CONSTRUCTIONS OF DEVIANCE, ATTRACTION AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

THE SEDUCTIVE CLAIM:

CONSTRUCTING DEVIANCE, ATTRACTION AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

By

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is composed of three essays that employ a social constructionist perspective to critically examine the way in which sociologists, criminologists and laypeople alike construct their subjects of study. Specifically, each essay examines how claimsmakers establish the "facts of the matter" and construct the frames within which social actors can experience their social realities. In doing so, the essays demonstrate that those who are engaged in analyzing and addressing social problems, crime and deviance act as claimsmakers engaged in constructing the realities they study.

The first of the essays examines the way in which sociologists and criminologists construct deviance and crime through the popular concept of "techniques of neutralization." The author demonstrates how the neutralization concept requires analysts to frame the speech of their subjects in a way that reinforces the deviant label. In doing so, analysts' claims about neutralizing behavior are made sensible.

The second essay focuses on a subculture of male pickup artists. It examines how members of the subculture use evolutionary psychology in their claims about how to attract and seduce women. How these men construct their reality using evolutionary science provides further insights into the processes by which people are constructed and how science is employed in the construction of social problems.

The third essay offers a commentary on the social constructionist approach itself. The author considers the process by which social constructionists themselves define constructionist theories and construct the boundaries of what constitutes legitimate constructionist research.

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Wherever you go in life, you make things better.

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With this ending comes a new beginning and a path far more exciting and rewarding than anything I could imagine.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

Chapter 1 – Introduction 1

Chapter 2 – Presumed Guilty 26

Chapter 3 – Love in the Time of Science 62

Chapter 4 – Beyond Ontological Gerrymandering 105

Chapter 5 – Conclusion 134

Bibliography 153

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is an examination of the ways in which our realities are constructed by claimsmakers who attempt to assert their knowledge over a particular sphere of life. How do claimsmakers construct a "map of reality" that they use to navigate the world around them and that helps to make sense of our everyday experiences? In exploring these questions, this dissertation will examine the contributions the constructionist approach to studying deviance and social problems can make to an understanding of how claimsmakers shape how the world is viewed and interpreted.

The dissertation takes the form of a sandwich thesis. It is composed of three separate essays. Each essay is a self-contained, stand alone piece that addresses its own issues. However, since each of the essays is informed by a social constructionist perspective, I begin with a discussion of social constructionism, its development and its central concerns. I will then describe the three essays in relation to these concerns.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Constructionism is, at its heart, characterized by an interest in understanding the process by which the categories we use to organize the world are created and imbued with meaning. To talk of how something was socially constructed or to discuss the social construction of some phenomenon is to talk of how actors come to understand the meaning of the thing in question, to unpack the process by which this particular understanding of reality came to be and to understand the process through which it changes.

A concern with how actors come to order and give meaning to their worlds is one of the core concerns of sociology. As such, the constructionist approach transcends many disciplinary and sub-disciplinary boundaries. One can find social constructionism in the study of social problems, social movements, health and healthcare, science, gender, and knowledge. This presence across the sociological spectrum has given rise to several different manifestations of constructionist thinking. Yet these variations on a theme are more similar than they are different. Though they may use slightly different terminology, they are often speaking to the same core concepts. Thus while the essays that follow call on the constructionist framework as it has emerged and developed in the study of social problems, the concepts referenced in these essays are relevant to constructionist thinking beyond the boundaries of the sociology of social problems.

The Emergence of the Constructionist Approach to Social Problems

Social constructionism emerged as an approach to studying social problems in the 1970s and has since grown to become arguably the dominant approach in the field (Best 2003b). In the view of constructionists, social problems are subjective interpretations. A condition becomes a social problem when it is viewed as such by an audience. When people view conditions as threatening, offensive or damaging, those conditions are rendered problematic from their perspective. Thus, the focus of constructionist researchers is on examining the process by which conditions come to be understood as problems.

Prior to the emergence of the constructionist perspective, social problems research had been dominated by functionalist theories and positivist approaches. Studies in these traditions focused on establishing the objective conditions of certain phenomena

identified by analysts or public claims makers as "social problems." These conditions were perceived as causing some type of social harm either directly to individuals or, more generally, to the stability and smooth functioning of the social system. However, the 1960s and 1970s witnessed the rise of hermeneutics in sociological research and an emphasis on qualitative research. This new stream of sociological inquiry would herald an alternate approach to the study of social problems.

This new approach would find some of its earliest influences in the closely related interpretive study of deviance. This begins in 1963, when Becker redefines the study of deviance, arguing that ". . . deviance is not a simple quality, present in some kinds of behavior and absent in others. Rather, it is the product of a process which involves responses of other people to the behavior" ([1963] 1991:14). The idea that the study of deviance should focus on those who view certain behaviors as deviant rather than on the behavior itself would find a similar articulation in the study of social problems. Three years after Becker reorients the study of deviance, Berger and Luckmann ([1966] 1985) bring the concept of "social construction" to the forefront of sociological thinking with regard to the process of creating and maintaining systems of knowledge. Like all constructionist research, their work deals with understanding how meaning is constructed, maintained and, eventually, institutionalized in the very fabric of a culture's way of knowing.

Blumer (1971) was the first to articulate these ideas in relation to the study of social problems. Echoing Becker's definition of deviance, Blumer argues that social theory is not equipped to detect what "really" is and is not a social problem. Instead, he

suggests that the societal definitions of what is and what is not problematic should be traced. What is truly interesting about social problems is their service as ". . . a focal point for the operation of divergent and conflicting interests, intentions and objectives" (Blumer 1971:301) and the process by which these interests, intentions and objectives emerge, gain prominence and fade away.

However, it was Spector and Kitsuse (Kitsuse and Spector 1973; 1973; 1977) who fully developed these ideas into the foundations of the constructionist approach to studying social problems, defining its scope and focus. They begin by summarizing and critiquing past approaches to social problems. At the heart of their critique is the controversial claim that "There is no adequate definition of social problems within sociology, and there is not and never has been a sociology of social problems" (Spector and Kitsuse 1977:1). The focus of social problems research, they argue, should be on how claims about social problems are made, not on verifying these claims or studying the nature of the condition itself.

Traditional studies of social problems focused on defining the criteria a condition had to meet in order to be considered a social problem (for instance, how widespread is the behavior and how serious is the harm it causes) and establishing the facts about those conditions that meet these criteria. Spector and Kitsuse argue that this type of analysis adds nothing to our understanding of the "objective" properties of these phenomena. They point to the sociology of crime as an example. Sociologists studying crime have produced data examining how crime is carried out, how it varies in its manifestations over time and across different physical spaces; they have studied different types of criminals, efforts to

rehabilitate and punish these criminals and a myriad of other facets of criminal behavior. Identifying crime as a social problem in the traditional sense of it being a "social ill" adds nothing to what is known about crime. The "social problem" label is superfluous: ". . . what is added to our understanding of crime by pointing out that it is a social problem? Nothing is added . . ." (Spector and Kitsuse 1977:3).

Instead of focusing on identifying and studying "objective" conditions of "harmful" social phenomena, Spector and Kitsuse argue for a sociology of social problems that examines how certain *putative* conditions come to be defined as social problems. These conditions are understood as putative because there is no attempt to verify the claims being made. What is of interest is how these conditions become the focus of social problems claims-making. "The notion that social problems are a kind of *condition* must be abandoned in favor of a conception of them as a kind of *activity*" (Spector and Kitsuse 1977:73). The social problems researcher should be disinterested with respect to the accuracy or the validity of these claims; their concern is not to prove claims-makers correct or incorrect, but instead to describe how claims-making occurs and how others react to those claims.

For Spector and Kitsuse, the core of social problems activities is claims-making. In their original formulation, claims were understood as ". . . a demand made by one party to another that something be done about some putative condition." (Spector and Kitsuse 1977:78). The concept has since been refined to mean ". . . any verbal, visual, or behavioral statement that tries to persuade audience members to take a condition seriously and respond to it as a social problem" (Loseke and Best 2003:39). There is nothing

intrinsic to certain activities that define them as claims-making activities, what matters is how participants define the activity "... claims are a common-sense category, understood by members of a society and often associated with such terms as demands, complaints, gripes, and requests" (Spector and Kitsuse 1977:79).

Framing social problems research in this manner generates certain research questions. For Spector and Kitsuse, questions of how parties come together as claims-makers and claims recipients, how claimants decide where to direct these claims, and how these claims are handled or responded to by those receiving the claims, all speak to the project they have laid out. Since then, those who have taken up the constructionist approach have identified other relevant questions, such as examining the rhetorical strategies claimsmakers use to make their claims convincing, observing the way in which these claimsmakers respond to challenges to their vision of the problem in question and explaining why certain claims succeed while others founder.

In examining these questions and others, constructionist researchers have elaborated on Spector and Kitsuse's vision of the discipline and broadened its theoretical underpinnings. Throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, constructionist studies of social problems proliferated . Topics of study included the "discovery" of child abuse (Pfohl 1977), drunk driving (Gusfield 1981; Reinarman 1988), partner abuse (Loseke and Cahill 1984; Loseke 1987), missing children (Best 1990; Fritz and Altheide 1987; Gentry 1988) and a variety of other "putative" problems. But beyond the numerous case studies examining the claimsmaking processes behind the creation of a myriad of social

problems, several theoretical developments have broadened and elaborated the project laid out by Spector and Kitsuse.

One of the most useful of these contributions is Loseke's (2003b) notion of the "social problems game." This concept brings to light the multi-faceted nature of claims making. Using a game metaphor, Loseke explains:

> The *goal* of the social problems game is to persuade people to worry about a condition and to do something to resolve it, it is to persuade people to use particular categorizations when they are practical actors in daily life trying to make sense of their own experiences and the experiences of others around them. The social problems game is a set of *activities* . . . and *players* who compete, and there are *competitions* and *strategies* for winning. (p. 20, emphasis in original)

The concept of the social problems game helps to establish of the terrain within which social problems claimsmaking happens and those who are participating in the process. Analysts can focus their attention on the players of the game, the choices they make in fielding their claims or the impact the broader context within which the game is being played has on the claimsmaking process. In doing so, constructionist researchers have come to understand the steps claimsmakers go through in framing the problem, the strategies they use to "win" the game and the consequences these claims have at the level of everyday interaction.

Framing the Problem

In attempting to understand how the social problems game unfolds, constructionist researchers have unpacked the general process claimsmakers go through in constructing their claims. The steps in this process usually include 1) establishing the facts of the matter or the "grounds" (Best 1990) of the problem, 2) identifying its causes (constructing a diagnostic frame), 3) motivating people to care and to do something about it

(constructing a motivational frame) and, lastly, 4) providing a solution for the problem (constructing a prognostic frame) (Loseke and Best 2003; Snow and Benford 1988). The grounds are the "facts" of the problem and answer questions about the nature of the problem and how widespread it is. They are comprised of definitions, typifying examples and estimates of the problem's extent (Best 1990). Definitions include "domain statements" and "orientation statements." Domain statements set the boundaries of the problem by identifying what things should be included as examples of the problem in question, and which fall outside of its scope. "Orientation statements" identify the *type* of problem being faced. For instance, claims that obesity may be linked to an "obesity gene" are orientation statements that identify obesity as a medical problem. Beyond definitions, examples are used to typify the problem. Often dramatic and sensational, these examples are meant to grab people's attention and lead them to perceive the most extreme instances of the phenomenon as typical. Lastly, constructing the grounds of the problem may involve statements establishing how widespread the problem is. These statements indicate how often the problem occurs, who or what is affected by it and how quickly the problem is growing.

Once the scope and breadth of the problem has been determined through the construction of grounds, its causes are identified. This is accomplished by constructing "diagnostic frames" (Loseke 2003b; Snow and Benford 1988) that answer questions about who or what is responsible for causing the problem. Diagnostic frames are entwined with the construction of grounds. Causes are part of the "facts of the matter" about the problem in question and are often a part of the orientation statements that

identify the "type" of problem we are being faced with. From the example in the preceding paragraph, we know obesity is being constructed as a medical problem because its cause, genetics, falls under the purview of medical science.

While identifying the nature and causes of the problem is essential for constructing social problems, it is not enough. Claimsmakers must motivate their audiences to do something about the problem. They do so by constructing what Loseke (Loseke 2003b) and Snow and Benford (1988) refer to as *motivational frames* and Best (Best 1990) refers to as *warrants*. Motivational frames answer the audience's question, "Why should we care?" (Loseke 2003b:63); they provide justification for action to solve the problem. This is achieved by framing the condition as being inconsistent with or a threat to commonly held values or *cultural themes* (Loseke 2003b). Since values are often deeply ingrained and commonly understood among audience members, the value the problem threatens may be implicit in the claim, rather than explicitly explained. For instance, if a group advocating for greater government commitment to fighting AIDS in Africa cites a rising number of AIDS related deaths in the region as part of their motivational frame, they need not explain that the rising death rate is bad because we value life.

Once claimsmakers have described why we should care about the problem, the final step in framing their claim involves assertions about how the problem should be solved and who should solve it. Known as "prognostic frames," these claims ". . . construct a general line of action (what should be done) and it constructs the responsibility for that action (who should do it)" (Loseke 2003b:98). Like diagnostic

frames, prognostic frames are inextricably linked to the framing processes that come before it. A condition that is framed as a medical problem will yield a prognostic frame that identifies medical solutions, and usually mandates medical professionals to deliver those solutions.

