

# What use is social problems theory? Forty years of uninterrupted reflection. An interview with Malcolm Spector

*Edited by Enrico Caniglia and Luca Recchi*



Malcolm Spector può essere considerato il co-fondatore, assieme a John Kitsuse, dell'approccio costruzionista ai problemi sociali. È stato co-autore, sempre assieme a Kitsuse, dei tre articoli, apparsi ai primi degli anni Settanta nella rivista «Social Problems» che inaugurarono il filone costruzionista dei problemi sociali, nonché coautore, ancora una volta con Kitsuse, del testo di riferimento principale dell'approccio: *Constructing Social Problems*, apparso nel 1977 e poi variamente ristampato nel corso degli anni. Ha insegnato prima alla Northwestern University, Chicago, dove ha incontrato per la prima volta John Kitsuse, e poi alla McGill University, in Canada. Dorothy Pawluch, coautrice assieme a Steven Woolgar di un contributo critico fondamentale nello sviluppo della teoria costruzionista sui problemi sociali, è stata una sua allieva alla McGill. Spector si è occupato degli aspetti teorici dell'approccio costruzionista e ha compiuto diverse ricerche empiriche in questo ambito.

*You are the author of fundamental papers in the sociology of social problems. Your most important and relevant published essays are signed by both you and J. Kitsuse as authors: how did you meet each other? Which was your way of working together?*

I was a student, both undergraduate and graduate, at Northwestern University in Evanston Illinois between 1961 and 1968. John Kitsuse was a professor there. As an undergraduate student, I took his courses, especially a criminology course in which he relied on the work of Edwin Lemert, one of his mentors. As a graduate student at Northwestern I also studied with John and worked as his research assistant on several small-scale studies, which focused on “the societal reaction.” John was on my thesis committee but my thesis was not a study in the sociology of deviance or social problems. It was an occupational study of an office of government tax attorneys, in the tradition that

Everett C. Hughes developed at the University of Chicago. Howard Becker was my dissertation director.

I finished by doctorate in 1968 and moved to Montreal, where I taught in the Sociology Department at McGill University. In the early 1970s John invited me to teach a graduate seminar in sociological theory with him at Northwestern University. Our work together on the social construction of social problems began in that seminar. A number of writers, going back to the 1920s, had written that, «Social problems are what people think they are». But this idea had never led to any consistent approach to studying the definitional process. Our aim in that seminar was explain why people who began with that original idea eventually fell back into the more conventional functionalist or positivist approaches.

*Can you tell us something about the situation of the sociological studies and the academic context of that field of during the Seventies, when you and Kitsuse wrote your three essays in «Social Problems» (1973a, 1973b, 1975) introducing your theoretical proposal? Could you explain us a bit how you reached that theoretical formulation?*

There was no substantive research area called “social problems” at that time. Social Problems was an introductory course for undergraduate students not studying sociology. At the same time, the study of deviance was emerging as an alternative to the study of crime and its causes. In *Outsiders*, Howard Becker presented naturalistic, anthropological or ethnographic research reports on marijuana smokers and jazz musicians, outsiders or deviants. Becker also proposed that an essential part of studying those outsiders was investigating how these individuals came to be labeled as deviant. David Matza’s book, *Becoming Deviant*, provided a powerful conceptual analysis of the different approaches to becoming deviant.

There were conceptual problems with labeling theory, particularly the “secret deviant” discussed by Becker. How could deviance be secret if labeling creates it? One had to be careful in talking about what “reactions to deviants” were reactions to. Could one talk about, and study, the societal reaction to deviance? Or did one have to confine the perspective to the societal reaction that constitutes or creates deviance? John Kitsuse always took the latter view and thus he proposed a “labeling theory of social problems,” in which the subject matter would be the societal (or social) activities that create definitions of social problems, and the condition defined as a problem would always be a “putative condition.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In a brilliant essay, Prudence Rains, another student of both John Kitsuse and Howard Becker, described the key role of this concept. «Like the term ‘alleged,’ ‘putative’ is intentionally, even ostentatiously, careful talk, allowing one to speak of something without commitment to its

*Social constructionism was introduced by Berger and Luckmann in the mid Sixties. What was your opinion of this theory and how did Kitsuse's and your idea of social constructionism differ from Berger and Luckmann's?*

Berger and Luckmann's book was only one of many approaches to social constructionism. Symbolic interactionism and the so-called Chicago School of Sociology were others. All of these interpretive approaches focus on how people construct and interpret their social relations, institutions and reality. The same is true of the labeling approach to deviance. None of these relied on Berger and Luckmann. Indeed, I do not think that we ever cited Berger and Luckmann. I may have read their book as a student, but I never used it in teaching. I do not consider it an important influence on my work. I do not remember that John ever cited it or relied on it.

