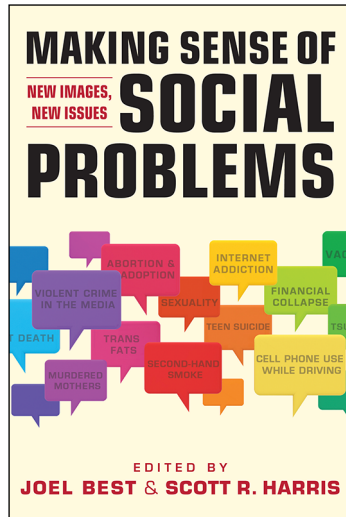


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Making Sense
of Social Problems:
New Images, New Issues

edited by
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1

Studying the Construction of Social Problems

Scott R. Harris

If you follow the news, or occasionally have a serious conversation with friends, you may know more about social problems than you realize. You are not starting from scratch.

Think about it. Just in the past year, has anyone complained to you about the rising cost of gasoline, college tuition, or health care? Have you heard about a new study linking cancer to something you enjoy doing, such as talking on your cell phone? Have you read or watched a news report about a major drought, flood, earthquake, or wildfire that struck somewhere in the United States or the world? Has someone warned you about a growing danger on the roadways, insisting that our bridges are crumbling or that too many drivers are drunk, sleepy, angry, or distracted? Have you been confronted with some of the consequences of a faulty economy, such as unemployment or homelessness?

In the space of even a single year, the list of issues that might be brought to your attention is long and daunting. A brief alphabetical sample could include anorexia, binge drinking, cyber-bullying, discrimination (by race, age, sex, height, etc.), election fraud, food poisoning, global warming, HIV/AIDS, incivility in politics and in everyday life, juvenile delinquency, kids growing up too soon, litter, marital rape, narcissism, oppressive government regulations, police brutality, road rage, stalking, terrorism, underfunded schools, video game addiction, white-collar crime, xenophobia, youth violence, and—who knows—maybe even zebra attacks.

It seems a safe bet that you have already heard and thought quite a bit about social problems in the past year, and even more so over your lifetime. Nevertheless, you probably have not considered the topic as carefully or systematically as you could. You probably have not tried to develop a consistent approach for making sense of problems in general, no matter what the specific issue may be. This book will help you develop a framework that you can use to analyze the arguments that people make about social problems of any sort.

It's in your interest to become a critical thinker about social problems. Otherwise, people may find it all too easy to influence or even manipulate you by playing to your fears, sympathies, and outrage. You need to evaluate the claims you encounter, to decide which issues merit your concern, and which causes deserve your support.

What Are Social Problems?

To think critically about social problems, we need a definition. What makes something a “social problem”? What kinds of issues deserve that label?

The Objectivist Answer

One way to answer this question is to focus on the “factual” or “objective” aspects of the problems themselves. For example, we might define social problems as “conditions or behaviors that have harmful effects on large numbers of people.” Then, we could decide whether an issue—water pollution or child abuse, perhaps—fits the definition, by asking whether the condition causes serious harm to a significant portion of the population.

This is a tempting path to follow, to try to define social problems in *objectivist* terms. This approach is used in many textbooks and seems to fit our commonsense notion of what might be a social problem. However, there are serious drawbacks to adopting an objective definition. First, there is no easy way to decide what qualifies as a “large number of people.” Is 100,000 enough? How about 10,000 or 1,000? Does the problem need to affect more than 1 percent of a nation's population—which in the United States would be at least 3 million people? Deciding whether a problem “affects enough people” to merit consideration is not an easy task; it involves subjective choices.

Similarly, the idea of “harm” is no easier to clarify. There are different kinds of harm—physical, emotional, economic, and so on. How much harm is necessary, and how does one measure it? Who gets to decide whether something is harmful? With contentious social issues, sometimes there is heated debate over whether *any* harm has occurred. For instance, some groups claim that same-sex marriage undermines the foundation of society, while others believe that it acts as a stabilizing force in the lives of individuals and their communities.

