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Social Problems and the Contextual Compromise: Subjectivity, Objectivity, and Knowledge in Everyday Life

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Abstract This article builds on recent sociological debates about the explanatory importance of claims-making contexts and the continuing challenges associated with subjectivism and objectivism in social problems research. The sociology of knowledge is used to illustrate how the contextual compromise that has sustained social problems theory and method for at least two decades is based on a number of erroneous assumptions about subjectivity and objectivity in the tradition of phenomenological analysis. To strengthen recent discussions about the contextual dimensions of claims-making activities and framing techniques, the article critically assesses the curious neglect and continuing misrepresentation of the sociology of knowledge in constructionist analyses of social problems.

Keywords Claims-Making; Social Problems; Contextual Constructionism; Phenomenology; Sociology of Knowledge

In the early 1920s, sociologists began arguing that what makes social problems socially problematic is not only, or even mainly, the objective harms that social-structural conditions pose to human well-being. Rather, sociologists such as Case (1924) and Frank (1925) pointed out that the problematic aspects of social problems more commonly stem from people's value judgments about

harmful structural conditions, whether they are partial or complete, real or perceived. In the absence of value judgments assigning moral worth to social-structural phenomena that are perceived unfavorably at certain moments in time, these early 20th-century sociologists recognized that no social-structural condition in and of itself constitutes a social problem.

Throughout the 1930s and 40s, sociologists built on the value-conflict perspective by highlighting the limitations associated with explaining social problems on the basis of the ostensible harms they pose (e.g., Waller 1936; Fuller 1938; and see Fuller and Myers 1941). While more familiar analogous theoretical developments took place in ethnomethodol-

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ogy, phenomenology, and labeling/deviance theory leading into the 1960s (e.g., Becker 1963; Schur 1965; Berger and Luckmann 1966; Garfinkel 1967), it was not until the 1970s that sociologists started to systematically think beyond objective structural harms by placing claims-making activities and social problems framing at the center of analysis (Kitsuse and Spector 1973; Conrad 1975; Pholf 1977; Spector and Kitsuse 1977). A lively debate about social problems theory and method played out in American sociology over the following two decades (e.g., Schneider 1985; Woolgar and Pawluch 1985). By the early 1990s, the social constructionist or definitional perspective had revolutionized how social problems research was done (Holstein and Miller 2003).

Since the mid-1990s, the influence of social constructionism on social problems research in disciplines spanning sociology and anthropology to management studies and nursing has been considerable (Loseke 2015). Innovative studies on the social construction of social problems have explored issues ranging from the impact of new digital technologies on social problems framing (Maratea 2008; Kampf 2014; Walsh 2016) to the ways in which government claims-making activities can actively deny allegations of government torture (Del Rosso 2011; cf. Cohen 2001). While there is little doubt that social constructionism has made a decisive impact on scholarly debates about the nature of social problems for at least a half century, sociologists have nevertheless recently returned to debates about the explanatory importance of claims-making contexts and the continuing challenges associated with subjectivism and objectivism in social problems research.

In his attempt to bypass the familiar standoff between objectivism and subjectivism in the sociology of social problems, for example, Thibodeaux (2014) argues that social problems theory suffers from a lack of integrity. Because social problems researchers have continued to blur claims and conditions (understood as subjective interpretations and objective realities, respectively), he says, “social conditions must be brought back in” (Thibodeaux 2014:830). For Thibodeaux, returning to social conditions does not signal a regression to objectively harmful conditions but rather the need to divert the empirical focus of analyses away from naïve forms of objectivism qua social facts and towards the social, political, and economic opportunity structures in which claims are made and acted upon. In Thibodeaux’s assessment, investigating social problems as the study of claims-making contexts eliminates the need to separate objective conditions from subjective interpretations of social problems by reimagining constructionism as the comparative study of the timing and prominence of how objective condition-contexts influence the production and reception of social problems claims and frames.

