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.

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.

May 7    INTRODUCTION

May 14    EXAMINING SOCIAL PROBLEMS: A NEW PERSPECTIVE


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


Preface to Second Edition
Chapter 1: Examining Social Problems


Chapter 1: The Social Problems Process

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

http://journals1.scholarsportal.info.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/journal.xqy?uri=/03600572


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

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


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


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?
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?


PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES


The remaining readings are all available in:


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


June 25  CONSTRUCTIONIST FUTURES


June 27  DISCUSSION OF POSITION PAPERS