the end of 2008, there were 3.65 million Internet users in Hong Kong; 68.7% of the total population of just over seven million (Hong Kong Internet Project 2009:3). The proportion of Internet users among those aged 18-30 increased from 70% in 2000 to 98% by 2008 (Hong Kong Internet Project 2009:6). In addition, across all sectors of society, students in Hong Kong had a near 100% penetration rate of Internet use between 2000 and 2008 (Hong Kong Internet Project 2009:11), suggesting that there may be very little by way of a digital divide in Internet access among adolescents in Hong Kong. While young people in Hong Kong communicate through a variety of ever-evolving social media (including Whatsapp instant messenger, Twitter, Instagram,

etc.), Facebook is one of the primary social network sites young “digital natives” (Prensky 2001) use to communicate with each other and with the broader society (Chu 2010).

Our interest in how politically active youth are challenging the post-colonial system and mainland Chinese authorities inspires our analysis of how student activist group Scholarism is able to achieve their goals for socio-political change. We focus on how Scholarism employed Facebook to mobilize public opinion and promoted an unprecedented reversal in proposed government policy. We do this through examining Scholarism’s Facebook “notes” postings from 2011 through 2013.

We collected three kinds of data (notes, statuses, and statistics) from Scholarism’s Facebook page: <https://zh-hk.facebook.com/Scholarism>. This paper centers on the content of translated notes, offering some descriptive statistical trends for further context. Notes created by the group were obtained from the link: <https://www.facebook.com/Scholarism/notes>. Notes offer a way to explore both the form and content of Scholarism’s organizational self-presentation. Notes from this hyperlink are posted by Scholarism itself, thus it is reasonable to assume the notes are posted intentionally by the group. A total of 99 notes were retrieved from 2011 (5 notes), 2012 (60 notes), and 2013 (34 notes) and translated into English. The notes also included illustrations and photos, although these were not analyzed for this paper.

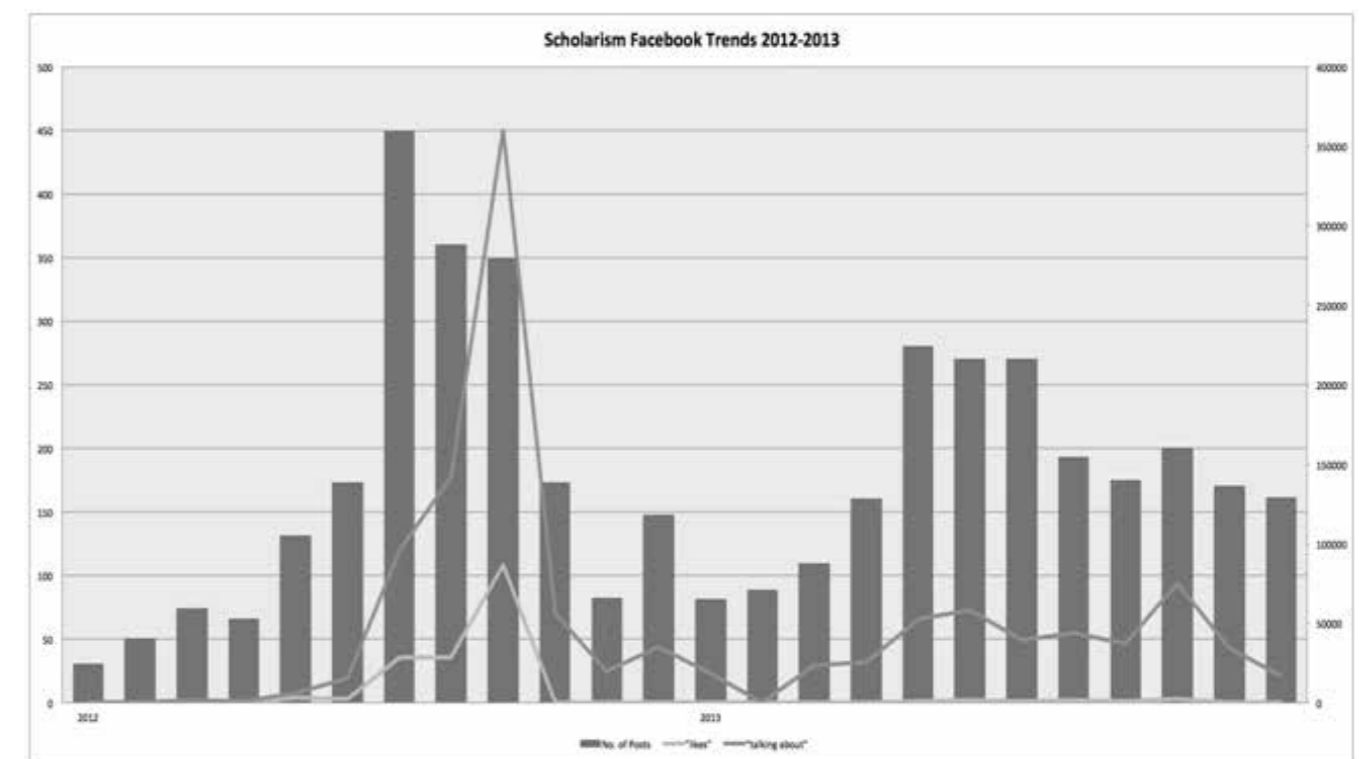
Statuses are identified as posts on the “timeline” feature of the social page. We selected “posted by page” to filter out posts by third parties on the

page and to ensure that the content analyzed was intended by the group. We then retrieved the individual links of the posts by clicking on the date of the post, followed by the production of statistical trends from the status links. All statuses from 2011-2013 were collected into a database of hyperlinks to 4315 posts. We then selected all 75 posts of 2011, and a comparable sample of 75/2084 posts from 2012 and 78/2157 from 2013 (every 28th post for 2012 and 2013). We analyzed the content of the immediate post (without further clicking other hyperlinks) according to a developed coding scheme. Statistics on “people who like this” and “people talking about this” generated by Facebook were also recorded. We also considered the content of

attached media without clicking into hyperlinks. Descriptive statistical trends were processed and compared across years. All information collected is publicly available; no confidential or private information was retrieved.

Overall trends indicate that the majority of posts occurred in 2012, especially in August and September, when the campaign against NEC was drawing the most momentum. Complementing this trend, it is clear that the majority of “likes” and “talking about” were concentrated during the same period. Interestingly, “talking about” metrics are substantially higher than the number of “likes.” This suggests that supporters are more inclined to disseminate

Figure 1. Scholarism: Facebook Trends.



Note: The scale for number of posts appears on the left; the scale for “likes” and “talking about” appears on the right.

Source: Self-elaboration.

information about Scholarism through Facebook rather than the shallower activism (or “clicktivism”) of just pressing the “like” button on Facebook. To generate a “like,” a user need only click the “like” button a single time. The “talking about” figure is related to the buzz or discussion generated by a particular page on Facebook. It includes “likes,” but also other forms of interaction and engagement, such as sharing content by posting it to a user’s Facebook wall. This implies that supporters of Scholarism are very active, not only browsing their Facebook page and retrieving information but also actively engaging and participating in social movements against the government.

Figure 1 shows aggregate trends regarding Scholarism’s Facebook page and supporter engagement. In the following section’s qualitative analysis of our sample of Facebook postings, we examine both the content of Scholarism’s messages to Hong Kong citizens and how Facebook was used to mobilize “real world” demonstrations, which had a great impact on governmental policy. We center on their efforts to reach out to citizens for support and to join in public demonstrations, and the shift to other wider, though related issues in 2013 (i.e., universal suffrage). By highlighting these themes, we show how Scholarism’s efforts helped inspire broad public support for social activism and challenge to Hong Kong’s post colonial government.

Facing the Government Through Facebook: Communicating With Citizens

Scholarism often takes aim at the lack of governmental public consultation and limited channels for dem-

ocratic expression in Hong Kong. They frequently accuse officials of posturing in their pronouncements of public consultation, and use Facebook to offer carefully crafted rejoinders. For instance, in October 2011, Chief Executive Donald Tsang announced, as quoted on Scholarism’s Facebook, “[w]e have carried out a public consultation on [Moral National Education]. The education community generally agrees with the idea and importance of introducing that subject.” Yet Scholarism criticized Tsang, stating:

[i]t seems that Tsang thinks that “public” does not include HK students and parents. In fact, the consultation held from May to August is merely a closed-door consultation, only a few teachers are allowed to attend the consultation meetings; student ... and parent organizations were not invited, neither are the public [informed] where those meetings were being held. While the largest stakeholders, students and parents, are not consulted, how can the government say that the public consultation has been carried? (Facebook, October 25, 2011)

Similar remarks are found in 2012, with Scholarism accusing the government of not consulting students, failing to publish revisions to the curriculum for public inspection, and failing “to allay public concerns about the brainwashing nature of the subject.” Asking secondary school boards to “implement programs or policies without consultation,” Scholarism writes, “is tantamount to contempt for public opinion and consultation mechanism. It is extremely disrespectful to civil society” (Facebook, February 27, 2012).

Having successfully organized demonstrations with the public in 2011, Scholarism then used Face-

book to actively resist officials’ attempts to negatively label them as troublemakers and naive students. In one post, Scholarism criticized Mr. Lau Lai-Keung, a member of a political advisory body in mainland China, for his criticisms of Scholarism’s demonstrations in late August 2011 as “being ‘senseless’”:

Mr. Lau pointed out that the demonstrators are a bunch of “young, mentally undeveloped” youngsters who don’t know the truth, and they are being incited. In fact, we are not being incited by others, all of our activities are organized by secondary school students, and we started to be aware of the issue of [Moral National Education] curriculum way before other political parties did, “being incited” is impossible. ... In terms of principle, Mr. Lau has a too limited view on the word “brainwashing” and it differs from our understanding. That’s why he did not understand our thoughts and actions, and saw us as deviants. (Facebook, September 07, 2011)

Such conscious resistance to efforts by officials to demean Scholarism invokes what Kitsuse (1980:9) termed “tertiary deviance,” referring to “the deviant’s confrontation, assessment, and rejection of the negative identity imbedded in secondary deviation, and the transformation of that identity into a positive and viable self-conception.” Kitsuse (1980:2-3, emphasis added) adds: “individuals who have been culturally defined and categorized, stigmatized, morally degraded, and socially segregated by institutionally sanctioned exclusions engage in the politics of producing social problems when they declare their presence openly and without apology to *claim the rights of citizenship.*”

While Scholarism may hope to communicate their rejoinders to key officials, it seems more probable that the primary audience they wish to capture is Hong Kong netizens. A frequent tactic is including a posting with a detailed and emotionally charged statement, followed by a number of itemized requests placed to the government, and closing with a call for public support. For instance, in response to a government-released consultation draft related to the NEC, Scholarism stated: “[w]e are of the opinion that this subject named ‘National Education’ is a disguised form of education to indoctrinate students with a form of twisted ‘patriotism.’ It insults the professionalism of teachers and academic integrity, with an intent to hinder students’ independent thinking ability” (Facebook, August 19, 2011). Three requests to the government are made at the end of the post: “1. Recall MNE Curriculum Consultation Paper”; “2. Introduce real human rights and civic education”; and concludes “at the same time, we urged HK citizens to participate.”

It is also evident through Scholarism’s Facebook posts that they do not expect all students who follow them to join in protests, which entail certain risks when clashes occur with police. In May 2012 (Facebook, May 21, 2012), Scholarism posted a transcript of an interview founder Joshua Wong conducted outside the Central Government Offices, regarding a recently organized protest. Wong, asked whether he thought schools would participate if students went on strike over the NEC, responded:

Thirty schools participate in the petition campaign on Facebook, which Scholarism initiated in April,

asking students to invite their fellow schoolmates to oppose brainwashing national education. This shows that many students are aware of this subject, but maybe they just need a channel. Also, parade [protest march] is not a familiar method of expression for students so Facebook is much simpler and easier for them.

This statement reveals Scholarism's cognizance regarding the power of social media to communicate with citizens—especially students—and recognizes that the majority of students in Hong Kong, while supportive, are not likely to join in direct clashes with police or hunger strikes. Nevertheless, Facebook provides a “channel” that students can use to collectively organize against governmental power. Maratea (2014:12), considering how the Internet affects the claims-making process for political activists, notes “even with an online networking structure in place, political claims-making campaigns are doomed to fail if activists are unable to acquire needed resources and mobilize supporters into action.” Facebook, in fact, provides Scholarism with the ideal platform to hail supporters, allowing Scholarism to focus resources on their offline mobilization efforts while garnering donations online.

By April 2012 (Facebook, April 23, 2012) Scholarism announced on Facebook its move into a “second wave of anti-brainwashing student movement,” detailing times and locations of “publicity street stations” in various districts. Scholarism writes that it “does not allow the government to treat any of the students as political puppets, and to suppress their freedom of thought!” Facebook posts began

to frequently call upon supporters to join in protests, with details of protest routes and times posted with additional links made available for further information. One post, for instance, encouraged supporters to surround the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government (Facebook, June 27, 2012). Also part of its “second wave,” Scholarism reached out explicitly to parents in a bid to garner support beyond students and teachers. They write on Facebook, alongside an appropriated *Simpson's* cartoon, that their campaign:

does not just concern students and teachers; parents and all the people of Hong Kong are important guardians of the next generation! We know that many parents have a common idea, but now parents' strength is scattered, so Scholarism wants to assist with setting up a Parents Concern Group on National Education so we can add further pressure on the government and demand it to withdraw the red education! (Facebook, July 08, 2012)

A link is provided for interested parents to join the Concern Group through a Google Docs form, requesting information on the school enrollment of their children and views on NEC.

Scholarism offers ample evidence of its deliberate intention to use Facebook in particular to garner public support and promote activism. One post, titled a “Declaration of Stance,” argues that their “stance is what we have shown in our Facebook pages' press releases and declarations. It is our *primary channel of information release*” (Facebook, July 25, 2012, emphasis added). Subsequent posts often end by reminding supporters to keep a vig-

ilant eye on their Facebook page for updates and details regarding public campaigns and planned protests.

By August, 2012, these strategies to collect public support were very successful. The pivotal protest and hunger strike that led to the government reverting its stance on NEC was originally publicized on Scholarism's Facebook page, with an announcement that the timetable of the Occupy the Government HQ protest would be posted to Facebook (Facebook, August 29, 2012). In a post subsequent to this Occupy protest, Scholarism notes “[t]he movement against National Education has grown from nameless to 120,000 people participating in the anti-National Education gathering. Many people are awake as a result, and understand the ambition of the [Communist Party of China]” (Facebook, December 19, 2012).

Shifting to Universal Suffrage

The victory of the summer 2012 led Scholarism to almost immediately post a justification for their continued vigilance and activities. Titled “Thanks for the support; The movement is not over; Get ready to build a new peak,” the post declared that Scholarism will continue to fight until the full recall of NEC (not just the retraction of its mandatory implementation). They state “[w]hat we have done has caused the government to fear the public opinion and so they have to come out and cool down the event. We hope that each HK citizen can keep supporting the protesting events of [Scholarism] and add more pressure on the government” (Facebook, September 09, 2012).

Scholarism then shifted to posts highlighting their concern that the government would tempt schools into voluntarily implementing the NEC through monetary incentives. Interestingly, one post documents how Scholarism was contacted by “some netizens” informing them that a particular school had apparently planned to implement the NEC voluntarily “without consultation with teachers, students, and parents.” Scholarism posted that it hoped the school's announcement “is merely a misunderstanding.” In fact, it was—the school issued a formal statement to Scholarism clarifying that it was not planning to implement the NEC. Scholarism concluded “[w]e urge netizens and citizens to keep monitoring the implementation of NEC in different schools. If they have discovered any brainwashing or biased element, they can seek help [through Scholarism]” (Facebook, December 17, 2012). This post reveals that Scholarism does not only inspire activism offline, through protests and demonstrations, but has engaged a body of netizens online, helping to act as watch dogs in the interests of advancing democracy and freedom in Hong Kong.

Our sample of Scholarism's Facebook posts demonstrates a clear shift away from NEC-related topics after 2012. 54 and 49 articles addressed NEC in 2011 and 2012 respectively, while only 7 in 2013 did so directly. The dominant issue Scholarism addressed in 2013 was universal suffrage (some articles also continued to address the mainland Chinese government crackdown of student activists in Tiananmen Square on June 04, 1989), especially given a planned “Occupy Central” movement for summer 2014, organized by local academics and supported by Scholarism.

This “turn” to universal suffrage was not a random grasping to remain politically relevant. Scholarism’s Facebook posts evidenced their concern with voters’ rights and democracy well before their 2012 NEC victory. Scholarism has always positioned itself as a group fighting for freedom and equality for all Hong Kong citizens, and NEC became a pivotal concern in 2012. Both the NEC and universal suffrage relate to concerns over the resinicization of Hong Kong. In fact, Facebook posts as early as March 2012 indicate an explicit concern with universal suffrage. In one posted statement in 2012, a poster with the caption “Refuse small-circle election, universal suffrage now” appears. Scholarism address students directly, inviting them to a University of Hong Kong website in order to participate in a Mock Civil Referendum in Schools and to “vote abstention” in order to communicate a no confidence in any candidates. They write:

[m]ost citizens and students do not have a right to vote, thus they are not allowed to select the leader of Hong Kong. CE [Chief Executive] candidates do not even disclose their stance, simply due to the loopholes of the election system [and] ... do not even need to face members of public, but they need the support from 1200-members from the Election Committee. Voices from the grassroots are often neglected. Thus, we oppose small-circle election, and believe that one-person-one-vote universal suffrage is the only way to make CE candidates respect voices and viewpoints from students, as well as to defend the public’s right. (Facebook, March 19, 2012)

In 2013, posts about universal suffrage are initially rendered with continued reference to the

campaign against NEC: “[t]he elements of political implantation will ... not disappear. After the [government] postponed the national education, Scholarism proposed the need to ‘change from defense to offense,’ preventing brainwashing material via striving for a democratic system” (Facebook, March 04, 2013). Subsequent posts refer to a “long-term war,” which “has started” and “would decide whether we can decide our own destiny” (Facebook, August 28, 2013). Democracy here is argued to be a more permanent corrective preventing corruption and ideological encroachment from emerging. Near the end of 2013, universal suffrage has become a central issue for Scholarism. In one typical post, they write:

Scholarism restates that we must insist on the principle of universal nomination and universal election. We do not want indirect citizen nomination nor closed discussion with the Liaison’s Office. We hope all those with similar objectives will insist on the bottom line together and not bow to political reality. Now is not a time to surrender; now is a time for all citizens to prepare for battle, welcoming the age of general election. (Facebook, December 21, 2013)

Scholarism remains on the forefront of the battle for universal suffrage in 2014. Their current proposal for full universal suffrage, which continues to be criticized by some (especially pro-Beijing officials) as against Hong Kong’s Basic Law, has received initial support by followers of the planned Occupy Central protest of summer 2014, designed to generate democratic elections as early as 2017 (Radio Television Hong Kong, May 06, 2014).