Just as Thibodeaux emphasizes the importance of investigating claims-making contexts, Weinberg (2009; 2014) similarly encourages social problems researchers to better account for the social-structural contexts within which claims-making activities take place. Aiming to preserve the legacy established by John Kitsuse, he calls on sociologists to account for the normative warrant that research subjects attribute to their own claims and to the claims of others. For Weinberg, however, the Kitsusian emphasis on actors’ perspectives need not come at the expense

of sociologists' interpretations of what actors count as such warrants. To move beyond the antinomy of subjectivism and objectivism, Weinberg (2009:62) therefore urges sociologists to pay greater attention to how "putatively problematic conditions, once assembled as meaningful objects of discourse and practice, might become dialectically related to the discursive claims made about them." In other words, claims-making activities are vitally important to the sociological study of social problems, but empirical analyses of social problems rhetoric in practice cannot be adequately explained without reference to the normative structural contexts from which claims-making activities emerge.

Finally, in one of the most recent arguments about the importance of attending to claims-making contexts in social problems research, Nichols (2015) defines contexts in terms of the pre-existing social fabric that affects who can make claims and what claims can be made, including when, where, and why certain claims are levied and the responses they elicit. In this way, Nichols points to the analytical importance of attending to context work: the implicit assumptions that claims-makers and sociological analysts rely on to make assertions about types of people, social settings, and social scale, as well as the ways in which meanings about certain sets of phenomena are indexed to meanings about others. For Nichols (2015:78), paying greater attention to the social-structural dimensions of context work not only avoids the counterproductive debate between strict and contextual constructionists that has defined social constructionism since the early 1990s. It also reaffirms the methodological importance of the interpretive tradition by understand-

ing how human beings create meanings and then apply them in social interaction (for similar arguments see: Ayukawa 2015; Furedi 2015; Xu 2015).

The resurgence of debate about conditioning contexts is an exciting development in the sociology of social problems. This article builds on the recent debates by revisiting the basic premises of the sociology of knowledge (more commonly known as the social construction of reality). The analysis illustrates how the contextual compromise that has sustained social constructionism for at least two decades—that claims-making activities are contextually situated in relation to objective social and material conditions—is based on a number of erroneous assumptions about the meanings of subjectivity and objectivity in the tradition of phenomenological analysis. To strengthen recent discussions about the contextual dimensions of claims-making activities and framing techniques, the article therefore critically assesses the curious neglect and continuing misrepresentation of the sociology of knowledge in social problems theory and method.

Claims-Making and the Activities-Based Approach

Social problems researchers are well aware of the fact that the claims-making or activities-based approach to studying social problems was formally inaugurated with the publication of Malcolm Spector and John Kitsuse's *Constructing Social Problems* (1977). Prior to the publication of this groundbreaking book, Kitsuse and Spector (1973) reworked earlier contributions to the value-conflict perspective

(Waller 1936; Fuller and Myers 1941) by explicitly conceptualizing social problems as generic processes of making claims about “putative” conditions. They were aided, if only indirectly, by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s (1966) celebrated treatise, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Berger and Luckmann’s text not only helped to popularize the term social construction but also to shape sociological theorizing on the importance of institutionalized stocks of knowledge, practical activities, and routine behaviors in everyday life. Howard Becker’s (1963) contributions to the sociology of deviance and labeling theory provided additional background support to facilitate the favorable reception of *Constructing Social Problems*, supplemented by Herbert Blumer’s (1971) famous definition of social problems as a form of collective behavior and Armand Mauss’s (1975) influential argument that social problems represent a special kind of social movement activity.

Spector and Kitsuse (1977:1) introduced *Constructing Social Problems* with the provocative statement that, “There is no adequate definition of social problems within sociology, and there is not and never has been a sociology of social problems.” What they meant was that social problems research lacked intellectual coherence and a common sense of purpose and direction. To be sure, by the late 1970s there was no shortage of sociological research on a variety of issues being identified as social problems. What was missing from the research literature, Spector and Kitsuse argued, was a clear, shared, and reliable definition—a conceptual framework—to explain what actually constitutes a social problem in the first place.

In the absence of a coherent theory or method capable of linking social problems research across the otherwise disparate topics that sociologists were investigating under the guise of the sociology of social problems, Spector and Kitsuse observed that sociologists overwhelmingly relied on their own tacit assumptions about harmful conditions to select and investigate topics that they then represented as objective social-scientific research findings. Owing to the poorly developed state of social problems theory and method, contributions to the field were often characterized by an assortment of descriptive characteristics about topics that sociologists arbitrarily selected on the basis of their own normative value judgments.