Claimsmaking Strategies

Understanding the framing processes that occur in the construction of social problems reveals a great deal about the nature of claimsmaking, but it does not tell the whole story of how the social problems game is played. Beyond the framing of problems, constructionist analysts have examined another facet of the game: the strategies claimsmakers employ to persuade audiences to take their claims seriously. The frames claimsmakers construct define the "facts of the matter" about the condition in question and how those facts should be understood. However, there are a multitude of ways a condition could potentially be framed, each yielding its own "facts of the matter" and interpretation of those facts. Yet not all of these frames will be equally palatable or credible to the potential audience or even to the claimsmakers themselves. Frames that speak to commonly held values, cultural feeling rules (Loseke 2000; 2003b) and ways of knowing will find a much more ready audience than frames that do not. As such, we see certain strategies being used by claimsmakers as they frame their claims in a way that will speak to their audience.

The number of strategies identified by social problems researchers is too lengthy to discuss here. However, the concept of "constructing people" (Loseke 2000; 2003) is relevant to two of the essays that follow and therefore merits particular attention. Loseke

conceptualizes constructing people as a process by which claimsmakers tell the stories of those who create the problematic condition (the villains) or are affected by it (the victims). In telling these stories, the claimsmakers create archetypal characters who embody certain traits. Putative facts about the characters in question are foregrounded while others are pushed to the background. Motives and desires are attributed to these characters in the hope that when the natures of these people are understood "properly," we can make sense of their action in a way that aligns with the claims being made. In doing so, the claimsmaker aims to inspire within the audience, a sense of moral outrage over the villain's victimization of the victim.

The process of constructing people can be found in each step of the claimsmaking game, from laying out the grounds of the problem to constructing prognostic frames. Claimsmakers may construct villains in the process of building the diagnostic frames that identify the causes of the problem at hand. While Loseke (2003b) notes that there may be situations where villains are not constructed by claimakers, when they do, they utilize a variety of strategies to ensure that the villain is constructed as condemnable. Thus the villains in these social problems stories may be constructed as a foreign or outside threat (Loseke 2003b). As an outsider, the villain's differences from the audience are highlighted while similarities are minimized. By constructing villains this way, there is less of a chance the audience will sympathize with the villain, thus enabling them to view the cause of the problem with contempt.

At the same time, the victims of the social problem may be constructed both as a part of the grounds of the problem and as part of the motivational frame. Establishing

who the victims are is essential for establishing what is and is not included as part of the problem. Yet the manner in which the victim is constructed often contains an emotional appeal that is meant to motivate the audience to care about the problem (Loseke 2000; Loseke 2003a; 2003b). The strategies used in constructing the victim are often aimed at creating a sympathetic emotional response. Thus, the suffering of victims or their innocence may be emphasized in order to provoke an empathetic reaction (Loseke 2000; 2003a; 2003b).

Like any other claim, these constructions of victims and villains may be contested by counter-claimsmakers. Thus, claims surrounding a case of a mugger who ends up killing his victims may refer to the mugger's callous disregard for human life, or allude to how he himself was the product of poverty, unemployment and desertion by his family. By highlighting these elements of the mugger's life, claimsmakers attempt to define the frame through which the audience is meant to view the subjects of their claims. While the social problems literature examines these questions in relation to social problems claimsmaking, in my first essay I look at how sociologists of deviance use these strategies in the process of making sense of the words and actions of the "deviants" they study.

Another aspect of claimsmaking strategies, beyond the construction of people, is employing expert knowledge. Experts are able to speak authoritatively on a subject and their knowledge is likely to be influential with claimsmakers and audiences alike. This influence derives from the values and discourses that a culture privileges. As Best (2008) explains, in colonial Massachusetts, ministers were able to speak authoritatively on many subjects as a Puritan discourse dominated the culture of the time. Today, scientific

knowledge is highly valued in North American society. Thus scientific knowledge and expertise may influence claimsmakers' perceptions of conditions and play a role in the direction of their claims. As Best (2008: 108) states: "Scientific experts' claims derive much of their rhetorical power from the understanding that scientists have special knowledge and access to particularly strong evidence, so their views deserve respect." Thus, even though the status of scientific "facts" may be in flux as scientific experts debate the meaning and merits of the evidence they create, scientific knowledge carries currency with both claimsmakers and their audiences and thus shapes how they make claims and construct reality. In my second essay, I address this issue by examining how a subculture of men uses scientific knowledge and evidence to make sense of their experiences with women and construct the nature of men and women's sexual behavior.

The Social Problems Marketplace

While some constructionist analysts have focused a great deal of attention on the maneuvers claimsmakers engage in while participating in the social problems game, others have focused their attention on the broader context in which the game is played. While at any given point in time there are any number of people engaged in making claims about social problems, not all these claims will reach a wide audience, and even fewer will gain purchase in the psyche of those who hear the claim. While much of this has to do with the frames these claimsmakers construct and the strategies they use to in constructing these frames, the state of the "social problems marketplace" (Benford and Hunt 2003; Best 1990) plays a large role in how claims are received by the audience. The marketplace metaphor illuminates the competitive nature of social problems

claimsmaking, not just among those who are making claims about the same putative condition, but among all claimsmakers making claims about all social problems. The amount of attention audiences can dedicate to social problems is limited. As such, claimsmakers are competing for a share of that attention (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). The result is that some social problems claims will never be heard. As Benford and Hunt (2003) note:

> . . . not all efforts to be deemed problems work actually becomes public problems. For instance, an organization might labor mightily in framing and claiming; its members might debate and fret as they produce fact sheets and position statements. There would be no question that they were earnestly engaged in problems work, and problem scholars could analyze their efforts as such. However, what if, despite all of their efforts, their diagnosis and prognosis of the imputed problem were not received by some public audience? (p. 156)

Part of the competition that occurs within the social problems marketplace involves claimsmakers attempting to gain a larger "share" of the market after already establishing their dominance over one social problems issue. This process, known as "domain expansion" (Best 1990), includes the process of bringing a wider array of phenomena under the rubric of the problem claimsmakers have already established. Best (1990:66) states "These new claims take the form: [new problem] X is really a type of [established problem] Y." Through this process, claimsmakers are able to add an ever increasing list of conditions to the domain of their expertise. Best notes how the problem of "battered children" expanded to include the concept of "child abuse and neglect." New behaviours, ranging from abortion, to smoking while pregnant, to the abuse of drugs by parents were claimed as part of the problem of child abuse.

Social Problems Work

While the contests and strategies involved in the social problems game form a large part of the constructionist agenda, Holstein and Miller (2003) consider the consequences that such claimsmaking activities have in everyday life through the notion of "social problems work." By social problems work, Holstein and Miller refer to ". . . those practices that link public interpretive structures to aspects of everyday reality, producing recognizable instances of social problems" (2003:71). Social problems, they argue, are manifested not only in claimsmaking campaigns, but in everyday interaction as people attempt to make sense of the world around them. While claimsmaking represents the process by which new ways of categorizing the world are created, social problems work is the process of applying these categories and typifications to everyday life. When an actor is labeled as suffering from attention deficit disorder, as a problem student, mentally ill or any other example of a problematic category, social problems work is being done. This work ". . . involves procedures for expressing and applying these culturally shared categories to candidate circumstances" (Holstein and Miller 2003:72). By using culturally understood notions of things that are social problems and applying them to some person or thing via interpretive processes, social problems are made manifest in everyday life. In introducing the concept of social problems work, Holstein and Miller have brought forth a broader and more nuanced notion of the social problems concept and about the consequences of creating social problems.

Ontological Gerrymandering

The preceding sections provide a basic summary of how the social problems process is understood by constructionist researchers. It illuminates the way in which the framework laid out by Spector and Kitsuse has been extended and elaborated over the three decades since the wrote their seminal works. However, these developments have been the subject of a variety of criticisms. Most relevant to this dissertation is a "friendly" critique known as "ontological gerrymandering." The critique, authored by Woolgar and Pawluch (Woolgar and Pawluch 1985), involves a subtle, yet important observation about social constructionist studies. Woolgar and Pawluch state that constructionist research is inconsistent in its stance toward the knowability of the "objective" world. Constructionists invariably, though not always obviously, take a relativist stance toward some aspects of reality while subtly using objectivism to support their argument.

The constructionist viewpoint as espoused by Spector and Kitsuse takes what can be described as an agnostic position on the existence and knowability of an objective world. They state ". . . we assert that even the existence of the condition itself is irrelevant to and outside our analysis" (Spector and Kitsuse 1977:76). However, in illustrating the constructed nature of social problems, they prove inconsistent in the application of their relativism. Woolgar and Pawluch (1985) use Spector and Kitsuse's own example of the construction of marijuana as a problem to illustrate this inconsistency. Spector and Kitsuse argue that, while definitions of marijuana as a problem have changed over time, marijuana itself has not. Woolgar and Pawluch point out that in juxtaposing the changing definitions of marijuana use against the constancy of marijuana itself, Spector and Kitsuse

make claims about the objective and unchanging nature of marijuana. Spector and Kitsuse (1977:43) state "The nature of marijuana remained constant throughout . . . and, therefore, an explanation of the variation in definition must come from another source." The claim that marijuana remained constant throughout a certain time period is an assertion about an objective quality of a condition, the type of assertion Spector and Kitsuse argued should be avoided.

While some "slips" into objectivism in constructionist analyses may be attributed to theoretical and methodological laziness and can therefore be avoided, Woolgar and Pawluch (1985) argue that ontological gerrymandering can be found in the fundamental premises and logic of a constructionist analysis. They explain the form of this logic as such:

> First, authors identify certain conditions or behaviors. Second, they, identify various definitions (or claims) made about these conditions (or behaviors). Third, the authors stress the variability of the definitions vis-à-vis the constancy of the conditions to which they relate. They imply that since the condition does not vary, variations in the definition of the condition must result from the social circumstances of the definers rather than from the condition itself. (p. 215)

In order to conduct this type of analysis, the researcher must assume knowledge of the objective condition. If claims about the presence of Martians on earth have changed over time, this change is attributable to social processes, not to whether Martians have arrived (if they were not here previously) or left (if they were already here). We must establish that the status of Martians on Earth has not changed in order to explain the socially contingent nature of changing understandings of Martians among us.

Responses to Ontological Gerrymandering

The impact of Woolgar and Pawluch's observations was immense, bringing to the forefront a variety of issues related to the logical consistency and theoretical credibility of constructionist projects. The heart of the debate would revolve around the types of questions constructionists should ask and the stringency with which they were going to apply their ontological assumptions. Based on the way researchers positioned themselves in this debate, Best (2003a) separated constructionist researchers into two camps: strict constructionist and contextual constructionist.

Broadly put, strict constructionists are concerned with at least trying to avoid a reliance on knowledge of objective conditions in their study of claims-making activities. Strict constructionists attempt to make as few assumptions as possible about what is "real" and what is not. Contextual constructionists, on the other hand, ". . . study claims-making within its context of culture and social structure" (Best 2003b:61). Contextual constructionists may be willing to accept certain statements as representative of an empirical reality. As Best (2003b) states:

> The analyst is more likely to be interested in the ways in which statistics are collected, the role they play in claims-making rhetoric, the responses they elicit from the media, officials and the public and so-on. But contextual constructionists assume that claims making occurs within some context. Thus, a sociologist studying Satanism may marvel that estimates of human sacrifice victims are supported by so little evidence, and ask why these claims are relatively successful. (P. 61)

However, to treat all contextual constructionists as if they belong in a single category is unfair as there is a great deal of variability within the contextualist camp. For instance, there are some who use constructionist style arguments to debunk claims by

appealing to other claims as "facts" or at least tentatively agreeing that certain claims are more representative of reality than others. Constructionists such as Best (2003a) and Gusfield (1985) have no qualms about doing so, even in the face of a seeming logical inconsistency. Gusfield (1985) argues that the ontological gerrymandering critique is unhelpful:

> Woolgar and Pawluch illustrate too well a kind of sociology that seems to me to be a dead end. It is a preoccupation with the logic of theory as something apart from and independent of the substantive questions to which directed. That separation leads toward programmatic statements and to the endless glosses that fill our shelves but contribute little to understanding our world (P. 18).

Best (2003a:43) argues that "We have no obligation to treat all points of view about all subjects as equally valid." He sees certain claims about how the world works as more consistent and helpful in getting "things" done. The science of physics seems to do a good job in helping build airplanes that do not fall from the sky and structural engineers have a knack for putting together buildings that do not fall down. For Best, the consistent results certain points of view seem to generate seems a good reason to treat those points of view as more valid representations of reality than others. However, Best points out that our interest should be less in debunking one point of view over another and focussing on the hows and whys involved in the acceptance or rejection of these points of view.

Other constructionists are less willing to privilege one set of claims over another in such an overt way. While some among them (Bogard 2003; Schneider 1985) have posited solutions to the ontological gerrymandering problem, none of these solutions are satisfying. Indeed, the problem seems intractable and over the last decade and a half, the

debate has faded from the forefront of constructionist discussions of theory. In the third of my essays, I offer a commentary on this debate in social problems theory.

