McMASTER UNIVERSITY
Department of Sociology

SOCIOLOGY 704

Spring 2017
Tuesday, Thursday 9:00 am – 12:00

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Hours: By appointment

SOCIAL PROBLEMS

This seminar deals with the social constructionist perspective in social problems theory. There are three objectives: First, the seminar aims to introduce you to the perspective. We begin by discussing the emergence of the social constructionism in the 1970s, contrasting the new questions the perspective raised with traditions that characterized the study of social problems to that point. Second, the seminar will give you an opportunity to explore the empirical research that social constructionism has generated and how the perspective can be used in research. The third goal is to familiarize you with the theoretical controversies that have arisen around social constructionism. We will discuss the ontological gerrymandering debate, the split between strict and contextual constructionists and some of the new directions in constructionist theorizing and research.

Seminar Requirements:
A good graduate seminar has been described as a meeting of engaged and informed scholars. The success of the seminar depends on everyone's attendance and full participation. You will only be able to participate if you have done the assigned readings and reflected on the issues raised. Please come to class prepared. I encourage use of reading notes, including a synopsis of the main points, your reactions and the questions that the readings have raised for you.

If for any reason you miss a class, full reading/viewing notes must be submitted at the beginning of the following class.

Your mark in this seminar will be based on the following:

Brief Presentations and Reports: (2 @ 20%)

You will each be responsible for short presentations on two readings:

1. The first presentation will involve a constructionist case study. Your task here will be to present the case study and to highlight both its central points and its constructionist logic. These presentations are scheduled for **Thursday, May 25**th. You will be expected to submit a 3-5 page (approximate) report at the end of the class.

2. The second presentation will be based on a theoretical commentary or critique of social constructionism. These readings will be assigned in class and presented through the latter part of the course. When you present will depend on the reading you choose to cover.

These accompanying reports too should be between 3 and 5 pages in length. They will be due **one week after** your presentation. If you would like to incorporate points made in the class discussion around your presentation, you are free to do so.

2. Final Paper (60%)

Each of you will be preparing a position paper on social constructionism. The paper should provide a critical assessment and not simply an overview of the approach. Among the questions you may want to address are: How do you understand social constructionism? What do you think about social constructionism and where do you position yourself in relation to the debates that have arisen around it? How do you see yourself using constructionism, if at all? What directions would you like to see constructionism and the sociological study of social problems take? I would like you to have drafts of these papers ready for our final class. We will be using them as the basis for our discussion. Final versions of these papers should be approximately 10 pages in length and will be due July 7th

Texts:

The following are the required texts for the course.

Malcolm Spector and John Kitsuse. 2006 [1977]. Constructing Social Problems. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books. (S and K)

Gale Miller and James A. Holstein (eds). 1993. Constructionist Controversies. NY: Aldine de Gruyter. (M&H)

Loseke, Donileen and Joel Best (eds). 2015. Constructionist Futures: New Directions in Social Problems Theory. Qualitative Sociology Review, Special Issue 11(2). (QSR) http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/volume33.php

In addition to these texts, there are a number of additional required readings that are available electronically and/or in the reading pack (RP).

The instructor and university reserve the right to modify elements of the course during the term. The university may change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances. If either type of modification becomes necessary, reasonable notice and communication with the students will be given with explanation and the opportunity to comment on changes. It is the responsibility of the student to check his/her McMaster email and course websites weekly during the term and to note any changes.

ACADEMIC DISHONESTY:

Academic dishonesty consists of misrepresentation by deception or by other fraudulent means and can result in serious consequences, e.g. the grade of zero on an assignment, loss of credit with a notation on the transcript (notation reads: "Grade of F assigned for academic dishonesty"), and/or suspension or expulsion from the university.

It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty. For information on the various kinds of academic dishonesty please refer to the Academic Integrity Policy, specifically Appendix 3, located at

http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/Students-AcademicStudies/AcademicIntegrity.pdf

The following illustrates only three forms of academic dishonesty:

1. Plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one's own or for which other credit has been obtained.
2. Improper collaboration in group work.
3. Copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES E-MAIL COMMUNICATION POLICY

It is the policy of the Faculty of Social Sciences that all e-mail communication sent from students to instructors (including TAs), and from students to staff, must originate from the student's own McMaster University e-mail account. This policy protects confidentiality and confirms the identity of the student. It is the student's responsibility to ensure that communication is sent to the university from a McMaster account. If an instructor becomes aware that a communication has come from an alternate address, the instructor may not reply at his or her discretion.

TOPIC AND READING OUTLINE

The following schedule provides a sense of order and direction. We may modify it slightly as we move through the material. Any changes will be announced in class.

April 27 INTRODUCTION

May 2 EXAMINING SOCIAL PROBLEMS: A NEW PERSPECTIVE

Spector, M. and J. Kitsuse: Introduction to Transaction Edition
Introduction
Chapters 1-3, 5

Questions:

1. Spector and Kitsuse start their book with the statement: "There is no adequate definition of social problems within sociology, and there is not now and never has been a sociology of social problems." What do they mean?

2. What approaches characterized the study of social problems before the emergence of the constructionist perspective?

3. Why were Spector and Kitsuse dissatisfied with these approaches?

4. What kinds of questions about social problems characterize the social constructionist approach? How are these questions different from those that sociologists of social problems traditionally asked?