*Which was your contribution to the three well-known essays published in «Social Problems» (1973a; 1973b e 1975), that had been signed by you and J. Kitsuse together? In which measure did you participate in the theoretical and written organization of the essays?*

Most readers will recognize that the intellectual style of our work was the culmination of the brilliant career of John I. Kitsuse. John made no attempt to be reasonable. He rejected a "balanced approach." He did not compromise. He did not synthesize competing paradigms. He did not try to convert the opposition. He did not try to make everyone happy. At most, he diffidently remarked that his work was a methodological critique of more positivist work. The lessons from his work for students of theory extend far beyond the confines of the study of social problems.

John had already published his critique of official statistics. With Aaron Cicourel, he had published a study of how high school guidance counselors advised students on their college plans. John was a student of and follower of Edwin Lemert, whose distinction between primary and secondary deviation introduced labeling theory ideas in his textbook, *Social Pathology*.

John wanted to apply to social problems the "societal reaction" approach. His style was to isolate one idea and follow it to its conclusion. But all previous writers who had flirted with the societal reaction approach to social problems failed to follow this idea. Our first article described how they deviated from this idea. The same is true of the article on social problems and deviance. Although John and I worked together, exchanging many drafts of these two articles and chapters, the style, the goals and the methods are those that John pursued throughout his intellectual career.

actuality.... The phrase 'reactions that impute mental illness' does not, after all, require mental illness in the same way that the phrase 'reactions to mental illness' does». (1975:3).

*We found interesting the idea of the 'natural history' of social problem. What is the path that led you to use this conceptual tool? What are the advantages and/or disadvantages or criticalities of this approach?*

Once you have decided to focus exclusively on the definitional process, the next question is how do you study it? One major goal of *Constructing Social Problems* was to provide tools to launch and support an empirical substantive area into the definitional process. The concept of "natural history" is one of those tools. As "history," it urges the researcher to develop case studies in the construction of definitions of social problems. The "natural" part of natural history urges the researcher to look for commonalities across case studies of such definitions. For example, many troublesome behaviors have been sequentially defined as sins, then as crimes, and then as diseases.

A second component of the natural history concept is that as a social problems definition develops through claims, counter-claims and responses, the reference of the claims may, itself, evolve. The first wave of claims may complain that nothing is being done about X. Then when there is some response, the claim may be that what is being done about X is wrong. We did not intend to suggest that all social problems definitions would go through these two stages, only that over time the focus of the claim might undergo change.

Most of the tools proposed to advance research on the definitional process were borrowed from the Chicago School of Sociology and its tradition of studying work, occupations, the professions and communities. Our aim was to identify a set of easily observable activities and provide a theoretical rationale and empirical tools to study them.

*The publication of your three essays inaugurated a new branch of researches. Several essays in that field of studies appeared in years mainly in «Social Problems»: we are thinking about the writings of Pfhol, Loseke, Best, Gusfield, etc. What are your general opinions about these essays? Do you think that they were aligned with your original idea of a sociology of social problems, or did they move away from it?*

In general, I cannot complain that these essays misrepresent our approach. All of the authors are sympathetic to the definitional approach. Their research reports focus on some part of the definitional process. Most of the essays are reflections based on the research experience. I particularly admire the work of Valerie Jenness and the work of Donileen Loseke. Both did research based on observational studies of the use and construction of social problems definitions. Their work is unusual and special because many other case studies of social problems rely primarily on documentary evidence.

Some of the essays that draw on ethnomethodology are somewhat removed from the main thrust of *Constructing Social Problems*. However, I recognize that John Kitsuse was much more sympathetic to the ethnomethodological

project than I was. This is evident in his subsequent work with Peter Ibarra, which I discuss below. The best of the early essays is by Woolgar and Pawluch, which I also discuss below.

As a general matter, there is a danger that our field can become bogged down with theoretical hair-splitting and overly subtle distinctions. This can create a fear that unless the writer adheres perfectly to some orthodoxy, the work will be terribly flawed. That should not be the case. The empirical field of study is easily identified and most researchers have had no trouble focusing exclusively on the definitional process.

