Constructionist Studies of Social Problems: How We Got Here, and Where We Ought to Go

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The principal theory of social problems (at least in the United States) is the social constructionist perspective, which defines social problem in terms of a claimsmaking process, rather than as a type of social condition. This perspective emerged in the 1970s, and its spread has led to many hundreds of case studies, both by American scholars and by sociologists in many other countries. While constructionists may be pleased by their perspective's success, they need to be aware that there are many academic fads. In order to avoid becoming a forgotten intellectual fad, constructionists need encourage several sorts of new contributions: They need to move beyond case studies and concentrate on synthesizing the research that exists; they need to foster the spread of constructionism in many more countries; they need to expand their focus beyond the present with studies of social problems construction in the past and the future; they need to develop clear methodological principles; and they need to foster collaboration with scholars in other disciplines.

The term *social problem* originated in the late nineteenth century as a singular noun: *the* social problem was the relationship between capital and labor (Schwartz 1997). However, by the end of the century, the new profession of sociologists made the term plural; they argued that there were lots of troubling social conditions that deserved to be called social problems. Many U.S. sociology departments began offering courses in "Social Pathology" with each week's lectures focused on a different social issue. By 1930, some departments had begun to give this course a more modern title: "Social Problems."

Almost immediately, critics began questioning the concept's value for sociological analysis (Spector and Kitsuse 1977). Instructors may have been comfortable labeling various social conditions as social problems, but they had more difficulty defining the concept. There were obvious challenges: on the one hand, many people assumed that social problems could be defined in terms of harms to the larger society, that is, what made something a social problem was that it was a harmful social condition; yet it was obvious that definitions of social problems varied across both time and space. How could something be considered harmful at one time or in one place, but be con-

sidered normal, and be taken for granted under other circumstances? Critics challenged the concept as early as the 1920s, although these critiques attracted little attention. In part, this was because sociologists almost never used social problem as a concept in their writings: the term was basically reserved for the title of undergraduate courses and the textbooks intended for those courses. But there was another problem: the critics tended to have trouble suggesting an alternative definition – it seemed natural to think of social problems as problematic conditions.

The solution to this muddle emerged once Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) published *The Social Construction of Reality*. They framed their book as a contribution to the rather esoteric sub-field of the sociology of knowledge, but sociologists realized that its perspective could be applied to all sorts of topics. The term "social construction" soon began to catch on among sociologists studying various specialties, including deviance, science, the news media, and social problems (Best 2008).

During the 1970s, scholars such as Herbert Blumer (1971), Armand Mauss (1975), and John Kitsuse and Malcolm Spector (1977) began arguing that social problems should be understood in terms of processes, rather than conditions. The most influential of these statements – Spector and Kitsuse's *Constructing Social Problems* – explicitly adopted the language of social constructionism. Their book began with an provocative sentence: «There is no adequate definition of social problems within sociology, and there is not and never has been a sociology of social problems» (p.1). In other words, all those social problems courses taught over the decades, all those textbooks titled *Social Problems*--to say nothing of the Society for the Study of Social Problems and its journal *Social Problems*--had failed to define their subject.

Spector and Kitsuse (1977: 75) offered a new definition: social problems were «the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions». This was a radical redefinition: it shifted the focus away from social conditions by dismissing them as "putative" (meaning it did not matter whether a condition actually existed, so long as some people made claims about it), and toward activities–the process of making claims. In this view, sociologists of social problems should study claimsmaking, rather than conditions. Beginning in the late 1970s, case studies of how particular social problems had been constructed began to appear, with titles such as: "The 'Discovery' of Child Abuse" (Pfohl 1977), "Rape as a Social Problem: A Byproduct of the Feminist Movement" (Rose 1977), and "The Battered Women Movement and the Creation of the Wife Beating Problem" (Tierney 1982) – all articles published in *Social Problems* between 1977 and 1982. Notice that these analysts sometimes used synonyms for

constructing – social problems could be discovered, created, manufactured, and so on.

