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Constructionism and the Textuality of Social Problems

Abstract   Building on the work of Dorothy Smith and Bruno Latour, this article examines the textual mediation of social problems activities. Because of their materiality and/or digitality, texts preserve constructions of reality, rendering those constructions durable and mobile. This, in turn, allows claims-makers distant in time or space to access those constructions as interpretive resources for claims-making. Texts, then, help us account for how social problems spread and endure. We show how texts mediate claims-makers access to two resources for claims-making: the "reality" of problematic conditions and definitions of problems. We also consider how texts structure social problems work. We conclude by briefly considering how the contemporary technological environment may be altering the textual mediation of claims-making.

Keywords   Knowledge; Organizations; Social Constructionism; Social Problems; Texts

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Constructionism and the Textuality of Social Problems

This is an article about paperwork—the manuals, forms, documents, reports, and files that constitute contemporary social life. These mundane things, we argue, have a special place in social problems activities that has yet to be fully recognized by theorists.

This is not to say that social problems research has neglected the textuality of problems. In fact, returning to the theory's foundational work—Malcolm Spector and John I. Spector's (1987) *Constructing Social Problems*—one finds references to all sorts of texts, including the American Psychology Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM*) and the Library of Congress's classification system. Texts also show up in myriad case studies of problems. X-ray images figure in Stephen Pfohl's (1977) study of the "discovery" of child abuse, a logbook in Donileen Loseke's (1992) *The Battered Woman and Shelters*, an intake survey in Leslie Irvine's (2003) study of an animal shelter, and forged documents in R.J. Maratea's (2008) study of claims-making on the Internet.

Despite the recurrent appearance of texts in social problems research, the textuality of social problems has yet to be adequately theorized. This article addresses this oversight. Drawing on work in the sociology of knowledge, particularly the work of Bruno Latour (1987; 2005) and Dorothy Smith (1990; 2001), we argue that texts make the resources of claims-making and social problems work durable and mobile. One can preserve and then pass along, distribute, mail or email accounts and definitions of problems when those accounts and definition are given textual form. Texts, in other words, help us account for how claims about problems spread and endure.

We develop these arguments in four sections. We begin by reviewing social theory related to textuality and social organization. Drawing on the work of Smith and Latour, we offer a definition of texts and discuss how the materiality of texts gives them their special ability to preserve and move constructions of problems. Our second and third sections explore this ability in the context of social problems work and claims-making. We focus on the ways that texts make accounts of reality a resource for claims-makers and, then, on how texts preserve and move social problem definitions. The fourth section shows how textually-inscribed realities and categories may be mutually constitutive. We conclude by considering how the contemporary technological environment may be altering the textuality of problems.

Textuality and Materiality

"Text" is a simple word with a complex legacy in the social sciences. On the one hand, postmodernists, deconstructionists, and discursive theorists have tended towards a broad understanding of texts as "simply assemblages of discourse that are combined together to produce a dominant meaning" (Stevenson 2006). Understood in this way, virtually anything that signifies may be treated and studied as a text.

Dorothy Smith, who brings texts to the center of social theory, offers an alternative definition. Texts are, according to Smith (2001:164), "definite forms of words, numbers, or images that exist in a materially

replicable form." Smith's definition encompasses written documents of all sorts, also including such things as audio recordings, photographs, digital images, and video recordings. These are texts in the most literal, everyday of senses rather than the more abstracted "assemblages of discourses" noted above. Smith's definition also emphasizes the materiality—and, we would add, digitality—of texts. Because texts possess these qualities, they can be fairly easily reproduced. This allows texts and, so, their content to have a temporal and geographic reach that they would otherwise lack.

Bruno Latour (1987; 2005) captures this by classifying texts as one type of "immutable mobile." Texts are immutable—though we should say *relatively so*—and mobile in the sense that they *hold steady* their content even when accessed at times and places where they were not originally created. When social constructs—accounts of reality or definitions of problems, for instance—are put down into textual form, they may outlast their moment of construction. Claims-makers distant in time or place can then access the "recognizably the same" (Smith 2001:174) account or definition. The text and its content, in turn, can become a point of reference for claims-making, "against which any particular interpretation [of a problem] can be checked" (Smith 2001:175).