*Steve Woolgar and Dorothy Pawluch, in 1985, criticized your essays with the ‘ontological gerrimandering’ argument. Pawluch has been your student and scholar. Can you tell us something about the background of the appearance of the ontological gerrimandering critique? Did you have the chance to discuss about it with D. Pawluch previously? Did you already personally know Woolgar at the time?*

Dorothy Pawluch was a doctoral student at McGill University during the time I was editor of *Social Problems*. She studied with me, worked on the journal, and wrote her dissertation on the New Pediatrics, a studied that combined an interest in the professions, deviance and social problems. Steve Woolgar was a visiting professor in the Department of Sociology at McGill for several years in the early 1980s. I knew him quite well. After I finished my term as editor of *Social Problems* I went on sabbatical and while I was away Steve taught the course in social problems that I had been teaching for a number of years. My understanding is that while he was teaching that course, he and Dorothy began to do the research that led to their article. It was submitted to *Social Problems*, reviewed, and published by the subsequent editor. I see that the authors thank me for my “helpful comments” in preparing the manuscript, but I do not specifically remember whether I read and commented on the manuscript before or after it was accepted for publication.

Criticism of *Constructing Social Problems* got off to very good start with the article by Woolgar and Pawluch. They get high marks for actually reading, very closely, all of the research done up to that time. Their critique has a brilliant knife-edge. You always feel that they are sympathetic to the approach. However, right up to the end, I had the sinking feeling that we might have to pack our bags and look for another line of work. But then magically, on the last page, they let us off the hook. The gerrymandering is, in their words, “inevitable and unavoidable.” Ah, well, that’s a relief. We could unpack our bags and go back to business.

Their point was essentially philosophical, but we are not philosophers. There are philosophers who share our curiosity about the world. They would

do empirical research if only they could solve all the logical, conceptual, epistemological and methodological problems, and deduce a set of testable hypotheses. But they cannot. Instead, they are condemned to a lifetime of thinking.

As sociologists, on the other hand, we are committed to doing research, even if we cannot, and have not, solved all these problems. We know that research is messy, especially our kind of research. We know our tools are flawed. We know our own story is intertwined with the story of our subjects, both the story of our (low caste) discipline, and our story as individual researchers. And yet we do not let that stop us.

Another interpretation of the findings of Woolgar and Pawluch is that the research reports they studied were published when the definitional approach was in its infancy and was, to say the least, neither well established, nor well respected. The authors were members of a more or less irrelevant and irreverent fringe group of young scholars. In the same year that *Constructing Social Problems* was published, my own department turned me down for tenure. They said my written work was not promising.

So, while presenting impeccable constructionist case studies, many young scholars inserted the kind of “reasonable” statements that Woolgar and Pawluch highlight, to please Chairs, Deans, and Editors. Fortunately these pressures did not lead them to focus on the “causes of the conditions.”

We must not let the philosophers put us in chains. Several commentators – Mel Pollner and Joel Best come to mind – have written that the more we focus on these conceptual conundrums the less able we are to do research, and the research that we are able to do is limited to the point of triviality.

*We are very interesting in your personal idea about the answer formulated by Ibarra and Kitsuse to the Woolgar and Pawluch critique. Do you find it persuasive? Would you modify or adjust it in some ways? Do you think that the loss of importance of the social and historical context in favor of arguments and argumentation's construction is it a fundamental issue within Ibarra-Kitsuse's answer?*

I will admit that for over twenty years I have returned to, and puzzled over, John's work with Peter Ibarra. They seem to have struggled mightily with the bedeviling conceptual problem of the status of the sociologist and the logical status of his or her “members' perspective” in the definitional process. Some people have written that they solved this dilemma. I do not find their proposed replacement of the concept of claims-making with “condition category” useful. When I look at their quasi-literary criticism and content analysis of words and phrases in our culture and language, I do not see a program for a vigorous research agenda on the social problems process.

The perspective of the sociologist is present in different ways. It will always be present when sociologists choose something to study. They will always

choose to study something they think is important. Who would choose to spend months or years studying something that is not important? There are institutional pressures of many kinds on the researcher. These may relate to the career stage of the researcher, pressures from the university or other institutions where the researcher works, or the status of sociology compared to other disciplines, to name a few. These are not conceptual problems, but are themselves research topics, if anyone finds them interesting enough to study. I think we must live with, and cope with, our place in the world as we study it and not let it prevent us from doing research or turn us into philosophers.