An objective answer to the question “What are social problems?” might also attempt to distinguish *social* from *nonsocial* problems. Cancer and erectile dysfunction might be classified as “physical health” issues,” flooding and hurricanes might be considered “natural disasters.” But here again, things are not clear-cut. If “social” refers to “things people do,” then there is arguably a human element in problems that seem merely physical, natural, or nonsocial in other ways. For example, cancer might reasonably be linked to the social behavior of corporations (which sell cigarettes, unhealthy food, cell phones) and consumers (who use the products). Or, the problem of flooding could be connected to governmental decisions regarding where to build levees (which may divert excess water toward downstream communities) and where to allow homes to be built.

At first glance, an objective, fact-based definition seems to enable us to focus on real social problems. But as we have seen, dilemmas of interpretation crop up from every direction. These dilemmas point toward the utility of the approach endorsed in this book—an approach that focuses on the subjective or interpretive dimensions of social problems.

The Constructionist Answer

What makes something a social problem? From a constructionist perspective, the answer is that people decide what is and is not a social problem by the way they react to things. Human beings *create* or *construct* social problems when they give a particular meaning or “spin” to potentially troublesome conditions. To put it another way, social problems are ambiguous situations that can be viewed in different ways by different people, and that are defined as troubling by some people. Social problems are subjective interpretations rather than objective conditions. It is the process of calling attention to a troubling condition, not the condition itself, that makes something a social problem. For a

social problem to exist, at least one person has to (1) notice a situation, (2) interpret it as bothersome, and (3) tell other people about it. Let's explore each of these processes.

First, it seems safe to say that people rarely—if ever—argue about things they don't notice. If I don't perceive an annoying behavior or detrimental situation, then I won't tell others what's going on, why it's happening, or what to do about it. People ignore or take for granted all sorts of things, all the time. We all have a lot to think about in any given day. We don't have time to pay close attention to everything that might bother us, whether as individuals or as groups. Even the US federal government—with its millions of employees and a budget in the trillions—must select which problems to work on and which to ignore.

Neglect is not necessarily a conscious, deliberate choice. There may be problems that go unrecognized simply because people don't have the ability to conceptualize them. If you are living in a culture where a man's wife and children are considered his property, then you probably have not been exposed to the concepts of spousal abuse and child abuse, and probably have not been socialized to notice such behavior. Or consider global warming (a.k.a. climate change). There are likely significant portions of the global population who have not heard of this problem or who haven't been encouraged to care about it at all.

Temperatures may begin to change and wounds may be inflicted regardless of whether anyone notices. But from a constructionist perspective, the existence of a problem in a society—as a matter to be argued about and acted upon—depends on its public recognition. Can you think of any potential social problems that are currently ignored or underappreciated in our society?

Once a potential problem is noticed, it must be interpreted as bothersome—and bothersome in a particular way. Consider public intoxication. In different times and places, communities may adopt a variety of attitudes toward those who drink heavily and act “out of control.” Some may consider public intoxication quite normal, expected, and even healthy; but others may argue that it is a sin, a crime, an illness (physical or mental), or simply poor judgment. Each of these definitions creates—constructs—a different type of problem out of this ambiguous situation, and each tends to be accompanied by corresponding claims regarding causes and solutions. If public intoxication is considered a sin, then the cause might be portrayed as temptation or a lack of moral fortitude, and the suggested solution might be prayer,

divine intervention, or spiritual counseling. On the other hand, if public intoxication is argued to be a crime or a disease, then other causes and remedies might be proposed (e.g., the solutions of prison or treatment or both). Of course, in a given society, people may disagree about which interpretation is correct; rather than settling on a single interpretation, they may combine or alternate between a variety of distinct viewpoints.