To be sure, we are not arguing that texts foreclose interpretive flexibility because they stabilize their content. Claims-makers contest the meaning of texts and that meaning is variable. But, as Smith (2001:174) puts it, even the "argument that the text is the reader's production presupposes a text that can be treated as recognizably the same in the varieties of readings that can be created." It is the content of texts, not the meaning of that content that texts stabilize. While meaning may be the primary concern of constructionism, we argue that the recognition of the textual mediation of social problems enhances social problems theory. In the following three sections, we discuss the textual mediation of "reality," definitions of social problems, and organizational constructions of problems.

Textual Realities and the Claims-Making Process

Claims-makers use grounds statements to establish the basic facts—or what they take as the reality—of a problem (Best 1990). These basic facts are themselves constructed. Accounts are given, descriptions offered, data compiled, analyzed, and cited.

The "reality" of problems that claims-makers encounter, interpret, and strategically deploy in their claims frequently takes the form of "textual realities" (Smith 1990). By textual realities we mean accounts and depictions of phenomena—for instance, a description, photograph, or video of an event—inscribed in a document. Social reality and the accounts people give of it are ephemeral; both would disappear into their own enactment if they were only made through face-to-face interaction. When given textual form, accounts of reality gain permanence; claims-makers distant in time and place—from both an event that might typify a problem and each other—are able to access, scrutinize, and make claims about the "same" event. We see, for instance, that releases of photographs and written accounts that documented abuse and torture tended to move the U.S. media and Congress into action (Del Rosso 2011; 2014). In the case of Abu Ghraib, the public release of digital images taken by American soldiers at the facility in Iraq provoked a protracted scandal over detainee abuse and torture. In the case of Guantánamo, the public release of FBI emails about the facility in 2005 and, subsequently, a military interrogation log provoked media, military, and congressional responses. Claims about what occurred at the facilities oriented towards those documents, and U.S. politicians referred to and sometimes quoted the accounts inscribed in them.

Recognizing textual mediation of claims about the "reality" of problems offers advances for the study of social problems. First, it is of note that textual realities themselves take diverse forms. This has as much to do with the content of textual realities as it does with the material form that they may take. Reality can arrive at sites of claims-making in the form of written investigations, photographs, audio recordings, video records, and the like. Claims-makers "read through" (Smith 1990) and deploy each differently. Visual records of reality—photographs and video recordings, for instance—are generally treated by claims-makers as objective records of the events that they document (Becker 1995). So, too, are images produced by specialized, technologically-sophisticated "instruments of vision" (Haraway 1988:586), as Stephen Pfohl's (1977) study of the discovery of child abuse and the role of x-ray images in that discovery suggests.

Claims-makers often assume, too, that the meanings of visual documents are straightforward; a photograph or video of an event may be asked to "speak for itself" in a way that a written account would often not be (Sontag 2003). Photographs are also useful to claims-makers because they can be appropriated in ways that written accounts generally cannot. A photograph, for instance, can be prominently displayed in the media and incorporated into posters, signs, and pamphlets. Finally, visual records of reality have particular "scales." Most photographs of events are like traditional photographs; they are taken by a photographer who is, more or less, level with and proximate to the action of an event. Such photographs bring one close to that action, displaying individual actors and moments. Aerial photos provide a broader view and "speak" about events in a different way. While most photographs used in claims-making probably offer a traditional, "near to the action" vantage, aerial photographs also can be useful: estimates of audience sizes, which is not an unimportant fact for claims-makers, are often based on aerial photographs (Martin and Lynch 2009). Aerial photographs can also be valuable by providing a claims-maker a seemingly direct, objective, bird's eye view on reality, as when Colin Powell relied on them in his speech to the United Nations on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (Morris 2008).