Even as the approach spread, it was becoming apparent there were difficulties with a constructionist theory of social problems. There was an underlying debate among qualitative sociologists, a tension between analysts who saw themselves as working in a symbolic interactionist tradition, and those who considered themselves phenomenologists. Berger and Luckmann's understanding of social construction was phenomenological, and the late 1960s and early 1970s were a period when many American sociologists were interested in developing phenomenology and ethnomethodology. They included John Kitsuse, whose principal works adopted a phenomenological approach. In contrast, other prominent sociologists who adopted a constructionist approach, such as Herbert Blumer and Joseph Gusfield, saw themselves as interactionists.

This tension came to a head in 1985, when Steve Woolgar (a prominent phenomenological sociologist of science) and Dorothy Pawluch published "Ontological Gerrymandering"– a critique of constructionist studies of social problems (Woolgar and Pawluch 1985). They argued that constructionism inevitably featured an internal contradiction: on the one hand, constructionists called into question the assumptions the people they studied made about social conditions by arguing that all reality was socially constructed; yet, on the other hand, Woolgar and Pawluch noted that constructionists themselves seemed to make assumptions about what was and wasn't real. They illustrated this critique by noting that, while discussing changing definitions of marijuana, Spector and Kitsuse (1977: 43) had asserted: "The nature of marijuana remained constant." Woolgar and Pawluch (1985: 217) pounced: «The key assertion is that the actual character of a substance (marijuana), condition, or behavior remained constant». In other words, didn't Spector and Kitsuse – and by extension every constructionist analyst – need to make assumptions about the nature of underlying reality in order to argue that changing claims about any social problem were interesting?

At first, this criticism was taken very seriously, especially by those with a phenomenological orientation (Holstein and Miller 1993). Some responded that perhaps constructionists needed to phrase their arguments more carefully, but it soon became obvious that even the most careful language about particular claims required making assumptions. Soon, these so-called strict constructionists were arguing that studies of social problems ought to avoid actually doing empirical research in favor of abstract theorizing, yet even these theories also incorporated assumptions (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993).

The problem with the strict constructionist position is that–as Berger and Luckmann pointed out–humans depend on language to make sense of their

world, and language inevitably constructs the world in particular ways (Best 1993). That is, language is a vehicle that carries assumptions; no one who uses chooses particular words can avoid incorporating their assumptions about reality. Although analysts occasionally declare that their research has been conducted as piece of a strict constructionist analysis, a careful inspection of their text inevitably reveals that they, too, have committed ontological gerrymandering. Today, even scholars generally sympathetic with phenomenology concede that a purely strict constructionist approach is impossible (Gubrium and Holstein 2008; Weinberg 2014).

Meanwhile, analysts working in the interactionist tradition–the so-called contextual constructionists have built a literature with many hundreds of empirical contributions. Contextual constructionism concedes that it is impossible to write about social life without making assumptions about reality. But all scientists make such assumptions. Just as Spector and Kitsuse assumed that the nature of marijuana had not changed, chemists routinely assume that chemical elements do not change, astronomers assume that moon's orbit does not change, and so on. Such assumptions are rarely the point of their analyses. In the case of constructionist analysts of social problems, the goal is to understand how and why particular issues become the focus of public concern, which involves understanding the cultural, structural, and historical context within which claims are made–hence the name *contextual* constructionism.

Constructionism has emerged as the principal theory of social problems. Of course, all sorts of sociologists--using a wide variety of theoretical orientations and methodologies–continue to study aspects of crime, poverty, and other conditions widely viewed as social problems. This has been true throughout sociology's history. But, as Spector and Kitsuse observed, those studies almost never use social problem as a concept. In contrast, constructionists focus on the definitional processes that all social problems have in common. That is, what suicide and globalization have in common is that people consider them – construct them as – social problems, and constructionists study that process. They adopt a comparative framework: they seek to understand how claims-making processes across different social problems resemble or differ from one another. The concept of social problems actually is at the center of constructionist analyses.

