

# Study of social problems



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The definition of a social problem varies greatly depending on whether an objectivist approach or a constructionist approach is taken. This is because sociologists that adopt these unique perspectives will differ in how they view the nature of a social problem. The objectivist definition of a social problem is perhaps more common sense because it “ suggests that the essence of social problems lies in objective social conditions and that some conditions are problems. 1] This definition focuses around the evaluation of conditions in society to decide whether they are harmful to either individuals or society, and then defining them as social problems. If a condition fails to meet a given criterion of harm, it then would not be considered a social problem.

While this process of defining social problems in terms of objective conditions may seem adequate, further analysis reveals serious flaws. Foremost “ it minimizes or even ignores the subjective nature of social problems. 2] This becomes apparent when one realizes that not all harmful conditions are considered to be social problems, such as the nutritional concerns of a high fat diet.

Another flaw in considering social problems to be the result of objective conditions of harm is that “ the objective conditions that people define as social problems have relatively little in common. ” [3] A list of social problems will have a great variety of topics with no common theme, nor common causes and effects. It may appear that social problems are inevitably subjective, and that a more valid definition could be sought in the constructionist perspective.

The constructionist perspective to social problems focuses on the processes by which people designate some social conditions as social problems. This approach assumes that what is or is not a social problem is a product, or construction of social activities known as claimsmaking. [4] This approach is quite unique as a social problem refers to the activities of individuals or groups, which make assertions towards some harmful condition. The constructionists will focus on and examine what the claimsmakers say about conditions, rather than the conditions themselves. ]

This examination will often take the form of case studies, in which sociologists will look at how a particular public issue is constructed. Constructionism is also interested in problem identification, or its perception and definition. Of interest is how certain conditions come to be defined as problems by certain groups, as this usually reflects an issue of power that this group stands to lose or benefit from. Typification, or the characterization of a problem's nature [6] is also important to sociologists.

Typification will take the common forms of assuming a particular orientation for a problem, in order to provide a solution, as well as using typifying examples to capture public attention. Examples of this can be found later in this paper, in the discussion of Best's logical structure of claimsmaking as applied to child sexual abuse. While constructionists agree that social problems are a subjective phenomenon, there is a division among them over the nature of constructionism, which manifests into the strict and the contextual approaches to constructionism.

Strict constructionism, as advocated by John I. Kitsuse [7], emphasizes the subjective view of a condition, and regardless of the analysts view, does not see the condition as an objective problem. Rather than providing an objective analysis, the strict constructionist will focus on who is making the claim, and what type of logic is being used. They will examine to what extent various claims are accepted, and by whom, and the impact that they have. This goal of assumption free sociology was found to be virtually impossible because every claim is made at a certain place and time, and in a certain language.

Languages represent the world in different ways, and in particular represent processes differently, and to ignore fundamental objective conditions such as these is not possible. Strict constructionism is flawed because the physical world offers too much objective feedback to be completely subjectively interpreted. It is not surprising then the majority of constructionists reject the strict approach because of the apparent impossibilities of having no objectiveness when analyzing claimsmaking.

The majority of sociologists examining claimsmaking use contextual constructionism, which attempts to locate claimsmaking within its context. [8] Contextual constructionists recognize that claims occur at a particular moment in time, at a certain place, by a specific group or individual. Because claims occur within these contexts, it is important to recognize and understand them, because this is often the key to understanding why a condition is being considered a social problem. Contextualists also study the apparent discrepancies between objective harm and subjective concern.

For example how some conditions for which there is great objective harm such as marijuana, receive less attention than something with less objective harm such as cigarettes. Also of importance is how the amount of subjective concern will vary over time, when the amount of objective harm remains constant. Joel Best's model of the logical structure of claimsmaking contains three main components which are making grounds statements, making warrants, and finally conclusion statements.

These components can be applied to any social problem or public issue in order to further understand the claimsmaking process. Rhetoric, which is the use of language and symbols to persuade, is found throughout the model in order to convince others that the claim should concern them. Rhetoric usually takes the common forms of rhetoric of morality, rationality and entitlement. Best's model can be applied to child sexual abuse for example, to demonstrate how the logical structure operates. Most claimsmaking activity surrounding child sexual abuse will begin with ground statements.

Ground statements provide the definitions and statistical background necessary to help draw a conclusion. For child sexual abuse to become a claim, the activists need a clear definition such as " a sexual act imposed on a child who lacks emotional, maturational, and cognitive development. " [9] This definition is critical as it must set out the boundaries of child sexual abuse, so a behavior can be easily compared to determine guilt. A specific claim always comes from a particular orientation, usually one which reflects the interests and goals of the claimsmaker.

The orientation refers to a particular stance, direction or interpretation, whether this be moral, medical or justice. For child sexual abuse, a common orientation is morality, and a group with its values and interests in religion may push this claim, such as the Catholic Church. The next step in Best's logical model is the choosing of the typifying example. This stage is crucial to the garnering of public attention. The typifying example is what the claimsmakers are describing as the most typical case, which is usually the most dramatic case, not necessarily the most valid or common one.

For child sexual abuse, a typifying example could be the sudden discovery that your own husband had been secretly sexually abusing your young daughter for years. Numerical estimates make up the final component of the grounds statement, and Best suggests that big, rounded numbers provided by an official agency hold the most credibility with an audience. For example a numeric estimate such as " data from police departments across Canada show that over 80 percent of child sexual assault victims knew their abuser.

The largest group of offenders is fathers. 10] contains these strong points as well as supporting the typifying example. Another part of numerical estimates is the frequency, such as every ten minutes a child is sexually abused. Trends such as an increase in abuse in the last year may be noted as well. Also the range of kids at risk may be stated, such as kids of all ages, or kids from any social class. The second major component to claimsmaking is warrants which is a term that refers to statements of values and beliefs of what should and should not be. Warrants can be normative statements expressing a social condition as being right or wrong.

Warrants play an important role in that they “ justify drawing conclusions from the grounds. ” [11] Best speaks of various warrants used in claimsmaking such as value standards, which could refer to children being a priceless resource, and that they are a very valuable cause. The warrant of blame can be used to show that children are innocent and blameless, and are not at fault for any sexual abuse that may occur to them. The warrant of vulnerability may be used in child abuse to explain that due to children’s age and level of maturity they are extremely vulnerable to sexual attack.

Warrants of associated evils may be brought forth to suggest that children are not only vulnerable to child sexual abuse, but also drugs and kidnapping for the same reasons. Finally, warrants can also take the form of criticizing deficient or inadequate policies surrounding child sexual abuse intervention. For example, claimsmakers may push for heavier prison sentences to deter, or for more effective treatment for offenders to cure. Very often in claimsmaking, the conclusions may call for more awareness and education toward child sexual abuse such as having children taught in school to report the immoral sexual conduct of adults.

Other programs could be directed toward the formal social control agencies such as increasing the powers of police to investigate and arrest possible child sex abusers. The claimsmakers may also suggest that child sexual abuse could simply be a symptom of a greater problem such as the breakdown of the family, and focus its intervention here instead. Whatever the conclusion suggested, it is always based on the grounds statements, and is justified through the use of warrants.