As sociologists whose primary interests were focused on understanding the ways that people enact meanings about social problems in everyday life, Spector and Kitsuse were keenly interested in how social problems are constructed through assumptions about and changing perceptions of problematic phenomena. The latter included the tacit assumptions of sociologists and other kinds of specialists. Where they parted company with the majority of mainstream sociologist, however, was in their steadfast methodological assertion that the appropriate subject matter for social problems research is not objectively problematic social and material conditions but rather the forms of generic social interactions involved in making assertions of grievances or claims about putatively problematic social conditions and arrangements.

To develop social problems as an independent or stand-alone area of empirical sociological research,

anchored by a central subject matter and a common set of theories and methods, Spector and Kitsuse therefore began by conceptualizing social problems in terms of claims-making activities. They argued that the phenomena we commonly think about as, and characterize in terms of, social problems do not represent objective worldly conditions whose inherently problematic features inexorably activate corrective measures to reduce harm. By contrast, Spector and Kitsuse maintained that social problems are properly defined as assemblages of discourses and claims brought into existence through a sequence of capricious human interactions. The latter is composed of many different kinds of claims-makers who engage in many different kinds of practical activities to define putative conditions as social problems and to generate viable strategies for their remediation.

Spector and Kitsuse's argument that the phenomena we commonly identify as social problems cannot be separated from the subjective judgments and definitional activities of claims-makers was, as it remains, controversial. In their attempt to develop the activities-based approach to social problems theory and method, they essentially advised sociologists to avoid making any reference to the influences that social problem conditions (i.e., the actual things that social problems claims are ostensibly about) have on how people subjectively interpret harm. For Spector and Kitsuse, every time sociologists lay claims to the influences that objectively meaningful social problem conditions have on problematizing activities—for example, the influences that deviant behaviors, social pathologies, or structural inequalities have on framing processes—they not only fall into the trap

of conceptualizing social problems as an effect of some more fundamental condition (essentially making the study of social problems about something other than claims-making activities). They also fail to appreciate how the definitional perspective is oriented towards understanding the ways in which social problems are constituted through, rather than external to, different configurations of interacting people. In this way, Spector and Kitsuse did not simply develop a new strategy for investigating the issues that sociologists had for generations identified as otherwise inherently problematic social problem conditions. What they provided was a distinctively (albeit underdeveloped) phenomenological approach (see below) to conceptualizing social problems exclusively in terms of social interactions called claims-making activities.

Ontological Gerrymandering

Spector and Kitsuse's activities-based perspective provided sociologists with a provocative, if contentious set of theoretical and methodological arguments to address the shortcomings associated with condition- or harm-based approaches to studying social problems. In several important ways, the limitations that Spector and Kitsuse (1977) identified with condition-based approaches pushed sociologists to think harder about what actually makes a social problem socially problematic. In doing so, however, their arguments also posed an unanticipated set of theoretical and methodological challenges that contemporary sociologists continue to struggle with.

The challenges stem from Spector and Kitsuse's original proviso that sociologists should investigate

all of the “subjective” claims-making activities that groups of people participate in to create and sustain meanings about “putative” conditions that they define as social problems. By using the term subjective to describe claims-making activities, Spector and Kitsuse were not arguing that claims should be analyzed in terms of personal opinions or biased perceptions. Nor were they suggesting that the truth about social problems is radically relative or entirely arbitrary. Rather, their intention was, in the first instance, to avoid reifying social problems as unchanging and inherently harmful phenomena by focusing on the forms of social interaction that give rise to changing definitions of putatively problematic conditions, be they entirely compatible with or in complete contradiction to various kinds of evidence we tend to call objective.