As people tell others about the problems they see, a number of reactions are possible. Clearly, we don't always fully listen to, or believe, or act upon all the claims we hear. In the twenty-first century, stories about the problem of witchcraft are not likely to receive the grave response they did in late-seventeenth-century Salem, Massachusetts. Today, few journalists, politicians, and police officers would take witchcraft seriously in their work. Activists and the general public would not demonstrate in the streets, or even start e-mail chains, in order to generate concern over the dangers posed by witches casting magical spells. To become a "real" social problem, an issue needs to be legitimated by enough people. And it's not just the number of people: some individuals and groups (i.e., those with resources or power) can validate an issue more effectively than others can. Prominent politicians, religious leaders, journalists, or celebrities are among those who can generate concern and legitimacy. You might recall that, in recent years, superstar George Clooney has helped sound the alarm in the United States over the problem of rape and genocide in Darfur, while actress Pamela Anderson has drawn attention to the plight of animals in this country.

Even when an issue is deemed real enough to merit attention and action, the exact nature of the problem may continue to be a matter of debate. As articles are written, hearings held, laws and policies formulated, government agencies created, and so on, different groups tend to make competing arguments about the extent, causes, and solutions to the problem. In some years, "immigration" may become a prominent concern and widely recognized as a social problem. However, consensus may never be reached on the degree to which immigrants are beneficial or harmful to a country, the factors that encourage or discourage immigration, or what new policies (if any) should be adopted to deal with it. Interpretations of all these matters will vary greatly. Just as there is no objective definition of "social problems" in general, there is no objective depiction of any single social problem in particular.

This discussion hints at one reason is why you should be highly motivated to read this book—or why it is important to develop a framework for understanding and evaluating the claims you hear about social problems: Given the prevalence of competing claims about problems, it would be foolish of us to quickly or haphazardly agree (or disagree) with any particular assertion or story about a problem. We need to think carefully. We need to compare a range of interpretations before we form a confident opinion or pursue a course of action. By approaching social problems as interpretations rather than as objective conditions, you can become a more effective consumer of the many claims you are likely to encounter in your daily life.

How to Think Like a Constructionist

This book can guide you toward a more consistent and sophisticated way of thinking about problems. It offers a coherent approach for making sense out of the diverse problems you hear about, rather than seeing each issue as a new and unique phenomenon. You don't always have to think like a constructionist, but you can cultivate the ability to do so when you choose.

When a constructionist hears people talking about social problems, he or she has a large collection of conceptual tools to use to make sense of what people are doing. Let's look at just a few of the more important concepts, and discuss them briefly. Additional concepts are discussed in the chapters that follow and in other constructionist books and articles (e.g., see Best 2008; Holstein and Miller 2003; Loseke 2003).

Claims and Claimsmakers

When thinking objectively, you might be inclined to treat people's statements as "information" or as "reports," especially when the source is an authoritative government official, scientist, journalist, or similar figure. If the source seems less authoritative, or if the speaker is saying something that you disagree with, you might be inclined to invoke the terms "wrong," "mistake," or "lie." A liberal might be inclined to treat a statement by a Democratic official as conveying information, while a Republican might be inclined to treat it as wrongheaded, even foolish.

In contrast, a constructionist prefers to use the term *claim*. From the constructionist point of view, *all* assertions about social problems are claims, regardless of the source. A constructionist does not want to decide (or at least, not until later on in the analysis) whether a statement is true or false. The first task of a constructionist is to begin to gather competing claims about social problems, and to study them. A constructionist wants to know:

- How many different types of claims are being made about this problem? What is the full range of interpretations?
- Who are the people making the claims? What groups tend to be associated with the different types of claims?
- How do the different claimsmakers give different meanings to the problem at hand? Do they categorize the problem in different ways? Suggest various causes and solutions to the problem? Propose different kinds of victims or villains? Invoke contradictory evidence to support their points of view?