Discussion

Scholarism’s efforts set a new precedent for the form through which claims-making and social movements occur in Hong Kong. Always articulate and impassioned, Scholarism’s application of Facebook to mobilize citizens presents the *sine qua non* of claims-making under the illiberal post-colonial context of Hong Kong. Through Scholarism’s influence, the NEC became one of the most rapidly and widely denounced government proposals over the last decade. It is not the case that in Hong Kong “policy makers frequently heed public opinion polls” (Best 2008:170). The government often produces public opinion polls to canvas views on social problems, but these are widely perceived to be theatrical. While traditional modes of claims-making still occur in Hong Kong to express concern over social problems, netizens represent the vanguard of political purchase, drawing on the Internet to bring voice to those silenced under Hong Kong’s undemocratic channels. In doing so, Scholarism challenges the legitimacy of Hong Kong’s government, widely perceived to be more concerned over having Beijing’s approval than its own citizenry.

Scholarism’s success may be related to their acute cognizance of their position as “outsider claims-makers”—those who are outside of powerful social circles, and often engage in attention grabbing tactics, including organizing protests and demonstrations, to get the media’s attention about social problems (Best 2008:64). Loseke and Best (2003:40) draw attention to the inter-relation of claims-makers and audiences, arguing that claims-making is successful only so long as audi-

ence members support them. By using Facebook, Scholarism is able to connect with many other youth who also feel socially and politically disaffected, and eventually expanded their audience to include parents, teachers, and academics. Their case demonstrates that netizens in Hong Kong are engaging, not merely in a shallow form of “clicktivism,” but in an impactful process which may come to transform the broader socio-political context of post-colonial Hong Kong.

Constructionist scholars have only begun to analyze how claims-making is impacted by the Internet. Blogs, for instance, offer claims-makers a virtually unlimited carrying capacity: they permit readers to hyperlink to associated content including other web pages, videos, social network sites, fund-raising sources, online petitions, et cetera (Maratea 2008). Still, there are limitations for individual bloggers including the commitment of their time, resources to maintain a blog, and the often dense material potential supporters need to sift through (see: Maratea 2008:145, 148). Facebook offers even greater possibilities, especially for groups such as Scholarism who acquire financial support from followers and invest their resources mostly in organizing mass demonstrations rather than maintaining an online presence for their claims. Interestingly, while Scholarism does have a Twitter account, most Twitter posts offer links back to their Facebook page. Scholarism are adept at placing numerous hyperlinks in all their Facebook posts, often linking to YouTube videos capturing the mass demonstrations they organized (and, of course, these videos have numerous comments and links themselves). The power of netizenship

in Hong Kong is that it facilitates the promulgation of a “unified protest network of inter-linked web-sites” (Perez 2013:83), which seeks the unified goal of freedom.

The case is made in this special issue of *Qualitative Sociological Review* that social constructionism needs to push beyond case studies (see: Best [this issue]). We agree, though case studies based in non-Western regions are still worthwhile conducting for what they contribute to comparative constructionism and theoretical development. Numerous lines of research inquiry are available to promote a comparative social constructionism, especially in regions outside of the liberal democracies constructionists usually study. We need to know more, in the case of youth activism in Hong Kong, regarding claims-making in cyberspace, as well as in media

(including English and Chinese-language sources), governmental strategies and counterclaims in response, and the further exploration of what forms social problems natural histories take.

Other more general questions emerge. How should constructionists treat the concept of culture when conducting comparative research? Or, is culture too vague a context to help us situate and understand claims? How do we avoid problems of representation such as Orientalism (Said 1994), for instance, viewing claims-making outside Occidental regions from Western eyes? How does globalization affect localized claims-making in non-Western regions, and how does localized claims-making in these regions affect larger global patterns? Attention to further development of the right questions is crucial before developing further lines of research.

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Constructing Crime in a Database: Big Data and the Mangle of Social Problems Work¹

Abstract This paper argues for programmatic change within social constructionist approaches to social problems by attending to materiality in the theoretical conception of social context. To illustrate how this might be done, we place the interplay between social problems construction and technology (what we refer to as the mangle of social problems work) at its center by examining how the advent of “big data” is impacting the construction of social problems. Using the growing field of intelligence-led policing (ILP) as our illustrative example, we will examine four effects the large scale collection and analysis of data has on the way social problems claims are made. We begin by arguing that big data offers a new method by which putative problems are discovered and legitimized. We then explore how large data sets and algorithmic data analysis are increasingly used for predicting future problems. Following this, we illustrate how big data is used to construct and implement solutions to future problems. Lastly, we use the interplay between big data and those who use it to illustrate “the mangle of social problems work,” where data is made meaningful and actionable through the interpretive and analytic processes of analysts and police officers.

Keywords Big Data; Social Problems Work; Social Constructionism; Science and Technology Studies; Intelligence-Led Policing

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Over the past decade, several leading figures in the social constructionist approach to studying social problems have warned that the theory is on the verge of irrelevance (Best 2003). They argue that constructionist theory has become stagnant, insular, and preoccupied with case studies that contribute little to the advancement of the theory. We share their concern. As such, we offer a place to begin theoretical advancement in social constructionism and social problems research by attending to the essential role that materiality, specifically technology, plays in the construction of social problems and social problems work, a topic that largely has been ignored in constructionist analyses.

To this end, we adopt Andrew Pickering’s (1995) concept of the “mangle of practice” as a means to illuminate the intricate connection between humans and materiality and the endless ways in which people must negotiate their goals, intentions, understandings, and activity in response to materiality. To identify the connection between materiality and social problems—what we refer to as the “mangle of social problems work”—is to recognize that the social and technological are interconnected and co-constituted (Latour 1987; Law 1991; Fujimura 1992; Clarke and Star 2003). This paper places the “mangle of social problems work” at its center. We aim to illustrate the essential role materiality plays in the construction of social problems and how social problems work is the result

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of socio-technical labor. As such, we argue for the integration of materiality into the core concepts of the constructionist approach. We do this through the lens of qualitative studies in science and technology (Latour and Woolgar 1979; Latour 1987; Bijker 1995; Pickering 1995; Clarke and Star 2003). Of course, in one paper, we cannot adequately examine all the roles materiality plays in the construction of problems. Thus, we focus our attention on one specific type of materiality, what we are terming “diagnostic technologies,” and their role in one aspect of the construction of social problems: social problems work.

We begin by introducing the “mangle of social problems work,” a concept that integrates qualitative studies in science and technology with social constructionist analyses of social problems work. We then illustrate the concept by examining the intersection of “big data” and crime analytics in the field of intelligence-led policing (ILP). We conclude with a call for programmatic change in the study of social problems work.

The Importance of Materiality in the Construction of Social Problems

The social constructionist approach to studying social problems is fundamentally interested in the construction of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Social problems claims-making is an exercise in knowledge construction. Claims-makers must convince their audiences of the “truth” about a problematic condition. In doing so, they construct what should and should not be included as part of the problem. What are its causes? Its solutions? Who

is responsible for solving the problem? The answers to these questions produce the “facts of the matter” that constitute a body of knowledge regarding the problem in question (Loseke 2003; Best 2008). However, knowledge is constructed through symbolic exchanges that occur within social contexts. These contexts matter and constructionists often have examined the various ways in which social problems knowledge is shaped by contexts (Holstein and Miller 1993; 2003; Best 2003).

For example, constructionists have clearly illustrated how the discourse and rhetoric used by claims-makers reflect particular cultures and social structures and are, therefore, not independent of their contexts but instead are a product of them (Loseke 1989; Fox 1999; Best 2003; Irvine 2003). By attending to macro-level socio-structural factors such as cultural themes and feeling rules (Loseke 2003), and micro-level site specific factors such as a declining client base (Pawluch 1996), social constructionist researchers have demonstrated the importance of attending to the interplay between the individuals involved in constructing a problem and the social context in which these activities occur. Yet, absent from much of this research is a theoretical conceptualization of the role materiality plays in the construction of social problems. Although Holstein and Miller (1993) highlighted how social problems work is embedded within organizational practices and sensitive to non-discursive practical circumstances, few researchers have been attentive to material contextual factors, such as technology.

Weinberg (1997) is one of the few social problems theorists to clearly identify the central role non-hu-

mans play in the construction of social problems work. Specifically, he illustrates how mental health diagnoses become influential and causal agents in social problems work, and concludes by *implicitly suggesting* that social problems researchers be attentive to the way human and non-human agents produce “the outcomes of social problems work” (Weinberg 1997:231). Yet, it appears that his call has fallen on deaf ears as few social problems researchers are explicitly attentive to materiality. The challenge, we believe, arises from the selective adoption and changing definition of “context.” Few contextual constructionists define or operationalize context, incorporating different aspects of context, such as “official statistics” and “structural constraints,” while maintaining analytical focus on the claims-making process (Stallings 1995; Best 2003).

Context, as conceptualized here, is *not* a reified state but is instead a fluid and ever changing *human-material construction*. It is something that is actively and interactively constructed by actors in relation with materiality (Latour and Woolgar 1979; Holstein and Gubrium 2003). By adopting Holstein and Gubrium’s (2003) conception of context as something actively constructed, we situate the analysis of claims-making on the actions, interpretations, and claims-making processes, while locating these actions within their local and situational work processes. For example, claims-makers, when constructing the grounds of their claims, can employ a variety of technologies to construct the facts about troubling circumstances. Each technology, whether a statistical model used to predict climate change (Rosa and Dietz 1998), or an x-ray

machine used in the process of diagnosing child abuse (Pfohl 1977), constructs the world in a distinctive way. The availability of specific technology enables certain discursive worlds to be invoked, their absence cuts off certain lines of action. The esteem with which the public holds the technology affects the extent to which claims will resonate or falter (Joyce 2005). Thus, the technologies used in the construction of knowledge are *inseparable from* the shapes social problems take.

The Mangle of Social Problems Work

The “mangle of social problems work” refers to this co-constituted process in which technology and knowledge of social problems are inextricably linked, or *mangled*, together. The concept draws on Pickering’s (1995) “mangle of practice.” “The mangle,” as Pickering calls it, addresses the interrelationship between human agency and technology, examining how human goals and intentions both shape and are shaped by technology. This process, we argue, can be found within the published research on social problems work. For example, Irvine’s (2003:561) study on unwanted pets provides a glimpse of the ways technology can shape the construction of social problems and solutions by illustrating how the standardized classifications provided on bureaucratic forms obscure “the complexity of the narratives offered by clients.” Research in science and technology studies have uncovered the ways in which standards and classification systems are “the result of negotiations, organizational processes, and conflicts” that become powerful tools that hide the human labor involved in their development, maintenance, and application

(Bowker and Star 1999:44; see also Sanders 2006). Such research has demonstrated how, as more people take up and use these classification systems, they become more natural and durable. “The more naturalized an object becomes, the more unquestioning the relationship of the community to it; the more invisible the contingent and historical circumstances of its birth, the more it sinks into the community’s routinely forgotten memory” (Bowker and Star 1999:299). Irvine’s (2003) study on unwanted pets illuminates the power of classification systems and the implications of the integration of standardizations and classifications in social problems work:

[i]f institutions think by providing models through which experience is processed, the reduction of client needs to a selection of prescribed terms on pull-down menus reflects how organizational discourse and practices produce particular characterizations of social problems and solutions. As software increases the capacity for recording the frequencies with which particular terms appear, the institutional model gains strength. (p. 561)

While Irvine did not look explicitly at the role materiality plays in the construction of social problems work, her analysis illuminates how technologies are situationally contingent and relevant, and how their use shapes both organizational practices and the construction of social problems. To better understand the “mangle of social problems work,” we now turn our attention to our case study examining intelligence-led policing (ILP) and the use of “diagnostic technologies” for constructing and managing crime.

Intelligence-Led Policing and Diagnostic Technologies

Holstein and Miller (2003:75) argue that human service organizations perform social problems work as “they routinely deal with, and constitute, persons and occurrences as problems.” We agree with their assessment and argue that police officers routinely participate in what Holstein and Miller (2003) refer to as the *production of concrete cases*—constructing instances of social problems in everyday interactions. Routine police patrol activities require officers to engage in an interactive process whereby various schemes of interpretation are brought to bear to determine whether a formal instance of “crime” will be produced. In addition to determining whether any part of the criminal code has been broken, officers may consider the comportment and attitude of those involved in the activity, any organizational pressures to produce more or fewer cases of a particular type of crime, and a variety of other factors before classifying an action as a concrete example of criminality.

While the actions of patrol officers are the most visible way in which police services engage in social problems work, police services’ adoption of intelligence-led policing (ILP) has led to the development of new social problems workers: crime and intelligence analysts. ILP is “the collection and analysis of information to produce an intelligence end product designed to inform law enforcement decision making at both the tactical and strategic levels” (Ratcliffe 2011:81). Crime and intelligence analysts are responsible for conducting this analysis and producing these “intelligence end products.”

To achieve this, analysts “de-contextualize and ... de-personalize crime data in order to develop an overview of the nature of crime problems ... [in order to] ... target, prioritize, and focus interventions” (Cope 2004:199). Thus, where police officers produce crimes, crime analysts produce crime patterns (e.g., crime waves and hot spots). By integrating crime analysts and their analytic practices into policing, it is believed that ILP provides police the ability to “scientifically” predict offender activities and “objectively” direct police resources to prevent crime and disrupt offender activity (Beck and McCue 2009; Lavalley et al. 2011).

Key to this intelligence-led approach is the emergence and use of “big data.” For the purposes of this paper, “big data” refers to large data sets, including those that “consolidate many datasets from multiple sources” (Wigan and Clarke 2013:46) and the tools and techniques used to analyze them. It is about applying advanced analytical techniques to a vast amount of data to infer probabilities and make predictions. “Big data,” in the context of ILP, serves as a *diagnostic technology*, which we define as the various tools and analytic practices used to construct the “facts” about a social problem and to identify concrete cases of a social problem.

Proponents of ILP believe “big data” will allow for the most informed and targeted allocation of police resources (Moses Bennett and Chan 2014). They argue that ILP shifts the practice of policing away from an exclusive focus on reactive crime control towards pre-emptive and predictive security, surveillance, and risk management (Ericson and Haggerty 1997; Maguire 2000; Lyon 2003). Where ILP

has taken hold, the hope is that police will be able to predict where crime will happen and intervene before it becomes a serious problem. Thus, through the mangle of diagnostic technology and interpretive practice, policing is no longer about what happened in the past, but about *what is happening now, what will happen next, and what actions should be taken in light of the predicted future* (Lavalley et al. 2011). By integrating data collection and statistical crime analysis techniques in the construction of the problem of crime, ILP gives us a glimpse into the *mangle of social problems work*.

Methods

Our empirical analysis draws upon 86 in-depth interviews with 24 crime/intelligence analysts, 1 police chief, 3 superintendents, 2 Staff Sergeants, 26 patrol officers, and 30 officers/civilians working within police information technology bureaus from six different police services across Canada. Interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to three hours, with the average being 1.5 hours in length. All interviews were digitally-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interview data was supplemented with participation in police ride-alongs, as well as attending three crime and intelligence analytic workshops (2011 Association of Law Enforcement Planners Meeting, 2012 National Institutes of Justice Crime Mapping Conference, and 2013 Regional Crime Analyst Training Workshop), and two (2013, 2014) Canadian Association Chiefs of Police (CACCP) workshops on police information technology and information management. Documents also were collected from information technology websites related to crime and intelligence analysis. Adopting a constructiv-

ist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006), we analyzed these data by identifying and connecting themes related to social problems work.

Findings

Our analysis examines how the “mangle of social problems work” in policing is accomplished through the negotiated labor of police personnel with their diagnostic technologies, such as classification systems, geographical information systems, records management systems, and so on. We begin by discussing how the organizational, political, and technological contexts facilitated, as well as legitimized, the integration of ILP and “big data” into policing practice. Next, we examine how the integration of scientific practices in policing (such as collation and algorithmic processing of large amounts of crime data) provides a veil of objectivity to their constructions of crime and provides legitimacy to police practices. Following this, we illustrate how these constructions are used to predict future criminal activity. Lastly, we explain how this socio-technical labor demonstrates the “mangle of social problems work.”

Intelligence-Led Policing As Consolidating and Informing Police Practices

The ascent of big data and intelligence-led policing over the past decade has occurred in the context of three interrelated concerns for policing organizations: 1) concerns about cost, 2) concerns about the consequences of failing to effectively share information across jurisdictions and between agencies,

and 3) a preoccupation with risk management. Big data and ILP have been touted as ways to address these putative concerns by 1) facilitating the creation of more efficient policing strategies and tactics, 2) creating information technology to facilitate the sharing of data across agencies, and 3) identifying risk populations.

For the past decade, political discussions concerning the economics of policing and police sustainability have come to the forefront (Drummond et al. 2012; Public Safety Canada 2014). In response, police services around the world have turned to big data and ILP as a means “to create smart, efficient processes and ... to leverage technology to move away from reactive to proactive policing and consequently reduce costs” (2011, Ontario Association of Law Enforcement Planners Meetings). To achieve these cost savings, police organizations have begun to structure their operational, strategic, and tactical decision-making around the collection and analysis of data.