*You were a pioneer of a field of studies that had attracted a lot of scholars and authors. Which are your personal ideas about the developments of the approach that you co-started? Which are – in your opinion – the most original developments and argumentations, if there are been?*

It has been forty years since the publication of *Constructing Social Problems*. In many ways the goals of our approach have been realized. Everyone who has adopted our approach has succeeded in focusing exclusively on the definitional process. No one has fallen back into a search for the causes of the putative conditions. There may still be positivists and functionalists teaching social problems, but now the study of the social problems process has emerged as a separate field of research, and many who have followed this approach have had excellent careers and produced a large body of interesting work.

Looking back, some of our key concepts seem slightly archaic or out of date. Our central concept, claims-making activities, and the image that the claimant is a member of, or spokesperson for, a social movement organization, now seems slightly archaic or out of date. Of course these claims-makers and social movements still exist, but times have changed. The constituencies and resources that can be assembled instantly through social media have radically altered the landscape of social disapproval. There was no discussion of “going viral” in *Constructing Social Problems*, but we have to deal with it now.

In addition to telling the stories of individual social problems, I have always been interested in the institutional context, the infrastructure of the definitional process. As the examples in chapter 1 of *Constructing Social Problems* show, I was particularly interested in groups and individuals who create categories and new words, and who used these categories to process or sort new items or issues: cataloguers at the Library of Congress, committees that revise *Diagnostic and Statistical Manuals of Diseases*<sup>2</sup>, or other systems of catego-

<sup>2</sup>I wrote an article describing how the American Psychiatric Association decided that homosexuality was not a mental illness.

ries such as the *Yellow Pages*, or *The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*. This list alone shows how much has changed in forty years. Google and its massive content-based search capabilities have put some of these category workers out of business or driven them to the margins. Going forward we should discover and describe the evolving infrastructure to understand contemporary social problems stories.

*Regarding the theoretical proposals after your book and after the ontological gerrymandering critiques, what is your opinion about the main ones, for example Joel Best's and Darin Weinberg's ones?*

I don't want to focus on the various conceptual distinctions between strict constructionist and contextual constructionists, or hard versus soft constructionism. Once you have decided to study the definitional process and put aside other types of research, the only task is to find substantive tools to help discover and tell the stories of how social problems are constructed. As a person who has written essays, I should not complain when other people write essays. But original research is the engine that drives our field. If the field becomes consumed with and dominated by essays rather than research reports, it will die.

May I offer some advice to the young scholar or potential social problems researcher?

1. Ignore the critical literature. Do not waste too much time reading it. Do not cite it. Do not contribute to it. Do not feel that you have to master it before beginning your empirical research. Do not take sides in the controversies. Do not try to resolve the disagreements. Do not adopt the horrible terminologies and categories found in the literature on "constructionist controversies."
2. Commit to studying some part of the definitional process. Focus only on the definitional process. Put aside other research interests. Do not try to do two (or more) things at once. If you have other interests, for example in the actual nature or causes of some condition that is controversial, do not mix that work with your study of the social problems process.
3. Find some group or institution that participates in the definitional process. Attach yourself to them. Tell their story. Forty years ago John Kitsuse and I promised that these stories would be interesting, (and publishable!) and they have been.
4. Be aware that telling the definitional story shifts the moral discourse. As Prudence Rains wrote, «A decision about what 'reactions to deviance' are reactions to tends also to become a statement about the degree to which such reactions are warranted, and this more implicit matter of moral tone



has also plagued labeling theorists and their critics» (1975:2). If your research is well done, you, too, will be “plagued” by these moral dilemmas. Try to resist and avoid making the kinds of “reasonable” and accommodating statements that attracted the attention of Woolgar and Pawluch.

*You reached the idea that the constructionist component plays a central and fundamental role in social problems: is it still such nowadays, or do you think that the study of constructionist component in social problems have to be put in contact with the study of historical conditions in the definitional processed occurrences?*

The idea is fairly well established that the unique subject matter of the sociology of social problems is the process of social and societal disapproval. This is really all that is needed to define the field: the social construction of social problems. It is a small step further to acknowledge that everything - not just social disapproval - is socially constructed and that researchers should always keep in mind that anything that they might choose to study is also a social construction. Thus, the theoretical rigor that John Kitsuse brought to the early theoretical approaches to social problems could provide useful lessons to those whose interests do not touch on social problems at all. Thank you for your interest in the development of *Constructing Social Problems*.