Throughout the 1970s, influential studies on the social construction of social problems investigated the social construction of everything from alcohol abuse and automobile accidents (Gusfield 1975) to hyperactive children (Conrad 1975). Many of these studies were published by the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP)—an organization originally founded in 1951 to provide an alternative perspective on what was perceived as mainstream elitist, scientific sociology (Abbott 2001). It is, therefore, no surprise that many of the studies on claims-making and problem framing, with their connections to labeling theory, were presented in the SSSP’s journal, *Social Problems*. But, as Steve Woolgar and Dorothy Pawluch (1985) explained, by the early 1980s sociological studies on the social construction of social problems had come to rely on a combination of three specific rhetorical techniques that, when applied in

empirical research studies, actually contradicted the main premises of the definitional perspective.

According to Woolgar and Pawluch, studies on the social construction of social problems typically begin by identifying certain behaviors or conditions to investigate in a matter-of-fact way (e.g., abortion). Following the identification of the condition under investigation, sociologists then proceed to explore changing claims about the same, ostensibly unchanging condition (e.g., pro-life, pro-choice). Finally, after showing how “subjective” definitions about seemingly “objective” conditions fluctuate over time, social problems researchers emphasize the variability of “subjective” social definitions in relation to unchanging “objective” conditions. The purpose of emphasizing the historical variability of social definitions, Woolgar and Pawluch explained, is to confirm the theoretical argument that social problems frames do not derive from the inherent features of objectively problematic conditions but rather subjective or situation-specific claims-making activities.

To illustrate how social problems researchers rely on a rhetorical explanatory framework to demonstrate the importance of the definitional perspective, Woolgar and Pawluch singled out Pfohl’s (1977) well-known study of the social construction of child abuse. Pfohl (1977) began his study by introducing what he identified as the age-old practice of child beating as an important topic for sociological investigation. He argued that although the ancient practice of physically punishing children had been “subjectively” defined as a necessary disciplinary practice prior to the nineteenth

century, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social reformers (such as activists associated with Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) increasingly replaced the disciplinary frame with one centering on “child abuse” as a form of social deviance and, later, a crime. For Pfohl, subjective changes in the ways in which the objective condition of child beating has been defined over time demonstrate that the contemporary social problem frame of child abuse derives from the socio-historical circumstances that claims-makers find themselves in rather than the actual condition of child beating itself.

In Woolgar and Pawluch view, the emphasis that social constructionists like Pfohl place on claims-making activities (such as the routine behaviors that were involved in early twentieth century child welfare advocacy, e.g., petitioning lawmakers, holding rallies, producing printed materials) is entirely compatible with the definitional perspective. But, they queried how sociologists like Pfohl could logically conceptualize changing social problem frames (e.g., discipline, child abuse) in terms of subjective claims-making activities that construct or enact definitions of problems while at the same time making their own tacit and unexamined claims about the unchanging status of the condition (i.e., child beating). In other words, Woolgar and Pawluch pointed out that Pfohl and sociologists like him rhetorically deploy terms like “child beating” as though they are impartial descriptions of an otherwise objective and unchanging social reality, yet selectively use other terms like “discipline” and “child abuse” to signify historically subjective moral evaluations that are deserving of sociological scrutiny.

Woolgar and Pawluch called this common rhetorical approach to studying the construction of social problems “ontological gerrymandering.” Ontological gerrymandering, they explained, is a form of analytical boundary work that rhetorically portrays some phenomena (e.g., child beating) as historically fixed and unchanging (i.e., objective) while depicting other phenomena (e.g., definitions of discipline and abuse) as historically variable and susceptible to change (i.e., subjective). When sociologists engage in the boundary work of ontological gerrymandering, they make certain implicit assertions about how social conditions “really are” (even when they merely identify some topics for investigation and ignore others) to, paradoxically, demonstrate how problematizing definitions or claims cannot be explained on the basis of assumptions about how social conditions “really are.” By relying on their own unexamined assumptions about the consistency of conditions (i.e., ontological assumptions about “what is”) to demonstrate the irrelevance of conditions for explaining problematizing activities, Woolgar and Pawluch argued that sociologists were essentially conceptualizing the definitional activities of claims-makers as malleable social constructions while at the same time assuming that their own claims about conditions represent objective and unchanging truths (i.e., a form of gerrymandering or selectively manipulating the analytical boundaries of social reality).