One of the most important steps in integrating ILP into these decision-making arenas has been the use of big data for synthesizing and analyzing crime data, and calls for service. Prior to the advent of big data, police services did not know how to manage and make sense of all the data to which they had access. “There was a clear need to collect, collate, evaluate, and analyze information in a timely manner with the greatest impetus being the overwhelming volumes of evidence and information” (Brewer 2009:1). This information, combined with the ease with which offenders could cross jurisdictions, created concerns about the possibility of important in-

formation failing to be passed on to those who most needed it. “Without a common repository, officers lacked a comprehensive view of criminals, robberies, assaults, or gang violence across jurisdictions and in different areas of the city. Making connections between seemingly unrelated data sets was difficult” (Prox 2013:1). In fact, “the inability of the different law enforcement agencies to pool their information ... effectively” enabled serious offenders to “fall through the cracks” and “innocent people to die” (Campbell 1996:5). Due to this constructed lack of information sharing, governments identified the need for “better communication between ... departments” (LePard 2010:27) and for the development of “standards for electronic case management software” (LePard 2010:29) to “ensure unified management, accountability, and co-ordination” (Campbell 1996:4; see also Bichard 2004; Sanders 2014).

As a result of this political and cultural context, big data came to be defined as a tool to enhance emergency preparedness by breaking down “information silos” and providing a centralized repository that facilitates comprehensive data analysis. An intelligence analyst explains:

I’ll show you what that means in reality, because when I connect in our database ... the capacity on this, we go back to March 21st, 2001, every police incident file, intel file, street check that has been collected since 2001 ... to today. So that’s 4 billion records. So when we run a query on this, I’m searching 4 billion records provincially. (39, Intelligence Analyst, *emphasis added*)

Big data has provided police services the ability to harmonize their intelligence systems by providing:

the ability to query and analyze data from a multitude of disparate systems ... a capability to query data, chart criminal associations, identify tactical and strategic trends, and map the distribution of crime and events. What would normally take weeks [can] now be done in a matter of minutes. (Prox 2012:13)

The ability to quickly retrieve and comprehend data from large data sets enables police to apply their institutional categories and rules to large amounts of data in *manageable* ways for conducting social problems work. What, in the past, would have been information overload—and extremely time consuming—becomes faster and manageable with the integration of technology.

Advocates for ILP legitimize the integration of technology and scientific practices within policing by arguing that big data provides “the opportunity to enter the decision cycle of our adversaries—drug dealers, gang members, terrorists—affords unique opportunities for prevention, thwarting, and information-based response, ideally preventing crime” (Beck and McCue 2009:19). Policing practices, therefore, have been constructed as moving away from reactive crime control towards proactive policing of *risk populations*, drawing on information and risk assessments, calculations, and analysis (see also Ericson and Haggerty 1997). This shift can be understood as reflecting changes in social control and the growth of the risk society. In the risk society, big data and ILP are perceived as essential for keeping police and the public safe by using past dangerous or criminal behavior to predict future behavior in order to manage it. Thus, the broader organizational, technological, political, and cul-

tural contexts have provided *both* justification and legitimation for the adoption of diagnostic technologies for social problems work.

Constructing and Legitimizing Social Problems

The incorporation of big data into policing has led to the scientification of policing—where the trappings and practices of the scientific method are routinely used in policing practice. For example, crime and intelligence analysts run algorithms that “can identify who the key people are within an organized structure, and from that it can help narrow the focus to the main targets of an investigation far quicker than through traditional techniques” (Bjornson 2013:1). The subjective interpretive work performed by police as they fill out routine paperwork is made “objective” through algorithmic processing and statistical analysis. The scientification of policing has created a veil of objectivity because it is argued that “the computer eliminates the bias that people have” (Friend 2013:1). Thus, technological data *legitimizes* the identification of social problems, as well as the deployment of resources and the management of the problem. A crime analyst explains:

I’ve now *taken the subjectivity* out of it ... I can now identify these hotspots ... with certain confidence, *statistically speaking*. So I can now say that there is something going on there. So the risks ... are greater in these areas than in the areas that are cold. (21, Crime Analyst, *emphasis added*)

Big data is perceived as leading to accountable, informed, and objective decision-making (Bennett

Moses and Chan 2014). The intelligence report “gives us our analytical evidence, *our grounds to be working* in the neighborhood where we need to be” (23, Police Chief, *emphasis added*). They provide a means for police to engage in *technologically augmented social problems work* by identifying social problems. Crime analysts working in conjunction with their diagnostic technologies construct analytic outputs that are used to guide police practices. For example, where do officers need to be deployed? What evidence justifies their new deployment patterns and interventions? Access to big data removes the temporal aspect of traditional policing, allowing police to legitimize their actions on the basis of stored records of past events (see also Sanders and Hannem 2013).

While diagnostic technologies legitimize the social problems work police do, this also aids in *constructing* crime problems. Access to big data promises abilities that were never before possible with “traditional” policing methods. For example,

crime mapping *turns data into visible stories* so that the police force can proactively recognize problem areas and swiftly develop crime fighting strategies ... Crime mapping equips crime fighters with geographic literacy by turning a wealth of police records into meaningful visuals. (ESRI Canada Limited 2010:2)

Geographic information systems (GIS) function to increase the legibility of municipal space, allowing police agencies to allocate officers and resources in a way that is deemed most efficient and accountable. As the following excerpt highlights, GIS are taken to be or defined as a “strategic and tactical

tool for law enforcement” (20, GIS specialist), assisting with crime prevention:

data is updated on the GIS server every 24 hours to enable analysis and visualization of spatial patterns and connections of crime. Part of our *strategic business plan* is to provide consistent and equitable deployment of police resources while optimizing the effectiveness and efficiency of community contact with police service. (2011, ALEP Annual Meeting, *emphasis added*)

Thus, police believe the use of GIS has rendered the municipal landscape increasingly legible and has allowed a reconfiguration of how police organizations make sense of public space.

Access to big data and computational tools provides police services with visual data that requires interpretation. For example, many police services provide their officers with access to technologies to do their own crime analysis. The following excerpt from a police chief explains how an officer who has been off work for a week can, upon her return, use the technology to visually identify crime problems in her area.

They should be able to bring up a map on the mobile work station, click the category, “tell me about Break and Enters, tell me about my robberies, tell me about my assaults” ... they should be able to see it. And then they see the common areas, and then they know where to go. (23, Police Chief)

By employing institutional rules and categories, the officer believes s/he is capable of collating and ana-

lyzing data in meaningful ways that s/he can interpret and address. “Using GIS, you can create a map that can *identify* where the crimes are occurring and *clarify* what crimes are or are not related based on your research. This can allow investigators to target their efforts and line officers to patrol and respond to locations while being more fully aware” (ESRI 2008:5, *emphasis added*). Through this process, we see how crime problems are constructed by police officers.

The use of big data for constructing facts about crimes is not restricted to identifying problematic areas. As the following analyst, working on a single case, explains:

I was ... just working in the wire room and analyzing phone records ... one of them was a half million cell phone records on a project and being able to crunch that down and look at uncovering new people of interest ... based on this [analysis] here are a dozen other people that have come out of the phone records and here is why they look [like] they could be of interest or could be relevant so we should go ... investigate these and then from there ... we end up following even more and interviewing more people and finding more victims. (30, Intelligence Analyst)

Without access to big data, the identification and justification of the social problem would not have been possible. For example, during a homicide investigation, an intelligence analyst conducted a nationwide analysis and identified a suspect who had “virtually been an unknown until we started looking at these homicides collectively and seeing how he came in ... He was completely off the radar ...and he’s responsible for nine homicides across the country and in-

ternationally” (33, Intelligence Analyst). Through the use of diagnostic technologies, the interpretive work conducted by crime analysts is rendered invisible and the analytic outputs constructed are regarded as objective and provide legitimacy to police practices.

Preventing and Predicting Future Social Problems

Beyond using diagnostic technologies to construct and legitimize problems that are presently occurring, big data is utilized by police to *predict* future problems in order to intervene and prevent impending occurrences. The predictive elements and outcomes of ILP boost the ability to forecast locations where future criminal occurrences likely will take place. Officers are directed to predicted areas with the goal of intercepting crimes before they happen. As explained earlier, police officers have the capability to conduct their own analyses or receive analytical information directly in their cruisers while on patrol,

enabl[ing] them to self deploy to crime locations predicted for the future ... The predictive capabilities of drawing upon and analyzing information contained within an agency’s data warehouse promise to empower individuals with the tools they need to monitor predicted crime hotspots within their own areas of responsibility. (Allen 2013:1)

Through the use of big data, police services are capable of constructing visual images of where crime *will* occur. Diagnostic products, such as those derived from risk terrain modeling, are perceived as being superior to other ways of knowing the city landscape and human behavior.

The following example provided by an intelligence analyst on geographical profiling illustrates how the information acquired from big data is ascribed authority and used to inform predictive practices.

I did the geographic profiling analysis, as well as a combination of this probability grid and was able to prescribe a deployment strategy. Specific times, I said you should be in this, one of these two areas, between 10:30 and 1:30 on a Tuesday or Wednesday, over the next four weeks ... they went out there on a Tuesday parked their car at 10:30, and at 11:33 ... they caught the guy. (I21, Crime Analyst)

Through the adoption and utilization of big data “many agencies are employing geographic profiling to forecast an offender’s residence or next crime target based on history and patterns” (ESRI 2007:2). The predictive capabilities of big data have been taken so far that the LAPD’s captain, Sean Malinowski, “envisions a time when the police will issue crime forecasts the same way the National Weather Service issues storm alerts” (PredPol 2013). Thus, the use of big data for predicting future crime problems further reinforces the notion of big data as an objective means for decision-making. When police services make strategic and tactical decisions, such as reallocating police cruisers to areas “predicted to be problem locations,” they ascribe authority and legitimacy to big data and construct it as an active agent within social problems work. Interestingly, using active rhetoric in their claims-making places increased importance on the function of these technologies, which in turn legitimizes the need for such technologies.

The Mangle of Social Problems Work: The Intermingling of Police and Technologies

The advent of science and technology in policing practices has led to organizational changes. As police services turn to “technology to tackle antisocial behavior and vehicle crime and extend its use across the capital” (Infante 2013:1), they acquire legitimacy by making invisible the subjective and interpretive aspects of policing. Although the intelligence products *are* a constructed artifact, the subjective and human elements of its construction become black-boxed and taken for granted. As a result of this black-boxing of human agency and interpretive practices, the outputs created are perceived as cutting edge, *authoritative* knowledge, devoid of subjectivity.

Crime classifications *are* human constructs that arise through the interpretive work of police officers in *conjunction* with their technology. The technological standardization of police reporting and analysis constructs makes invisible the socio-technical labor, while simultaneously providing objectivity and authority to the outputs. Through the use of big data, police personnel are provided with “meaningful information.” However, the technologies do not, in and of themselves, provide *interpretations* or *actionable* data. Instead, social problems work is accomplished through the negotiated labor of police personnel with their diagnostic technologies. As a crime analyst explains:

[we] need the analysis to get further explanations as to perhaps, “Oh, why is that happening?” And, when is

that happening? What’s the breakdown of things that are happening there? Is it seasonal? Is it cyclical? Does it follow a pattern? Does it follow a spatial pattern? (21, Crime Analyst, *emphasis added*)

Thus, the data is only made meaningful and actionable through the interpretive and analytic processes of people—analysts and police officers. The following example illuminates the interplay between intelligence analysts and big data for conducting social problems work. An intelligence analyst, working sex crimes, designed and created a sex crime modus operandi (MO) template to enable her to filter searches based on types of sexual assaults (stranger, acquaintance, etc.) and MO (intercourse, groping, oral, kissing, alcohol or drugs involved, sex trade worker, etc.). She created these classifications based on institutional rules of policing.

Using the sex crime MO template ... she started linking 20 cases that were never connected that were related ... And she started drawing all these causal linkages, and then she drilled it down and she goes [to a police service outside of her jurisdiction and said] ... you’ve got a serial sex offender/violent offender on the loose ... So they put a project together ... put surveillance, and they caught him in the act taking a girl down. And he was like mid-strike with a tire lock ... when they went break down, shake down and took him out. And he was charged with 17 previous offenses. (39, Intelligence Analyst)

Through the application of criminal classifications, codes, and categories to big data, the intelligence analyst identified a previously unknown serial rapist.

Through her use of big data the police were “able to articulate that ... for their warrants” in order to make an arrest (I30, Intelligence Analyst). The data the analyst provided the police legitimated their decision-making by giving them cause to take action. Thus, it is this very mangle of social problems work—with police in conjunction with their technologies—that shapes the construction, interpretation, and understanding of crime problems and the social problems work conducted by police.

Conclusion

Technology has a significant effect on human actions, interpretations, and understandings. The human actor and the non-human technology are co-constituted, and as such, one does not make sense without attending to the other. Here, we illustrated how social problems work was accomplished through the interplay of police personnel with materiality, specifically, diagnostic technologies. Through a case study of ILP, we have demonstrated the importance of context for understanding how one engages in social problems work. Drawing on qualitative studies in science and technology, we argue that more analytical attention needs to be placed on the *structural contexts* and *material realities* that influence, shape, constrain, and guide the mangle of social problems work.

We argue that social constructionists’ analyses of social problems work must be more centrally attentive to the impact of context. Language and meaning-making, we argue, does not exist independent of its context but is instead a reflection of the cultures and social structures in which it

exists. We have attempted to more clearly conceptualize context by drawing on Holstein and Gubrium's (2003) notion that context is actively constructed, but expanding it by noting that it is interactively constructed by actors *through their interactions with technology* (Holstein and Gubrium 2003). Thus, at the heart of this paper, we are calling for a *programmatic change* to the study of social problems work. Specifically, we argue that materiality is integral to the construction of social problems and therefore should be incorporated into the perspective in the same way other central concepts, such as framing and cultural feeling rules, are attended to.

Our analysis of ILP has demonstrated how social problems work is accomplished through the interplay of meaning making processes, institutional rules, and technologies. Social problems are affirmed, constructed, and predicted based on the collation and analysis of numerous subjective categorizations completed and technologically standardized by police. Thus, to understand and make sense of police services' engagement in social problems work we must be attentive to its co-constituted make up. Police officers' interactions with people on the ground and the meanings they attach to those interactions become encoded, based on organizational rules, into documents that are later collated and analyzed. The use of technologies for *constructing* crime problems and *proscribing* lines of action provides police with *legitimacy* because technologies occupy "a privileged space in the cultural production of objectivity and truth" (Joyce 2005:457).

As illustrated in the case study, the use of big data by intelligence analysts for doing social problems

work provides objectivity and legitimacy to a process that, at its foundation, is subjective. As many science and technology theorists have identified, objectivity is "tied to a relentless search to replace individual volition and discretion in depiction by the invariable routines of mechanical reproduction" (Daston and Galison 1992:98). Technologies, such as classification systems, are powerful tools in social problems work as they become viewed as self sufficient or "black boxes" that remove the human labor involved in their development, maintenance, and application (Latour 1987). However, black boxes contain multiple memberships, negotiations, and complexities, but these activities are rendered invisible by the acceptance that "no one is going to dispute a black box" (Latour 1987:29). Thus, *facts* produced by machines, such as those used by police for constructing and targeting social problems, "provide neutrality in the production of knowledge ... [and] have remarkable status, and operate as signifiers of authoritative knowledge" (Joyce 2005:457). It is this legitimacy afforded to technologies that exemplifies the important role they play in social problems work and necessitates the need for closer examination.

Conceiving of technologies as powerful tools that incorporate heterogeneous groups, interests, and activities provides social problems researchers with an ability to provide critical insight into the prejudices, desires, and inequalities of the designers and users that are enmeshed with the technologies they develop (see: Star 1995; Sanders 2014). Thus, by placing analytical attention on the "mangle of social problems work," we believe that social constructionists can provide critical insight into processes underlying the reproduction of inequality.

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Enlarging Constructionist Agendas

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Social Constructionism Turned Into Human Service Work

Abstract Studies of applied constructionism are opportunities for scholars to explore how social constructionism is a resource used by claims-makers in describing and justifying their orientations to professional practice. The present paper expands sociological constructionism by analyzing applied constructionism in social problems work in Copenhagen, Denmark. Based on interviews with staff members in narrative drug treatment, we explore two themes: the relationship between dominant and liberating narratives and the position of expert knowledge in narrative therapy. Our guiding framework is Ian Hacking's inquiry into the *Social Construction of What?* and Kenneth Burke's dialogic approach of comparing statements to counterstatements. The purpose of the paper is to link academic studies of the social construction of realities to applied constructionists' principles in addressing social problems. We do this by describing narrative therapists' critical reflections on their own work, suggesting that these reflections are not only useful when it comes to developing narrative therapy but also for the advancement of academic constructionism.

Keywords Applied Constructionism; Constructionist Activism; Statements/Counterstatements; Narrative Therapy; Oppressive vs. Liberating Stories; Expert Knowledge

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While it remains an important perspective within the humanities and social sciences, social constructionism is no longer limited to the halls of academia. A significant development is the spread of social constructionist ideas within contemporary applied professions. These professions include urban planning (Throgmorton 1996), policy analysis (Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth 2011), management theory and practice (Stacey, Griffin, and Shaw 2000), occupational therapy (Mattingly and Fleming 1994), social work (Hall 1997; Parton and O'Byrne 2000), and psycho- and family therapy (Lock and Strong 2012). The diversity within this list is magnified when we consider the multiple orientations to social constructionist ideas within each of these professions. These practical adaptations of social constructionism form a significant international domain within the contemporary social constructionist world.

While related to one another, applied and academic constructionists often ask different questions about how social realities are constructed, orient to different constituencies, and use different standards in assessing the usefulness of their own and others' contributions to social constructionism. These differences can make it difficult for applied and academic constructionists to collaborate with each other. They should not, however, discourage academic constructionists from making applied constructionism a focus of their research. Such a focus promises at least two benefits.