In the United States, the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP) has become the intellectual home for many constructionists. Several prominent constructionists have served as SSSP's president, or as the editor of its journal *Social Problems*. But the perspective has spread far beyond SSSP, to other disciplines and other countries. Thus, Japanese sociologists have published several English-language analyses of social problems construction in

Japan, and–I presume–many more works in Japanese. We can take satisfaction in the 2005 declaration by the editors of the American Sociological Association's magazine *Contexts*: «We are all social constructionists today, almost» (Jasper and Goodwin 2005: 3)

However, I want to argue that complacency is ill-advised. All academics who study the histories of their disciplines can point to intellectual fads. In sociology, we can recognize faddish enthusiasms for particular theoretical perspectives, research methods, and research topics. When I was an undergraduate sociology major, the major journals were filled with studies of small groups, and Talcott Parsons was widely considered to be the leading American sociological theorist. My introductory sociology textbook discussed the early history of American sociology without even mentioning W. E. B. Du Bois. Today, of course, small group studies and Parsons occupy much less central places in American sociology, while Du Bois has come to be viewed as the most significant U.S. figure in our discipline's early history. Today, the pages of the leading American sociology journals are filled with research on social movements, gender, and economic sociology–topics that were neglected fifty years earlier. From a distance, it is apparent that sociology–like all academic disciplines–is subject to fads (Best 2006).

Of course, the long-term prospects of different concepts, models, theories, and methodologies can be hard to predict at any given moment. No doubt, those small-group researchers and Parsonians not only viewed their work as important, but anticipated that the future would be filled with even more studies of small groups and work further extending Parsons's theorizing. They would not have been able to predict the new, very different scholarly directions their discipline would take. Similarly, many of today's sociologists doubtless assume that studies of social movements, gender, and economic sociology will remain central topics within sociology. They might be right, but then again...

What accounts for academic fads? Three factors seem to be important. First, scholarship demands that a new work make a contribution, that it add something to what is already known. Moreover, this contribution should not be merely substantive. That is, it may be true that no one has published an article describing the social construction of social problem X. But there are already hundreds of studies of the social construction of various social problems, and the editors of major journals are unlikely to be eager to publish yet another such study demonstrating that essentially the same thing occurred in the case of X. Editors favor papers that make theoretical or methodological contributions, that extend either some theoretical perspective (for instance, focusing on a previously neglected aspect of the process of social construction) or research methods (for example, by analyzing data on social construction

in a new way). When analysts have difficulty identifying theoretical or methodological contributions, their findings seem familiar, perhaps boring, and they find it more difficult to place their work in prominent journals. Over time, an analytic approach that isn't evolving theoretically or methodologically becomes less visible within the discipline, and scholars begin to turn to other, more interesting, more fashionable projects. Sharks, we are told, die if they remain still; they must keep swimming to survive. In much the same way, scholarly specialties like constructionism also need to keep developing in order to thrive.

Second, one way to keep a scholarly specialty healthy is to establish an organizational apparatus to support its advance. Starting a new, specialized scholarly society, holding meetings for individuals working in the specialty, creating a new journal devoted to work within the specialty, and awarding prizes for the best examples of this work are standard ways of institutionalizing a specialty. Constructionist studies of social problems have at various times had some book series, such as the Aldine de Gruyter book series "Social Problems and Social Issues" started by John Kitsuse and Joseph Schneider that published more than 50 volumes between 1987 and 2004, and the annual *Perspectives on Social Problems* volumes edited by James Holstein and Gale Miller (1989-2000). Such arrangements assure prospective researchers that their work can find a home, that their submissions are likely to be read by sympathetic reviewers. Currently, however, constructionists do not have any special forum for publishing their work; rather, they have tended to operate under the broader umbrella of SSSP and its Social Problems Theory division, which offer relatively little in the way of institutional support. And without strong institutional supports, it is easy for a specialty to fade, to be remembered as just another academic fad.