Written accounts of the reality of problems can also take diverse forms. Some written accounts, like traditional photographs, dwell on the particular and the local, providing readers the sense of "being there," alongside the event. Atrocity tales and horror stories are well-recognized in social problems theory and are an example of such local accounts (Best 1990; Johnson 1995). Human rights reports often highlight first (or third) person accounts of specific events; doing so, they bring audiences *nearer* to violence than

official, state discourse generally allows. But, other types of written accounts, namely, statistical representations, offer a differently textured reality. Statistical representations of the scope of problems are useful to claims-makers who want to build up a problem (Best 1990). Statistics can also be used to contain public conceptions of problems. *Relatively* small numbers can show that a problem is asystematic or well-contained (Potter 1996; Del Rosso 2011). Statistics help contain problems in another way. While human rights reports often focus on the particular, discrete, and local experiences of violence, state investigations might offer quantifications of more abstract *types* of events in turn (Cohen 2001; Del Rosso 2011). The states' descriptions are often sufficiently generic and bureaucratic as to render the account of reality a poor resource for those who wish to build up concern for human rights violations.

Textual realities offer unique vantages on problems; some are local, some zoom out to grander scales. And some, like the x-ray, offer wholly different vantages. Recognizing this adds richness to social problems theory's consideration of how "reality" figures in claims-making. We can consider how different sorts of textual realities are deployed by claims-makers and how audiences receive them. We can also consider whether and why some forms are assumed to represent the objective reality of problems better than other forms. Finally, we can consider how localized and zoomed-out vantages work together or against each other to establish the size and scope of problems for claims-makers.

Second, textual realities have organizational histories. They are constructed things that circulate from one site of claims-making to another. In theory, sociologists can follow the textual realities undergirding grounds-makers' claims back to their point of origin, the claims-makers and organizations that produced those texts. What we will find, in many instances, is that an individual document and its textual reality are merely links in what Bruno Latour (1999; 2013) refers to as chains of representations, a circulating set of texts that contain the representations that constitute reality and that link dispersed sites of social activity. By this, we mean that a single document on which a claims-maker relies to ground an argument about the reality of a problem may itself be made up of constituent documents and textual realities. The intertextuality of claims about problems suggests an inter-organizational network of textual reality construction. Tracing this network, we can reveal the paths and mediums by which textual realities spread and how claims-makers at one site may influence those at another by shaping the resources available for claims-making.

The Textuality of Social Problems Definitions

When thinking about how problem categories and definitions have a textual quality or may be said to be textually mediated, Spector and Kitsuse's example of claims-making around the *DSM* is enlightening. In the early 1970s, the American Psychiatric Association faced considerable pressure from the Gay Activist Alliance and other gay rights groups to remove homosexuality from the APA's listing of sexual deviations in its *DSM-II*. The change was eventually made and "sexual orientation distur-bance" replaced "homosexuality" in the *DSM* (Spector and Kitsuse 1987:19; see also Kirk and Kutchins 1992:81-90). Subsequent, claims-making activities resulted in further changes to these categories. *DSM-III* distinguished between "ego-syntonic" and "ego-alien" homosexuality; those diagnosed with the former were not in need of treatment, while those diagnosed as the latter were (Silverstein 2009). A 1987 revision to the *DSM-III* subsequently removed the reference to homosexuality (Silverstein 2009). This process is not unique. Subsequent revisions of the *DSM*, including the revisions which led to the publication of the most recent, *DSM-V*, have spurred claims-making activities. Claims-makers, for instance, mobilized around the APA's decision to eliminate several autism spectrum diagnoses, including Asperger's in the *DSM-V* (Carey 2012; Lutz 2013). Certainly, the bulk of the action, for the analyst, concerns the claims that interested parties and activists make to the APA, as well as the APA's organizational response. But, the fact that all this claims-making leads to the alteration of a material document is also worthy of attention.

In fact, it is not unusual for categories that can be used in claims-making to be written down, textually inscribed. Laws, policies, authorizations, diagnostic categories—all types of formalized rules and categories—generally take textual form. This is the rudimentary foundation of bureaucratic and legal-rational authority (Smith 2001) and organizational agency (Cooren 2004). In the contemporary context, claims-makers may engage in what Michael Lynch and David Bogen (1996:214) refer to as the "documentary mode of interrogation," scruti-nizing the categories, rules, authorizations, policies, and laws inscribed in texts to build a claim that a specific case, event, or behavior should or should not be understood as problematic.