ESSAY 1: PRESUMED GUILTY: CONSTRUCTING DEVIANCE AND DEVIANTS THROUGH TECHNIQUES OF NEUTRALIZATION

While the preceding overview hinted at how the three essays that comprise this dissertation are positioned with regard to the social constructionist approach to social problems, the remainder of this introduction describes each of these essays in greater detail and outlines the central questions they address. Each essay applies the social constructionist approach to its subject matter. The first examines how sociologists and criminologists construct reality through their claims. It looks at the concept of "techniques of neutralization," one of the most enduring concepts in the sociology of deviance and unpacks the assumptions sociologists make about their research subjects when applying the neutralization concept. The essay has been accepted for publication in Deviant Behavior.

First formulated by Sykes and Matza in 1957, techniques of neutralization are understood to be the methods by which those who engage in deviant acts attempt to mitigate their feelings of guilt by generating explanations, rationalizations and justifications for their actions. Yet, as I argue in the essay, in identifying these techniques, analysts make several assumptions about the way their subjects view "conventional" morality and the moral status of the behavior they are engaging in. These assumptions structure the ways in which subjects of this type of research are constructed and how what

they have to say is interpreted by analysts. When viewed through the frame these analysts offer, interpreting the talk of social actors as a technique of neutralization makes sense. As such, this interpretation is offered as an explanation as to why certain individuals are able to engage in habitual deviance. However, it does so at a price. The subtle consequence of the frame analysts invoke is the tacit endorsement of the deviant label. To call the speech acts of social actors neutralizations requires the analyst to take the deviant nature of the actor's behavior for granted, thereby taking a stand on what constitutes a deviant act.

In discussing the way in which sociologists and criminologists construct deviants and deviance through the concept of techniques of neutralization, the paper deals with issues surrounding how analysts construct their subjects. In the context of my earlier discussion of social constructionism, the essay offers a case in the construction of grounds and the construction of people, demonstrating that sociologists and criminologists as well as social problems claimsmakers engage in these processes. In doing so, they too can be understood as engaging in the construction of reality.

ESSAY 2: LOVE IN THE TIME OF SCIENCE: SEX, EVOLUTION AND KNOWLEDGE IN THE SEDUCTION COMMUNITY

The second essay presents the results of an empirical study of a subculture of men who identify themselves as "pick up artists" and who belong to what they refer to as a "seduction community." These "pick up artists" have seized on a growing literature on evolutionary biology and evolutionary psychology to explain the success of their

techniques in attracting and seducing women and to organize and make sense of their experiences of "picking up." The essay is concerned with understanding the worldview of members of this community with a particular focus on how evolutionary science figures in their meaning-making activities.

In relation to social constructionism, the essay may be understood as a case study in claims-making activity. Examining how these pickup artists construct their reality using evolutionary science provides further insights into the processes by which people are constructed. Men and women are understood by these social actors to have different, yet essential desires in their mates. In order to successfully engage in picking up women, the men must develop some sense of the types of men women find desirable and embody those traits. Further, in constructing men and women in this way, members of the seduction community construct the grounds, or the "facts of the matter," of the arena of life to which they are claiming to possess knowledge. In doing so, they establish the "proper" way to view the process of romance and seduction. Their interpretations of both their failures and successes in this process are rooted in the evolutionary psychological frame they have constructed. Their experiences are understood as evidence for the accuracy of their constructions. Meanwhile, the views of others, especially women, who approach the topic of sex, romance and relationships from outside the frame these men have constructed, are dismissed.

ESSAY 3: BEYOND ONTOLOGICAL GERRYMANDERING: NEW CHALLENGES FOR THE CONTEXTUAL CONSTRUCTIONIST PERSPECTIVE ON SOCIAL PROBLEMS

In the third essay, I offer a commentary on the debate within social constructionism between contextual and strict constructionists. In relation to the previous two essays, the third can be seen as examining the costs of being claimsmakers about claims. The central question I address is: What are the consequences of asserting that knowledge is socially constructed while simultaneously claiming to have knowledge about how claims are made by claimsmakers and are received by audiences?

I consider the process by which those making the claims (in this case, social problems researchers) frame the subject of their study. In doing so, I argue they engage in the process of constructing the grounds of constructionist research and establish the difference between what constitutes "legitimate" constructionist research and what does not. These "domain statements" about the boundaries of the different types of constructionism speak to issues surrounding the way social problems researchers construct the reality of the social problems game. Earlier, I discussed the difference between strict and contextual constructionism. This essay explores the consequences of this division. It examines the way in which constructionists have constructed the reality of the social problems game and the unanswered questions that arise from this construction.

Lastly, the dissertation concludes with a chapter that summarizes each of the essays and comes back to the question of the contributions that each makes to social constructionist theory. Further, it considers the implications these essays have for future

research and the extension of the constructionist approach to social problems into areas of sociology beyond social problems and deviance.

CHAPTER 2 – PRESUMED GUILTY

Presumed Guilty: Constructing Deviance and Deviants through Techniques of Neutralization[1]

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Presumed Guilty: Constructing Deviance and Deviants through Techniques of Neutralization

Techniques of neutralization have become one of the most ubiquitous concepts in the study of deviance. This article examines the way in which analysts who use neutralization theory construct the nature of deviance and those who engage in it. The author argues that by invoking the concept of neutralizations, analysts endorse the deviant label being applied to those they study and engage in the practice of "motive mongering." In many cases, assumptions about the behavior and disposition of those who engage in deviant behavior have been accepted without empirical justification. The implications of this practice for objectivist and subjectivist approaches to defining deviance are examined.

The study of deviance is rife with rich narratives. The stories of those who are labeled as rule-breakers, deviants and criminals are often fascinating. They may present us with a seemingly exotic world, far away from our own experience of everyday life or they may be remarkably familiar to us. In telling these stories, we relate certain facts of the situation, call attention to certain experiences of those involved and we interpret the speech and actions we deem germane to our study. Simultaneously, we background the facts, speech, actions and motives deemed irrelevant to our analytical goals. By doing so, we construct images of the people we study, discussing who they are, what they do and why they do it. We engage in what Loseke (2003) terms the construction of people. How these constructions are achieved and what is done with them depends on our theoretical approach to the study of deviance. Our concepts and theories about deviance become the filters used to sort out the relevant details from the irrelevant, the foregrounded from the backgrounded. This paper examines how one of these concepts, Sykes and Matza's (1957) techniques of neutralization, is employed by researchers to construct the subjects of their studies and the implications these constructions have for those who study deviance.

Techniques of neutralization (Sykes and Matza 1957) are entrenched within the study of deviance. In 2005 (Jacobs), the American Sociological Review recognized "Techniques of Neutralization: A Theory of Delinquency" (Sykes and Matza 1957) as one of the highest impact articles published by the journal. With 709 citations, Sykes and Matza's work on techniques of neutralization is the eighth most cited article published in the ASR. Further, Jacobs (2005) notes that Sykes and Matza's work has seen a steady

increase in use since its publication: "Citations to Gresham Sykes and David Matza's (1957) 'Techniques of Neutralization: A Theory of Delinquency' have been gradually increasing over the last 47 years, with no sign yet that its peak has been reached" (p. 3). This concept has become a popular tool used by those who research deviance and crime.

This paper is also about techniques of neutralization. However, it focuses not on the behavior of deviants and rule-breakers, but on the researchers and analysts who invoke the concept in making sense of those they study. It examines the way in which researchers construct their subjects and their subjects' actions in a way that confirms the validity of the neutralization concept. Three main arguments are presented. 1) Analysts using the neutralization concept construct an interpretive framework that frames the motives and desires of those being studied in a way that directs us toward interpreting speech as a neutralization. 2) By constructing people and actions in this way, analysts subtly "take the side" of those who condemn the behavior in question. 3) In applying the neutralization concept analysts engage in what Mills (1940) refers to as "motive mongering." Following this is an examination of whether Scott and Lyman's (1968) conception of "accounts" provides a useful alternative to neutralizations. Finally, the possible critical implications of invoking the concept of neutralizations are discussed.

TECHNIQUES OF NEUTRALIZATION

Introduced in 1957 by Sykes and Matza, techniques of neutralization have become a popular and useful tool for those studying criminology and the sociology of deviance. In their article, Sykes and Matza explain the process by which actors neutralize any feelings

of guilt that may inhibit their participation in acts that are viewed as deviant. Originally applied to juvenile delinquents, the idea of neutralizations has been extended to a number of behaviors, including corporate crime (Leeper Piquero, Tibbets, and Blankenship 2005), the sex trade (Thompson, Harred, and Burks 2003), shoplifters (Cromwell and Thurman 2003), the holocaust (Alvarez 1997), pedophiles (De Young 1988; Durkin and Bryant 1999), hit men (Levi 1981), rapists (Scully and Marolla 1984), beauty pageant mothers (Heltsley and Calhoun 2003) and the perpetrators of a variety of other non-conforming behaviors (Copelton 2007; Eliason and Dodder 1999; Evans and Porche 2005; Gailey and Prohaska 2006; Gauthier 2001; Green, South, and Smith 2006; Peretti-Watel 2003; Pershing 2003; Pogrebin et al. 2006; Vitell and Grove 1987). Others have attempted to examine the concept's limits, scope and potential in more general theories of crime (Agnew and Peters 1986; Copes 2003; Copes and Williams 2007; Landsheer, Hart, and Kox 1994; Minor 1981; Teevan and Dryburgh 2000).

Sykes and Matza (1957) proposed techniques of neutralization as an extension of Sutherland's differential association theory and as an alternative to Cohen's (1955) sub-cultural explanation of deviance. Cohen posited the idea that those who participated in deviant subcultures replaced the norms and values of mainstream culture with those of the deviant subculture to which they belonged. These theories, Sykes and Matza argue, overemphasize the extent to which sub-cultural norms supplant those of the mainstream. Sub-cultural theories ignored the fact that many juvenile delinquents felt guilt or shame over their deviant acts. Sykes and Matza (1957) took this guilt as an indication that delinquents still felt some attachment to the values of mainstream society:

> The fact that the world of the delinquent is embedded in the larger world of those who conform cannot be overlooked nor can the delinquent be equated with an adult thoroughly socialized into an alternative way of life. Instead, the juvenile delinquent would appear to be at least partially committed to the dominant social order in that he frequently exhibits guilt or shame when he violates its proscriptions, accords approval to certain conforming figures, and distinguishes between appropriate and inappropriate targets for his deviance. (P. 666)

If delinquents fully dissociate themselves from the mainstream and replace its values with those of a deviant subculture, there would be no feelings of remorse because the norms they violate are of no consequence to them.

Instead of complete commitment to a deviant culture, Sykes and Matza argue that delinquents are still committed to conventional morality at some level. Their delinquent behavior, while seeming to flout these norms, is constructed as a justifiable exception to a valid rule:

> It is our argument that much delinquency is based on what is essentially an unrecognized extension of defenses to crimes, in the form of justifications for deviance, that are seen as valid by the delinquent but not by the legal system or society at large. (Sykes and Matza 1957:666)

The justifications delinquents use are learned behaviors that allow them to maintain a non-deviant image, thus permitting them to "drift" back and forth between delinquency and rule-abiding behavior (Matza 1964; Sykes and Matza 1957).

For Sykes and Matza, these justifications can work in two different ways. If the justification is given after the deviant act is committed, delinquents are *rationalizing* their behavior. However, these justifications can also emerge before the act is committed and enable rule-breaking behavior. This type of before-the-act justification constituted "techniques of neutralization." These techniques allow delinquents to perform deviant acts because:

> Disapproval flowing from internalized norms and conforming others in the social environment is neutralized, turned back or deflected in advance . . . he [the delinquent] remains committed to the dominant normative system and yet so qualifies its imperatives that violations are 'acceptable' if not right. (Sykes and Matza 1957:667)

Though their list is not exhaustive, Sykes and Matza identified five types of neutralizations used by juvenile delinquents. 1) The denial of responsibility is invoked when the delinquent proposes a cause for his or her behavior other than consciously willed action. 2) The denial of injury refers to the justification of the act because there was no appreciable harm resulting from the behavior. 3) The denial of the victim occurs when the delinquent claims the victims of his or her act deserved what was done to them. 4) Condemnation of the condemners refers to a claim that those imposing the deviant label have no moral authority to do so since they are guilty of their own deviant acts. 5) Lastly, the appeal to higher loyalties is a justification of the act by arguing that it serves a purpose (usually the needs or purposes of a subgroup to which the delinquent belongs) that supersedes the expectations and demands of the larger collective. Since the original publication of the article by Sykes and Matza, other authors have added new techniques to the list, including the metaphor of the ledger (Klockars. 1974), the defense of necessity (Benson 1985; Minor 1981), justification by comparison, postponement (Cromwell and Thurman 2003), the claim of entitlement, claims that everybody else is doing it, and the denial of the necessity of the law (Coleman 1985).