Third, scholarly specialties need to be able to defend themselves from rivals' critiques. Here, it is worth taking a lesson from the sociology of deviance (Best 2004). In the 1960s, deviance – and particularly labeling theory – was a hot topic within sociology (note that such leading constructionists as John Kitsuse and Joseph Gusfield initially rose to prominence as labeling theorists). Yet, by the 1970s, the sociology of deviance began to recede in importance as it attracted a great deal of criticism; these attacks came from several different directions–conflict theorists, feminists, advocates for identity politics, and mainstream sociologists all criticized the labeling approach, and labeling lost its momentum and has never really recovered. Compared to labeling's remarkable growth spurt in the 1960s, there have been relatively few Important contributions to labeling theory in the past forty years. Academic specialties that cannot defend themselves risk becoming fads.

So, consider constructionism's situation. Constructionism certainly has some critics. R. A. Dello Buono's (2015) gave his presidential address before SSSP entitled "Reimagining Social Problems: Moving Beyond Social Constructionism," which argued that constructionism had failed: «its ability to generate new insights for confronting social problems is ebbing, as is its strategic capacity to interface with the 'actually existing' struggles unfolding in the current global economic crisis» (p. 331). Other critics assume that the constructionist approach has only limited utility. They imagine a sort of vulgar constructionism that equates socially constructed with false beliefs. That is, they are happy to agree that UFO abductions are a socially constructed problem, yet they insist poverty is a genuine social problem. In this view, social constructionists are understood to study moral panics, collective delusions, mass hysteria, and other episodes of irrational collective behavior. Obviously, this critique fails to understand what social constructionists do. However, these critics do not really threaten constructionism, because most sociologists do not so much criticize constructionism as ignore it. Outside constructionist circles, it remains true that social problems is just a course title, rather than a concept actually featured in sociological analysis.

What of the other characteristics of academic fads? Currently, constructionism has only limited institutional protections. Although there are two social problems textbooks that adopt constructionist stances (Doni Loseke's *(2003) Thinking about Social Problems* emphasizes phenomenological issues, while my *Social Problems* adopts a more interactionist approach [Best 2017]), most of the market remains divided among more traditional books that address one problem per chapter. While there is an active network of constructionist sociologists, they constitute a small minority of those who teach social problems classes, or who belong to SSSP. This means that, given their modest institutional resources, constructionists lack the sorts of support that might protect them from shifts in academic fashions. SSSP offers a place where constructionists can gather, but the vast majority of SSSP members have little interest in social constructionism.

All of this is to say that the future of constructionist studies of social problems is far from certain. However pleased constructionists may be with their perspective's growth, there is no guarantee that it will continue to thrive as an academic enterprise. It is not enough to continue doing what we already do. The key question is whether we are doing enough to encourage scholars to extend the perspective, to find ways to make further theoretical or methodological contributions. Such contributions can keep the perspective lively; they can inspire authors to study fresh, engaging topics, which in turn will encourage editors to publish more constructionist research. The rest of this presentation

will attempt to identify what strike me as five particularly promising directions for future developments of the constructionist stance.

First, I think it is important that we move beyond case studies (Best 2015). Both Blumer (1971) and Spector and Kitsuse (1977) offered natural-history models of the stages through which they believed social problems were constructed. A number of early constructionist articles simply applied one of those models to a case. Spector and Kitsuse clearly thought this was how constructionist studies ought to develop; they recommended that: «Detailed analyses of individual cases should shed light on how future cases should be analyzed» (p. 158). Whereas early case studies tended to follow the natural history models by depicting the process of social problems social construction from the initial claims through (usually) the establishment of some social policy, later studies tended to focus on particular stages in the process, and often on particular aspects of those stages. Thus, case studies examined the rhetoric of claimsmaking, or even the use of horror stories or statistics as key features of such rhetoric. This was an important form of contribution, focusing on some specific aspect of claims or claimsmakers fostered a fuller understanding of the larger process of social construction.

