SOCIAL PROBLEMS THEORY AND RESEARCH

This course examines the emergence, development, application and controversies surrounding “social problems theory.” The focus of the course is on the social constructionist perspective which emerged in the 1970s and has become a dominant frame for studying social problems.

Expectations: The objective of this course is to provide students with an understanding of the constructionist perspective and enable them to conduct their own research on the social construction of a problem of their choice. Students are expected completed the readings for each week, participate in class, complete three short writing assignments, and a major research paper. A goal of this course is that each student complete a research paper that could be presented at a professional meeting or even developed into a publication. The first 9 sessions will involve discussions of readings and issues; the final 3 sessions will be devoted to 20 minute research presentations by each student.

Required Books:


Approximately 25 required Articles will be available in a packet (SP is Social Problems in the syllabus).

Week

1. SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

   Introduction to the Course
   The Chicago School and Social Problems
   Social Problems and Scientific Sociology
   “Labeling Theory” and Social Problems

2. THE EMERGENCE OF THE CONSTRUCTIONIST STANCE

   Readings:
   Spector and Kitsuse, Chapters 1-4.


3. CLAIMS-MAKING AND THE CONSTRUCTIONIST STANCE

   Readings:
   Loeske, Chapters 1-6
   Best and Harris, p. 1-10
   Gusfield, Chapters 1-4.


4. CONSTRUCTIONIST DEBATES

   Steven Woolgar and Dorothy Pawluch, “Ontological gerrymandering: The anatomy of social problems explanations.”
SP 32: 214-27, 1985, with comments by Schneider, Hazelrigg and Pfohl.

Best and Harris (eds.), chapters 8, 9 and 16


Loeske, chapters 6, 8 and appendix

Numbers:


5. THE MEDIA AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM


Best and Scott (eds), Chapters 7 and 9

6. SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND CONSTRUCTIONISM


Best and Harris (eds), Chapter 8

7. MEDICALIZATION OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS


Best and Scott (eds), Chapters 5


8. ANOTHER KIND OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Ian Hacking, chapters 1-13


9. RELATED ISSUES

Moral Panics

Erich Goode, “Moral Panics” *Annual Review of Sociology*


Risk
Kathleen Tierney, “Toward a Critical Sociology of Risk.”

Adam Burgess, “Understanding Health, Risk and Society” (on line)
http://www.kent.ac.uk/sspssr/staff/burgess_risk%20article%20for%20webpage.pdf

Science and constructionism

Policy
Best and Scott (eds.), Chapters 3, 13, 14.

Two articles that were germinated in this class and later published.


Sessions 10-13 will feature the presentation and discussion of student research papers

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