For instance, a one-page document, "Interrogation Rules of Engagement" (see: Figure 1), was a point of reference for claims-making in congressional hearings about Abu Ghraib (Del Rosso 2014): Military officials argued that the events at Abu Ghraib, such as the hooding, stripping, and assault of detainees, were blatantly prohibited by the document, which included safeguards that affirmed the Geneva Conventions and prohibited Americans from touching detainees in a malicious manner. Congressional Democrats, on the other hand, tried to argue that the policy clearly authorized some practices—the use of stress positions, sensory deprivation, and the use of military dogs—that had been photographed at the prison. These practices appear in the upper-right quadrant of Figure 1, under the heading "Require CG's [Commanding General] Approval." Whether the Abu Ghraib practices would be viewed as an outcome of official policy put in place by the military and high-ranking members of the George W. Bush administration or as the result of the actions of a "few bad apples" depended, in part, on which claim about the policy prevailed.

By inscribing problem categories into texts, it becomes possible for social problems to possess relative stability over time and place. Definitions of problems can be shared by claims-makers distant in time and place simply because a text can be physically or digitally copied and transmitted

Figure 1. Interrogation Rules of Engagement Slide.*

* Figure 1 is the first author's reproduction, using Microsoft Power Point, of the original document, which is not of sufficient quality for publication. The original document appears in several annexes of the U.S. Army's "Article 15-6 Investigation of the 800th Military Police Brigade" (Taguba 2004), including Annex 40. The report, including annexes, is available online at the University of Minnesota Human Rights Library (2014).

without deforming the literal definition of a problem, authorizations, laws, and policies that the text carries. The interpretive flexibility that actors inevitably employ around definitions, then, has a relatively stable reference—the problem category or definition—that it would otherwise lack if that reference had not been inscribed in a text.

Again, the *DSM* is instructive. The development of the *DSM* by the APA—especially the *DSM-III*—played a vital role in the restructuring of U.S. and global understandings of mental distress and approaches to managing mental distress. In part, this has to do with the *content* of the *DSM*, and the evolution of the classifications of disorder that it offers.

For our purposes, though, it is the very materiality of the document that makes it interesting. As a material (and digital) thing, the *Manual* is portable and its portability facilitates efforts to standardize mental health categories across the U.S. and, increasingly, the globe (Watters 2011). The *DSM*'s standardizing power is buttressed by powerful interests. Health insurance companies require clinicians to use the *Manual*'s categories to diagnose patients in order to be reimbursed for services (Watters 2011). Clinicians develop "workarounds" to this requirement, claiming some autonomy and interpretive flexibility from health insurance companies. But, these workarounds exist precisely because of the institutionalized power of the text and they orient to the *DSM*, as well as to the layers of documents clinicians are compelled to complete.

Institutional ethnographers have extensively documented the ways that organizational workers and clients interact with organizational documents, how those documents structure organizational behavior, and how they tend to override the everyday experiences of clients. Attunement to these processes, to some extent, also has been incorporated into studies of social problems work. James Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium (2000), for instance, refer to textual mediation in their study of narrative identity. Centering studies of social problems construction on textual mediation can illuminate how the resources that social problems workers use in their interactions with clients are produced by the organizations in which they work, as well as policy makers and federal organizations. Examining this permits us to consider both the power and the limits of collective definitions of problems. Do the texts that social problems work-

ers use attempt to determine the accounts they give of problems, as well as their behavior towards those who seek services? If so, do workers develop workarounds, as Owen Whooley (2010) shows clinicians do? Conversely, do texts open space for workers to exercise considerable interpretive flexibility? What, then, is the result of that interpretive flexibility?

The Interplay of "Reality" and Definitions in Texts

Accounts of the "reality" of a problem and collective representations or definitions of that problem are mutually constitutive—and texts, at times, are at the core of that mutual constitution. This is particularly true in organizations. When social problems workers give accounts of their work, they often do so on organizational documents. Those documents shape and structure how workers describe and report problems. In some cases, organizational texts are sufficiently powerful as to practically determine social problems workers' accounts of problems. In others, they are open-ended, making space for workers' interpretive flexibility.