The Bifurcation of the Social Constructionist Perspective

Woolgar and Pawluch’s critique of the rhetorical strategies that social constructionists implicitly

rely on to investigate how claims-making activities constitute social problems qua human social interactions was meant to remind sociologists about the original methodological arguments that Spector and Kitsuse made (and why they made them). Woolgar and Pawluch specifically emphasized the explanatory difficulties that sociologists encounter when they fall back on their own value judgments about problematic conditions (like child beating) to develop analytical insights into social problem claims-making activities. In line with Spector and Kitsuse, Woolgar and Pawluch reasoned that if social problem framing cannot be explained on the basis of actual or perceived harmful conditions qua material facts, then the notion that harmful material conditions can productively contribute to a theory of claims-making activities about social problems definitions should be abandoned. The latter includes sociologists' putative assumptions about the invariance of objective conditions in relation to changing subjective definitions.

When Woolgar and Pawluch pointed to the common practice of ontological gerrymandering, their aim was to strengthen research on the social construction of social problems. Their critique had the opposite effect, however, by inadvertently contributing to the bifurcation of the social constructionist perspective. On the one hand, a group of constructionists sympathetic to Spector and Kitsuse's version of the activities-based approach doubled down by insisting that the phenomena we commonly identify as social problems are inseparable from subjective or situation-specific claims-making activities. The so-called strict social constructionists, as they came to be known (e.g., Ibarra and Kitsuse

1993), heeded the charge of ontological gerrymandering by affirming the explanatory irrelevance of material conditions in sociological explanations of social problems claims-making activities. Their argument was not that the reality of harmful material conditions (e.g., poverty, war, violence) equates to nothing more than a set of capricious human interpretations and perceptions. Their point, rather, was that constructionists need to resist the seduction of reifying social problems by remaining focused on the claims-making activities and forms of human social interaction through which interpretations of social problems are enacted and maintained (Holstein and Miller 2003).

On the other hand, responding to the perceived deficiencies of the strict version of constructionism, a competing group of constructionists (who were, incidentally, mostly responsible for recasting the strict constructionists' methodological arguments in terms of a theory of the reality of material harms themselves) rejected the view that social problems researchers should ignore objectively verifiable social and material conditions. The latter included the objectively verifiable socio-historical contexts in which certain kinds of claims are made. Similar to the strict constructionists, the "contextual" constructionists argued that claims-making activities are, in the main, crucially important for understanding how social problems are framed and acted upon. Like the strict constructionists, the contextual constructionists remained committed to investigating the "subjective" or definitional aspects of social problem construction. But, the contextual constructionists also insisted that just because social problem definitions are constituted through

claims-making activities does not necessarily mean that sociologists are unable to discriminate among and assess the validity of various claims in relation to objective evidence about the actual conditions that are being investigated. As Best (1989:247) put it, “calling a statement a claim does not discredit it.”

To demonstrate the importance of the contextual version of social constructionism, Best (1993) offered the example of claims-making activities about Satanism in the 1980s. By the late 1980s, he explained, US television talk shows and popular media outlets were routinely laying claim to the menace of blood cults involved in sexual abuse and human sacrifice. Set in the broader socio-historical context of social concerns about serial murder, missing children, heavy-metal music, and child sexual abuse, he explained, Satanism was only one component in a “great web of evil” (Best 1993: 110) occupying the popular imagination at the time.

For Best, the limitations of strict constructionism are exemplified by the example of Satanism. Because strict constructionists are mandated to inquire into the claims-making activities or actual behaviors that have brought the social problem frame of Satanism into being, they examine claims made by police officers, social workers, journalist, and ritual crime specialists. What they refrain from doing is examining, first, if there are in fact any actual people who engage in Satanic worship (i.e., assessing the validity of the actual condition) and, second, explaining why claims about Satanism appeared specifically in the socio-historical context of the 1980s (rather than the 60s or 70s). According to Best, by trying to avoid the contamination of naïve forms of objectivism that

characterize both condition-based approaches and constructionist ones that are guilty of ontological gerrymandering, strict constructionists essentially threw the baby out with the bathwater. They did so, he insisted, by shunning all assumptions about empirically verifiable social conditions *and* the social settings and historical contexts that condition social problem frames at certain times, in particular places, and across social spaces.