First, it expands the scope of constructionist scholarship to include practices that are inadequately addressed in the current academic literature. Perhaps

the most important reason for studying applied constructionism involves how these approaches challenge many taken-for-granted assumptions about problem-solving and proper professional-client relations. For example, applied constructionists have questioned the usefulness of: diagnostic approaches to defining people's problems; established ideas about organizational leadership; the primary focus on the body in doing occupational therapy; and human service professionals' depictions of clients in case records. Many applied constructionists also reject the claim that professionals are experts to whom clients should acquiesce in defining and treating clients' problems.

Second, studies of applied constructionism represent a standpoint for looking at academic constructionism in new ways. Just as people note resemblances and differences in defining themselves as members of families, so academic constructionists might gain insight into their own assumptions and practices by attending to how they are similar to and different from those of applied constructionists. The similarities point to what is common to social constructionism as a general perspective, and the differences may suggest how social contexts shape particular constructionist orientations. Such studies are also helpful reminders that doing applied and academic constructionism involves socially constructing realities.

We explore these issues by analyzing interviews with staff members in two drug treatment centers in Copenhagen, Denmark. While they draw from a variety of applied constructionist approaches, the staff members emphasized their use of narrative therapy

in working with clients (White and Epston 1990). Narrative therapy is designed to “re-story” clients’ life experiences by replacing the troublesome stories that dominate clients’ lives with new stories. The new stories promise to help clients build more satisfying lives in which they realize their authentic selves and moral principles (Parry and Doan 1994; White 1995).

Our analysis of the interviews forms a starting point for comparing applied constructionists and academic constructionists’ orientations to social problems. The comparisons illustrate one way that applied and academic constructionists might learn from each other. First, however, we discuss the guiding framework of the paper—a combination of Hacking’s (1999) reasoning on claims-making activities and Burke’s (1969a; 1969b) dramatism—as well as the context and methods of the study.

Guiding Framework

We begin with Hacking’s (1999) inquiry into *The Social Construction of What?* His study focuses on basic assumptions and claims found in many social constructionist analyses of science, social identities, social problems, and social policies. Hacking’s analysis turns on the claim that diverse constructionist orientations are united by the assumption that current definitions of reality are not inevitable. Present “realities” have been built up over time in ways that often obscure viable alternative possibilities. Hacking states that many social constructionists expand on this assumption by making one or both of the following claims: established “realities” are undesirable; and they need to be changed if not totally eliminated.

Hacking adds that social constructionists have developed these claims through three activist strategies. The first emphasizes how established truths might be modified to reduce the negative consequences of dominant realities. The second strategy involves attempts to undermine people’s belief that dominant realities are facts that must be accepted or are clearly superior to alternative constructions. Finally, Hacking notes that some activist constructionists adopt a more rebellious strategy designed to replace dominant social realities with alternative constructions having more desirable consequences. While the rebellious strategy might appear to be the most radical form of constructionist activism, the other strategies are potential early steps in developing far-reaching changes.

Miller and Fox (1999) extend Hacking’s analysis by discussing how studies of activism in applied constructionism might proceed. They treat social constructionism as an aspect of practical settings made up of shifting events that can be interpreted in multiple ways. So viewed, social constructionism is not so much a theoretical perspective as it is a resource that people use to make sense of their experiences and justify preferred actions. It is a rubric for assessing situations and making choices. One such choice involves deciding which claims about social reality will be treated as accurate, ethical, or useful. Applied constructionists also make choices in responding to situations that might be perceived as challenges to their commitment to constructionist principles and practices. Specifically, how do applied constructionists reconcile their assessments of some situations as perhaps calling for non-constructionist responses while maintain-

ing their sense of themselves as constructionist practitioners?

This brings us to Burke’s (1969a) dramatism approach to social constructionism (Järvinen and Miller 2014). For Burke (1966), human beings are symbol-using animals who are both creators of language and constrained by their linguistic creations. People use words to render aspects of their worlds meaningful; as having abstract significance that extends beyond any particular instances that words label (Burke 1968). Words expressed in social interactions also operate as *terministic screens*, that is, they direct people’s attention to some and away from other aspects of the world (Burke 1966). Words are perceptual signals telling people where to look and what to look for in engaging their worlds.

The concept of terministic screen serves as a background for Burke’s (1968) focus on statements and counterstatements (Järvinen and Miller 2014). Statements include the wide variety of contexts and forms through which social realities are constructed. They include the everyday accounts voiced by people in the course of their daily lives, organized appeals by groups to persuade others to adopt preferred social values and actions, the social constructions of philosophers, theologians, and scientists, and artistic performances and literary works of various sorts. For Burke, all statements are incomplete because words operate as terministic screens that call attention to some and obscure other aspects of the world. They are also incomplete because statements advance some orientations to action over other viable possibilities.

Burke (1968) explains that the incompleteness of all statements make counterstatements possible and necessary. Counterstatements correct statements by advancing alternative orientations to reality and action. To return to Miller and Fox’s (1999) analysis, counterstatements call attention to the multiple ways in which changing and ambiguous situations may be interpreted, as well as to the rubrics that organize diverse interpretive frameworks. Burke also stresses that counterstatements are incomplete; hence, they invite new counterstatements involving additional perspectives that facilitate continuing dialogue. This is how new social realities emerge within conversations about social issues. Thus, Burke’s constructionist approach to social change fits easily with Hacking’s (1999) second activist strategy. Burke seeks to undermine established realities with counterstatements that question the factual status and presumed superiority of dominant statements.

These approaches form a framework for examining applied social constructionism. We use Hacking to show how applied constructionists define their own approach (narrative therapy) as an alternative to approaches which they regard as undesirable, and to discuss the degree of radicalism in their constructionism (Hacking’s three activist strategies). We use Burke’s analytical approach of comparing statements to counterstatements to reveal how ideas and practices constituting narrative therapy are by no means stable but the objects of constant reflections among practitioners. Especially important are the therapists’ questions about the limits of constructionism, the relationship between what practitioners see as constructed and what

they see as “real” (e.g., human suffering related to drug addiction), and questions about prioritizing some discourses at the expense of others. We regard these reflections as relevant for both applied and academic constructionism.

Context and Methods of the Study

Our data come from interviews with 16 staff members at two treatment centers for young people with addiction problems in Copenhagen.¹ Drug addiction treatment in Copenhagen is organized as a system with four district reception units where all citizens with drug problems can seek free treatment. Some clients are offered treatment at these units; others (for instance, young people) are enrolled in specific treatment projects located in these units or in separate centers. Our data is gathered at two separate centers, one center offering treatment to people under 25, the other also welcoming older clients (typically up to 30). Most of the young clients at the two centers have problems with cannabis, although some use other drugs as well (e.g., amphetamine, cocaine, and ecstasy). Both centers offer the clients ambulatory treatment in the form of individual sessions or group therapy, or both, typically once or twice a week. The staff consists of a combination of psychologists, social workers, “social education workers” (a Danish occupational category trained to work with specific vulnerable groups), and others. For the analysis in the present paper, 16 staff members (nine women, seven men) were interviewed: six psychologists, six social workers, and four social education workers.

¹ Most staff interviews were conducted by research assistants Ane Grubb and Maja Thorsteinsson, Department of Sociology, University of Copenhagen.

During the past ten years, there has been a change in treatment approaches to addiction in Denmark. Treatment centers focused exclusively on abstinence (such as centers using 12-step-treatments) have diminished in number. Instead, more and more centers, including the ones we have studied, work with “graduated goals,” meaning that a reduction of the clients’ drug intake (such as a change from smoking cannabis every day to smoking during weekends only) is defined as “as good an achievement as a complete stop” (quote from staff interview). According to the two centers, it is the clients’ own decision whether they want treatment aimed at reduction or complete cessation of drug use.

The interviews with staff members were semi-structured and focused on four main themes: what treatment approaches did the participants use in their work with the clients; what concrete treatment methods did they use; how did they conceptualize the clients’ problems and development in treatment; and what did they regard as the main challenges in approaching drug problems the way they did? All interviews were conducted at the treatment centers. They were audio-recorded and transcribed in full. For anonymity reasons, we mix the interviews from the two centers.

Constructionist approaches to treatment—particularly narrative therapy (White and Epston 1990)—were common at the centers, although some interviewees said they combined them with other approaches such as cognitive therapy. In the following sections, we focus on two themes in narrative therapy: oppressive versus liberating stories and the position of expert knowledge in narrative therapy. Both issues

were major themes in the interviews. Staff members portrayed their orientations to these issues as central to the mission of the centers, and as distinguishing the centers from other drug treatment approaches in Denmark. We start each section by discussing how these themes are handled in the literature on narrative therapy, and then analyze staff members’ statements and counterstatements about them. It is important to note that we often found statements *and* counterstatements within the same interviews. Thus, it is not possible to divide staff members into competing camps: those who support the centers’ mission; and those who question it.

Oppressive Versus Liberating Narratives

Narrative therapy is one of several approaches that Strong and Lock (2005) classify as discursive therapies. Discursive therapists pay careful attention to their own and their clients’ uses of language and to the practical implications of meanings emergent in their interactions. Narrative therapists treat people’s lives as stories that link persons’ senses of the future with social constructions of their past and present lives (White 1995; Freedman and Combs 1996). Narrative therapists state that people who are optimistic and confident about the future tell different life stories than people who are worried and pessimistic. Such stories organize clients’ life experiences, highlighting some and glossing over others. Stories are also interpretive schemes that privilege some meanings over others.

Drawing from Foucault (1972; 1977), narrative therapists stress that while each of us contributes to the construction of our life stories, our stories are

also shaped by general cultural and institutional forces that promote dominant stories within society (White and Epston 1990; Parry and Doan 1994). Dominant stories remain unproblematic so long as they generally fit with persons’ life experiences and interests. There are, however, times when some people’s lives significantly depart from dominant stories. This may leave them feeling excluded, “flummoxed or confused or puzzled” (White 1995:15). People’s sense of confusion, exclusion, and perhaps fear is exacerbated as their troubles take root and grow within dysfunctional dominant stories, thereby turning otherwise short-term issues into long-term problems (White and Epston 1990).

Narrative therapy is said to be liberating because it frees clients from the constraints of dominant stories and assists them in constructing multiple life stories (O’Leary 1998; Rosen and Lang 2005; Afuape 2011). It also facilitates resistance to social forces that recruit clients to institutionally preferred orientations to life that are not always useful to them (White and Epston 1990; Parry and Doan 1994; Besley 2001). These goals of narrative therapy are connected to therapists’ efforts to *sub-junctivize* clients’ lives. According to Bruner (1986), subjunctivizing narratives direct attention to implicit meanings and possibilities in situations rather than predefined certainties. White and Epston (1990) explain that subjunctivizing narratives aid narrative therapists in helping their clients become agents who are capable of developing new life stories that fit with their circumstances and desires.

We now turn to our interviews with narrative practitioners in Copenhagen. We analyze the

practitioners' accounts about their clients' cannabis use and the narrative approach to drug treatment in terms of statements and counterstatements.

Statements

The differentiation between dominant, oppressive stories and subjunctivizing, liberating stories was clear-cut in the interviews. Without exception, staff members associated oppressive stories with the traditional treatment system, where young drug users were seen as "abusers" or "addicts" and abstinence was the only treatment goal. They described this treatment approach as problem-focused, explaining that it may very well have increased people's drug problems because of its negative visions of personhood and processes of client stigmatization. Narrative practitioners countered these aspects of traditional treatment by focusing on drug users' resources and looking at future possibilities for clients' lives.

Staff members' portrayals of their attempts to replace oppressive narratives with liberating future-oriented narratives contained several different dimensions of work, that is, constructionist activism (Hacking 1999). One dimension involved avoiding such words as "abuse"/"misuse" and "abusers"/"misusers"—which are the terms used in the treatment system in general, as well as in official documents. One of the psychologists explained:

We never talk about abuse or misuse here. This is because reality exists through the language we use, so we are very careful with words. The term abuse is defined beforehand, and so it fixes your relationship to drugs

as being problematic. If I say "your abuse," I have already decided what kind of use you have, and that's not our approach. (interview with psychologist 1)

This strategy, which was very deliberate and visible at the two centers, is a way to avoid stigmatizing young people by using words that lock them into negative identity categories. Staff members preferred the terms "drug use" and "drug users" because they regarded them as neutral. As a social worker stated, "many young people experiment with illegal drugs these days, should we call the majority of young people in Denmark abusers?"

The second dimension of the practitioners' constructionist work expands the first by focusing on the general negativity of traditional treatment. The psychologist quoted above continued, explaining how his center is different from "traditional" treatment centers:

Usually, when you come to treatment, it's like entering a negative room, things become grave. When you seek treatment, you realize you have a serious problem... Here we try to put brackets around the problem, and to focus, not necessarily on the things that are difficult for people, but the things that are important to them, things they want to achieve in their life. (interview with psychologist 1)

What is at stake here is not just the words used to describe the clients' relationship to drugs (drug misuse or drug use), but a more radical strategy of avoiding focusing on negative things. Negative stories are oppressive when they convey an overly serious and pessimistic tone about the severity

of people's problems, their possibilities in life, and the social interactions at hand. For staff members, oppressive stories dominate the traditional Danish treatment system where derogatory words are used about the clients and the focus is on the clients' problems rather than their resources. Liberating stories, on the other hand, orient to the clients' future possibilities, and towards talking about how clients' drug use may hinder the achievement of these possibilities. While clients' drug use is implicated in staff member-client interactions, their interactional focus is not primarily on the frequency, amount, or type of drugs used by clients.

A third, and potentially more radical, dimension in staff members' constructionist work concerns whether cannabis use should be considered harmful at all. Consider the following statement made by a social worker:

Cannabis smoking in itself is neither good nor bad. Many people smoke every day and are still perfectly able to look after their jobs, and they primarily smoke in order to relax and for social reasons... We are expected to work with the young people's drug use, of course, because we're an addiction treatment center. But, very often, it's rather unimportant that they smoke. It would be much better to focus on the real problems in their life ... family issues, emotional problems, the fact that they do not have an education or a job. (interview with social worker 1)

This statement is radical in the sense that it seems to undermine the logic of having a specialized addiction treatment system (a system that the interviewee's own center is part of). If drug use is an

innocent activity and the clients' "real" problem is not their addiction, then they should be helped by other means. Appropriate alternative means of help would consist of whatever social services best address the "real" problems in clients' lives. It is not clear whether staff members assumed that their clients' cannabis use would decline as a result of addressing their other problems. One can imagine a variety of future drug use trajectories for clients. Concerns about these possible trajectories are evident in the interviewees' counterstatements.

Counterstatements

Staff members' counterstatements questioned each of the activist themes described above. They raised issues that were ignored in the justifications of the narrative approach discussed so far. However, it is significant that staff members did not link their critical concerns to appeals to reject the narrative approach or to suggestions of alternative treatment approaches. The absence of such appeals indicates that the counterstatements were not designed to undermine the narrative approach to drug treatment. Rather, we interpret them as critical reflections on the fit between the narrative approach and the circumstances of some clients' lives. We see such reflection in the following staff member's questions about the harmfulness of cannabis use. The account also challenges claims that staff member-client interactions should focus on the "real"—non-drug—problems in clients' lives.

You may say that our approach is "Cannabis is not their real problem; they smoke because they have other problems. We shouldn't label them as abusers

because then they become abusers.” But, what if we’re wrong? What if cannabis abuse is their real problem? How can we know it isn’t? (interview with psychologist 2)

This statement blurs narrative therapists’ distinction between oppressive and liberating narratives. The idea behind the prioritization of certain narratives over others is that dominant, problem-saturated stories “do not sufficiently represent people’s lived experience, and that there are significant aspects of their lived experience that contradict these narratives” (White and Epsom 1990:14-15). What the psychologist quoted above, and some of her colleagues, reflected upon is how they should decide which stories best match their clients’ circumstances—and, related to this, on what grounds they could answer this question. The statement can be extended to ask, “How might clients determine the real problems in their lives?”

A second type of counterstatement concerns the relationship between narrative drug treatment and dominant understandings of illegal drug use in Danish society. In a critical article on narrative therapy, Skovlund (2011:190) discusses the challenge of finding narratives that are robust enough to stand “resistance from the world.” By this he means that therapists and clients in treatment may very well work out alternatives to dominant stories, but that these alternatives may not always be convincing to other people. It is one thing to put brackets around a young client’s use of illegal drugs and to define other problems as more real. It is another thing for the young person to manage outside of the therapy setting when facing family members, teachers, and

potential employers who think that daily cannabis use is harmful and difficult to combine with good family relations, school, or work. One of the psychologists stated:

We try to take the heat out of the situation by telling parents not to worry so much, and we often succeed. Parents calm down “Whew, it’s not that bad, many young people use drugs these days.” And yet we also know, and we have to tell them this too, that drug use may have negative, as well as positive consequences. You need to be a real strong young person if you are to combine school or work with a daily drug intake. (interview with psychologist 3)

The psychologist acknowledged that competing orientations to youthful drug use can intrude into staff members’ interactions with clients. These orientations complicate staff members’ treatment practices by reminding them that the potential harmfulness of cannabis use involves more than its effects on clients’ bodies and psyches. It may also harm clients’ relationships with significant others and limit clients’ opportunities to realize desired possibilities in their lives. This counterstatement might be developed as a direct challenge to statements that make sharp distinctions between oppressive and subjunctivizing stories. The psychologist stopped short of this possibility by redirecting attention to how negative words create self-fulfilling prophecies. She explained that one should not put too much stress on the negative consequences of drug use “because if the young people start thinking it’s impossible to go about your work if you smoke cannabis in the evening, it becomes impossible.”