Referring to a statement as a *claim* does not imply that you disbelieve it—or even believe it, for that matter. Rather, the intention behind the word *claim* is to treat every assertion as just one of many possible interpretations. Later on, you may want to decide that one claim makes more sense or that a particular claimsmaker is more reliable, but then you'll be stepping outside of the constructionist framework, or at least incorporating an objectivist concern into the framework.

The Contingent Careers of Social Problems

The constructionist approach assumes that problems are interpretations that are “built” or “made” by people. A claimsmaker must point out the troublesome condition or behavior. Then the media may publicize the claim. Opinion leaders and the general public may ignore or legitimize the claimsmaker's concern. Policymakers may or may not decide to hold hearings, establish committees, and formulate new rules or laws. New agencies or occupations may or may not be created to deal with the issue.

At any point in time, the existence of a problem—from a subjective perspective—is in jeopardy. People can always stop thinking and talking about an issue. They can get distracted by another event or news story. They can decide that the issue is not as bad as previously

thought. They can decide that a problem is “solved,” or even that it is “unsolvable,” and hence turn to other matters.

When constructionists say that a problem is *contingent*, they mean that problems “depend” on a great many things. A social problem exists because people do things to ensure that the problem continues to be an ongoing concern. Problems have “careers” or “histories” that develop over time: problems emerge, gain or lose attention, become categorized in one way or another, undergo debate, are addressed with policies, and so on. At every stage, the perceived nature of a problem is not automatic or inevitable; it is contingent on how people choose to think and talk about it. Over centuries, decades, or even days or minutes, what starts out as a normal part of life (e.g., smoking near your children) may come to be seen as immoral or perhaps illegal. It depends on the choices people make, within the constraints set by their cultures, economies, political contexts, and other social factors.

Adopting the constructionist framework, then, requires that you form a particular style of questioning. You develop an inclination and ability to ask:

- Where is this problem within the social construction process? Is it just emerging? Is it being newly discovered, or rediscovered? Is it being categorized for the first time? Is its perceived nature being shaped and reformed by new or recycled claims?
- Is claimsmaking about this problem increasing, decreasing, or remaining stable? How much attention has the problem received over time? What might explain this level of attention?
- Which claimsmakers and which audiences are paying attention to the problem? What social factors may be influencing the actions of those who are attempting to promote, undermine, or redefine the problem?

These kinds of questions draw your attention to the subjective experience of social problems among various groups in a society. Rather than trying to determine the true nature of a problem—or even whether it exists—a constructionist’s first impulse is to collect and analyze examples of the claimsmaking that may occur at one or more points in the contingent career of a social problem. The constructionist’s goal is to understand how (and why) problems are noticed, interpreted, discussed, and acted upon.

**What's to Come in This Book:
A Series of Case Studies**

It takes practice to fully learn and appreciate the constructionist perspective. It's not enough to read a theoretical explanation (such as this book's introductory and concluding chapters) or to read one or two studies of specific social problems. Instead, what is needed is repeated exposure to the practice of constructionist analysis across a wide range of social issues. After a while, the perspective sinks in, and you develop the knack for applying the perspective in your everyday life—if not to a research project of your own. The recurring thought—“Ah yes, I see how this problem too could be interpreted in different ways”—will be replaced by a firm habit of thought: an enduring sensitivity to the social construction of problems, to the processes by which bothersome behaviors and conditions become viewed and acted upon in particular ways.

To help you develop this habit of thought, we present a series of case studies in this book. Topics run the gamut from teen suicide to natural disasters to our current financial crisis. Each chapter is intended to provide an interesting, succinct, and clearly written example of constructionist analysis. While they share this theoretical perspective in common, the chapters do tend to emphasize different dimensions of the social construction process. Thus we have separated the chapters into five parts, covering claims, claimsmakers, experts, the media, and policy outcomes. Each part is preceded by its own introduction to help orient you to the theme and to highlight the contribution each chapter makes.