We now have hundreds of constructionist case studies, and the vast majority deal with a single case. It is easy to see practical reasons why case studies are popular: analysts who study the details of a single case for a reasonable amount of time can often produce a publishable article; it takes more effort and time to conduct a study of two or more cases. Occasionally, analysts will present research that compares two or–rarely–three cities, countries, time periods, or social problems: This is how homelessness was constructed differently in Washington, D.C. and New York City (Bogard 2003); this is how sexual harassment was constructed differently in the U.S. and France (Saguy 2003); and so on. But the great majority of constructionist work focuses on the specifics of one, or occasionally two or three cases, rather than generalizing.

This points to a key flaw in much qualitative sociology. One of the central documents in its development was *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1965) which argued for the value of inductive reasoning in sociology. They argued that the deductive model for sociological theorizing, in which hypotheses derived from some overarching theory, was only one method of doing social science. An alternative was inductive reasoning–building theory through generalizations based on case studies; they called this grounded theory, in that it was grounded on observations of the empirical world. Qualitative sociologists in particular seized upon this model because it offered a justification for case studies. Ethnographers had always been vulnerable to critics asking why people should care about the specific

details analyzed in their work. Grounded theory seemed to offer answer to that critique. Case studies should be seen as building blocks: once a body of case studies had been collected, their results could be compared and used to develop theoretical generalizations that would encompass a broad range of phenomena. Case studies should be the foundation for building grounded theories; and grounded theories therefore justified, gave a reason for conducting case studies.

The problem with the grounded theory model has become obvious. It is fairly easy to conduct a piece of research, say, a study of the construction of some social problem. Academia readily rewards such work, which can be turned into conference presentations and journal articles. But there seem to be fewer rewards for those who synthesize theories based on the results of a body of research. While there are venues that publish review articles, these tend to involve critiques, rather than theory-building. There don't seem to be a lot of works of grounded theory being published. There are many studies of the rhetoric of social problems claims, of media coverage of social problems, or the ways social problems workers implement social policies, and so on, but relatively few efforts to build grounded theories of social problems rhetoric, media coverage, or social problems work. Without such grounded theories, the constructionist literature risks becoming a great heap of unrelated studies.

This is why I argue we need to move beyond case studies. Constructionists need to make more comparisons, both within the confines of a particular piece of research (that is, it is preferable to study constructions of homelessness in more than one city, as opposed to studying the process in a single city), but also through efforts to review bodies of different studies in order to identify the similarities and differences in their findings, and then go on to, not only make generalizations across their findings, but also identify questions that could guide analysts in choosing research topics that might further clarify the field's findings. Given that we have hundreds of published works dealing with aspects of social problems construction, we have a responsibility to work toward grounded theories of these processes. Failure to develop larger theories will consign constructionist work to sociology's margins.

Second, we need to move beyond ethnocentrism. It should be obvious that, at least in my view, sociological studies of social problems construction began in the United States, and while there is constructionist research published in English that deals with the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, the Netherlands, Italy, France, Germany, Scandinavia, Japan, and China, it remains true that the largest share of constructionist work has been done by U.S. scholars studying social problems construction in the United States. (I realize that there are studies being published in other languages, but they

are less likely to come to the attention of monolingual Americans, such as myself. It is not impossible that parallel constructionist literatures in different languages could coexist.)

The fact that constructionist research has been U.S.-centric poses an important problem–ethnocentrism. Most ethnocentrism is not intentional, so much as a reflection of limited experience. But it is especially easy for Americans to be ethnocentric: most of us are monolingual, and we often have very limited experience with other cultures, which makes it easy to assume that the social arrangements we are familiar with are widespread, if not universal