Beyond the addition of new types of neutralizations, the concept itself has been the subject of debate and revision. For example, Hirschi (1969) and others (Cromwell and Thurman 2003; Hamlin 1988; Hindelang 1970; Maruna and Copes 2005) argue that

neutralizations arise as post-crime rationalizations which then serve to enable further deviant acts beyond the first event, rather than enable first-time offences. Others (Cromwell and Thurman 2003; Gailey and Prohaska 2006; Nelson and Lambert 2001) have interpreted techniques of neutralization not only as a method to assuage guilt, but also as a form of impression management (Goffman 1959):

> Even those who did not appear to be committed to the conventional moral order used neutralizations to justify or excuse their behavior. Their use of neutralizations was not so much to assuage guilt but to provide them with the necessary justifications for their acts to others. Simply because one is not committed to conventional norms does not preclude their understanding that most members of society do accept those values and expect others to do so as well. (Cromwell and Thurman 2003:547)

Beyond these revisions, others have incorporated the neutralization concept into their own theories. Scott and Lyman (1968) include all five techniques of neutralization as types of accounts that can be given to repair interactions damaged by unexpected or problematic behavior. These accounts were then subsumed under Stokes and Hewitt's (1976) concept of aligning actions. Others (Copelton 2007; Eliason and Dodder 1999; Peretti-Watel 2003; Thurman 1984) see a link between neutralization techniques and the reduction of cognitive dissonance (Festinger [1957] 1962) arising from violating the norms and values one is committed to. As Maruna and Copes (2005) state:

> . . . the central concept [of techniques of neutralization] has been integrated into theoretical frameworks as different as learning theory, control theory, reintegrative shaming theory, and rational choice theory. The theory has also influenced criminal justice innovations ranging from cognitive therapy to reintegrative shaming and restorative justice. (P. 221)

The popularity and ubiquity of the neutralization concept provides several useful examples of how analysts use the concept to construct their subjects and their subjects' behavior.

DEFINING THE INTERPRETIVE FRAME

In order for analysts to construct the speech of their research subjects as neutralizations, they must define an interpretive context within which we are meant to interpret the actions of those being studied. Symbolic interactionists, ethnomethodologists and linguists have long been aware that context affects how we interpret the meaning of signs and symbols. Goffman's (1974) conception of the frame provides us with a useful metaphor for this process. For Goffman, actors move in and out of a set of structurally defined frameworks which organize actors' understandings of their own experiences. Though Goffman's approach has a decidedly structural bent that many interactionists and ethnomethodologists would be uncomfortable with (Denzin and Keller 1981), his work has provided a useful conceptual tool for conceiving of how actors' perception of reality is socially constructed. How we interpret an action or statement is greatly dependent on the way the situation in which it occurs is typified. Our reaction to seeing one person punching another person in the face will differ greatly depending on if it occurs in a sociology class or in a boxing ring. Since context can have a profound effect on the way we understand actions, one of the explanatory moves analysts make is to define the context within which the phenomena they are analyzing should be interpreted. This

context serves as a frame through which the reader is meant to view and interpret the behavior being presented by the researchers.

In their examination of how experts on battered women construct the explanations women give for staying with the men who abuse them, Loseke and Cahill (1984) recognize how critical it is for experts to control the interpretive frame. They argue that experts define behavior in a way that allows them to create ". . . an interactional situation which will produce evidence confirming the accounts they [experts] offer . . ." (Loseke and Cahill 1984:302). They note that by framing the act of staying with abusive husbands as "undeniably deviant," battered women's explanations of why they stay are not likely to be honored. Instead, their explanations will be interpreted as rationalizations of irrational behavior, as ". . . accounts which are self-serving and inaccurate" (Loseke and Cahill 1984:301). By framing the behavior of women who stay as unreasonable at the outset, experts can discount the reasons women give to explain their behavior, interpreting them as rationalizations instead of reasonable explanations.

Like experts on battered women, analysts using the neutralization concept build an interpretive frame that produces evidence affirming their interpretation of their research subjects' speech. This frame offers up a construction of those who engage in deviant acts. For Sykes and Matza, people who commit deviant acts are generally committed to mainstream norms and know that they will feel shame and guilt over their violations of conventional norms. Techniques of neutralization were meant to enable the individual to commit a deviant act by neutralizing these feelings before the act was committed. The assumption of feelings of shame or guilt over the commission of deviant acts defines the

interactional context in which experts and their audiences interpret the speech given by those who are labeled deviant. This premise must be accepted if the concept of neutralizations is to make any sense in its application. If, instead of agreeing to Sykes and Matza's assumption of shame and guilt, we accept ". . . the gross stereotype of the juvenile delinquent as a hardened gangster in miniature" (Sykes and Matza 1957:665) who feels no remorse, techniques of neutralization makes no sense. It therefore becomes imperative that we accept the interpretive context that Sykes and Matza provide us in order for claims about techniques of neutralization to make sense.

This interpretive framework then serves as a powerful influence on how the statements made by the subjects of these studies are interpreted. An example of this is seen in Cromwell and Thurman's (2003) examination of the techniques of neutralization used by shoplifters. They echo Sykes and Matza's argument that neutralizations are used to avoid guilt over nonconforming behavior.

> Whether the adaptation is truly neutralizing (before the act) or rationalizing (after the act) the result is the same - crime without guilt. (Cromwell and Thurman 2003:548)

With this in mind, they interpret several statements of their subjects as types of neutralizations. For instance:

> I got laid off at Boeing last year and got behind on all my bills and couldn't get credit anywhere. My kids needed school clothes and money for supplies and stuff. We didn't have anything and I don't believe in going on welfare, you know. The first time I took some lunch meat at Dillons (grocery chain) so we'd have supper one night. After that I just started to take whatever we needed that day. I knew it was wrong, but I just didn't have any other choice. My family comes first. (Cromwell and Thurman 2003:545)

This statement is identified as an example of "the defense of necessity," through which the speaker reduces his or her guilt by arguing the act was committed to achieve a necessary purpose which could not be obtained through conventional means. However, we can also treat this statement as an explanation of why the speaker committed the act. Instead of framing this statement as strategy to alleviate shame or an attempt to justify his behavior, which he himself states is "wrong," this statement can alternatively be understood as an explanation of why he shoplifts. He shoplifts to give things to his family, even though he knows it is wrong to do so.

Gauthier (2001), in her research on the neutralizations used by veterinarians, notes that "The neutralizations they employ are linguistic devices that allow the actor to break the rules yet neutralize the guilt of participation by making the violations acceptable in their own minds" (p. 471). When she encounters the statement below, given by one of the participants in her study, Gauthier interprets this as a defense of necessity, stating that veterinarians justified the use of unnecessary tests to cover the costs of nonpaying customers:

> We probably shouldn't encourage testing or procedures that might not be necessary, but that helps the practice make more money.
>
> Yeah, sure, we run blood tests on every animal that is spayed or neutered, because the tests may identify kidney or liver problems that could complicate the use of anesthesia, and create a higher risk of death during the spay/neuter procedure. Chances are, 99% of the dogs and cats that come in, you're not going to find anything. It's a way to make fifty extra dollars. (Gauthier 2001:478)

Again, though the speaker recognizes that the behavior may be wrong, there is nothing in the statement that indicates shame or guilt over the behavior. But the analyst and the readers are not approaching this type of speech naively. Already assumed is that people

feel guilt over rule-breaking acts and feel the need to minimize that guilt; thus feelings of guilt and shame do not need to be empirically established. This frame structures the interpretation of these statements and directs analysts and readers away from other possible readings. As Loseke and Cahill (1984) point out in their analysis of experts on battered women, experts define behavior in a way that produces an interactional situation that yields evidence confirming the experts' interpretation of events.

We may ask whether the assumption that people will feel guilty when they engage in non-normative behavior is merited. Sykes and Matza (1957) argue that ". . . there is a good deal of evidence suggesting that many delinquents do experience a sense of guilt or shame . . ." (pp. 664-665). They do not cite this material. However, the assumption of shameful feelings holds a certain amount of commonsense appeal. Readers will likely have felt guilty about something they have done in the past and may even recognize some of the things they have said or thought to defend their actions as the very techniques Sykes and Matza mention. Yet, some may argue that this assumption be approached with caution. While some may feel a certain amount of guilt or repugnance at the thought of shoplifting an item or charging for unnecessary medical tests, it may not follow that *everyone* would feel the same shame or repugnance at participating in this behavior.

Many analysts using the concept of techniques of neutralization avoid this issue by shifting focus away from neutralizations as a strategy to negate guilt to focus on their use as an impression management strategy. This approach seems to concentrate on Sykes and Matza's (1957) notion of rationalizations, which ". . . are viewed as following deviant behavior and as protecting the individual from self-blame and the blame of others after

the act" (p. 666). In their study of "hogging," which is the act of men engaging in sexual behavior with women they deem unattractive, Gailey and Prohaska (2006) interpret techniques of neutralization as follows:

> Sykes and Matza argue that in an attempt to *avoid adverse social censure for their actions*, deviant actors construct justifications for deviance that may not only precede the behavior (making it possible), but also follow it (*making it acceptable to self and others*). (P. 34, emphasis added)

De Young (1988), in her study of pro-pedophilia groups, states:

> More than mere excuses or defensive justifications, these techniques of neutralization were viewed by the authors as rhetorical attempts to both disavow a deviant identity and to normalize law-breaking behavior so as *to make it more palatable or even acceptable to the law-abiding public*. (P. 585, emphasis added)

When interpreted in this way, analysts put aside the role of neutralizations in enabling deviance. Instead, neutralizations are seen as a way of casting objectionable behavior in a more favorable light so as to reduce the stigma associated with it. This interpretation of neutralizations provides an interpretive framework that sensitizes analysts and readers to the practice of impression management. By constructing an interpretive frame that focuses on impression management, the attention of the analyst and the reader is drawn away from the putative desire to assuage guilt and focused on a different desire, the desire to present a positive image.

ENDORSING THE DEVIANT LABEL

Neutralizations are framed as forms of speech that either 1) serve to mitigate guilt or 2) serve as an impression management strategy. In either case, they are being issued with regard to some type of "bad" behavior that would evoke feelings of shame or besmirch

the character of anyone who participated in it. Thus, in order for their interpretation of their subjects' speech to make sense, analysts using the concept of neutralizations must further elaborate the interpretive frame they have constructed by demonstrating the shame-worthiness of the acts committed by their subjects. In doing so, these researchers tacitly endorse the deviant status of the acts in question.

How researchers establish the shame-worthiness of an act can be subtly accomplished or overtly stated. The process may involve detailing widespread negative perceptions of or reactions to the act in question (Alvarez 1997; Durkin and Bryant 1999; Heltsley and Calhoun 2003), examining the harm caused by the act (Cromwell and Thurman 2003; Durkin and Bryant 1999) or appealing to ethical or legal guidelines prohibiting the behavior (Durkin and Bryant 1999; Gauthier 2001). In engaging in this process, analysts create a definition of deviance which is then used to frame the acts their subjects engage in as shame-worthy. Whether this shame emerges from engaging in acts that bring condemnation from others, cause harm, are prohibited by law or some combination of these or other criteria, the speech of the research subjects is interpreted with the understanding that the words being uttered are being uttered by someone who has done something wrong.

Again, the interpretive frame plays an important role in directing the attention of the researchers and their audiences away from alternative interpretations of the talk being analyzed. With the deviant nature of an act established, the statements of the research participants are read as the justifications given by offenders rather than as alternative definitions of what counts as deviance. Sykes and Matza state that neutralizations are an

extension of the "extenuating circumstances" defense that is accepted by the individual but not by society at large or the justice system. "Society" as a whole cannot be present to pass judgment on these statements, instead, the analyst and the reader act as agents of society at large, interpreting these statements as attempts to use the extenuating circumstances defense and judging them to be unacceptable. Thus, when a shoplifter in Cromwell and Thurman's (2003) paper states that his or her shoplifting is permissible since stores "rip people off," this statement is read as a reaction to being deviant rather than as a competing narrative about the deviant status of shoplifting. By establishing a behavior as deviant or shame-worthy, the analyst becomes a referee, endorsing one construction of the behavior over others. Within that context, the "wrongness" of an act (i.e. shoplifting is deviant and unacceptable) is treated as unproblematic and uncontested, even when the statements being analyzed could be read as evidence that the moral status of the act *is* contested (i.e. shoplifting is acceptable when it is done against businesses who "rip people off"). The "offender's" claim is treated as a strategic response to being involved in activity that is undeniably deviant, not as a plausible alternative to the claim that this behavior is deviant.

This reading of speech makes sense given the assumption of a consensus around what constitutes normal and non-normal behavior implicit in Sykes and Matza's neutralization theory. While the very speech being defined as techniques of neutralization can be read as data indicating that definitions of what constitutes a deviant act are not shared by everyone involved, analysts have locked themselves into an analytic framework that does not allow them to interpret the speech of their research subjects as an alternative

understanding of the morality of their actions. Doing so would challenge the assumption that those who engage in rule-breaking acts are still committed to the moral consensus.

MONGERING MOTIVES

In addition to endorsing one understanding of the rightness or wrongness of a behavior over the other, analysts using the neutralization concept cast themselves as having privileged knowledge of their participants' motives and internal states. Built into the notion of neutralizations is an assumption that those who utter them have a secondary motive beyond explaining their understanding of their actions. For instance, by saying that shoplifters are utilizing the defense of necessity or any other technique of neutralization in order to negate their shame or to maintain a non-deviant image, analysts make a claim about actors' motives for uttering this type of speech. They claim to have insight into why their subjects "really" explained their behavior in this manner.