Narrative Therapy and Expert Knowledge

Many discursive therapists challenge claims that therapists know better than their clients about how clients should live their lives (Strong 2012). Instead, they stress how they collaborate with their clients. This theme is related to discursive therapists’ skepticism about diagnostic approaches that treat different circumstances as the same by classifying them within the same categories (Lock and Strong 2012; Strong 2012). For discursive therapists, diagnostic approaches are designed to “fix” people by correcting their personal flaws and social inadequacies. This focus may result in blaming the victims for circumstances that they cannot control, and ignores the personal strengths and life-managing resources that clients possess. Diagnostic approaches may also be invasive and insulting by forcing clients to think of themselves, their actions, and relationships in ways that do not correspond to their self-understandings.

Narrative therapy combines aspects of social constructionism with a political consciousness focused on the negative impact of selected cultural and institutional forces on clients’ lives. It is a practical strategy for responding to clients’ problems as both personal matters and conditions of exclusion and oppression. Given its ideological complexity, it should not be surprising that different narrative therapists emphasize some aspects of the narrative approach over others. Indeed, Wallis, Burns, and Capdevila (2011) report that seven respected experts on narrative therapy gave eight different responses to questions about what narrative therapy is about. Some of the responses emphasized po-

litical themes, others stressed practical issues, and a third group consisted of attempts to integrate political with practical concerns.

One important area of contestation concerned the question of therapist expertise. Some participants in Wallis and colleagues’ study (2011) were strongly against positioning themselves as experts, stating that expert knowledge contained concealed power. Other participants accepted therapist expertise as part of the process, the latter being a position that may be compared to White and Epsom’s “purposefully interventive” approach (Flaskas 2002) which is quite directive when it comes to providing people with expert advice. This brings us back to Miller and Fox’s (1999) interest in the choices that applied constructionists make about their professional responsibilities to clients. The choices are partly practical matters, but they may also include ethical considerations. In the following sections, we see how staff members’ practical and ethical concerns intersect in their statements and counterstatements about their orientations to clients.

Statements

Most of the interviewed staff members stated that they try to avoid a “traditional” expert role in which “professionals know what is best for their clients, although the clients disagree,” as one of the interviewed social workers put it. Staff members stressed that narrative drug treatment involves collaborative relationships in which therapists and clients work together to identify clients’ real problems and resources that might be used to change clients’ lives. Also in this regard, the interviewees’

statements echo narrative therapy's emphasis on resisting oppressive stories. Staff members associated oppression with typical power arrangements in diagnostic relationships. While they stopped short of characterizing their collaborative relationships with clients as liberating, they did cast them as humane and ethical. Consider the following two statements. The first was made by a social education worker and the second by a psychologist.

The young people are the experts in all this, right, and I think this is where traditional social work fails, trying to dictate solutions, having this know-all attitude... It's not my job to give them advice, "Listen, you need to do this and that." My job is to help them find things inside themselves, find a way that is navigable for them, and I cannot know what that road is, can I? (interview with social education worker 1)

I think many professionals like their role, telling people what to do, giving advice. It feels good to be professional... Here it's all about being a person, entering the meetings as a person more than a therapist. I don't treat them as clients. It's a different kind of relationship. It's not friendship but something resembling friendship... I'm a person for them the same way I'm a person for many other people in my life. (interview with psychologist 4)

An important theme in both of these statements is staff members' portrayals of their clients and themselves as people. The social education worker depicted herself as someone who assists clients to better understand themselves and what is possible in their lives. The psychologist went further by defining staff member-client relationships as indis-

tinguishable from diverse non-treatment relationships in everyday life. Staff members' emphasis on collaboration and being a person in their interactions with clients was also central to their rejection of treatment manuals. Such manuals standardize interactions by instructing treatment professionals on the types of questions they should ask and responses they should give to clients. As one of the psychologists stated,

Nobody wants to be subjected to methods. If you sit talking with another person, and you suddenly realize that what you thought was a spontaneous talk in fact are themes from a manual. "Oh, he's taking me through a manual, he uses methods on me." It doesn't feel good at all. And it really doesn't fit with our attempts of treating them as equals. (interview with psychologist 4)

This statement resonates with the emphases on collaboration, ethics, and personal relationships found in many of the interviews. The staff member depicted manuals as undercutting narrative treatment values by regarding all clients as needing the same treatment methods, thus mirroring aspects of diagnostic approaches. Manuals also hinder the development of subjunctivizing narratives by predefining what is possible in staff-client interactions. This orientation to social interaction might be contrasted with the open, creative, and collaborative conversations about the possibilities in clients' lives that are preferred in narrative treatment. Further, the psychologist's statement pointed to authenticity as a social value in narrative drug treatment. Manuals and methods make authentic spontaneous talk between equals impossible, and

produce hurt feelings when clients discover that they are being taken "through a manual."

The interviewees were clear about their rejection of traditional treatment methods and professional-client relationships. They questioned the effectiveness and ethics of such traditions, while arguing that narrative treatment is an ethical and effective alternative. These statements aligned staff members with Hacking's (1999) rebellious activism. However, this alignment becomes less clear when we consider the interviewees' counterstatements about therapeutic expertise.

Counterstatements

Staff members' reflections on their professional responsibilities to clients oriented to Miller and Fox's (1999) concern for how applied constructionists deal with situations that appear to challenge their constructionist principles. Specifically, the interviewees' counterstatements focused on situations in which their sense of responsibilities to clients contradicted their understandings of the mission of narrative drug treatment. They discussed three major ways of responding to such situations. The first involved modifying typical professional practices by altering the context of staff member-client interactions. Consider the following adaptation of what the interviewee called the "relativist" position towards clients and their problems prevalent at his center:

What's the alternative? The alternative is just *being* with them. I may, for instance, take a walk around the lake with "Nicolas" talking in an everyday way...

And in that situation I am not necessarily as relativistic as I am here where it's all about communicating to him "You're the only one who knows what's best for you." When we walk around the lake, I talk like an ordinary adult, saying what I think is best for Nicolas. As opposed to here at this meeting table where I am always reluctant, or at least cautious, with giving advice or standing up for certain values. (interview with psychologist 1)

While not invoking the concept of expert, the psychologist's counterstatement casts doubt on the claim that typical staff member-client interactions were indistinguishable from conversations outside the centers. Indeed, he reported leaving the center in order to have such conversations with clients, conversations that include advice-giving. It is also significant that the staff member acknowledged that he cautiously gives advice during meetings with some clients in the center. In other parts of the interview, he described "the cautiousness in giving advice" as a challenge in narrative therapy because the young clients expect the professionals to "instruct them and lay down guidelines." Cautious advice-giving is the second way that staff members modified typical narrative treatment practices to fulfill their responsibilities to clients. A social education worker explained that this is necessary because, even with treatment, some clients do not know how to manage their problems.

There are times when I have had meetings with them, and I have thought "Wow, this was good, this was narrative, and we have really worked with your identity." And then the young person sits there looking a bit awkward: "Yeah, right, but what shall I do

about my problems?”—clearly needing something more concrete than what I have given him. (interview with social education worker 2)

These counterstatements point to the shifting and uncertain environments in which narrative therapists work. Constructionist practitioners are not free to define reality independent from clients and others who may bring different expectations and needs to their mutual encounters. Indeed, one might argue that in modifying preferred treatment practices, narrative therapists better achieve their shared goal of treating their clients as people with real problems.

The third way of responding to challenging situations reported by staff members points to a very different strategy. It involves remaining true to the principles and practices of narrative drug treatment while casting one's doubts as evidence of one's limited professional skills. Consider the following situation described by a social education worker:

It may be extremely hard to sit here with a girl who takes far too many drugs and supports herself as a prostitute at age 18, and she thinks it's cool, I mean "cool" [shows quotation marks]. She is a mess, really miserable, but in her own opinion everything is fine. And then you have to sit on your hands and do all you can not to panic and think, "Please, let me fix this for you." Again, it's this thing about being present and being accepting and communicating to her "When you're ready, you know we are here for you." (interview with social education worker 3)

Despite her possible feelings of panic and desire to fix the client, this staff member remained true

to the "not-forcing-solutions-down-their-throat approach" she said characterizes her center. She added, however, that her feelings during the interaction suggest that she is probably too "clutching and possessive" to be very successful in narrative methods and that she needs to work with this in supervision. She had to remind herself never to have ambitions on the young people's behalf and to let them do things in their own way and at their own pace "because when is their drug use unproblematic and when is it problematic, and who am I to tell?" The social education worker's words remind us that counterstatements do not always question dominant constructions of reality. They may also be used to question one's own understandings and commitment to constructionist principles. We next turn to the implications of our research for future studies of applied constructionism and academic constructionists' reflections on their own work.

Discussion

The purpose of this article has been to link two somewhat distinct approaches to social constructionism: academic studies of the social construction of realities and applied constructionists' use of constructionist principles in addressing social problems. We have combined aspects of Hacking's (1999) reasoning on constructionism, Miller and Fox's (1999) approach to the study of applied constructionism, and Burke's (1968) dialogic interest in statements and counterstatements in analyzing interviews with staff members practicing narrative drug treatment in Copenhagen. The staff members' statements and counterstatements describe a complex treatment scene. Staff members' state-

ments emphasize how their narrative approach is designed as an alternative to traditional drug treatment programs. They are rebellious activists, to use Hacking's terminology. Staff members' counterstatements, however, describe concerns and modifications in preferred narrative therapy practices that moderate the radicalism of their constructionism. These responses signal staff members' cautious embrace of narrative drug treatment, a cautiousness that is related to the shifting and ambiguous conditions of their work as much as their commitment to narrative drug treatment.

Our analysis of staff members' statements and counterstatements points to several issues that warrant discussion among academic constructionists who study social problems. The issues turn on the activist impulses in constructionist texts that are often presented as straightforward and dispassionate analyses. Hacking (1999) notes that such constructionist studies are activist because they assume that current definitions of reality represent only some of the multiple ways in which social issues might be defined. Whether intended or not, constructionist studies are resources for undermining dominant realist depictions of social problems in media accounts and policy debates. The studies also suggest additional considerations for inclusion in conversations about social problems and reveal the contestable grounds on which dominant realist claims rest.

Staff members' statements and counterstatements form a point of departure in making inquiries about academic constructionists' choices and practices. They challenge academic constructionists to reflect on how their choices about which activist

strategies to adopt are influenced by constraints and opportunities in their work environments. A related issue involves how academic constructionists cast some aspects of the social settings they study as real in order to analyze other aspects as sites of social construction. The applied constructionists in our study openly declared their rejection of the concept of drug abuse and the assumptions of traditional drug treatment. We might then ask about the spoken and unspoken commitments to selected social values and intervention programs in academic constructionist studies of social problems. Our interviews also pointed to questions about whether and how ethical considerations are implicated in choices about what and how to study the social construction of social problems.

A further challenge posed by the applied constructionists in our study centers in academic constructionists' nearly exclusive focus on past and present social constructions of social problems. The academic literature is filled with studies of claims-making efforts, including how successful claims-makers fend off competing definitions of social issues. But, this literature tells us very little about future possibilities, which is the organizing concern of narrative drug treatment and many other forms of applied constructionism. Academic constructionists would do well to ask, "What possibilities—not certainties—are immanent in our data?" Answering this question is less about predicting the future than it is about expanding academic constructionists' engagement with the social worlds that they study. It places their studies within larger unfolding processes of social construction and change in concrete social contexts.

Burke's focus on the interplay between statements and counterstatements is one approach to exploring possible futures immanent in academic studies of the social construction of realities. We have noted how staff members' statements and counterstatements described possible discontinuities between staff members' understandings of the promise of narrative drug treatment and the circumstances of its implementation in the treatment centers. Staff members' counterstatements questioned, but did not directly challenge, fundamental themes in narrative drug treatment. Thus, we might ask, "Under what conditions might staff members' questions become calls for changing established treatment practices in the centers?"

Staff members' statements and counterstatements point to clients and parents as possible catalysts for such change. Both groups represent potential alternative orientations to the purposes of drug treatment in the centers. This potential is suggested in staff members' reports about encouraging parents to calm down and not worry about their children's cannabis use, as well as some clients' requests for advice on how to deal with their problems. Clients and parents could also advance alternative orientations by challenging staff members' claim that they are not experts on how clients should live their lives. For example, clients and parents might ask, "Aren't staff members acting as experts when they downplay clients and parents' concerns about reducing clients' cannabis use?"

We conclude by suggesting two ways that academic constructionists might extend their engagement with applied constructionism and further explore

how these approaches to constructionism are similar and different. These are just two examples out of several possible ways of developing constructionist analyzes of social problems work.

The first path focuses on the various narrative perspectives within applied constructionism. The narrative drug treatment approach in Copenhagen is only one way of implementing ideas and practices in narrative therapy. We have noted Wallis and colleagues' (2011) findings about narrative therapists' multiple orientations to the politics and pragmatics of narrative therapy. Other studies might investigate how narrative therapy is conceptualized and used across treatment settings, client populations, and cultural contexts. Comparative studies might also be conducted on uses of narrative perspectives in non-therapy contexts. These various studies form a standpoint for extending academic constructionists' understandings of the narrative organization of social problems.

The second line of development consists of comparative studies of diverse applied but non-narrative orientations to social problems and change. These orientations point towards the range of philosophical starting points used by applied constructionists in developing their perspectives and techniques. For example, unlike narrative therapy's stress on Foucauldian philosophy, solution-focused brief therapy emphasizes Wittgenstein's (1958; 1980a; 1980b) analyses of language and the philosophy of psychology. This difference has implications for how narrative and solution-focused therapists orient to the politics of therapy, therapist-client relations, and ethics in therapy, as well as for the

techniques they use in interacting with clients. The difference might also have implications for the counterstatements told by these practitioners and perhaps how they deal with doubts and worries expressed in their counterstatements.

Comparative studies of narrative and non-narrative approaches in applied constructionism promise to expand academic constructionists' understanding of how future possibilities are constructed within different settings and forms of interaction. This is perhaps the most important reason for academic

constructionists to study their applied counterparts. Such studies might form a basis for developing a synchronic academic constructionism that links past, present, and future possibilities in analyses of the social construction of social problems and other realities.

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Social Workers and the Sociological Sense of Social Problems: Balancing Objectivism, Subjectivism, and Social Construction

Abstract The aim of this article is to explore the intricate relations between objectivism, subjectivism, and constructionism. I explore the construction of social problems in everyday professional practice as a valuable source for addressing and reflecting on differences in perceptions of knowledge. Using data from a study of how Danish social workers perceive social problems, the article shows how social workers' perceptions of social problems reveal a sociological sense of social problems that renders possible both ontological assumptions, as well as epistemological reflections on the objective, subjective, and social constructionist dimensions of social problems. The social workers are constructing a model of social problems and how they are reproduced, as well as epistemological reflections on the uncertainty of knowing the "reality" of social problems. Those constructions are not formulated strictly in line with scholarly approaches but rather stem from experiences of working with social problems. The article proposes that we can learn something from this in terms of *reimagining social constructionism*. I propose that *social constructionists* should cultivate a sociological sense of the practical perceptions and approaches to solve social problems in society.

Keywords Social Problems; Social Work; Knowledge; Objectivism; Subjectivism; Constructionism

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Since early attempts to develop theories of social problems, the intricate relation between the objective and subjective dimensions of a social problem has been a recurring aspect of scholarly debates. For example, the subjectivist notion that *social problems are what people think they are* represented an attempt to deconstruct common-sense ontological assumptions of social pathology by addressing the processes and values contributing to the constitution of a social problem (Fuller 1938; Fuller and Meyers 1941a; 1941b). In opposition, this approach was criticized for a lack of reflection on the various objective social conditions and conflicts

which influence the processes whereby something becomes defined as a social problem (Lemert 1951). Since then, theories of social problems have been characterized by a certain dichotomization (Nissen 2013a). Some approaches have been focusing primarily on the processes by which something is perceived and defined as a social problem (e.g., Becker 1963; 1966). Others have been focusing on the objective conditions leading to the emergence of social problems (e.g., Merton and Nisbet 1976).

This dichotomization was also at play in the 1980s debates on "ontological gerrymandering" (Woolgar and Pawluch 1985a; 1985b; Hazelrigg 1986). Those debates criticized social constructionism for making non-reflective lapses into realism. It was argued that all claims about reality, even if they are termed social constructions, are inevitably based on ontological assumptions. If social constructionists refuse to admit this basic premise, it would open for ontological gerrymandering, it was argued. Social constructionists would critically, but selectively claim something to be "constructed" dependent on their attitudes. From a constructionist point of view, it was argued that even if one is claiming to have an objective perception of how reality "really" is, this could still be perceived as a social construction: any statement takes place in a social world of various constructions of reality.

One can say this controversy represented a change in reflections on social problems, moving from an ontological dichotomy between subjectivism/objectivism to an epistemological reflection on how it is possible to study and make claims about reality at all. This reflection is inherent in processes

of reflexive modernization where traditional world views are contested, urging us to ask not only what *is* but *how* something becomes "real" (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994). By embracing and incorporating the relativity and risks of modern society, social constructionism offered strong potentials for critical analysis by analyzing *how* social problems are constructed through allegations (Spector and Kitsuse 1987). Since then, social constructionism has gradually developed into a variety of ways the construction of social problems can be studied as embedded in interactional, institutional, and wider contextual settings (Miller and Holstein 1993; Best 1995; 2001; 2004; 2008; Gubrium and Holstein 2008). However, recently, the potentials of social constructionism have been questioned. Can social constructionist analysis actually contribute to understanding how social problems can be solved? Does social constructionism hold potentials for critical analysis that captures the practical problems of solving social problems? Such questions have been framed as "moving beyond social constructionism"—the theme of the 2013 annual meetings of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (Dello Buono 2013). The epistemological controversies of the 1980s have been revitalized, but from a practical point of view. There is no single answer to those questions, but it might be possible to explore them. As already recognized by social constructionists, the precondition to developing analysis and theories of social problems are endeavors to transcend differences in perceptions of knowledge (Best 2004).

