

McMASTER UNIVERSITY
Department of Sociology

SOCIOLOGY 704

Spring 2019
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 has been applied in so many areas of substantive interest in sociology. 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 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 you miss a class for any reason, please submit notes at the beginning of the following class. Your notes should include a thorough summary of the readings you missed and your responses to the questions in the course outline, as well as any reflections or questions you may have.

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 **Tuesday, May 28th**. You will be expected to submit a 3-5 page (approximate) report at the end of the class.

2. For the second presentation, you will be summarizing a theoretical commentary or critique of social constructionism and leading the class in a discussion of that reading. 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 some of the debates that have arisen around it? What do you think of the kind of research the perspective has generated? 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 8th

Texts:

All of the readings for the course are available either in the reading pack (RP) and/or electronically online.

<p>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.</p>

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.

May 7 INTRODUCTION

May 14 EXAMINING SOCIAL PROBLEMS: A NEW PERSPECTIVE

Spector, M. and J. Kitsuse. 2006 [1977]. Constructing Social Problems. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.

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 16 SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST FRAMEWORKS

Loseke, Donileen. 2005. Thinking About Social Problems: An Introduction to Constructionist Perspectives. Second Edition. New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine Transaction.

Preface to Second Edition
Chapter 1: Examining Social Problems

Best, Joel. 2017. Social Problems. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.
Chapter 1: The Social Problems Process

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

Questions:

1. Loseke and Best each lay out a framework or a series of questions about social problems processes to explore as a follow-up to the shift in subject matter that Spector and Kitsuse recommended. What questions do they identify? What are some similarities and differences in their approaches?
2. How are these frameworks reflected in Nicole Rafter's analysis of the first US eugenics campaign?

May 21 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>

McCrea, Frances, 1983. The Politics of Menopause: The "Discovery" of a Deficiency Disease. Social Problems 31(1): 111-123.

<http://www.jstor.org.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/stable/pdf/800413>

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 McCrea's analysis of the "discovery" of menopause as a deficiency disease structured as a constructionist analysis?

May 23 SOUND AND FURY

May 28 CASE STUDIES

May 30 THE ONTOLOGICAL GERRYMANDERING DEBATE

Woolgar, Steve and Dorothy Pawluch. 1985. Ontological Gerrymandering: The Anatomy of Social Problems Explanations. Social Problems 32(3):214-227.

<http://www.jstor.org.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/stable/800680>

Gusfield, Joseph. 1985. Gusfield Responds to Woolgar and Pawluch: Theories and Hobgoblins. SSSP Newsletter 17: 16-18. (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>

Questions:

1. What is the gist of the “ontological gerrymandering” argument?
2. How does McCrea’s paper on the medicalization of menopause gerrymander?
3. What do you think of the ontological gerrymandering critique? Do you agree with Gusfield and Rafter that it goes too far and is much ado about nothing? Or do you think that the critique is a useful observation to have made about the logic of constructionism?
4. What implications does the critique have for a social constructionist approach to social problems? What are constructionists supposed to do with it?
5. How do you understand the difference between strict and contextual constructionism?

June 11

ENDURING CHALLENGES

1. Peter R. Ibarra and John I. Kitsuse. 2003. Claims-Making Discourse and Vernacular Resources. Pp. 17-50 in James A. Holstein and Gale Miller (eds). Challenges and Choices: Constructionist Perspectives on Social Problems. NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

2. Joel Best. 2003. But Seriously Folks: The Limitations of the Strict Constructionist Interpretation of Social Problems. Pp. 51-69 in James A. Holstein and Gale Miller (eds). Challenges and Choices: Constructionist Perspectives on Social Problems. NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

3. Michal M. McCall. 1993. Social Constructionism in Critical Feminist Theory and Research. Pp. 181-192 in Gale Miller and James A. Holstein (eds). Constructionist Controversies. NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

Questions:

1. What strategy have Ibarra and Kitsuse come up with in an effort to avoid ontological gerrymandering? Do you think they have succeeded?
2. What case does Best make for contextual constructionism?
3. Where does feminist constructionism, as McCall explains it, fit in with the constructionist perspective as it has developed in the sociology of social problems?

June 13

NEW DIRECTIONS

Question:

1. How does each of these authors attempt to advance the constructionist perspective? What new direction for constructionist theory and/or research are they proposing?

4. Donileen R. Loseke. 2003. Constructing Conditions, People, Morality and Emotion: Expanding the Agenda of Constructionism. Pp. 120-129 in James A. Holstein and Gale Miller (eds). Challenges and Choices: Constructionist Perspectives on Social Problems. NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

5. Joel Best. 2003. Staying Alive: Prospects for Constructionist Theory. Pp. 133-152 in James A. Holstein and Gale Miller (eds). Challenges and Choices: Constructionist Perspectives on Social Problems. NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

6. Robert D. Benford and Scott A. Hunt. 2003. Interactional Dynamics in Public Problems Marketplaces: Movements and the Counterframing Reframing of Public Problems. Pp. 153-186 in James A. Holstein and Gale Miller (eds). Challenges and Choices: Constructionist Perspectives on Social Problems. NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

June 20

PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES

7. Kathleen S. Lowney. 2008. Claimsmaking, Culture and the Media in the Social Construction Process. Pp. 331-353 in James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium. Handbook of Constructionist Research. NY: Guilford Press.

The remaining readings are all available in:

Loseke, Donileen and Joel Best (eds). 2015. Constructionist Futures: New Directions in Social Problems Theory. Qualitative Sociology Review. Special Issue 11(2).

<http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/volume33.php>

Donileen Loseke. Introduction to Constructionist Futures: New Directions in Social Problems Theory. Pp. 6-14.

8. Joel Best. Beyond Case Studies: Expanding the Constructionist Framework for Social Problems Research. Pp. 18-33.

9. Lawrence T. Nichols. Contextual Understanding in Constructionism: A Holistic, Dialogical Model. Pp. 76-93.

June 25

CONSTRUCTIONIST FUTURES

10. Carrie Sanders, Tony Christensen and Crystal Weston. Constructing Crime in a Database: Big Data and the Mangle of Social Problems Work. Pp. 180-197.

11. Margaretha Järvinen and Gale Miller. Social Constructionism Turned Into Human Service Work. Pp. 198-215.

June 27

DISCUSSION OF POSITION PAPERS

D. Pawluch. 2019. On the Unbearable Lightness of Being a Constructionist.