This consequence of using the neutralization concept is somewhat ironic as many researchers (Alvarez 1997; De Young 1988; Evans and Porche 2005; Heltsley and Calhoun 2003; Scully and Marolla 1984) link techniques of neutralization to Mills' (1940; Gerth and Mills 1953) notion of vocabularies of motive. For Gerth and Mills, motives are the statements given to explain or make sense of action. These types of statements typically emerge to explain a given type of action in a given context. Their particular forms are influenced by the social and cultural milieu and the specific context in which one is uttering them. Mills (1940; Gerth and Mills 1953) wanted to avoid a conception of motives as a need or desire residing in individuals that explained their

action, arguing that it is difficult to check whether our attribution of these needs is correct. He states "There is no way to plumb behind verbalization into an individual and directly check our motive-mongering . . ." (1940: 910) and "When there are many vocabularies of motives, it becomes difficult to know the 'real motives' of persons" (1953: 129). Instead, motives are seen as a method through which actors make sense of action in the present and in the past as well as possible lines of future action. In investigating motives, Mills advises us to focus on verbalized accounts and be cautious when making inferences to "real motives" that lie within the individual: "As I see it, motives are circumscribed by the vocabulary of the actor. The only source for a terminology of motives is the vocabularies of motives actually and usually verbalized by actors in specific situations" (1940: 910).

To a certain extent, techniques of neutralization are an excellent example of what Mills was hoping to achieve with the concept of vocabularies of motive. Sykes and Matza have created a typology of the statements that people often use to explain behavior that others have labeled deviant. However, Mills' caution to avoid motive mongering is abandoned when analysts attempt to explain *why* these statements are being given. For Sykes and Matza, it is to alleviate shame. For others, neutralizations are a form of impression management. Whatever the reason given, by speculating about why people utter techniques of neutralization, researchers engage in the very motive-mongering Mills wished to avoid. By stating that people issue the statements they do to make their actions seem palatable either to themselves or to those they are speaking to, the analyst imputes a motive to the speakers. This motive may be a desire to maintain a non-deviant identity, to

maintain a positive self-presentation to others or to neutralize guilt. Whatever the reason given, analysts are attempting to "plumb behind verbalizations" (Mills 1940:910), trying to ascertain why they "really" said what they said.

Interestingly, few analysts discuss any evidence demonstrating that techniques of neutralization and rationalization serve the functions being attributed to them. Whether analysts argue that this type of speech is designed to achieve a reduction in guilt or shame, to maintain a non-deviant identity or manage the impression one makes on others, it is difficult to empirically demonstrate that this speech was uttered in service to one of these purposes. There is no evidence that techniques of neutralization serve to neutralize guilt. There is no measurement of the individual's feelings of guilt before and after the neutralization was uttered. Attempting to establish that individuals are feeling guilt proves problematic since analysts cannot be sure if individuals are trying to present themselves as remorseful for the purposes of impression management or if they truly feel guilt.

This matter is complicated by the argument that neutralizations and rationalizations are used to avoid feelings of guilt altogether. Analysts argue that by neutralizing guilt, individuals convince themselves that their actions are reasonable or justifiable. In doing so, they sidestep the shame we would expect them to feel. Analysts are left to assume that the deviant *would* have felt shame had he or she not so skillfully skirted it. The validity of this assumption seems to rest on the notion that any *normal* person would feel shame or guild about the act in question. The deviant's speech is then interpreted as a strategic act. The analyst does not accept the deviant's explanation at face value, but instead attributes an ulterior motive to it. So, when the speech of those accused

of committing deviant acts is framed as a technique of neutralization or rationalization, analysts assume their speech is double talk, a manipulation of their own perceptions of the world done so they can cope with their questionable acts.

Through this practice, analysts not only impute a motive about why the speaker would issue a neutralization, but also imply that there is some other "real" reason for why the speaker committed the act he or she is accused of. If a statement is categorized as a neutralization, the statement's status as an explanation of the behavior in question is not accepted. Instead, the statement is understood as a type of strategic artifice used in service of impression management. If the statement is not accepted as an explanation, the analyst either implies that a) there is some other, as yet, unspoken motive behind the behavior or b) there was no motive behind the behavior. Unless the analyst believes there is some other reason behind a person's act (or that the act had no reason behind it at all), there is no basis for categorizing speech as a neutralization instead of an explanation.

ACCOUNTS AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO TECHNIQUES OF NEUTRALIZATION

Scott and Lyman's (1968) concept of accounts offers up a broader application of the neutralization concept. While accounts do incorporate the techniques introduced by Sykes and Matza, they are not tied to attributions of shame or guilt on the part of those who utter them and, thus, many of the assumptions incorporated into the neutralization concept can be sidestepped. Instead, the focus is on the practice of explaining unexpected or untoward acts. By their definition, an account is ". . . a statement made by a social actor to explain

unanticipated or untoward behavior - whether that behavior is his own or that of others . . ." (Scott and Lyman 1968:46) and that they are ". . . uttered in response to an accusation" (Lyman 1997: 15).

Accounts are divided into two general types - excuses and justifications. Excuses refer to ". . . vocabularies for mitigating or relieving responsibility when conduct is questioned" (Scott and Lyman 1968:42). The concept of excuses closely mirrors Sykes and Matza's (1957) notion of denial of responsibility in that those who invoke these types of accounts explain their problematic behavior as being a result of some force outside of their control. While excuses are a way of mitigating responsibility for behavior, justifications are ". . . socially approved vocabularies that neutralize an act or its consequences . . . to justify an act is to assert its positive value in the face of a claim to the contrary" (Scott and Lyman 1968:51). Again, Scott and Lyman draw on the concept of techniques of neutralizations, listing denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners and the appeal to higher loyalties as forms of justifications while adding the categories of "sad tales" and "self fulfillment."

The appeal of using accounts in place of techniques of neutralization is that the concept does not rely on an assumption of guilt or shame on the part of those giving them. Instead, accounts serve as a linguistic tool for constructing past action in a way that will make it acceptable in present interactions. In this way, accounts fall closely in-line with Mills' vocabularies of motive. However, claiming that speech constitutes an account requires explanatory maneuvers similar to those made by analysts using the neutralization concept.

Like those who use the concept of neutralizations, analysts invoking the concept of accounts in their analysis subtly endorse the deviant label. Scott and Lyman (1968) distinguish between accounts and explanations. While accounts are given to explain untoward or unexpected behavior, explanations ". . . refer to statements about events where untoward action is not an issue and does not have critical implications for a relationship" (Scott and Lyman 1968:47). What is left ambiguous is whose definition of the situation is used to categorize an act as "untoward." Do those who offer up these "justifications" and "excuses" view them in these terms or instead see them as explanations of the behavior in question? This ambiguity is clearly seen in Scott and Lyman's own work. In illustrating the justification of self-fulfillment, which they define as an attempt to justify problematic behavior by arguing that it brings some type of joy or satisfaction to those who carry it out, Scott and Lyman (1968) state:

> We might also note that the drug users and homosexuals interviewed (in San Francisco) who invoked the justification of self fulfillment did not appear to find anything 'wrong' with their behavior. They indicated either a desire to be left alone or to enlighten what they considered to be the unenlightened establishment. (P. 52)

In this case, those who were being interviewed saw nothing wrong with their behavior, yet it was categorized as an account, not an explanation. In this situation, the definition of drug use and homosexuality was contested as Scott and Lyman viewed it as problematic while their research subjects indicated that there was nothing "wrong" with it. Categorizing talk as an account when the act's status as deviant or wrong is contested requires the analyst to pick sides, to validate the accuser's definition of the behavior over the other.

The necessity of constructing an act as shameful or untoward is still necessary when defining speech as an account. For instance, in analyzing the accounts offered by pedophiles, Durkin and Bryant (1999) point out that some pedophiles use the denial of injury account to explain their sexual behavior. They comment:

> In fact, clinical reports reveal that many child molesters believe that such activity will not harm a youngster unless force is used. Such fallacious assertions contradict the voluminous body of scientific literature that indicates that children who are molested often suffer a variety of physical, psychological, and social damage because of their victimization. (P. 110)

The accounts offered by pedophilia advocates are labeled "diatribes" (p. 110) and attempts at "propagandizing pederasty." In constructing their arguments in this way, Durkin and Bryant take the role of referee and pass judgment on the validity of the accounts being offered. Further, they take the stance that accounts can serve the "neutralizing" function. "This account may serve an exculpatory function for pedophiles by assuaging the guilt associated with engaging in (or desiring to engage in) sex with children" (Durkin and Bryant 1999:119).

Other analysts utilizing accounts engage in the same type of motive mongering necessitated by the neutralization concept. In examining the accounts men who have abused their partners give to explain their behavior, Mullaney (2007) argues that these men offer up justificatory accounts to reclaim their masculinity, "Feeling totally emasculated by their partners, the criminal justice system, and the agencies to which they have been assigned, men attempt to reclaim specific facets of hegemonic masculinity by focusing on the unjust ways others denied it to them." In this case, Mullaney is speaking to the motivations behind the types of accounts offered.

IMPLICATIONS

While this exploration of the way analysts apply the neutralization concept can be read as an examination of the techniques used by researchers to make sense of the behavior those they research engage in, it also carries some critical implications for those who wish to use the concept. First, it reveals how the interpretive frame constructed by researchers using the neutralization concept leads them to ignore interpretations of their data that would challenge the assumptions implicit in this frame. Second, it demonstrates how experts using the neutralization concept place themselves as agents of conventional morality who pass judgment on the shamefulness of certain acts.

Ignoring Alternative Interpretations

As was mentioned earlier, researchers using the neutralization concept construct interpretive frames through which they make sense of the actions of the subjects of their research. Embedded in one of these frames is the assumption that those who engage in rule-breaking behavior are committed to mainstream values. The validity of this assumption is rarely examined by the researchers using this frame.

Few researchers attempt to establish that their subjects are committed to conventional norms. Some (Alvarez 1997; Durkin and Bryant 1999) spend time establishing how the behavior in question is widely condemned. Once this is done, the reader is left to assume that the subjects of the study are also committed to this popular conception of the behavior. The actions and speech of the subjects of these studies are then interpreted as the actions and speech of people committed to conventional norms. Yet these actors' very participation in the behavior in question can be read as evidence

that they are not committed to these norms. Their "neutralizations" can be interpreted as evidence that their understanding of the moral status of the behavior is not the same as the mainstream. These interpretations are not entertained. The assumption that those being studied are committed to "conventional" norms is left unchallenged.

Some analysts do make an attempt to establish whether their subjects are committed to conventional morality. In examining the neutralizations shoplifters use, Cromwell and Thurman (2003) attempt to ascertain their subjects' views on the morality of shoplifting by asking them two questions, "How do you feel about stealing from stores?" and "Do you think that shoplifting is morally wrong?" (p. 541). By doing this, Cromwell and Thurman are able to establish their subjects' commitment to conventional morality and distinguish those who are using neutralizations to deal with guilt from those who are using neutralizations as a form of impression management:

> Even those who did not appear to be committed to the conventional moral order used neutralizations to justify or excuse their behavior. Their use of neutralizations was not so much as to assuage guilt but to provide them with the necessary justifications for their acts to others. (P. 547)

Their statement illustrates how the interpretive frame being used directs researchers' interpretations of the evidence in a way that will confirm their construction of their subjects. By stating that they feel shoplifting is morally wrong, the participants may be engaging in impression management, trying to present themselves as generally decent folk to the researchers. Yet Cromwell and Thurman choose not interpret the responses in this way. Instead, the participants' statements about their commitment to conventional values are accepted without skepticism while statements about why they engage in shoplifting are skeptically evaluated and interpreted as either neutralizations or

impression management. By engaging in this selective skepticism, they are able to present interpretations of the evidence that confirm the use of neutralizations by their research subjects and avoid challenging the assumption that their subjects are committed to conventional views.

Researchers who view neutralizations as a guilt management technique face data that lend themselves to multiple interpretations. For instance, in Cromwell and Thurman's research, the participants generally indicate that they believe shoplifting is wrong. But they also engaged in shoplifting. Further, they indicate that they believe shoplifting is acceptable under certain circumstances. The researcher must choose which of these acts represents the actor's understanding of his or her moral commitments. In Cromwell and Thurman's research, the actors' statements indicating their belief that shoplifting is wrong are treated as an accurate representation of their "real" beliefs regarding the moral status of shoplifting. Doing so fits the interpretive frame being used. However, the reasons why these data are chosen to reflect the subject's "true" understanding of their moral commitments over the other data is left unexplained.