Let me give you an example from my own work. Drawing on the work of other scholars, I often refer to the social problems marketplace (Best 2017). This image is intended to highlight the competition among claims. That, I liken claimsmakers to vendors in a traditional bazaar, hawking their wares by shouting to attract the attention of passersby. In my mind, this image captures claimsmakers' struggles to get people to listen in a world with hundreds of television channels and billions of webpages. When I was a college student, the United States had three major tv networks, each running a half-hour long, weekday news program that attracted about thirty percent of the viewers. It was hard for activists to get television coverage of their campaigns, but if they succeeded, their message could reach a substantial fraction of the population. Today there are countless televised or web-based talk shows; it is relatively easy to get one's claims on tv, but most of those shows reach a fraction of one percent of the viewing audience. These changes have consequences: the audiences for particular programs become more homogeneous, more like-minded, so that it is easier to reach people who may agree with you while, at the same time, it is much harder to get your message out to a very wide audience.

Envisioning a competition among claimsmakers makes sense to Americans because ours is a culture that celebrates competition. We have a capitalist culture that generally thinks in terms of competitors and markets. Our jurists speak of a "marketplace of ideas" when justifying free speech; in an open society, they argue, the best ideas will thrive. But other societies may use very different arrangements to advance social problems claims. In authoritarian states such as China, for example, the state attempts to set the agenda by drawing attention to some problems, even as it seeks to obstruct others' rival claims (Xu 2015, 2017). And, I gather from reading the works of Japanese scholars that activists and their protests play lesser roles in Japan, while lawyers play much more prominent parts in the social problems process than they do in the United States (Ayukawa 2001, 2015). In other words, while it may make sense for Americans to describe a social problems marketplace, that image may be less applicable in other countries. The metaphor of the social

problems marketplace is a bit of unintentional ethnocentrism.

All of this means that we need studies of social problems construction in many different places. Comparisons among claimsmaking in different places, whether they are different neighborhoods in the same city, or different nations across the globe is a key way of moving beyond cases, but it can also help us move beyond ethnocentric assumptions. While we can hope that constructionist literatures will emerge in a variety of countries in different languages, it is also important that scholars find ways to communicate their findings across language barriers.

Third, constructionist studies need to address differences across time, as well as space. Most social problems have histories; they have been constructed and reconstructed again and again (Parsons 2014). Many problems exhibit a pattern of cyclical episodes of intense concern that reoccur every generation or two (Jenkins 1998). But the specifics of these claims tend to shift, to reflect new cultural and structural arrangements. Note, too, that social problems claims often construct a future. That is, there are warnings that however bad things may be today, they are likely to be even worse tomorrow.

Sociology tends to be preoccupied with the present; most sociological research reports on some current topic. But, of course, sociology began as a reaction to the Industrial Revolution, and the great classical theorists–Durkheim, Marx, and Weber--framed their analyses in terms of social change, trying to understand the transition from the preindustrial past, to the new arrangements of industrial society. A sense of history is part of sociology's original DNA. And given the constructionist appreciation of social problems as processes, sociologists of social problems are used to thinking in terms of narratives about the passage of time. Still, constructionists rarely exploit the possibilities of historical analysis.

Comparisons across time offer many of the same advantages as comparisons across space: they, too, allow analysts to explore the processes of social problems construction when social arrangements vary. Recent technological developments, in particular offer opportunities for comparison. The availability of new electronic communications technologies–personal computers, tablets, smartphones, the Internet, social media, etc., etc. are altering the ways social problems emerge and evolve (Maratea 2014). Social construction is, after all, fundamentally about communication via claimsmaking, and a sudden realization that some new communication method is reshaping social life has become a routine form of social commentary. This revolution has several elements:

Speed. Messages take less time to travel, not just because electronic transmission occurs essentially at the speed of life, but also because people spend more

of their time available to receive messages. Smartphones make instantaneous reception possible under most circumstances.

Size of Audience. Social media make it possible for even private individuals to communicate with large numbers of people. Some public figures have nearly 100 million followers.