The contextual version of social constructionism has been appealing to social problems researchers over the past quarter century. Perceived as a sort of compromise position within social constructionism, the contextual approach has been used to examine the “objective” socio-historical circumstances in which claims appear (e.g., the post-9/11 era) while at the same time striving to make a practical contribution to public discourse by continually assessing the validity of “subjective” claims-making activities in relation to objectively verifiable conditions (such as US governmental claims-making about weapons of mass destruction after the 9/11 attacks on Washington and New York).

The challenge that contextual constructionists continually encounter, of course, is that they run the risk of reproducing the same fundamental problems that were initially identified in condition-based perspectives. Not only do they demonstrate the kind of selective relativism that Woolgar and Pawluch warned against in research on the constitutive features of claims and frames. Possibly more damaging, by explaining the subjective dimensions of social problem framing as internalized features of “objective” socio-historical circumstances (at least

in the absence of the more detailed or nuanced framework elaborated on below), they inadvertently foster the impression that claims-making activities are merely a priori effects of social-historical conditions (cf. Thibodeaux 2014; Weinberg 2014; Nichols 2015). As critics have been quick to point out, it is not therefore clear what role claims-making activities actually play as a constitutive (or world-making) component of social problem frames if they are explained as the inevitable expression of objective socio-historical conditions.

Social Problems and the Sociology of Knowledge

One of the regrettable features of the cleavages that developed within social constructionism is that the debate was (as it remains) staged in either/or terms. Partially owing to the conceptually imprecise language used in Spector and Kitsuse's (1977) original writings, social problems have been repeatedly conceptualized as *either* subjective definitions *or* objective conditions. To reiterate, Spector and Kitsuse did not use the term subjective to imply that claims-making activities are akin to personal opinion. Rather, they deployed the term subjective to investigate the claims-making processes through which meanings about social problems are created, maintained, disseminated, reproduced, and/or transformed.

Despite Spector and Kitsuse's clear intention to formulate a theory of claims-making qua routine practical human activities, however, their framework was, as it remains, tacitly construed by constructionists and condition-based researchers alike as a choice that social problems researchers face: to

either investigate subjective-idiosyncratic definitions or objective-material and/or socio-historical conditions (or, in the contextual version of social constructionism, to blend them). It is worth reiterating that Spector and Kitsuse never declared that objectively harmful material conditions do not exist independently of human consciousness and definitional activities. In fact, in one of their seminal statements on the definitional approach they readily conceded that, "It is an empirical question whether certain types of conditions are correlated with or associated with certain types of claims" (Kitsuse and Spector 1973:148). Their point was simply that there are no guarantees that harmful material conditions will be problematized (or that harmless ones will not) for the simple reason that social problems *definitions*—and hence "social problems" as such—are always constituted through claims-making activities of some kind. Spector and Kitsuse therefore stressed the importance of developing a theory of social problem claims-making activities that does not pivot on (or gerrymander) the reality of material harms.

Setting aside the circumscribed way in which Spector and Kitsuse used the term subjective to characterize social problems as a sequence of human interactional accomplishments, most of their attention in the 1960s and 70s was admittedly focused on demonstrating why objective material conditions are not reliable indicators of social problem framing. Because Spector and Kitsuse concentrated on the explanatory limitations associated with harm-based perspectives, they did not sufficiently explore the theoretical underpinnings of their own approach (Loseke 2003). Had they taken time to better clarify

the ways in which they were working with a phenomenological framework linked to the sociology of knowledge—one that places an explanatory premium on routine activities, processes of human meaning-creation, and especially the interpretive socio-historical resources that people draw on to navigate everyday social life—much of the confusion about the status of objective conditions in social problems research on claims-making activities might have been avoided.

It is, in this regard, more than a passing irony that the bifurcation of social constructionism took the form of a subjective/objective standoff when we consider that Spector and Kitsuse loosely, but unmistakably structured their understanding of social problems on Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Nowhere is this influence clearer than in Ibarra and Kitsuse's (1993) refined explanation of the definitional perspective, where they explicitly talk about the importance of institutionalization, typification, vernacular resources, moral universes, and the language-bound character of social reality.