Passing Judgment on Deviant Acts

Earlier in this paper, I established how using the neutralization concept requires the researcher to legitimize the deviant label being applied to the subjects of the study. The critical implications of this vary depending on the researcher's theoretical orientation to the study of deviance. Among those who take an objective approach to defining deviance, validating the deviant label is unproblematic as they argue that acts that meet certain criteria are objectively deviant. However, for those who argue that definitions of deviance

are subjective creations, taking sides in determining what is and is not deviance is problematic. For subjectivists, no act is inherently deviant. Becker's ([1963] 1991) oft-quoted statement that ". . . deviance is not a simple quality, present in some kinds of behavior and absent in others. Rather, it is the product of a process which involves responses of other people to the behavior" (p. 14) accurately represents the subjectivist premise that what is and is not viewed as deviant is a product of social processes. For subjectivists, particularly those taking an interactionist approach, the field is about understanding the process of deviance, about understanding how people come to be seen as deviants, how people manage these labels, how they enter into and exit deviant careers and the way in which deviants live their lives. Techniques of neutralization seem like a logical addition to this paradigm. The concept serves to illuminate the consequences of the deviant label and how that label is managed by those who receive it. Questions of whether researchers view the behavior in question as "actually" deviant are irrelevant to subjectivist approaches as deviance is viewed as behavior that is successfully labeled deviant. In light of this stance on what constitutes deviance, those operating from a subjectivist viewpoint have assiduously avoided pathologizing or moralizing deviant behavior.

Yet, despite the aversion subjectivists have toward validating one view of deviance over another, the very act of framing speech as neutralizations puts the analyst on the side of the labelers. Some may point out that the analysts are not applying the label themselves so much as they are examining the way others react to being labeled. While it is true that analysts using the neutralization concept may be following the labels being

applied by others and do not label the subjects of their studies themselves, the issue becomes problematic when analysts engage in discussions about *why* actors offer the speech they do. While there may be patterns in the way actors explain their non-conforming behavior, the concept of neutralization requires the researcher to assume their subjects are feeling guilt or shame. In doing this, the analyst alleges that there is something "bad" or shame-worthy about the behavior in question. Although neutralizations could be understood as competing claims about the shame-worthiness of the act, this speech is not treated this way. The interpretive context the researcher is operating within assumes the shamefulness of the act. While researchers may be following the labels applied by others, the way the speech of their research subjects is treated clearly indicates whose understanding of the act the researcher endorses.

CONCLUSION

This paper is an attempt to illustrate the way sociologists of deviance construct the subjects of their studies through the concept of neutralizations. By building an interpretive framework through which the moral commitments, desires, emotions and motives of their research subjects are constructed, researchers are able to sensibly interpret their subjects' talk as acts of neutralization. Alternative interpretations of this talk, such as treating these types of speech as explanations of an actor's reasons for participating in the acts in question are ruled out.

While this paper can be read as an examination of the way sociologists and criminologists construct the people they study, it also has critical implications. It raises

questions about how we, as researchers, can establish the motives and internal desires of those we study. Why do we choose one interpretation of the data concerning the moral commitments of our subjects over others? Are we comfortable with the way in which the moral status of the acts engaged in by those we study are framed when we interpret their speech as neutralizations? How these questions are answered and, indeed, whether or not they are considered problematic at all, will vary depending on how researchers define deviance and conceive the goals of the discipline. Some who engage in the study of deviance wish to examine what leads individuals to participate in deviance. Others seek to understand the issues of power and hegemony involved in the creation and enforcement of rules. Still others look to find out how the deviance process is enacted in interaction. Some researchers openly condemn the behavior their subjects engage in while others attempt to avoid passing judgment on their subjects. Ultimately, when we consider the contribution and utility the concept of neutralizations has made to the study of deviance, it is worthwhile to consider the implications the concept has for how we perceive the goals of the study of deviance.

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CHAPTER 3 – LOVE IN THE TIME OF SCIENCE

Love in the Time of Science: Attraction, Evolution and Knowledge in the Seduction Community

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, the author examines the role evolutionary psychology plays in the claims made by a subculture of male pickup artists known as the "seduction community." The seduction community is composed of a loose network of men who share routines, strategies and advice on how to successfully attract and seduce women. In explaining why their techniques work, members of this community often invoke the work of evolutionary psychologists. Based on participant observation and analysis of the various media this community produces, this essay uses the lens of social constructionism to examine how the men in this community use evolutionary psychology to frame attracting and seducing women as a "problem," to construct solutions to this problem and claim ownership of the capacity to dispense these solutions.

You are a biological machine. Your motives in this life are simple, but not simplistic: To live and love.

(Mystery 2005:3)

This statement appears in the opening pages of a manual written to instruct men on how to seduce women. Penned by a prominent member of a subculture of men known as the "seduction community," it reveals this community's typical method of making sense of the way men and women make choices about their sexual behaviour. For those who belong to this subculture, this is of paramount importance as much of their time is dedicated to learning and teaching how to successfully approach, attract and seduce women. Within this community, love and sex are not matters of romance, fate or kismet. Instead there is a science to attraction and a system to seduction.

This paper examines how the men who make up the seduction community understand male/female relationships. In particular, I am interested in how members of this subculture employ the science of evolutionary psychology in the claims they make about the process of "picking up" women. While the claims and activities of a group of men who instruct others on how to seduce women is an issue that will undoubtedly lend itself to a fruitful critical analysis of their role in promoting and reinforcing hegemonic masculinity, this paper focuses its analysis elsewhere. In examining the claims made by these men, I use a social constructionist approach, an approach that directs attention to the social processes by which reality is constructed and meanings are ascribed to social experiences. The constructionist approach is explained in greater detail in the next section. It is important to note here, however, that the approach does not concern itself with the validity of the claims being made or the meanings ascribed. Instead, the focus is

on the meaning-making process itself – in this case how the members of this community apply, reconfigure and extend the expert knowledge of those who study evolutionary science. The paper examines 1) how members of the seduction community frame the *grounds* or "facts of the matter" about the romantic and sexual desires of men and women through the use of evolutionary psychology, 2) the role these grounds play in their construction of the causes or *diagnostic framing* of the "seduction problem," and lastly 3) how evolutionary psychology is used within the community to construct *prognostic frames* that allow them to discount "mainstream" relationship advice as inherently flawed and to construct their own theories about the nature of attraction and seduction. To begin, however, I explain what the seduction community is, how it developed and some of the key beliefs to which members of the community subscribe. This is followed by a more comprehensive discussion of the social constructionist perspective that informs the analysis of claims made by the seduction community and a description of the methods used to collect the data presented here.

THE SEDUCTION COMMUNITY

The seduction community is a group of men who identify themselves as pickup artists. These men share tips, techniques and tactics for "hitting" on, generating attraction from and, eventually, seducing women. They communicate with each other via several Internet forums and mailing lists. Beyond the Internet, members of the community who live in close proximity to each other will form "lairs." A lair is a group of pickup artists who meet face-to-face on a regular basis to discuss pickup with each other. Since the

Internet provides a simple way to connect and network with pickup artists around the world, when pickup artists travel to other areas, they may meet up with local lairs. As a consequence, many lairs share interpersonal connections with each other.

In addition to discussions in lairs and on the Internet, several members of the community produce instructional books (both in traditional print and electronically), videos and audio recordings which they sell for prices ranging from $50 to several hundred or even thousands of dollars. One particularly famous member of the community sold a limited number of training packages, consisting of over twelve hours of video and over 1500 pages of printed material, for $4000. Well known members of the community known as "pickup gurus" or "master pickup artists" hold in-person seminars, often referred to as "boot camps," where a limited number of men can get personal training and feedback on their techniques of "picking up." The cost of these "bootcamps" can range from several hundred dollars to several thousand.

The origins of the seduction community are difficult to establish. There are several historical examples of famous seducers, ranging from literary characters such as Lothario to real-life examples such as Casanova and countless books detailing techniques for finding love, having better sex, attracting a mate and negotiating the difficult terrain of a romantic relationship. In a sense, there has always been a type of seduction community so long as there has been advice and literature on love, sex and relationships. However, the loose network of men studied here began to emerge in the late 1980s. One of the well known figures at this time was a man named Ross Jeffries. Jeffries taught a technique of seduction entitled "speed seduction." He began his enterprise by holding seminars to

teach his method in person while selling home "courses" through the mail. He later self-published a book entitled *How to Get the Women You Desire Into Bed: A Down and Dirty Guide to Dating and Seduction for the Man Who's Fed Up With Being Mr. Nice Guy* (Jeffries 1992). Until the mid-1990s, Jeffries remained one of the most well known figures teaching seduction. While the seduction community remained largely unknown to the mainstream, Jeffries gained enough fame to inspire the character of Frank "T.J." Mackey played by Tom Cruise in the movie *Magnolia* (Sellar and Anderson 1999).

By the mid-1990s, the seduction community had moved online. The newsgroup alt.seduction.fast (ASF) and, later, moderated alt.seduction.fast (mASF) became the forums for aspiring pickup artists and gurus to share ideas, ask questions and distribute advice. At this time, David DeAngelo, a former student of Ross Jeffries, established his own "school" of seduction now known as "Double Your Dating." Like Jeffries, DeAngelo produced books, DVDs and held seminars for large numbers of men where he taught his understanding of what made men attractive to women. Soon after, another guru named Mystery began to gain popularity in the online forums and held his first in-person "boot camp." Mystery was the first person to incorporate "field experience" into his workshops. This meant that Mystery would take his students into clubs and bars and encourage them to "open" (approach) a "set" (a group of people) while applying what they had been taught earlier in the day. He would then critique the students' attempts and offer advice on how to improve their techniques.

By the early 2000s, several more pickup gurus rose to prominence and have begun their own businesses teaching seduction. Each business employs several instructors who

travel between major cities and teach the school's particular brand of seduction. Additionally, there are several less well known pickup artists who offer boot camps in their local area at a price far below that charged by the more well-known schools.

With the growing numbers of "gurus" and the increased commercialization of their efforts, the community is gaining attention from the mainstream. This was aided by a bestselling autobiographical book (Strauss 2005) detailing one man's entry into and rise to prominence in the world of pickup artists. Since the publication of this book, the community has moved further into the mainstream with "reality" television shows involving members of the seduction community being broadcast on VH1 in the United States, The Comedy Network in Canada and Channel 4 in England. With this growing attention, the community has begun to emerge from Internet obscurity and into the mainstream.

While each school teaches a slightly different brand of seduction, they all borrow from each other heavily and are based on a set of common principles: 1) most women are attracted to the same basic set of qualities in men; 2) interaction between men and women is patterned; 3) one can learn to interact with women in a way that conveys these qualities. With an understanding of what women find attractive and a conception of how the process of attraction and seduction flows, pickup artists argue that men can be taught to think and behave in ways that will convey the qualities women find attractive. The notion that some men "have it" while others do not is rejected. Thus, those who join the community are taught to recognize the process of attraction and seduction and how to behave "properly" in each of the steps that make up this process.

What is taught is broad in scope and range. What follows is a brief summary of a body of knowledge that is large, complex and more nuanced than the summary may suggest. For men who have just discovered the seduction community, an emphasis is placed on changing external appearances and behaviors to convey and emulate the traits women are thought to find attractive, such as confidence, status and wealth. Examples include giving advice on how to groom and dress as well as how to change one's body language to be more masculine. For instance, the importance of clothing in portraying an identity that embodies attractive traits is stressed by many different seduction gurus. The instructional videos produced by a pickup guru named Style contain a section wherein five men are given a fashion appraisal by Style and a panel of women. Each man is given fashion recommendations based on the identity or "character" the panel believes the man can "pull off" based on his physical characteristics and "energy." For instance, one of the men is told his character is ". . . the club owner, who is possibly into some shady activities" and he is encouraged to wear pinstripe suits and "rock the big cross" for jewelry. The idea behind such advice is to use clothing as status symbols, to grab the attention of onlookers and portray a strongly defined role that embodies some combination of power, status, creativity or mystery that sets the pickup artist apart from "regular" men. The men are not encouraged to fabricate stories to match the character their clothing suggests. Instead, women are left to make their own assumptions based on their association of the clothing with certain traits.

The pickup guru Savoy (2007) explains the importance of style for seduction in his instructional manual:

> Remember, when you first start interacting with her, she won't know much about you, and your clothes are one of her most useful sources of information about you:
>
> - She knows that your clothes didn't fall on you by accident. You made a choice to wear what you're wearing and she will use that information to make assumptions about you.
> - She will make implicit assumptions about you without even realizing it. Before she even really notices you, she may already think you are "boring" or "sexy" or "creative".
> - She is going to assume that you behave and live a lifestyle similar to those of other men she has met who dress in a similar way.
> - She is going to draw on stereotypes from the media, especially films and television, and assume that you emulate, or are trying to emulate, movie or TV characters who dress that way.
>
> So, how you dress is important not only for enhancing your looks but also for conveying your identity. She's going to make judgments about you based on your clothes anyway, so you may as well have her make the judgments you want. This is another reason why one-size-fits-all fashion and grooming advice can be a disservice. (Pp. 173-174)

Beyond external appearances, a great deal of time is spent teaching men how to talk and what to talk about. Men are taught how to approach a group of strangers in a way that puts the group at ease and engages them in conversation. For instance, men are coached on how to use "openers" to get conversations started. Openers are a pre-made comment or question designed to pique the group's interest and generate conversation. There are different styles of openers one can employ. For instance, an "opinion opener" is designed to solicit opinions from the group, such as "Who lies more, men or women?" while in an "Oh my God!" opener the pickup artist asks a question prefaced by the exclamatory "Oh my God!" phrase, as in "Oh my God! Did you see the two girls fighting outside? It was crazy!"