The aim of this article is to encourage such explorations that can contribute to reflection on the intricate

relation between objectivism, subjectivism, and social constructionism for the purpose of developing social constructionism. Using an example of how Danish social workers perceive social problems, my ambition is to illustrate such an exploration, and some reflections it might invite. By merging social constructionism with a sociological understanding of social workers' knowledge of social problems, as well as with the idea of "sociological imagination" (Mills 1959), the construction of social problems in everyday professional practice is explored and recognized as a valuable source for addressing and reflecting on the problem of transcending different perceptions of knowledge. I call this everyday construction *the sociological sense of social problems in social work*.

The basis for this exploration are three qualitative studies of Danish social work and social workers primarily in child welfare and employment services.¹ By reanalyzing the statements of social workers and managers with social work backgrounds, this article finds that the sociological sense of social problems in social work constructs at least three different forms of knowledge of social problems: 1) an *ontological model* of social problems referring to both *subjectivist, objectivist, and social constructionist* assumptions, including 2) a model of *how social*

problems are reproduced, and finally 3) *an epistemological reflection on the uncertainty of understanding and explaining social problems adequately* from any point of observation. As such, a major point of this article is that social workers' perceptions of social problems reveal a sociological sense of social problems that renders possible both ontological assumptions, as well as epistemological reflections on the objective, subjective, and social constructionist dimensions of social problems. I will conclude by considering what we might learn from this in terms of *reimagining social constructionism*. I will propose that *social constructionists* should cultivate a sociological sense of the practical perceptions and approaches to solve social problems in society. Those perceptions are not formulated strictly in line with scholarly approaches, but stem from experiences of working with social problems. A cultivation of such experiences does not presuppose "moving beyond social constructionism," but might move social constructionism further into a reflection on different perceptions of social problems.

The Sociological Sense of Social Problems as a Form of Practical Knowledge

In this article, I assume that by studying social workers' perceptions of social problems social constructionists can obtain knowledge that can work as a valuable source for addressing, reflecting on, and eventually transcending different perceptions of knowledge about social problems. What are the grounds for this assumption?

Social work emerged on the basis of both everyday experiences of social disorder, as well as strong ref-

erences to sociological and psychological knowledge (Philp 1979). In scholarly debates, sociology and social work have been perceived as having a "lifelong" relation constituted by a common interest in social problems (e.g., Klein 1931; Kahn 1957; Lindesmith 1960; Sussman 1964; Kallen, Miller, and Daniels 1968; Shaw 2009). My assumption is therefore that social workers' perceptions of social problems are grounded in both a common-sense understanding of reality gained from working with and among people suffering from or identified as social problems (Schütz 1972), as well as the institutionalized, generalized, and abstract forms of knowledge of social reality constructed in society (Berger and Luckman 1966). This means that when studying social workers' perceptions, we are likely to discover a particular form of practical knowledge grounded in both everyday experiences, as well as institutionalized perceptions. I call this practical form of knowledge *the sociological sense of social problems in social work*, emphasizing how it is based on common-sense knowledge deriving from both doing social work with social problems and from sociological knowledge of social problems. This particular form of knowledge might refer to sociological theory or concepts. However, it more likely appears as more informal understandings and explanations of social problems that contribute to the construction of a model of the world.

Social work is characterized by a strong orientation towards people's life worlds, and social workers' purpose for analyzing social problems differs from that of science (Lorenz 2006; Parton and Kirk 2010). In social work, conducting analysis and constructing knowledge of social problems are primarily

done for the purpose of being able to act and promote well-being, social change, and so on. This "attachment" to trying to solve social problems in society makes a difference in the way reality is approached. In general, actors producing knowledge refer to different systems of meaning, including different understandings and explanations of what is a problem to be solved. Thus, problem identification and problem solution are perceived and made sense of differently (Luhmann 1995). In science, the problem of finding solutions to social problems can be distributed to the environment: Scientists (including social constructionists!) are not expected to produce solutions and evaluate how they might have consequences. They see their task as producing knowledge about social problems, while leaving it to society—politicians or social workers—to act (Nissen 2010). In contrast, the need to evaluate actions and solutions is an integrated aspect of social work practice (Payne 2005).

Professional knowledge is thus related to, but is genuinely different from, knowledge in science, one of the main differences being the professional orientation towards knowledge for solving practical problems (Kirk and Reid 2002; Von Oettingen 2007). Neither social work nor social problems "behave" strictly in accordance with scholarly approaches, which means that solving social problems often requires a combination of approaches. Because social workers occupy this position of experiencing and practically trying to solve social problems as real human troubles, it is likely we can learn from their knowledge. We might discover more pragmatic and therefore less dogmatic ways of perceiving social problems, constructions which transcend

¹ The empirical examples in this paper are deriving from qualitative studies on social work and social workers based on (1) in-depth field studies within institutional settings (Nissen 2005), (2) qualitative interviews with social workers and managers (Nissen, Harder, and Andersen 2008), as well as (3) qualitative interviews with managers in social work with a social work background who are additionally students in a master's program in social work (Nissen 2013b). Citations in the paper will refer to these studies by the above numbers. The paper represents an elaboration of previous empirical and theoretical analysis (e.g., Nissen and Harder 2008; Nissen 2013c) also reflected in the article "In Search for a Sociology of Social Problems for Social Work" (Nissen 2013a).

dichotomies related to objectivism, subjectivism, and social constructionism *because* they are not embedded in scientific controversies but in a practical context. Of course, this requires that we recognize how sociology is dependent on everyday concepts (Giddens 1990), and how we might learn something from the forms of knowledge constructed in society (Lee 1954; 1986; Wardell and Zajicek 1995; Mesny 1998). It requires sociological practice maintaining a dialogue with the manifold forms of knowledge in society, constantly questioning whether the way we perceive social problems is actually capturing the complexity of social life (Mills 1959).

In sum, the sociological sense of social problems in social work is a form of professional knowledge referring to both common-sense and practical *everyday knowledge*, as well as institutionalized forms of knowledge including knowledge adopted from *sci-*

ence. It is a form of knowledge shaped by and contributing to the construction of certain approaches to *problem identification* and *problem solution* involving *understandings* and *explanations* of social problems, as well as practical reflections on *practical problems* and *potentials* related to solving social problems. Using this practical form of knowledge as a source for reflecting on and addressing sociological problems is valuable: we can learn how social problems are perceived in a more pragmatic and therefore less dogmatic way. This might open for ways of developing *existing, as well as new theoretical approaches* within social constructionism. This approach is summed up in the scheme below, and underpins the following exploratory analysis. The analytical question is: *Is there a sociological sense of social problems in social work, and if so—how does this relate to scholarly controversies on the perception of social problems?*

Table 1. Analysis of the identification and solution to social problems as complex phenomena.²

Analytical Concepts	Exploratory Questions
(a) Everyday knowledge/science	What forms of knowledge are in use in the identification and solution to social problems?
(b) Problem identification/problem solution	How is something identified as a social problem that should be solved and how is it solved?
(c) Understandings/Explanations	What understandings and explanations are inherent in the identification and solution to social problems?
(d) Practical problems/potentials	What problems and potentials for problem identification and solutions derive from the above knowledge of social problems?
(e) Existing theory/development of new theory	How can answers to the above questions be reflected theoretically as a problem of existing theories, as well as a source for theory development?

² This table is developed on the basis of Nissen 2013a and 2013b, both addressing the need to develop the sociology of social problems to respond more adequately to social work and the challenges of solving social problems collectively in society.

Society as a Context: The Conditions and Constructions of Social Problems

When social workers reflect on their work, what they do, and what knowledge is important when working with concrete instances of social problems, they emphasize the importance of knowing about and being able to act within a complex context, which in the widest sense is perceived as “the world.”³ A social work manager says that this is because social work is situated in a “world constantly changing.”

When social workers reflect on this world, they speak of, for example, “prevailing ideologies,” “views on human nature,” what “society wants” and “feels obliged to do” as socially constructed conditions that affect the possibility of solving social problems. For example, social workers working with unemployed people say:

We have this mix of demands built in the legislation, and they are different depending on what groups of unemployed we are talking about, and in terms of ethics and the prevailing ideology, no doubt there has been a paradigmatic shift. (social work manager, employment services [2])

Focus is changing towards getting as many unemployed people as possible through the machinery. Quantity is valued more than quality ... It is about getting as many as possible through the system [to meet economic incentive structures]. The faster they get out the door, the

³ In the following analysis, words in quotation marks are expressions used by the social workers exemplifying more general perceptions of social problems.

better. Instead of asking: *Do we act and help the citizen in a good way?* But, measuring the latter is more difficult. (social worker, employment services [2])

It is a scary view on human nature lying behind the political idea of giving economic reimbursement to the municipalities for getting more people into the job market. You don't think of the individual human being [who is not capable of working] at all. (social worker, employment services [2])

One can say social workers construct an ontological model seeing society as a construction of conditions, ideas, and views on human nature, altogether influencing the goals of society, as well as the inclination and incentives to act upon social problems. Inherent in this ontological model held by social workers is an idea of how ideologies and views on human nature are susceptible to social forces. As stated above, the prevailing paradigm for solving social problems can change.

When speaking of conditions, social workers emphasize *economy* and *politics* as two spheres in society having objective consequences. The economy and mechanisms of the market affect the job market, as well as the economy of ordinary citizens by having an “immense impact on the possibilities of the making of everyday life,” as one social worker puts it. In addition, the political climate and the shaping of policies through legislation have an equal impact on “how money is allocated for welfare.” One can say that social workers’ ontological model of society points out economy and politics as two significant spheres of society conditioning how it is possible to promote welfare.

When reflecting on *how* economy and politics have an impact on social work and the ability to solve social problems, social workers speak about what can be termed *power relations* and *forms of regulation*. A social work manager expresses this implicitly by asking: “Who decides the development of society?” “What kind of behavior does one want to regulate?” Social workers experience this in very concrete ways as changes in expectations for productivity and efficiency:

If people still want a welfare society and a welfare state, they have to hold on to the social workers and the people who are actually working with and providing a safety net for the citizens ... Too many social workers bend their heads, or try to save their own skins, because they are too busy, and it is a shame. Instead, someone should examine the work and say: *Can it be true that everything should be calculated and quantified? And is it OK for each social worker to have 45 child welfare cases?* (social worker, child welfare services [2])

When we took our first step as social workers in the social service department, we had a lot of contact with the citizens. This was what it was all about. Of course, we also made records. Today, things are diametrically the opposite. We actually run the whole company without meeting the citizen. There is not much dialogue. It is a very formal way of working with many administrative procedures. (social work manager, employment services [2])

Social workers’ evaluation of the adequacy of resource allocation seems dependent on how it is possible to work with social problems in practice. They believe resource allocation should be based

on solidarity and complex in-depth knowledge of social problems and how to solve them. They do not believe that allocation of resources should be based on performance measurement and assumptions that social problems can be solved in the same way that a “company” produces quantifiable things on the basis of standardized procedures. Social workers relate variations in how resources are allocated to the support for the welfare state and the willingness to put resources into social welfare:

We have a government and prime minister who want to break down social reproduction, and this is what every government has wanted for a long time. There has just not been the willingness to put resources into it. (social worker, employment services [2])

According to social workers, the amount of and ways of allocating resources have an impact on the life situation and troubles of clients:

The clients can be very aggressive because each and every one who could be squeezed into the job market is now employed. And right now, we are dealing with those with huge barriers [for getting into the job market], and it didn’t take long before I was subject to the first threat from a client. I had to close my door and sit by myself for the rest of the day, fearing he would come back. Over time, you get more thick-skinned. (social worker, employment services [2])

Quite often, aggressive behavior among unemployed people on social welfare is actually about human beings who just feel they haven’t been heard and seen. They feel that someone is cracking the whip over them. If you already have a lot of problems, maybe

abuse, maybe you have just gotten out of prison, maybe you have psychological problems—evidently you tend to have a quick temper. (social worker, employment services [2])

Just as social workers explain how the society’s economy has an impact on the everyday lives of individuals, they tend to explain “problematic” behavior of individuals by certain “conditions,” as the statements above exemplify. Social workers are reluctant to understand and explain social problems as “deviant behavior.” One can say that their ontological model emphasizes both the interconnections and discrepancies between objective conditions and social constructions affecting the institutional preconditions for allocating welfare. What could be perceived as deviant behavior is explained by these interconnections and discrepancies (cf. Merton 1938).

In sum, social workers’ perceptions of social problems reveal an ontological model of society as a world of both symbolic and objective conditions, as well as social forces contributing to the emergence of social problems. This holds both on the level of society, as well in the lives of ordinary citizens. Social workers explain social problems by the complex constitution of and relations between different spheres in society, in particular economy and politics, power relations, and the policies and regulations of social work, which influence the capacity to understand, explain, and solve social problems. A recurring theme among social workers is the support for the welfare state and the allocation of ever scarcer resources for social welfare. Seen from this point of view, a social worker

points out that social work is not about “saving the world”: it is a “tiny pawn” in society.

The Reproduction of Social Problems

The ontological model of social problems among social workers could be criticized for not taking into account individual variations in behavior, as well as the influence of smaller groups (cf. Sutherland 1947). In the light of this, it is worth noting that social workers do not ignore how social problems are also related to subjective preferences. However, when speaking about individual preferences, they often note that what might *appear* to be individual actually is attached to wider social conditions in society. Human beings are individuals *within* a society. Working with social problems on the micro-level requires an understanding and explanation of how “the situation of people is influenced by the conditions under which they live” and of how “human beings develop,” a social worker says. This is a complex task since even though human lives are influenced by various social conditions, there is no simple causal explanation for why some people’s lives become troublesome. As one social worker says, “Even people who are apparently well-functioning, are well educated, and so on can be troubled.” According to another, people from “all classes in society” can suffer because life is “unpredictable” and “can develop in an awry way.”

When social workers speak about personal problems, they draw on an explanatory model suggesting a *reproduction of social problems*. Conditions at the macro-level of society create problems, which might be distributed to the micro-level, where

social problems appear as, and can be reproduced as, personal troubles. For example, social workers speak about social expectations within a capitalist society where consumerism and expectations towards educational and work performance are high. A social worker says: “if society continues to develop as it does, problems will continue and exacerbate.” According to another, people live in a society where “the pressure is much higher than before.” Under such conditions, “social events” such as unemployment, family conflicts, divorce, disease or death have a strong impact. Social workers believe that some individuals suffer from social and emotional strains, which can eventually become so burdensome that they suffer from social and psychological deprivation.

In relation to this, social workers speak of “less ordinary forms of living” characterized by lack of norm regulation, instability, poor self-esteem, and distrust in others, which can eventually lead to violations of both the self and of others. A condensation of case records in social work with families illustrates how this is viewed as a consequence of social reproduction involving social and psychological deprivation:

In case records, it is noted that severe family problems are related to the parents being the bearer of social reproduction such as low educational level, limited work experience, economic problems, marital problems, and housing problems—this often gender related. Social reproduction is considered being about having limited possibilities for and experiences of living the good life. In the case records, it is noted that the parents experience a life of hardship, adversity,

and of disfavor. This is related to an accumulation of individual problems such as substance or alcohol abuse, poor health conditions, loneliness, isolation, anxiety, and various psychological problems. It is noted that some individuals have a lifelong experience of problems going back to early childhood—conflicts, domestic violence, drinking problems, sexual abuse, sickness and death, family breakup, changing or unstable schooling, bullying, et cetera. They feel as if they are carrying a weight on their shoulders, sometimes related to a lifelong feeling of neglect and exploitation. As a consequence, they feel distrust in other people, shame, and develop few or unstable social relations. Some parents feel anxious or worn out emotionally. It is noted that some have tried to commit suicide. (condensation of case records made by the author during field work [1])

This adds complexity to the ontological model of social problems. The relation between social conditions, the construction of social expectations, and the subjective dimension of social problems is not simple or predictable. People are different and have different resources; this has an impact on the strengths and capacities for mastering life expectations. When seeking to solve social problems as they appear and have consequences in the lives of individuals, social workers speak about the need to have a “wide” and “deep” knowledge of human life. According to these workers, human life is influenced by various social and psychological conditions and processes, each and together conditioning how human beings develop differently:

It is important to know something about human beings in society, to have knowledge about social sci-

ence. In addition, it is important to know something about human development, psychology because it is important to be able to see human beings as a whole. (social work manager, child welfare services [2])

Efforts to solve social problems must be based on complex understandings and explanations of such conditions and processes.

The Uncertainty of Solving Social Problems

Because the ontological model of social problems among social workers is based on a complex understanding of social problems and how they are reproduced unpredictably, problem solution becomes shrouded with uncertainty. Thus, ontological assumptions do not necessarily exclude sensitivity towards relativity and risks in modern society. Experiencing the multi-causality of social problems creates an undeterminable space—when it comes to both knowing about and acting upon social problems. One might say that this undeterminable space refers to an epistemological problem: the problem of knowing and acting adequately upon a “reality” of social problems. A social worker reflects on this problem:

The purpose of what we are doing we need to hold on to this and construct it. It is very much about the child and believing that what we are doing is a help: that the child will not be harmed or will not be able to attach to anyone. In reality, we have social inequalities related to class and unfairness. And the public welfare system cannot compensate. (social work manager, child welfare services [1])

This short statement reflects how social problems are “in reality” problems related to social inequality and unfairness. It also reflects how a public welfare system cannot fully compensate for this, which makes it necessary to construct the value of trying to solve social problems. Finally, the statement reveals how ontological assumptions are not tantamount to an absence of an epistemological reflection about how social problems are constructed. In fact—and this is worth noting—there is an appreciation that constructions are necessary (“we need to hold on to this and construct it”), not only because of the uncertainty in actually *knowing* whether a social problem is ontologically real but because of the uncertainty related to *being a part of a society*, where one is obliged to act upon social problems. This reflection on the social construction of social problems is not a reflection of a “social constructionist” but of a social worker trying to construct the value of solving social problems.

