Realist and constructivist approaches to social problems

Critically analyse the way social problems are constructed and prioritised for intervention. Distinguish between the realist and construction approaches to social problems and offer an assessment of their value. Apply the relevant social theory to a contemporary social problem such as prostitution.

Outlined below is a critical analysis of the way in which social problems are constructed and prioritised for intervention. This critical analysis will aim to distinguish between the realist and the construction approaches to social problems, going on to assess the value of each approach in turn. Then the social theory deemed to be the most relevant would be applied to a contemporary social problem.

The realist approach to social problems is an approach that stresses that there is usually underlying causes of issues or phenomena within modern societies. The realist approach to social problems assumes that such problems have short – term and also long – term causes that are actually found ingrained into the social structures of modern societies. [1] The starting point of the realist approach to social problems stress that the underlying social causes of such problems as crime, illegal drug taking, and prostitution are generally more important over the long – term rather than the sometimes more obvious short –term causes of the phenomena being examined. [2]

Advocates of the realist approach to social problems frequently contend that sociologists should always delve deeper into the specific social problems that they are evaluating. The realist approach to social problems implies that sociologists delve deeper to find out the affects of factors such as

deprivation, discrimination, prejudices, and also poverty. [3] According to the realist approach to social problems these factors whether own their own, or in various combinations with each other are the real underlying causes of social problems. Therefore in many respects the realist approach to social problems has a great deal in common with the Marxist approach to social problems and all related issues. The main difference being that the Marxist approach to social problems would always contend that class and economic conflicts or developments are the root causes of every social problem. [4]

The Construction approach to social problems examines the causes of all such social problems from a different perspective than the realist approach to social problems does. Whereas the realist approach to social problems contends that there are nearly always underlying factors causing these social problems, the Construction approach to social problems does not automatically that to be the case. Thus in contrast to the realist approach to social problems the Construction approach assumes that social problems are specifically constructed and that they could actually have causes that are as straightforward as they appeared to be at first glance. [5]

The Construction approach to social problems argues that these problems are often constructed at the same time as the societies that they are found inside, and sometimes constructed after the society in question has already become well established. In the Construction approach to social problems it also often implied that the issues that are deemed to be social problems are classified as such due to the prevailing social and moral values within any

given society. What is regarded as a social problem in one society might be regarded as being partly or entirely acceptable in another society. [6]

For instance different societies have different attitudes towards issues such as homosexuality and prostitution, with more liberal minded societies perhaps not regarding them as social problems at all. Under the Construction approach to social problems various social issues and whether or not they constitute social problems depends upon the subjective values of prevailing social and moral attitudes. [7] Societies are not always entirely agreed as to which social issues can be regarded as being social problems. The Construction approach to social problems therefore finds it useful to argue that it is the strongest or prevailing social and moral attitudes that construct and prioritise social problems and labels them as such. [8]

The best of the approaches to social problems to be used to construct and also to prioritise the social problem or problems being examined would be the realist approach to social problems. [9] The strength of the realist approach to social problems is that it would offer the chance to gain an understanding of the underlying causes of social problems. The realist approach to social problems such as drug taking and prostitution gives more extensive explanations than those provided by the Construction approach to social problems does. [10]

The realist approach to social problems offers a deeper insight into the underlying causes of problems like prostitution. To begin with the realist approach to social problems would make the sociologists examining the

issue look into all the possible underlying causes of prostitution. [11] When following the realist approach to social problems like prostitution sociologists would evaluate the parts that addiction, alienation, desperation, discrimination, sexuality, and violence played in making the problem better or worse. [12]

In other words the realist approach to social problems would contend that prostitution was a social problem that demonstrates the unfair, harsh, violent, and frequently hypocritical ways social problems are formed and also understood are actually common in contemporary modern societies. [13] The realist approach to social problems would contend that prostitution has been around for thousands of years in virtually every society that has ever existed, its most obvious cause being that people will pay for sex, and that other people will exchange sexual services for cash payments. According to the realist approach to social problems prostitution has more underlying causes such as prostitutes selling their bodies to make a living, to pay for drink or drug addictions, and more sinisterly they are physically forced into doing it. Whether or not prostitutes undertake their role freely or are forced into it the realist approach to social problems would nearly always argue that they are being exploited for the financial gains of others. The realist approach to social problems or at least its advocates would contend that prostitution will probably never go away, and the main aim of society should be to protect prostitutes from exploitation, violence, and sexually transmitted diseases. [14]

Therefore to conclude the realist approach to social problems is better than the Construction approach to social problems as it allows sociologists the chance to evaluate social issues and social problems in greater detail. The realist approach to social problems offers a better understanding of the constructing and the prioritising of prostitution as a social problem.

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Footnotes

[1] Abercrombie, Hill & Turner B, 2000 p. 326

[2] Abercrombie, 2004 p. 25

[3] Abercrombie, Hill & Turner B, 2000 p. 312

[4] Abercrombie, 2004 p. 25

[5] Lawson & Heaton, 1999 p. 58

[6] Abercrombie, 2004 p. 25

[7] Lawson & Heaton, 1999 p. 58

[8] Abercrombie, Hill & Turner B, 2000 p. 326

[9] Lawson & Heaton, 1999 p. 176

[10] Cavadino & Dignan, 2002 p. 53

[11] Abercrombie, 2004 p. 25

[12] Abercrombie, Hill & Turner B, 2000 p. 326

[13] Cavadino & Dignan, 2002 p. 53

[14] Lawson & Heaton, 1999 p. 58