Audience homogeneity. At the same time that audiences have grown, they have become more homogeneous. Sixty years ago, social commentators were worrying about mass media and mass culture producing an Orwellian mass society, in which everyone received the same messages from Big Brother. Those predictions proved to be wildly wrong. Back when there were three major television networks, it was easy to argue that there was no real difference among them, but when there are hundreds of networks, it is economically advantageous to target a specific segment of the population, so that television features cable channels tailored to attract viewers of specific ages, genders, ethnic groups, religions, political ideologies, and so on. This means that it has become very easy to reach, and therefore to share social problems claims among like-minded people. But it also means that different sectors of society may be less aware of what other sectors are thinking about social issues.

These technological developments have also created a fourth direction in which constructionists might expand their literature–by making methodological contributions. Forty years ago, practical considerations limited an American sociologist who wanted to track the emergence of claims about some social problem to looking at coverage in the *New York Times* (which was the only newspaper with a reasonably detailed index), the 200-some popular magazines indexed in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, the three evening network news programs, or congressional hearing transcripts. That was a world, not just without the Internet, but one in which electronic resources were not yet affecting publishing or libraries. Today, of course, those printed newspapers and magazines that continue to survive are shrinking, the vast majority of claims are online. and libraries offer fabulous electronic tools for searching for all sorts of information, to say nothing of the search engines available to individuals on the Web. These resources present new, extraordinarily rich opportunities to locate social problems claims.

Constructionist sociologists – and other scholars – have begun to exploit these new resources by studying claimsmaking: they use electronic indexes for newspapers, television transcripts, and other media; they sample the content of websites, blogposts, and social media; and they are beginning to make use of big data. Google, for instance, offers a number of useful tools, such as Google Books (which enables a researcher to track the appearance of a word

or phrase in the books Google has downloaded across time–some 25 million titles in the U.S.) and Google Trends (which allows us to track terms used in Google searches beginning in 2004). Other researchers have been analyzing patterns in Goggle searches (Stephens-Davidowitz 2017).

Thus far, researchers have been using these methods in fairly casual ways. Often, it is difficult to understand just what a particular database holds, or how it is being sampled. We need a more substantial methodological literature to guide scholars considering adopting these techniques.

A fifth direction in which constructionism might expand is beyond sociology. Constructionist thinking can be found in a range of disciplines. This began to occur shortly after Berger and Luckmann published *The Social Construction of Reality*; the term migrated across all sorts of academic borders, into the natural sciences, the humanities, and the helping professions, as well as the other social sciences. In many cases, people who used the term social construction found themselves talking about very different things.

Sociologists of social problems are most likely to find collaborations with colleagues in the other social sciences most helpful. There is, for example, a growing literature in political science that tries to understand the social construction of policymaking (Schneider and Ingram 2005). Similarly, there are constructionist literatures in psychology, as well as social work and other applied social scientific disciplines.

I also believe that constructionist sociologists ought to reach out to the emerging field of behavioral economics. These economists have begun to appreciate that humans often make choices that fail to match the "economic rationality" predicted by economic models. However, in their efforts to understand this behavior, behavioral economists have turned to psychology, viewing choice-making as internal to the person making the choice (e.g.). They ignore the degree to which are choices are shaped by social context, by our culture and social structure. It seems to me that the perspective of constructionist sociologists might make valuable contributions to understanding why choices often fall short of economic rationality. A satisfactory explanation for why, say, some students choose not to focus on their studies or why some people begin to use addictive drugs probably requires looking beyond psychological processes in order to understand how the people making these troubling choices construct their lives.

These suggestions are to move beyond case studies; to strive to minimize ethnocentrism; to explore both the past and the future, as well as the present; to take new methodological opportunities seriously; and to foster interdisciplinary connections among constructionists–strike me as offering rich opportunities for constructionist research and analysis. And I believe that it

is important that constructionists seize these opportunities. It is easy to settle comfortably into continuing to do what we already know how to do. But that will encourage others to view us as predictable and boring. Like that shark that needs to keep swimming to survive, the constructionist sociology of social problems needs to continue evolving in new directions if it is to thrive.

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