When social workers are reflecting on the contingencies related to solving social problems, the ontological model of social problems is applied to social work itself. They ask how social work as an institutionalized practice can in itself contribute to reproduction of social problems. Social work is not outside but working *within* a society of conditions and constructions. In particular, power relations can be reproduced within social worker-client relations:

This [reproduction of problems] has also to do with the system we have. I usually say that we get many well educated clients ... They have learned to invent problems and have learned to comply and satisfy the

demands of the system ... By creating such a relation, we produce clients. (social work manager, child welfare services [1])

In fact, we decide what is necessary. There is not that much user involvement. There is absolutely a lot of discipline and restraint ... you can favorably compare it to discipline, expressing exactly what it is. This is not something they are asking for. (social work manager, child welfare services [1])

In continuation of this, some social workers are concerned with what they term as a problem of "overtreatment." Overtreatment refers to the risk of constructing social problems, which are not real, consequently constraining or stressing individuals disproportionately, and thus contributing to the reproduction of social problems. This process is related to social workers' aspirations for solving problems and "doing good":

By overtreatment, I mean, this is about having respect for the agenda of the families. We are not to intervene as soon as we see something that we think might be problematic. We must be capable of accepting what we perceive as minor violations. We must be able to embrace this ... We are making small interventions; we are to disturb as little as possible. This is why we are working with the families only 9-5 because in the long run we want the families to learn how to take care of themselves. But, this requires you have confidence in them. (social worker, child welfare services [1])

On the other hand, there is a risk of neglecting certain objective conditions and problems, failing to

act, and thus contributing to the reproduction of social problems. A social worker gives an example of this:

But, isn't it strange. On the one hand, we experience really heavy consequences of hash abuse. On the other hand, when this problem is addressed in the media, it is as if it is less problematic than drinking. It says in the newspaper today, that a lot of people say that children's use of hash is OK. *We have never suffered from smoking hash*, they said. But, here we are, dealing with the heavy, heavy consequences of hash abuse. (social worker, child welfare services [1])

Those reflections of social workers indicate the problem of knowing how reality really "is" when subjective experiences, objective conditions, and social constructions are all at play.

Even though the social workers do not have an explicit solution to this epistemological problem, they seem to draw on a particular form of knowledge that contributes to a constant reflection on the objective, subjective, and social constructionist aspects of social problems. This form of knowledge is expressed when social workers talk about the importance of "life experience," "a sense of how social life can be 'outside' your own sphere," a "sense of and an association with social problems," and the ability to "sit with and communicate with various people." A social worker reflects on this:

I dare to say that social workers must actually have a lot of knowledge. One thing is that we are more and more turned into specialists. Another thing is the importance of the approach you have to people.

It means something really, really special, when we are talking to a mother who is psychologically troubled. And it means something in terms of how we meet her and talk to her. Besides knowledge about people, we must have a sense of empathy, and we must be engaged. (social work manager, child welfare services [2])

Through meeting people, social workers get a sense of reality valuable in terms of constraining disproportionality. The mainspring of this sense is the experience of being together with, communicating with, and developing an emotional sensitivity towards the troubles and worries in people's lives. A social work manager explicitly takes a phenomenological approach when reflecting on the forms of knowledge promoted by the government:

Well, we want to do a good work, but we don't want to do it on the basis of the isomorphism, which they [the government] represent. We want to do a good work in a space, which allows us to be human and professional, and where there is a space for a phenomenological understanding of a family situation. (social work manager, child welfare services [3])

This "phenomenological space," which is attentive to *understanding* the immediate life world of people, might be what makes the combination of different approaches to social problems possible.

Reflections on Ontological and Epistemological Models

The exploration of social workers' perceptions of social problems indicates how social workers adopt

a sociological sense that is constituted by both an ontological model of social problems, as well as by epistemological reflections on the uncertainty of understanding and explaining concrete instances of social problems adequately from any point of view. In other words, in the sociological sense of social problems, in social work both ontological and epistemological reflections on the objective, subjective, and social constructionist aspects of social problems are possible. While it might be an exaggeration to claim that social workers transcend dichotomies related to objectivism, subjectivism, and social constructionism, it remains that practical action calls for a multidimensional understanding and explanation of social reality. In practice, a preference for one single position is not the case. Instead, *different ontological and epistemological approaches to social problems are in use for the purpose of understanding and explaining social problems*. In this way, the perceptions of social problems in social work challenge scholarly approaches to social problems. What makes this possible?

Social workers express knowledge in a pragmatic, informal, and concrete way. Understandings and explanations of social problems are furthermore substantiated in *the actual experiences of how people's problems, worries, and suffering are related to changing societal conditions, constructions, and forces*. It is as if the practical capability to integrate subjectivism, objectivism, and social constructionism is based on a *sociological imagination*. Social workers seem to:

[k]now that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues—and in terms of the problems of his-

tory making. Know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles—and to the problems of the individual life. Know that the problems of social science, when adequately formulated, must include both troubles and issues, both biography and history, and the range of their intricate relations. Within that range the life of the individual and the making of societies occur; and within that range the sociological imagination has its chance to make a difference in the quality of human life in our time. (Mills 1959:226)

On another level, this is possible through the imaginative capacity to make changes in perspective:

[f]or that [sociological] imagination is the capacity to shift from one perspective to another—from the political to the psychological; from examination of a single family to comparative assessment of the national budgets of the world; from the theological school to the military establishment; from considerations of an oil industry to studies of contemporary poetry. It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self—and to see the relations between the two. Back of this use there is always the urge to know the social and historical meaning of the individual in the society and in the period in which he has his quality and his being. That, in brief, is why it is by means of the sociological imagination that men now hope to grasp what is going on in the world, and to understand what is happening in themselves as minute points of the intersections of biography and history within society. In large part, contemporary man's self-conscious view on himself as at least an outsider, if not a permanent stranger, rests upon an absorbed

realization of social relativity and of the transformative power of history. (Mills 1959:7)

As Mills argued, the ability to make changes in perspective is not only related to the observation of social phenomena in an ontological sense but also to an epistemological reflection. The individual observer must be able to place himself in a position of being *outside*, but must also recognize how he is situated *within* a social reality. This epistemological aspect of sociological imagination seems to be present in social workers' reflections on the uncertainty and the contingencies related to solving social problems.

A Final Remark: Re-Imagining Social Constructionism?

The promise of this article was to illustrate how explorations of social workers' perceptions of social problems can be a valuable source for addressing and reflecting on social constructionism. It was assumed that by studying social workers' perceptions of social problems we as social constructionists can learn something. Recent critiques of social constructionism question whether social constructionist analysis can actually be sensitive to the reality of social problems. This critique revitalizes scholarly controversies between objectivist, subjectivist, and social constructionist approaches. This article has explored the possibilities of learning something about this intricate relation between objectivism, subjectivism, and social constructionism by studying social workers' perceptions of social problems.

Through the exploration of social workers' perceptions of social problems—the *sociological sense of*

social problems in social work—it became possible to identify three different forms of knowledge of social problems: 1) an *ontological model* of social problems referring to both *subjectivist, objectivist, and social constructionist* assumptions, including 2) a model of *how social problems are reproduced*, and finally 3) an *epistemological reflection on the uncertainty of understanding and explaining social problems adequately*. As such, a major point of the article is that social workers' perception of social problems renders possible both ontological assumptions, as well as epistemological reflections on the objective, subjective, and social constructionist dimensions of social problems. This sociological sense of social problems is embedded in a practical approach to social problems reflecting the challenges of solving social problems. A major source for this approach is not only formal knowledge but also the social worker's life experience, practical engagement, empathy, and sensitivity towards social problems—in particular as they appear in the lives and troubles of individuals.

What might we as social constructionists learn from social workers' perceptions of social problems? We might learn that in society, and in particular where social problems are expected to be handled, people have a less dogmatic approach to social problems. Among social workers, dichotomies related to objectivism, subjectivism, and social constructionism are not prevalent. Rather, social workers seem to combine various ontological and epistemological reflections in a model of how social problems emerge, how they might be reproduced, and how solving social problems is a challenging task. In Mills's words, they practice a form of sociological imagination based on an ability to make changes in perspective.

As social constructionists, we might ask ourselves whether we are capable of making changes in perspective for the purpose of developing social constructionism: Can we enhance the scope and potentials of social constructionist analysis by being sensitive to other perspectives emphasizing the subjective and objective dimensions of social problems? I believe this would require a re-imagination of social constructionism as a reflexive approach. A way of approaching this re-imagination could be by cultivating studies of how various social actors working with social problems perceive and thus construct social problems based on their practical experiences. Without taking individual actor's perceptions for granted, we could use their constructions for reflection. *Are our theories and conceptualizations of social problems adequate when it comes to reflect on the complexity of social problems and how they are solved?*

Some might ask why social constructionist should be burdened with this reflection. Do we need to re-imagine social constructionism? Nothing is necessary, but we might learn something new about social constructionism's relation to society. For example, we might ask whether it is possible for social constructionists to hold a position of being outside while *at the same time* recognizing how we are a part of and can learn something from everyday experiences in society. I think this is possible if the pragmatic and less formal perceptions of social problems are used as a source for reflection. Perhaps this will move social constructionism into uncharted waters. However, the gain might be that we find ways of constructing new approaches to the social constructionist study of social problems.

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The Crisis Model: A Socially Useful Psychology

Abstract The model of “crisis” is a culturally shared and widespread idea of human reactions to misfortunes such as accidents, diagnosis of disease, divorces, becoming a parent of a disabled child, and so on. The crisis model conveys the idea of coming to terms with unwanted experiences while advancing through various phases, for example, of denial, processing, and acceptance. The language of crises is integrated into Western emotional culture, particularly in the language used by caring professionals (e.g., social workers, psychologists, counselors, and health staff). Crisis talk is also frequent in the media, popular science books, and in everyday conversations when individual experiences are reported, debated, or discussed. Investigating the specific local culture of the Swedish world of the Deaf, to which families whose children have been diagnosed deaf belong, we aimed to extend the current understanding of crisis. How do parents and professionals make use of the crisis model when speaking about their own experiences, as well as the experiences of others? We observed that the crisis model served as a prop in such talk; it was used to compare, defend, criticize, and explain the behavior of others, but also to account for one’s own emotions and behavior. In the process, locally relevant identities and categorizations of others were constructed. The crisis model was originally a way of “diagnosing” parents’ emotional experiences when they learned about their children being deaf, but it has proven useful for other purposes in a context with abundant ideological differences.

Keywords Crisis; Crisis Model; Deaf; Hard-of-Hearing; Cochlear Implants; Psychology; Caring Professionals; Parents

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Idioms of distress manifest in quite different ways across cultures; anthropological studies elucidate how such idioms are interwoven into religions, social networks, traditions, and rituals of grieving (Watters 2010). Different societies have different emotional regimes (Reddy 2001), and in any society, various organizations, institutions, and occupations foster local cultures in which different emotional regimes reign. As such, they offer fertile ground for the sociological studies of emotions (Kusenbach and Loseke 2013).

Ideas travel in a globalized world (Czarniawska and Sevón 2005), and may become standardized, popular resources for people’s ways of understanding social life. The psychological “crisis model” with its various stages is one such idea. Stemming from psychiatrist Kübler-Ross’ (1969/2009) stage-wise model for dealing with death, its popularized version expects people in crisis (due to a variety of circumstances) to work through several phases of shock, denial, anger, and grief. The positive results of working through the crisis should lead to acceptance and insight.

As part of a Westernized, psychologically oriented, emotional culture, the crisis model is particularly present in the work of caring professionals, for instance, social workers, psychologists, counselors, and health staff (Watters 2010). Professionals apply the crisis model with small variations in different settings in order to explain or treat emotional responses to a number of misfortunes and unwanted experiences, such as accidents, disease diagnoses, divorces, aging (“mid-life crisis”), and becoming the parent of a disabled child. In addition,

the language of crisis is frequently used in the media, in popular science books, and in everyday conversations when individual experiences are reported, debated, or discussed. In short, a stepwise approach is often used by both professionals and amateurs as a model for dealing with crisis in general (Holstein and Gubrium 2000:12-13).

In this article, we will only briefly sketch the dissemination of “the crisis” across nations and contexts, devoting our analysis to inquiries of how the idea of crisis is used once it has arrived at one of its many destinations: the Swedish world of the Deaf. Instead of a classical constructionist analysis highlighting how specific ideas come into being (Best 2008), our analysis focuses on how this established idea is used, and in the process, how it implicitly defines identities and categorizes others. The Swedish world of the Deaf from the 1990s to the present day serves as a distinct context for such an analysis. Parents whose children were diagnosed as deaf found themselves entering a local culture with strong opinions about what was right and wrong for their children. The leading Deaf culture perspective in the 1990s strongly relied on sign language, while expressing stark criticism of speech practice and technological hearing aids; some parents and professionals defended these practices. Despite ideological differences, “the crisis” is taken for granted by all parties as a natural psychological reaction to the diagnosis of deafness.

The aim of this text is to examine a Westernized, culturally shared, and widespread idea of emotional responses to misfortunes, dramatic accidents, and serious illnesses: the crisis model. Whereas the basic

idea of the crisis seems surprisingly indifferent to local influences, in-depth studies of a specific local culture such as ours may reveal the ways people come to use an idea in a variety of imaginative and inventive ways for purposes other than its original understanding. In the world of the Deaf, the crisis model was originally a way of “diagnosing” parents’ emotional experiences when learning about their children being deaf or hard of hearing, but has proven useful for other purposes in a context with abundant ideological differences.

An Established Idea

In the Western world, a popular stepwise approach to personal crises has grown out of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’ psychoanalytic analysis of terminally ill patients.¹ In her influential book *On Death and Dying* (1969/2009), Kübler-Ross proposed five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance; these stages are “worked through.” Kübler-Ross’ crisis model received steady academic criticism, yet won great popularity (Hooyman and Kramer 2006). In the introduction to the 40th anniversary edition of the book, Dr. Allan Kellehear contended that the critics “never succeeded in putting off millions of ordinary men and women looking for some basic understanding and insight into the social and emotional experience of their dying or those of their loved ones” (Kübler-Ross 1969/2009:vii).

¹ The Kübler-Ross model bears resemblance to other psychological stage theories, for example, Erikson’s (1980) theory of psychosocial development, which states that a healthy personality depends on the individual’s ability to master challenges or “identity crises” inherent in the eight critical stages of a life cycle.

In Sweden, the psychologist Johan Cullberg’s (1975) crisis model (or theory of crisis) echoes Kübler-Ross’ in dividing crises into four “phases” of shock, reaction, adaptation, and re-orientation. His widely cited book made Cullberg the leading voice on the subject in Swedish medical education and institutions (Jarkman 1996).

The idea of crisis has not only travelled between nations but also among contexts within nations. In Sweden, the idea that people “lived with their crisis” and its stages turned up in various qualitative studies of people with illness, of parents with children who had diabetes (Richt 1992) or spinal cord lesions (Jarkman 1996), of self-help groups for mothers with children with traumatic brain damage (Wästerfors 1999), and of staff and patients in brain trauma clinics (Åkerström 1993). These studies all demonstrated the discourse of “crisis” in various medical settings, as well as how the language of crisis spreads among parents, families, patients, and professionals.

One explanation of the crisis model’s popularity is that it captures experiences, emotions, and responses to (sudden) misfortunes in a common recognizable language. The step-like construction of crises and the notion that the phases or stages have to be “worked through” have given rise to spatial, often tunnel-like, metaphors that are familiar from phrases such as “being in crisis,” “going through a crisis,” or “coming out of a crisis.”

As the notion of crisis has become established, the interpretation of its meaning and definition has become more nuanced, and some understandings are

now under debate. School counselors, for instance, criticize what they claim to be outdated knowledge, and suggest a Modern Crisis Theory with specifying categories of crises (traumatic crisis, age crisis, and grief).² Such diversifying processes provide further evidence that the crisis model is firmly rooted for dealing with crises in general, akin to what researchers have called “domain expansion” (Best 1990; Loseke 1999) in terms of claims and diagnoses of social problems (for instance, threatened children, and battered women). In our case, domain expansion concerns the construction of new areas for the application of a psychological model for diagnosing and understanding how people respond to a range of unwanted experiences.

Whereas the basic step-like features of the crisis model and its psycho-therapeutic vocabulary seem to be established as a shared language for human reactions to a variety of experiences, its specific content is locally shaped (cf. Silverman and Gubrium 1994). What causes a shock? What does it mean to “be in denial”? What is “adaptation” or “acceptance”? A constructionist perspective makes it possible to answer these seemingly psychological questions sociologically, and to analytically grasp what is taken for granted as everyday knowledge.

The Swedish World of the Deaf

Below we will investigate how the crisis model is used as a moral resource and as a discursive prop based on material from studies of professionals involved with deaf children and parents of deaf chil-

² See: http://www.skolkurator.nu/sveriges_skolkuratorer_lulea_okt2013.pdf.

dren. Our studies of the Swedish world of the Deaf have lasted more than 20 years, with the most intense research period occurring during the 1990s. During this time, a Deaf culture perspective had long been promoted by Deaf organizations; this perspective was eventually established in official arenas and more or less embraced by professionals and parents of deaf children. According to this view, deaf individuals belong to a cultural and linguistic minority, and medical interventions are an attack on this minority and its language (Berbrier 1998; 2002). Accordingly, the introduction of cochlear implants (CIs), a surgical device intended to give a deaf child a type of artificial hearing, was met with suspicion and protest. Over the years, however, the number of children with CIs has risen dramatically: almost all Swedish deaf children undergo the operation today. The ideological debate over language persists, with Deaf culture advocates promoting sign language for children with CIs and arguing that a too-heavy reliance on spoken language is harmful to them. After all, they argue, children with CIs are deaf the minute the external CI device is removed or broken. Our case is characterized by dramatic ideological and practical changes over the last few decades, a time during which parents’ crisis over having a deaf child has remained a prominent topic.

Materials and Methods

This study draws from material collected by the authors and several graduate students, encompassing investigations that aimed to analyze ideology and practice in a time of profound change in the care and education of deaf people in Sweden (Jacobsson

1999; 2000; Ryding 1999; Åkerström 2004; Säwe 2004; Åkerström and Jacobsson 2009). We used several methods: interviews, field observations, taped meetings, and documents. Taken together, we carried out more than 100 unstructured active interviews (Holstein and Gubrium 1995) with educational and medical professionals, as well as parents of deaf children. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the quotations we use in this article have been translated into English in a way that preserves the original meaning and style. A few interviews were carried out with deaf parents with the help of a sign language interpreter.