May 4 SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM: FRAMEWORKS AND ISSUES

Loseke, Donileen Chapter 1 of Thinking About Social Problems (RP)

Best, Joel Chapter 1 of Social Problems (RP)

Rafter, Nicole Claims-Making and Socio-Cultural Context in the First U.S. Eugenics Campaign. Social Problems 39(1):17-34. 1992
http://www.jstor.org.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/stable/3096909

Questions:

1. Loseke and Best each lay out frameworks for exploring the kinds of questions about the social problems process that Spector and Kitsuse argued sociologists ought to be exploring. How would you describe their respective frameworks?

2. How are these frameworks reflected in Nicole Rafter's analysis of the first US eugenics campaign?

May 9 SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM AND MEDICALIZATION

Conrad, Peter, 1992. Medicalization and Social Control. Annual Review of Sociology 18: 209-232.
http://journals1.scholarsportal.info.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/journal.xqy?uri=/03600572

Pfohl, Stephen, 1977. The "Discovery" of Child Abuse. Social Problems 24(3): 310-324.
http://www.jstor.org.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/stable/800083

Questions:

1. What does the term *medicalization* mean?

2. What issues around medicalization are sociologists of medicalization interested in studying?

3. What are the points of connection between those interested in constructionist perspectives on social problems and those studying medicalization?

4. In what ways is Pfohl's analysis of the "discovery" of child abuse structured as a constructionist analysis?

May 11 SOUND AND FURY

May 25 CASE STUDIES

June 8 THE ONTOLOGICAL GERRYMANDERING DEBATE

Woolgar, Steve and Dorothy Pawluch. l985. Ontological Gerrymandering: The Anatomy of Social Problems Explanations. Social Problems 32(3):214-227.
http://www.jstor.org.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/stable/800680

Woolgar, Steven and Pawluch. l985. How Shall We Move Beyond Constructivism? Social Problems 33(2): 159-162.
http://www.jstor.org.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/stable/800559

Gusfield, Joseph. l985. Gusfield Responds to Woolgar and Pawluch: Theories and Hobgoblins. SSSP Newsletter l7: 16-l8. (RP)

Troyer, Ronald J. 1992. Some Consequences of Contextual Constructionism. Social Problems 39(1): 35-37.
http://www.jstor.org.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/stable/3096910

Rafter, Nicole. 1992. Some Consequences of Strict Constructionism. Social Problems 39(1): 38-39.
http://www.jstor.org.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/stable/3096911

Peter R. Ibarra and John I. Kitsuse. Claims-Making Discourse and Vernacular Resources (Chapter 2 in M&H)

Questions:

1. What is the gist of the "ontological gerrymandering" argument?

2. What do you think of the ontological gerrymandering critique? Do you agree with Gusfield that it goes too far and is much ado about nothing? Or do you think that it is a useful observation to have made about the logic of constructionism?

3. What implications does it have for a social constructionist approach to social problems? What are constructionists supposed to do with it?

4. How do you understand the difference between strict and contextual constructionism?

5. Does Ibarra and Kitsuse's proposed solution to study condition categories solve the ontological gerrymandering problem?

June 13 ENDURING CHALLENGES

All of the following readings are in the M&H or QSR text.

Gale Miller and James A. Holstein. Constructing Social Problems: Context and Legacy. (Chapter 1)

Jaber F. Gubrium. For a Cautious Naturalism (Chapter 3)

Melvin Pollner. The Reflectivity of Constructionism and the Construction of Reflexivity (Chapter 4)

David Bogen and Michael Lynch. Do We Need a General Theory of Social Problems? (Chapter 5)

Joel Best. But Seriously Folks: The Limitations of the Strict Constructionist Interpretation of Social Problems (Chapter 6)

June 15 NEW DIRECTIONS

James A. Holstein and Gale Miller. Social Constructionism and Social Problems Work (Chapter 7)

Leslie J. Miller. Claims-Making from the Underside: Marginalization and Social Problems Analysis (Chapter 8)

Michal M. McCall. Social Constructionism in Critical Feminist Theory and Research (Chapter 9)

Herman Gray. Cultural Theory, Social Construction, and Social Problems (Chapter 10)

Donileen R. Loseke. Constructing Conditions, People, Morality and Emotion: Expanding the Agenda of Constructionism (Chapter 11)

June 20 CONSTRUCTIONIST FUTURES

Donileen Loseke. 2015. Introduction to Constructionist Futures: New Directions in Social Problems Theory. (QSR)

Joel Best. 2015. Beyond Case Studies: Expanding the Constructionist Framework for Social Problems Research (QSR)

Jared Del Rosso and Jennifer Esala. 2015. Constructionism and the Textuality of Social Problems (QSR)

Patrick Archer. 2015. Towards a Theory of Interest Claims in Constructing Social Problems (QSR)

Lawrence T. Nichols. 2015. Contextual Understanding in Constructionism: A Holistic, Dialogical Model (QSR)

June 22 CONSTRUCTIONIST FUTURES

Jun Ayukawa. 2015. Claims-Making and Human Rights in Domestic and International Spheres

R. J. Maratea. 2015. Online Claims-Making: The NRA and Gun Advocacy in Cyberspace (QSR)

Carrie Sanders, Tony Christensen and Crystal Weston. 2015. Construvting Crime in a Database: Big Data and the Mangle of Social Problems Work. (QSR)

Margaretha Järvinen and Gale Miller. 2015. Social Constructionism Turned Into Human Service Work (QSR)

June 29 DISCUSSION OF POSITION PAPERS