In *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckmann go to great lengths to dissolve the distinction between subjective and objective social reality by highlighting a fundamental paradox characterizing human social existence: namely, that human beings create (rather than discover) social realities (or ways of being human) that they subsequently experience as something other than ongoing human accomplishments. Examples are all around us: religious systems, family arrangements, racial/gen-

der identities, sexual mores, and moral codes. Not only are such realities (be they norms, values, expectations, roles, rituals, customs, or conventions) subjectively constituted through reciprocal typifications—that is, shared ways of apprehending oneself, others, and the social world—that develop into easily recognizable collective habits and routines (i.e., institutions). They are also maintained through everyday practical activities that have become objectively embedded in reified stocks of knowledge that are available to each member of a social group through the processes of primary and secondary socialization (see: Berger and Luckmann 1966:128-189). In other words, despite the fact that all social realities are enacted rather than discovered on the basis of “subjective” human interpretations that impose a predictability on subsequent social interaction (a kind of certainty about the everyday social world that enables continuing interpretation, innovation, and reconstruction), institutionalized common stocks of knowledge are nevertheless objective in the sense that they are available to all members of a group as historical resources that shape and direct social interaction. As Berger and Luckmann (1966:61, original emphasis) famously put it, “Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product.”

It follows that the truth-value of social reality as an objective human accomplishment cannot be verified as correct or incorrect by applying certain social-scientific techniques (or, worse, subjecting different definitions of reality to normative evaluations). This is why Berger and Luckmann (1966:1) took care to define social reality narrowly as, “a quality appertaining to phenomena that

we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition ('we cannot wish away')." What this definition of social reality implies is that the relationship between human beings-as-continual producers of social realities and social realities-as-institutionalized constraints on enduring human interactions is properly conceptualized as dialectical rather than dichotomous: human beings produce and maintain meanings about the social world through routine practical activities that, once habituated, institutionalized, and reified act back on and shape human meanings about and routine activities in the social world (even as they are maintained by them).

And yet, despite the fact that social realities do not exist independently of ongoing human interactions, the relationship between human beings-as-producers of social realities and social realities-as-constraints on human (inter)actions is not equivocal. While it is true that social realities are both foundationally constructed and continually maintained on the basis of institutionalized human beliefs and dispositions (revealing the character of society as dialectical), there are nevertheless obvious differences in the spatial and temporal dimensions of constructing and maintaining/reproducing social realities. In plain terms, we are all born into existing social realities that are highly institutionalized, to the extent that they appear to us as both natural and inevitable (e.g., language, cultures, customs, rituals, routines). Those reified realities (social-structural patterns that we cannot wish away) profoundly influence our "subjective" thoughts and actions in everyday life, even as they depend on them for their continuing existence.

The assertion that social reality is simultaneously subjective and objective is therefore more than an oxymoron: it speaks to the ways in which human meanings about the social world are created by human beings, and how historically constituted social stocks of institutionalized knowledge simultaneously constrain the possibilities of human action, especially as they are transmitted to future generations.

Berger and Luckmann's dialectical conceptualization of social reality as simultaneously subjective and objective is essentially what Spector and Kitsuse were driving at when they formulated the definitional perspective on social problems. The definitional perspective is oriented towards investigating the methods or practical activities that people engage in as they create, institutionalize, and reproduce social problems as "moral objects." The latter term, introduced by Ibarra and Kitsuse (1993) to clarify the original focus of the definitional approach, refers to the ways in which claims-makers selectively, but discernibly draw on vernacular resources such as rhetorical idioms (i.e., conventional modes of expression), cultural motifs (i.e., figures of speech), and even socially sanctioned claims-making styles (e.g., protests, news stories, memes) to portray some people, conditions, and/or experiences as problematic, troubling, and in need of remediation (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993).