Roughly 20 parental meetings were attended, most of which were audiotaped. We also attended conferences for various categories of professionals dealing with deaf issues. Field observations were carried out at different sites, such as schools for the Deaf, parental associations, and in a variety of medical settings. Finally, documents such as magazines from the Swedish Association for Deaf People, National Association for Hard-of-Hearing People, and the parent organization for young CI patients were systematically collected and analyzed. While the current article draws its background from all of this material, the data included for analysis consists mainly of interviews and parental group discussions.

Uses of the Crisis Model

There is a widespread understanding among various professionals and among parents of deaf children that parents undergo crisis when their children are diagnosed. Almost all of our interviews with people involved in Deaf culture and in professions car-

ing for and teaching deaf children contained “crisis talk,” without us asking about it or raising the issue. Interviewees made use of the idea of crisis as a discursive resource when they accounted for their own or others’ behavior and when they argued for or against a variety of things. Parents invoked “the crisis” when they complained about the professionals in the field, and professionals explained parental behavior and decisions in terms of the same crisis. Parents and professionals also complained about resources, a recent example of which is the requests for more “crisis knowledge” and for the training of professionals in how to work with parents in crisis (e.g., National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools 2011).

Comparing One’s Own Experiences

It is not only professionals who expect that a diagnosis of deafness will trigger a crisis; many parents do, too. Against this well-established idea, parents of deaf children reflect and compare their own experiences, emotions, and responses. Social comparison is a central theme in sociology and has been analyzed by several sociologists. The classic sociologist Max Scheler (1992) and others have commented on people’s habitual comparisons and examinations of each other. Such comparisons are vital for “investigative” identity work; identities are carved out in contrast with others, or people distinguish themselves in terms of being a bit better or worse off than others (for example, relative deprivation). Scheler’s (1992:122-123) formulation emphasized comparison-based ways of constructing a moral value: “[e]ach of us—noble or common, good or evil—continually compares his own value

with that of others ... All jealousy, all ambition... are full of such comparisons.”

Social comparisons are useful for other purposes, as well. People may compare their own experience with what has become expected, as one father did when he recalled how he felt about having a deaf child, “It was never a big deal,” and he remained a little surprised by the crisis that never was:

Yeah, sure, it was a little tough. But, I haven’t, well, I’ve waited the whole time for what could happen—well, not anymore, but quite a while after I thought: now it’s going to hit me, anytime now.

Crisis is not only expected, but also prescriptive. This observation is supported by a mother who accounts for why she is not in crisis despite her son being diagnosed as deaf a couple of months earlier; she was newly divorced at the time, which demanded intense emotional work, there were many practical issues to deal with, such as selling the house, and on top of these demands, she took part in many meetings with professionals in the Deaf field. She listed her troubles to the interviewer, which formed a background for explaining why she was distracted from the impending crisis (Ryding 1999).

Similar to the idea that a chronic illness causes intense crisis and biographical disruption regardless of other mitigating factors (Faircloth et al. 2004) is the idea of the necessity of crisis when a child is diagnosed. “Everything *should* be rocky during this period,” says one professional (cf. Gregory 1991). When our interviewees talked about the experience of having a deaf child, they all referred

to “the crisis” as an expected reaction, and some interviewees, exemplified above, expressed surprise or excuses when it failed to appear. The crisis is portrayed as a model for emotional reaction against which parents compare themselves.

Furthermore, the vocabulary of crisis seemed to be used to describe one’s own experience in a rather automatic way, visible in the following excerpt when the interviewer points out the word “acceptance”:

Interviewer: But, you said there were blows all the way until you accepted the deafness—when did you think you were able to do that?

Father: Well, it ... “accept the deafness,” that was, I don’t know ... where did I get that word from? But, it’s, yeah ... I really don’t know. There isn’t a date when you can say you accept the deafness. It’s a process, right, where you feel that ... [sighs] I don’t know, in some kind of way it felt as if, if, if...

When the interviewer repeats the parent’s choice of words, they seem to be less obvious to the interviewee. The parent even asks himself if the word “acceptance” is his own, while still borrowing it to describe the experience of having a deaf child.

Accounting for Others’ Wrongdoing

Another way of using the crisis model is when discussing other people’s behavior, choices, and ideas, particularly when they are constructed to be the wrong behavior, choices, and ideas. During the 1990s, educational professionals provided clear and indisputable recommendations for the family: preschools for the Deaf in which sign language

was the first language, and sign language courses for parents and siblings. When parents were reluctant to implement these recommendations, professionals made use of the crisis model to explain their behavior. In the following excerpt, the interviewer asked what the professional would think of parents who did not recognize the importance of sign language:

Educational professional: It's always a question of "Where am I in the crisis?" All parents want the best for their child, but they can get stuck, they cannot see clearly because it's such a different new world that's opening up, and I think it's important that they be allowed to be afraid of it. They have to go through this, it's nothing you can just accept like that, I don't think so.

With the help of a crisis model, professionals can understand and even come to expect opposition from parents, which also serves as an explanation for why their work is sometimes difficult. The use of the crisis model is analogous to that used during an illness with stages through which one must pass to become well again. If the stages are not passed, one is still "in" crisis. People in crisis are constructed to be not quite rational.

When CIs were introduced in the mid 1990s, educational professionals faced difficulties in guiding parents because they were anxious to "neutrally convince" parents to make the right choices (Jacobsson 1999). In general, educationalists joined the Deaf movement's critique of CIs in more or less explicit ways. In this sensitive matter too, the crisis model was used to account for wrongdoing in a dismissive yet sympathetic way. It was believed

that choosing the CI operation and accepting one's child's deafness were incompatible. In the following excerpt, a preschool teacher talks about whether parents would choose CIs:

And I really think that parents who have come such a long way that they place their child here [in a sign language preschool], they have accepted sign language as their child's first language and I don't think it [CI] would be considered then, but maybe at an earlier stage, before they've come such a long way in the stage of working it through.

Associations for the Deaf also used a crisis vocabulary and opposed the CI doctors who stressed the importance of surgery shortly after diagnosis in order to enhance the likeliness of success. According to the crisis model, this is a sensitive period in which parents cannot be expected to have entered the acceptance phase. A representative for one of the Deaf organizations who was strongly against receiving the CI explained in an interview: "Personally, I believe that it's impossible to make any other decision than to do this surgery ... when given this opportunity in the middle of the crisis."

At times, more understanding or sympathetic accounts were given by interviewees. Consider, for instance, a Deaf culture advocate who explained to the interviewer why parents do not join the prescribed parental education activities in courses given quite far from home. In her account, she adds on the crisis as a self-evident "clinching fact" after she lists a number of things: "You have to be active, which everybody isn't. You have to organize to be able go away, buses, flights ... To learn sign language, you

have to be outgoing, you can't be shy. During the evenings you have to socialize with others. Everybody can't handle this." And then she ends, "And if you're in the middle of a crisis, it's really hard."

Towards the end of the 1990s, more and more children wore CIs, and there was also a new parent organization working in the interest of children with CIs. During one of the meetings of this organization, parents discussed the opposition towards CIs, trying to determine what could be causing it:

Karin: I mean, their way now, reacting so strongly against this [CI] may well be a way to work through the crisis that their children did not get the opportunity to have the surgery 10 years ago. I mean, it's just a hypothesis, of course, but it might be like that.

Birgitta: It must be like that I guess. I'm thinking: their train has left the station [i.e., too late for a surgery for medical reasons].

The crisis explains and makes sense of the various responses it is assumed to trigger. Nobody needs to be worse than any other person since no one can be held personally liable for a crisis. Rather than allowing themselves to be provoked by their antagonists, Karin suggests a more sympathetic explanation for the parents' behavior. This approach was also used by the Deaf culture activist above who described the choices made by parents who opted for their children to undergo CI surgery.

Criticizing Professionals

The idea of the crisis was not only used to explain the behavior, decisions, or emotions of others; it

was often used as a discursive prop by parents to criticize professionals. On the one hand, parents criticized professionals for not being sympathetic enough towards their state or condition (being in crisis). A mother, for instance, narrated an ownership struggle when describing how the preschool treated her child as if her child belonged to them: they had given the child its Deaf name, a personal sign used in the signing community that is different from the child's given name. The mother then continued to explain that the preschool teachers had not been educated in crisis, and that she was "pissed off" by this omission: "Cause no matter if you've accepted it, you're in a crisis."

On the other hand, parents criticized professionals for being too focused on the crisis, for not treating parents as rational beings. At times, crisis talk by professionals was referred to with irony by parents; the professionals' statements were highlighted by uncovering an incongruity or contrast between the parents' expectations of a situation and what the parents felt was really the case. In institutional settings or local cultures that are said to harbor strict authoritative norms, humor can be a strategy for resisting, ridiculing, or dealing with these cultures or their representatives (Gradin and Aronsson 2013). A mother claimed that the preschool teachers had too much interest in the *parents'* well-being. She referred to the preschool teachers' views of parents in the following way:

You have to have this whole crisis work that you have to follow step by step. It has to be the shock phase, the adaptation phase, and then you have to continue. If you have skipped ... then it's very ... then there's something

wrong. That's something that's taught really thoroughly, how parents should be taken care of. So you're very well taken care of even if you don't want to be.

The interviewee describes the preschool teachers as religiously adhering to the crisis model: "you have to follow it step by step," if not, "there's something wrong," suggesting an implicit criticism of the parents. She dryly points out how the teachers were taught to take care of the parents (rather than the children), and ends with the classic rhetorical device, ironically stating the reverse of what is intended: "so you are very well taken care of."

This type of complaint was common during our research. Several parents constructed the professionals as putting too much emphasis on the crisis instead of providing practical help, such as answers to questions like, "Where can I find sign language courses?" "Is my child entitled to school transport?" "Can grandma attend a course?" In patient organizations that advocated Deaf culture, this understanding of professionals' misguided emphasis on crisis formed a theme around which parents could align themselves with others in a common complaint. This theme thus served as a way to create and sustain social bonds by trading stories. During a parental meeting with ten parents present, this conversation was initiated by the chair's (Father 1) question:

Father 1: How many of you have had a crisis forced on you?

Father 2: How do you mean, forced on?

Father 1: Well ... eh, according to my experiences, as soon as it was verified, as soon as it was a certainty,

when at last we had it verified what we suspected, then we were supposed to enter a crisis.

Mother 1: That's what they said?

Father 1: Yeah, that was a must ... I thought it was extremely irritating to be treated like something that was, was fragile like a glass. I mean, of course, we were sad and all this, but, that we should be in such a crisis that was forced on us ... That was frustrating, that was hard.

Father 2: For me, the biggest crisis was when, when you started to suspect, before you knew. So, the diagnosis was a relief. That's how I felt.

Mother 2: Sure, you came into a crisis or became really sad, but then the home instructor [professional educator helping parents with disabled children] told us about what it meant, and to take sign language courses, and we were really happy. But, then the counselor and hearing consultant came and told us, "You have to wait with sign language, you have to work through the crisis first." [Sighs] And that's where the frustration was. We didn't want to, we didn't want to, yeah, we wanted to work with the crisis 'cause we were sad. That is, I mean, crisis, it's hard to say that it wasn't there, but we didn't want to speak with them about it. We wanted to get sign language and get a communication with our daughter and ... that's where it was solved.

Mother 1: I agree, you wanted to *work* yourself out of it somehow, I mean, practically all time you had [continues to talk about time devoted to sign language classes].

The experts are constructed, with one exception (the home instructor), as one-dimensional, tiresomely zooming in on the crisis to the extent that the described real needs (such as sign language) were not acknowledged. The crisis, on the other

hand, is de-dramatized: "we were sad and all this," where "all this" indicates a taken-for-granted, but not very dramatic response. Parents portray themselves as being competent in dealing with these feelings by themselves: "it's hard to say it [the crisis] wasn't there, but we didn't want to speak with them about it." Experts can help with practical matters such as sign language, but were described as either actively delaying or withholding such help.

A newly published handbook seems to answer this type of critique against professionals: *Congratulations! You've Become a Parent! Children With Impaired Hearing* (Gyllenram and Jönsson 2014). The first part of the book partly deals with crisis and emotions, but mainly addresses medical tests for the child and how to communicate with a baby. A reader's review (posted on the publisher's website) welcomes the easily accessible information about language development and practical tips for parents included in the book. The reader also states, "[i]t is written in a positive spirit, that everything actually will work out fine."³

At times, the critique of professionals during meetings or our interviews was implicit; instead, parents presented a performed strategic and tactical persona in response to the crisis-rigid orientation one expects from experts who have the power to make important decisions for one's child. In order to respond to critiques from the Deaf movement, CI medical teams expanded to include psychologists, counselors, and educators. The task of these occupational groups was to ensure a psycho-

³ See: <http://www.interquest.se>.

social perspective on the decision of whether to offer a child a CI operation. Psycho-social evaluation of the family involved an assessment of the parents' expectations of the CI. The expectations had to be reasonable. Parents who thought the surgery would cure their child's deafness and render sign language unnecessary were said to have unrealistic expectations and could be suspected of providing a poor milieu for the child. To parents who wanted to be offered the surgery, much was at stake during this evaluation, and to them, the evaluation was associated with criticism of not having accepted their child's deafness. In an interview with two mothers whose children had CIs, the interviewer asked how it felt to be evaluated as parents before they received the decision about the CIs. The mothers started laughing when they recalled their strategy:

Lisa: Oh no, God! Oh, we discussed it before [going there]: "My God, what shall we say now?" [Annika laughs]. What shall we say so we don't make mistakes, and they [the staff] say "No, they have not dealt with their crisis, nah, *they* won't have an implant!"

Annika: Well, that's how it is! [Interviewer laughs].

Lisa: You're kind of afraid because you have to kind of strike the golden mean. You can't be too like, "We accept that she is deaf and there is nothing to it" and you can't be like "Not at all! We won't survive if she is deaf."

The children of both of these mothers were eventually offered CI surgery. Knowledge of the heated debate and the interpretative framework of the crisis model seemed to have yielded material for what might be called proper crisis management. We may

also interpret such recalled experiences as ways of performing as a savvy player, a tactical and knowledgeable parent who outwits the experts.

Conclusion

During our studies of parents of deaf children and professionals dealing with deaf children's education, care, and medical issues, it became apparent that preschool teachers, teachers, nurses, counselors, welfare officers, and others had to learn about crisis. When these professionals were not updated through their workplaces, they had to attend courses or lectures given by experts. In this sense, it is fair to conclude that the psychological idea of a crisis model has been successfully implemented. To be truly effective, however, an idea must be used among people in their everyday lives, and not dismissed and forgotten as soon as professionals close their books or leave the lecture halls.

We were fascinated by how the crisis model was used, not only by professionals but by parents as well, in a variety of imaginative and inventive ways for purposes other than the original understanding of psychological responses to grief, misfortunes, and illness. As Lemke (1995:21) states, "[w]e speak with the voices of our communities, and to the extent that we have individual voices, we fashion them out of the social voices already available to us, appropriating the words of others to speak a word of our own."

We have sought to show how a widespread psychologism can be used by the individual voices described above, or rather in subcategories within lo-

cal cultures that center on parents of deaf children. Members of these local cultures use the idea of crisis in several sociologically significant ways: above we have discussed how "the crisis" was used as comparisons, as accounts, and as criticism.

Moreover, in situations that include conflicting socio-political opinions, crisis may come in handy as a tool or a weapon in ideological debates. In our studies, this was the case when some participants argued in favor of Deaf culture implying a strong reliance on sign language, where "the crisis" was used to define parents who did not choose sign language as their main communication but opted for hearing aids or CIs. These parents were described as "blocked" because they were not out of the crisis, or because the crisis had not yet caught up to them. Parents who decided on a CI could use the same strategy when explaining the antagonism from Deaf culture activists: these activists were "in crisis" when they realized that they had made "the wrong decision" and that it was too late for their children to have surgery.

People may be trapped in common understandings or discourses; we live by the words given to us, and in many ways we speak with common voices. In contemporary modern society, we use sociologisms and psychologisms, simplified understandings based on sociological and psychological results; or lines of reasoning that have developed into general knowledge about categories of people, situations, or human life, a tendency that may be called a "scientization" of everyday life, language, and meaning (Berger and Kellner 1982:128). Still, as Garfinkel (1967:66-75) reminded us, we are not simplified "cul-

tural dopes," or their relatives, the "psychological dopes." In this article, we have aimed to illustrate this versatility, this "art of witcraft," in our research participants.

Finally, our studies point to the utility of the idea of crisis: creating *implicit constructions* of various categories. Such constructions foster an image of the victims of crisis. People may act as victims, but also fight against victimhood; the sympathy given to victims is double-edged because it invites associations with incompetence (Clark 1997). In contrast, parents may portray themselves as smart by strategically presenting themselves as being in crisis or having passed through crisis in order to achieve various sought-after decisions from experts in the field who possess mandates to make decisions. In their criticisms, parents described experts as not understanding them, as denying them sympathy, but parents also thought of experts as narrow-minded and limited: "they learn crisis

through books, but when they meet someone outside the cliché, it's 'error.'" This quote was provided by an interviewee who wanted more concrete, technical material help rather than sympathetic psychological understanding. The experts, on the other hand, used the idea of crisis to realize their roles during interviews, presenting themselves as experts when explaining to us the typical responses of parents. In some cases, experts also used the idea of crisis to explain parental lack of attendance or seeking help connected to crisis management, mirroring the fact that parents are currently in this or that phase of the crisis.

The interviewees not only presented themselves and dramatized experiences, but also portrayed others. They spoke with a common voice about crisis, but used the word for very different purposes, not only for straightforward criticism, but also adding sarcasm, irony, jokes, and asking questions, such as "When will the crisis arrive?"

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