Leslie Irvine (2003), for instance, documented how workers at an animal shelter ("The Shelter") completed a standardized, intake interview with clients who were abandoning pets. The interview, which was recorded in a specialized, computer survey, required that workers transform clients' accounts into a single reason—taken from a pre-established list—for abandoning their pets. Because of the "tyranny" of the software (Irvine 2003:563; see also Gubrium, Buckholdt, and Lynott 1989), intake workers had to reduce the complexity of

client reasons for abandoning a pet to a single, pre-established one. Here, texts powerfully structure workers' accounts of problems. Interpretive flexibility is minimal. Workers interpret clients' accounts only to figure out which of the shelters' pre-set categories they "best" reflect.

Compare what Irvine found to what Donileen Loseke (1992) documented at a shelter ("South Coast") for battered women. At South Coast, intake workers noted activities at the shelter, including intake work, in a logbook that consisted of blank pages in a binder "to be filled by workers in free-form writing. An entry could be a few words or a whole page, notes could contain profanity or poetry, commonsense or clinical reasoning" (Loseke 1992:168). Accounts in the logbook were often more nuanced and complex than those that Irvine documented at The Shelter. An account of a battered woman, for instance, might be built up over several, increasingly detailed, and multi-faceted entries.

The juxtaposition of these cases is useful because very different types of texts structure social problems work in different ways. Irvine's intake workers completed a computerized survey with pre-set categories to describe client motives for making use of the shelter. Loseke's intake workers wrote up their accounts on blank pages. We may observe, in the juxtaposition, both the power and limits of texts to influence human activity. In both cases, the textual inscription of intake workers' accounts preserves the social problems work in which they have engaged. These otherwise ephemeral interactions gain a permanence that they would otherwise lack if not for that textual inscription. We

see, too, how different textual forms produce different social problems work. The intake workers at Irvine's animal shelter were compelled, by the computerized survey they used, to produce a uni-dimensional account of clients' motives for pet abandonment. The log at South Coast promoted free, open-ended writing. It allowed for greater complexity of and varieties in writing. There are details and multisided accounts in South Coast's logs that would have been impossible to record and preserve had South Coast relied on the sort of computerized survey used at The Shelter. Even so, Loseke found that workers at South Coast produced accounts that tended to homogenize clients. We see, then, the limits of texts and the power of collective representations of problems, which, in the end, structured South Coast's accounts of clients nearly as powerfully as The Shelter's survey no matter the texts. Studies of social problems work might further highlight the texts relevant to that work. How do they structure what social problems workers do and say about problems? How much complexity and artfulness do they permit of those workers? And how are they subsequently used by organizations and those who study organizations as indicators of the "reality" of problems?

Conclusion

Texts, we have argued, make constructions of reality durable and mobile. Representations and definitions of problems become resources for claims-making and social problems work when inscribed in texts. Claims-makers cite, reference, or gesture to investigations and reports; organizations incorporate manuals, forms, surveys, and logs into their work. These

enable social problems activities and also potentially structure and constrain them. Claims-makers may check each other's arguments about problems against the accounts of those problems available in investigations, scholarly publications, and other documents. Organizational documents compel— or do not, as the case may be—workers to produce textual traces of their activities that take particular forms. Attuned to the textuality of problems, studies of social problems can further document the types of texts involved in problem construction, the ways that different types of texts structure social problems claims-making and work, and the different uses to which people put those different types of texts. We can also uncover the connections, forged by texts, between organizations, agencies, and claims-makers, providing one answer to the question of how claims spread.

Attunement to texts is especially vital in today's technological environment. This environment is substantially different from that which existed

when Smith and Latour made their initial contributions to social theory. Many, if not most, texts are now digital. The "means of producing" texts are, too, more dispersed, as virtually anyone with a smart phone may photograph or video record events and, with access to social media sites, publicize accounts of those events. While claims that digitality and social media have democracized claims-making may be overblown, the contemporary technological environment has, at a minimum, altered the carrying capacity, archivability, retrievability, modifiability, and dissemination of claims (Maratea 2008; 2013). As Irvine's work suggests, contemporary technologies may also have the capacity to "tyrannize"—compelling responses or preventing users from "going off text," so to speak—in ways that paper documents never could. Future research should consider the ways that technological changes alter texts and textually-mediated organizations and how these, in turn, shape social problems activities in organizational and other social contexts.

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