The main purpose of an opener is to get the pickup artist involved in a conversation with the set. However, there are many subtleties embedded in an opener. For example, when one approaches a set, he should not hover around them beforehand. Doing so telegraphs that he is going to "hit" on the set. Further, one should not approach the set directly as this can be seen as very confrontational, instead, pickup artists approach from an angle. If possible, the opener should be delivered in an over the shoulder manner as if one were talking to a group of friends and decided to casually solicit an opinion about the topic from a group of nearby people. The reason offered for this is that turning to face the set directly shows neediness, which is an unattractive quality. Further, when delivering an opener, one should not apologize for intruding as this is also considered to show weakness or neediness.

Beyond the manner of delivery, the opener should be prefaced with a "false time constraint." This is a statement indicating that the pickup artist will not be bothering the set for long, although his intent is to stay for a long time. For example, one might say, "Hey guys, I need a quick female opinion on something, *it'll just take a minute because I've got to get back to my friends*. It's guys' night out so I shouldn't even be talking to you." This, it is argued, allays the fears members of the set may have that this stranger is intending to impose on them for an extended period of time and should, therefore, be given the brush off. Lastly, an opener must be "grounded" in that a reason must be given as to why the pickup artist is asking this question. An example might be "My buddies and I were just talking and we need someone to settle a bet for us . . ." This must be done to

make the odd act of approaching a group of strangers for an opinion seem reasonable in the context of the situation.

Learning to communicate extends far beyond learning to open. Men are encouraged to mine their past experiences for stories that demonstrate that they possess the traits that women are thought to look for in men. Those in the seduction community argue that men and women tell stories in very different ways, with men focusing on plot while women focus on the emotional experience. The pickup guru Mystery states:

> When telling stories, men tend to focus on the facts at hand, whereas women look for the sensation and emotion caused by the experience. Structure your language to take this into account. Example:
>
> **Bad:** This guy grabbed my ass, can you believe that? I looked like an idiot.
>
> **Good:** Then I felt a strong hand caress my ass and grip it tightly. I turned around, and there was this man with a handlebar mustache smiling suggestively at me. All the girls started laughing. I have never ... felt so surprised ... and embarrassed ... in my entire life!
>
> Notice how the above story segment conveys the emotions of surprise and embarrassment – both of which are useful during a story. Three or four story segments like this put together can lead the listener through a little emotional journey. (P. 115)

Guidance is given on how to tell these stories in a way that women will relate to and that conveys attractive qualities without seeming to brag. This practice of subtly conveying attractive qualities is referred to as "demonstrating higher value" or DHVing.

Many of the techniques taught may seem counterintuitive until one understands the logic that underlies the theories about men and women that pickup artists espouse. The concept of the "neg" serves as a perfect example. The neg is one of the techniques used within the community that draws a great deal of attention, misinterpretation and

scorn from outsiders and from members new to the community. The neg is a type of backhanded compliment or tease designed to show "active disinterest." Active disinterest is the process of actively showing that the pickup artist is not interested in hitting on the woman (even though he is) and thus putting her at ease so she does not view him as a "threat." According to some pickup gurus, the neg will also lead her to question her sexual attractiveness and thus seek out the pick up artist's approval to re-validate her self-image as an attractive woman.

A simple example of a neg is to pick some piece of clothing the woman is wearing, such as a handbag, and say "I like your handbag, they're very popular these days. I saw another woman with the same one earlier tonight." Though it seems counterintuitive to subtly insult someone the pickup artist is trying to pursue a romantic or sexual relationship with, members of the seduction community argue that many of the assumptions men make about women's thinking are incorrect. In this case, while it might seem reasonable to assume that a woman (and people in general) would appreciate being complimented, they explain that a compliment early on in the interaction only telegraphs one's interest and comes across as insincere, since the man knows very little about the woman. Instead, the subtle tease embedded in the neg is believed to elevate a man's status by demonstrating that he is used to being around attractive women and is not desperate for her approval.

Beyond learning how to communicate in what they argue is an attractive manner, members of the community are also taught to read women's reactions and body language

and adjust their behavior accordingly. This practice was discussed at a meeting of pickup artists I observed:

> Aaron: Yeah, you can't always trust what they're saying. Just last week when I was out, I was talking to this girl. After talking to her for a while, she mentioned a few times that she wasn't interested in seeing anyone. But you could see that what she was saying wasn't congruent with her body language. She had her legs crossed toward me, leaning in a bit and sticking out her chest. And she kept running her fingers along her neck. So I just said "Yeah, I totally understand" and kept physically escalating [progressively touching in more intimate ways] and we ended up going home together. [Field notes]

Beyond teaching men how to interact with women, the seduction community also focuses on "inner game," that is, on cultivating a certain type of personality or identity that is considered attractive to women. Much of this has to do with changing how men conceive of themselves. The lack of confidence exhibited by many members of the community is attributed to low self-esteem and low feelings of self-worth. While its felt that the advice on style and storytelling can greatly improve men's interactions with women, many gurus argue that men must come to believe that they are people of value who have much to offer. As one guru states, men must learn to find their "best self." These teachings move away from dwelling solely on seduction and, instead, focus on achieving a type of lifestyle that is fulfilling in all areas of life, such as in health and financial arenas.

Although the seduction community recognizes that doing well in these other areas of life can make one more attractive to women, this is not the reason they encourage each other to develop themselves in this way. Members of the community are advised to improve these areas of life for their own benefit. As one progresses deeper into the community, less emphasis is placed on the tactics and strategies by which one can convey

putatively attractive qualities, in favor of discussions related to how to internalize these traits and genuinely embody them. As an aspiring pickup artist cultivates these traits, the need for contrived tactics and routines are meant to disappear as men begin to authentically embody the personality and lifestyle that they argue women find attractive.

THE CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH

To better understand how members of the seduction community frame seduction through the use of evolutionary psychology, I draw on concepts developed in the social constructionist tradition. Constructionism is a many-headed animal. First invoked by Berger and Luckmann ([1966] 1985) as a way to study the sociology of knowledge, constructionism has found a prominent place in the sociology of science (Latour and Woolgar 1979; Pickering 1984), the study of social problems, (Spector and Kitsuse 1977) and a variety of other subject areas within and outside of sociology. Yet, despite its various manifestations, the constructionist approach is, at the very minimum, tied together by an interest in understanding how actors come to conceive of the world around them. To talk of how something was socially constructed or to discuss the social construction of some phenomenon is to talk of how actors give meaning to the thing in question. The fundamental assumption behind such ideas is that actors' understandings of reality are a function of a continuous process of interpretation and meaning-making or construction. The way in which people understand the world around them and the knowledge they have about the way the world works is not self-evident. Instead, these meanings emerge through social interaction. They are *socially constructed.*

In the analysis that follows, I invoke several concepts that have been developed by social constructionists, particularly those working in the field of social problems. Among these are the concepts of claimsmaking and framing. The focus of the constructionist approach to social problems is not on the objective facts of allegedly problematic conditions. Instead, the process by which social actors construct or make claims about the problematic nature of certain conditions is examined. The approach focuses on how claims to knowledge about problematic conditions are made. Social problem claims are understood as "... any verbal, visual, or behavioral statement that tries to persuade audience members to take a condition seriously and respond to it as a social problem" (Loseke and Best 2003:39). Questions about the validity of claims, or whether claims are true are false are bracketed. Instead, constructionists are interested in the form claims take, the strategies claimsmakers use in constructing and communicating their claims and the outcome of claimsmaking activities.

This paper focuses on three processes constructionists have identified as part of the claimsmaking process: 1) the construction of grounds through orientation statements, 2) the construction of diagnostic and prognostic frames and 3) the construction of people. The construction of grounds (Best 1990) refers to the way claimsmakers lay out the "facts" that define the nature of the condition. This is achieved through the use of "domain statements," typifying examples, estimates of the problem's extent and "orientation statements," (Best 1987; Best 1990). Domain statements set the boundaries of the problem by identifying what things should be included as examples of the problem in question and which fall outside of its scope. Once the boundaries of what constitutes

the problem are set, examples are used to typify the problem. Often dramatic and sensational, such examples are intended to grab people's attention and create a perception of the most extreme instances of the phenomenon as typical. Further, constructing the grounds of the problem frequently involves estimates of how widespread the problem is. Such estimates indicate the frequency of the problem, who or what it affects and how quickly the problem is growing.

Most relevant to the use of evolutionary psychology by pickup artists is the concept of the orientation statement. "Orientation statements" identify the *type* of condition being discussed. For instance, claims about teen pregnancy may revolve around teenage promiscuity and increasing lax attitudes toward chastity and the sanctity of sex. Constructed this way, the problem of teen pregnancy is a moral problem. Alternatively, teen pregnancy can be constructed as a problem of education, using claims that focus on inadequate information about and availability of birth control methods to teenagers (Best 1995:8).

Beyond the construction of grounds, claimsmakers must identify the causes of the condition, provide reasons why we should care about it and explain how the problem should be solved. This is done through the construction of various frames (Loseke 2003; Snow and Benford 1988). In making claims about the causes of a specific condition or problem, claimsmakers construct *diagnostic frames*. These frames provide answers to questions about who or what is responsible for causing the problem. *Prognostic frames* identify what should be done about the condition in question and who should do it. Both diagnostic and prognostic frames are necessarily entwined with construction of grounds.

Causes and solutions must speak to the "facts of the matter" and are often a part of the orientation statements that identify the "type" of problem being faced. Thus, from the example in the preceding paragraph, if teenage pregnancy is being constructed as a moral issue, the causes are likely to be linked to depictions of sex in the mass media or the decline of religion in everyday life. The solutions may involve attempts to limit the visibility of such depictions and to introduce abstinence only sexual education curricula in schools.

Lastly, the construction of people (Loseke 2003) involves making claims about the people related to the condition in question. Those constructed may include people who are adversely affected by the condition, those who are responsible for the condition's existence and any other players the claimsmakers may deem relevant. In constructing people, claimsmakers create archetypal characters who embody certain traits. Putative facts about these characters are brought to the attention of the audiences. They are attributed certain motives and desires in an attempt to allow the audiences to "properly" understand the nature of those involved in this problematic condition. Once this is done, audiences can make sense of the action of these characters in a way that aligns with the claims being made. The process of constructing people can be found in each step of the claimsmaking game, from laying out the grounds of the problem to constructing its solutions.

METHODS

My analysis is based on an analysis of several Internet sites and materials produced and sold by members of the seduction community, combined with observation of meetings held at regular intervals by a small group of pickup artists (known as a "lair") in a large city in southern Ontario. Additionally, I conducted a limited amount of observation in several bars in the city as these pickup artists put their theories into action "in the field" (a term pickup artists use to refer to any situation where they are attempting to pickup women). Observations were conducted over a seven month period from September 2006 to April, 2007.

I analyzed a number of materials that have come out of the seduction community, including the books *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists* (Strauss 2005), three self-published e-books: *The Venusian Arts Handbook* (Mystery 2005), *Magic Bullets* (Savoy 2007), *Double Your Dating* (DeAngelo 2001), and *Attraction Isn't a Choice* (DeAngelo 2004), and four instructional video series entitled *The Annihilation Method* (Style 2005), *Foundations* (Durden Unknown date), *Deep Inner Game* (DeAngelo Unknown Date) and *The Mystery Method* (Mystery Unknown date). I also examined several articles indexed and stored on the website of a well known lair.

The group I observed was located through a publicly accessible Internet site that lists the contact information and Internet presence of lairs around the world. When I began the study, I was looking for a lair within a reasonable travel distance and that was

reasonably active. The lair I selected held meetings approximately once a month in the apartment of one of the lair members. They were open to anyone who showed up.

I gained entry by attending one of the open meetings. Several attendees were new to the lair and the meeting organizers asked all attendees to introduce themselves. I did so, mentioning that I was doing my PhD in Sociology. My commitment to using participant observation to study the seduction community was still tentative at this point. I was not sure about whether I would be able to gain the kind of access I needed and had not yet worked through the issue of how open I could afford to be about my intentions. I had resolved at least to minimize the deceptions and to be open about my status as a PhD student. This introduction would have fortuitous consequences. During the socializing after the meeting, one of the attendees, Wayne, suggested that it would be interesting if I did a sociology project on doing pickup. This created an opportune moment for me to take the next step. At the beginning of the next meeting, I mentioned that Wayne had suggested that I do a study on doing pickup and that I felt there were many sociologically interesting things that I could learn from pursuing the idea. There was general agreement and enthusiasm within the group. I asked if they would mind if I wrote about what I saw and experienced while "hanging out" and if any of them would be interested in talking one-on-one later. I received several affirmative verbal responses.

Interestingly, the only reservations came from two of the leading members of the group. Ironically, their concerns had less to do with possible harm to the group and more to do with any harm to my reputation that might come from being associated with pickup artists. I noted the following exchange in my field notes:

Charles: You just need to be careful about telling people that you're a pickup artist. Some won't take that well.

[Several affirmations, "yeahs," etc.]

James: Yeah, but he'll be presenting it like research, not like he's teaching it or anything.

In addition to attending meetings, I was invited to accompany some members of the lair to several nightclubs and bars as they engaged in picking up women. Several times I was encouraged to try my hand at the techniques being taught. Having anticipated this, I had considered what limits I would place on my participation. I determined that I would approach groups of people if encouraged to, but would limit my interaction to friendly conversation and avoid any type of romantic overtures. In other instances, I was asked to support or "wing" for some of the lair members. During these situations, I was expected to "play-up" the positive traits of the person I was winging for and do a certain amount of work in keeping the group engaged in conversation.