The interplay between claim-making activities that take place in particular social settings (i.e., the subjective experiences of social reality) and the vernacular resources that are drawn upon to diagnose problems and proffer viable solutions (i.e., the

objective dimensions of social reality) is crucial to this formulation. By emphasizing the conditioning role that vernacular resources as a general class of *moral* objects play in instances of social problem claims-making activities, Ibarra and Kitsuse were essentially trading on the kind of conceptual distinction that Saussure (1924) famously made concerning the arbitrary constitution of speech and language. Rather than opting for the contextual compromise of blending the activities- and condition-based approaches, Ibarra and Kitsuse, like Spector and Kitsuse before them, for all intents and purposes understood objective and subjective reality as different temporal moments in a unified social reality (the essence of Berger and Luckmann's sociology of knowledge). In this way, they not only avoided the seduction of gerrymandering putative conditions (Spector and Kitsuse 1977) or condition-categories (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993) by unambiguously conceptualizing social problem conditions as a human interactional accomplishment. They also avoided the lure of explaining claims-making activities as an effect of more fundamental underlying socio-historical conditions by conceptualizing claims as simultaneously conventional, as well as emergent (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993).

Conclusion

The notion that social problems are socially constructed has enjoyed considerable support among sociologists since the 1970s. Following a lively debate about the scope of social problems theory and method in the 1980s, constructionists settled on a contextual compromise that granted explanatory

importance to both objective material conditions and subjective social definitions. The contextual compromise represented a seemingly practical solution to perceived divisions among constructionists, providing sociologists with a theoretical justification for distinguishing between legitimate and exaggerated social problems claims. Notwithstanding the appeal of contextual constructionism as a pragmatic framework for debunking fanciful social problems frames (inadvertently blurring the distinction between the sociology of social problems and conventional moral panic studies), with few exceptions adherent to both the "strict" and "contextual" version of constructionism have all but ignored how the constructionist perspective qua institutionalized patterns of making claims and asserting grievances originally contributed to the sociology of knowledge.

In this regard, the resurgence of debates about the future of social constructionism in social problems research presents an important opportunity to revisit the explanatory significance of the sociology of knowledge in the constructionist tradition. Of all the recent contributors who have drawn attention to the importance of claims-making contexts, Weinberg (2009; 2014) arguably comes closest to this understanding when he identifies a dialectical relationship between claims-making activities and the vernacular resources that condition and are conditioned by social problems claims and frames. Yet like so many other contributors to contextual constructionism, there is a conceptual slippage in his otherwise exemplary theoretical critique, whereby objective conditions are sometimes conceptualized as institutionalized stocks of knowl-

edge (e.g., norms, routines, patterns of interaction, styles of rhetoric) and other times as real world material facts that are unaffected by claims-making activities.

In its most benign form, the continuing neglect of the sociology of knowledge has contributed towards the ongoing tendency among contextual constructionists to either reify or not fully explain what it means to assign explanatory power to opportunity structures and claims-making contexts. In its more malignant form, it contributes towards the kind of critique offered by DelloBuono (2015), where he argues that the unsustainable orthodoxy that characterized social problems theory into the early 1990s has given way to a conception of the ahistorical claims-maker devoid of real structural context.

To be sure, the perennial neglect of Berger and Luckmann's dialectical theory of society reflects a wider disciplinary confusion about the processes involved in constructing social reality (Vera 2016). What is being suggested in this article is not that Berger and Luckmann's sociology of knowledge offer a ready-made methodological strategy for investigating social problems claims-making activi-

ties. Rather, the argument is that by paying greater attention to the phenomenological orientation that gave rise to the constructionist approach to social problems in the 1970s, at least some of the ambiguity about the meaning of social-structural context that continues to haunt contextual constructionists could be avoided.

Hence, as social problems researchers contemplate the future of constructionism (Loseke 2015), their discussions and debates should not hinge on the antiquated dichotomy between subjective definitions and objective material conditions. Nor should contextual constructionists uncritically rely on an undifferentiated notion of objective socio-historical conditions to prop up their accounts of social problems claims and frames. Recent contributions to rethinking constructionism have acknowledged the importance of empirically investigating contexts of meaning. What they have yet to do is provide a clear theoretical and methodological way to move beyond the explanatory problems that continue to characterize contextual constructionism. Berger and Luckmann's widely neglected sociology of knowledge is a useful way to begin thinking about the future of contextual constructionism.

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