The age range of the members was between 18 and the early 40s with most members in their mid 20s. The number of attendees at the meetings I observed ranged from five to 12 with 14 different members attending the meetings over the period of observation. There were three members who attended all meetings. These three were also the most experienced members of the group and dominated most of the discussions. One of them, Charles, took responsibility for organizing the meetings while James hosted them in his apartment.

Members of the community often use pseudonyms in online forums. Many of the "gurus" also use these pseudonyms in their day-to-day interactions. For the purposes of

maintaining the anonymity, the names of the lair members observed have been changed while names and pseudonyms of publicly known members of the community who sell instructional material have been left unchanged.

GROUNDING THE "PROBLEM" OF ATTRACTION IN THE SCIENCE OF EVOLUTION

The seduction community exists to provide heterosexual men with a solution to a problem they perceive exists in their relationships with women. For a variety of reasons, the men who join the community are unhappy or dissatisfied with these relationships. Their particular goals and desires vary from individual to individual. Some have never had a girlfriend and are looking to find their first long-term relationship. Some are dissatisfied with the type of women who will agree to date them (for reasons ranging from her personality to her looks). Others want to have certain sexual experiences, whether that be to increase the number of women with whom they have sexual relationships, to be involved in several simultaneous sexual relationships or to experience certain sexual acts they have not yet experienced. Some men are looking for long-term relationships, including marriage partners. Whether their goals are conventional or prurient, the men view their relationships with women as a problem and the seduction community claims to offer the solutions they desire.

These solutions are rooted in a series of assumptions about the essential natures of men and women. These essentializations are what undergird the explanations of *why* their techniques work and are what constitute the grounds of the claims they make. To

construct these grounds, pickup artists draw on many sources, including psychology, neuro-linguistic programming, religious and spiritual philosophy, and, quite prominently, evolutionary psychology. By invoking evolutionary psychology, members of the seduction community begin to identify what *type* of problem seduction is; that is, one that rests on understanding and appealing to the traits women have been "programmed" to look for through the process of evolution. The paradigm on which this understanding of behavior is based argues that the genes that are passed on from generation to generation are those which allow an organism to survive long enough to reproduce, that allows the organism to attract a mate and that compels an organism to select a mate that will provide the best chances of producing offspring that will survive to pass on its genes. Through this paradigm, pickup artists come to see men and women's choices about who they have sex with as deeply rooted in their biology.

Popular books that explain human sexual behaviour in terms of evolutionary processes, such as Baker's ([1996] 2006) *Sperm Wars*, and Ridley's (1994) *The Red Queen*, as well as books dealing with broader evolutionary explanations of human behaviours, such as Dawkin's (1978) *The Selfish Gene*, are often referenced with the seduction community. At one lair meeting, attendees were encouraged to seek out this literature by one of the leading members of the lair, "You guys need to read it [*Sperm Wars*], it's *the* guide to being a pimp." [field notes] and Strauss' (2005) chronicle of his experiences within the seduction community underlines the significance of these books and the theories they offer to members of the community:

> Among the required reading for all PUAs were books on evolutionary theory: *The Red Queen* by Matt Ridley, *The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins, *Sperm Wars* by

> Robin Baker. You read them, and you understand why women tend to like jerks, why men want so many sexual partners, and why so many people cheat on their spouses. (P. 294)

In this way, the claims of experts working in the field of evolutionary psychology are co-opted and applied by members of the seduction community as part of the solution to a problem they have identified. Evolutionary psychology serves as part of their "orientation statements" (Best 1990), identifying the problems of attraction and seduction as a matter of evolutionary biology. In this science, the seduction community finds the grounds for the claims they will make about how to successfully attract women.

Examples of this approach to understanding sexual behavior and its relevance to the concerns of the seduction community are seen in the various manuals offered by the different gurus. For instance, in his instruction manual on doing pickup, the pickup guru Savoy explains his understanding of female psychology with a "quick primer on evolutionary biology." He states ". . . it should become apparent why evolutionary biology is so important to the science of dating. Other than the basic need to survive, every component of evolutionary success relates directly to effectively choosing a mate and managing a relationship" (Savoy 2007:22). Another guru, Mystery, makes a similar argument:

> The healthiest man, the most intelligent man, the most socially-connected man, the most financially independent man, the most sexually pre-selected man - these sorts of traits will attract the woman because such a man provides survival and replication value to her, as well as to her offspring. (Mystery 2005:11)

It is here one begins to see the way in which evolutionary psychology informs the construction of people within the seduction community. Women are constructed as being evolutionarily "programmed" to find certain traits attractive and to seek them out in their

mates. These traits: leadership, confidence, wealth, a capacity to take care of one's friends and family, are believed to be sought by women because the men who possess them will be better able to provide for a child. Further, it is argued that women seek signs of health (clear skin, athletic physique, etc) in men as a man who is healthy has genes that will allow him to survive and to pass these "survival" genes on to a child. In each case, the purported attraction women have toward these traits is understood to be a result of an evolutionary imperative. This imperative directs women (and men) to increase the odds that their children will survive and pass on the woman's genes.

Men are also constructed through the lens of evolutionary psychology. This is most clearly demonstrated in the concept of the alpha-male, which permeates much of pickup artist discourse. Within this discourse, the alpha-male is understood as the apex of masculinity who embodies all of the traits listed above. He is the pack leader, the male who gains sexual access to the females in the pack, pride, harem or high school. According to pickup dogma, women are naturally attracted to these traits: "What do women want? . . . a strong, alpha man." (Mystery 2005:21). Men who are perceived to embody these characteristics and attract women without any type of instruction on how to do it are known as *naturals*. Naturals are viewed as distinct from pickup artists in that pickup artists must consciously work to embody what naturals came by organically.

The alpha-male concept suffuses many of the ideas the community discussions. For instance, smiling is argued to be important because it conveys alpha-maleness. Alpha-males occupy the top of the status hierarchy, they control their destiny and are not victims of circumstances. Since an alpha-male has everything going for him, he should be smiling

and having a good time. His posture should be erect, he should take up space, make eye contact and hold it, and not be afraid to initiate physical contact with a woman. These are behaviours the men in this community believe show dominance and a refusal to supplicate, just as alpha-males in nature, they argue, do not supplicate to the females they mate with:

> Early on, the number one rule I learned was no supplication. Don't buy things for girls. Don't take them on dates until you're dating them, then you can roll out the red carpet. But beforehand, you don't supplicate, you know, like buying them dinner and things to get them to like you. (Style 2005)

CONSTRUCTING DIAGNOSTIC FRAMES

By identifying sex, attraction and seduction as matters of evolutionary psychology, pickup artists lay the groundwork for the diagnostic frames (Loseke 2003; Snow and Benford 1988) they construct. Diagnostic frames identify the causes of the problem in question and, within the seduction community, these frames focus on why many men are unsuccessful in reaching their sexual and relationship goals with women. Most often, blame is laid on the increasing feminization of men in North American culture.

Many members of the seduction community view the last 50 years as a period during which men in North America have lost touch with the masculine traits to which women are inherently attracted. This loss is often associated with the rise of feminism and the lack of strong male role-models in most men's life. A quote from the movie *Fight Club*, that "we are the first generation of men raised by women" was often recited both at the lair meetings and on various message boards and documents within the community.

This "feminization" of men is antithetical to the concept of the alpha-male.

Another guru, David DeAngelo (DeAngelo 2004) explains the problem:

> I heard a great theory once: Too many of us men were raised by our MOTHERS, and not our fathers. Or, we were raised in a household where our mothers dominated our fathers. In either case, we learned how to attract a MOTHER, not how to attract a LOVER. (P. 26)

Neil Strauss (2005) echoes this sentiment:

> The reason I was here . . . was that our parents and our friends had failed us. They had never given us the tools we needed to become fully effective social beings. Now, decades later, it was time to acquire them. (Pp. 21-22)

In each case, the cause of the problem is understood to be the lack of alpha-male role models and an upbringing that discouraged men from demonstrating alpha-male behavior.

The consequences of this cultural feminization is illustrated by the construction of another male archetype, the "average frustrated chump." The average frustrated chump is the antithesis of the alpha-male natural. Within the seduction community, most men outside the community and most new members are believed to be average frustrated chumps. The average frustrated chump is commonly associated with the "nice guy" who constantly ends up in the "friendship zone," meaning the women he ends up becoming friends (and nothing more) with the women he is romantically interested in. He is described as someone who has low self-esteem, is needy and is desperate. These traits manifest themselves in what is characterized as well-meaning, yet misguided behaviour that results in his continual frustration. Behavior such as giving a new female acquaintance several gifts and tokens of affection, constantly asking what she would like to do, pining after a woman who treats him poorly and viewing a woman as a "soulmate"

or "the one" despite only knowing her for a short time are frequently used examples of what average frustrated chumps do.

The frustration average frustrated chumps experience in their dating lives are often discussed by members of the community. For instance, a pickup guru named Tyler Durden (Unknown date) explains his views on why "nice guys" tend to be treated rudely or rejected by the women they approach:

> One of the reasons why women will be a little bit cold toward a lot of guys is because they know that those guys will read too much into it, they'll psych themselves out and it'll cause more harm than good. So one of the reasons why women act like that [coldly or rudely] is for your own protection, it's to help you . . . she'll be so much more friendly to you than if she thinks you're going to read into it, go home and obsess over her or anything like that.

Later:

> They [average frustrated chumps] think that if they can stay friends with a woman long enough that eventually she'll come to see the light . . . She'll realize, "You don't want that jerk, you want me because I won't treat you like that." . . . [However] the poor girl thinks that she's got a friend that she can confide in and meanwhile the guy just jumps out of the closet randomly one day and says "I like you, I want to be a man for you." . . . That's what most guys think will get them girls. If you want to be friends with a girl, do it because you want to be friends with the girl, but don't do it because you want something more and you're not satisfied with that relationship. (Durden Unknown date)

And finally:

> One of the best, funniest things you can do, you know, is to imitate the approaches that every other guy is doing. And they'll [women] laugh because they've seen it, it's there entire lives of getting the same, boring, generic, Disney, Hollywood type of approach that every other guy is doing. So if any of your approach resembles that, just stop. (Durden Unknown date)

Another pickup guru, Mystery (2005) makes a similar claim:

> What these men don't realize is that women of beauty get bombarded by these nice guys every day, and it can grow quite tiresome . . . There are simply too many nice guys approaching them in a day to indulge in the same old lengthy dialogue time after

> time . . . Simply by approaching her and being nice, women of beauty assume you want something from them. If she doesn't think you are selling something (or begging for change), she'll reason it's because you want to win her sexual favor. (Pp 52-53)

Members of the community claim that men who experience frustration at attracting the women they desire are often the victims of a culture that has villainized strong masculine identities and attempted to replace them with feminized "nice guy" ideals. They argue that by allowing women to be primarily in charge of socializing men, women have raised men to embody the traits women say and *believe* they are attracted to, instead of raising them to have the traits that women are *actually* attracted to. They construct the "average frustrated chump" as the product of this culture, the counterpoint to the "alpha-male," whom they construct as the man women desire.

CONSTRUCTING PROGNOSTIC FRAMES

Once the diagnostic frame is established, members of the seduction community then construct a "prognostic frame" (Loseke and Best 2003; Snow and Benford 1988) that present the solutions to the problem and identify who is responsible for providing those solutions. Like diagnostic frames, prognostic frames reflect the grounds that claimsmakers have established. By suggesting that attraction and seduction are processes rooted in evolutionary psychology, the pickup artists set the stage for solutions that also rely on evolutionary reasoning.

Constructing Solutions

Pickup artists construct the solutions for the problems men encounter in attracting and seducing women by combining their understanding of evolutionary psychology with their

experiences and observations "in the field." While their in-field observations and experiences provide them with an understanding of what behaviors will be successful and which will not, evolutionary psychology helps to tie together these observations thematically and support the validity of their claims. Once their knowledge has been systematized, they can use it to theorize new techniques, routines and strategies for doing pickup which can then be taken into the field and tested, thus resetting the cycle of theorizing, testing, reconfiguring theories and testing again.

The way in which evolutionary psychology enters into the thinking of pickup artists is evident in commonly invoked concepts such as "pre-selection." Pre-selection refers to being seen as attractive to other women. The belief within the community is that a man will be more attractive to women if he is seen in the company of other women or is known to have been successful with other women, rather than being seen only with other men or by himself. The company of other women is thought to demonstrate that he must have "something going for him" to have been chosen or "pre-selected" by other women. Being in the company of women acts as a cue to other women that this is a man worth the attention of women. A similar phenomena is found in Ridley (1994), where he explains why peahens mate with peacocks bearing long, elaborate tailfeathers:

> Sir Ronald Fisher had suggested then that females need no better reason for preferring long tails than that other females also prefer long tails . . . Once most females are choosing to mate with some males rather than others and are using tail length as the criterion . . . then any female who bucks the trend and chooses a short-tailed male will have short-tailed sons . . . All the other females are looking for long-tailed males, so those short-tailed sons will not have much success. (Pp. 138-139)

Much like peacocks and peahens, pickup artists argue that being in the presence of women acts as a shorthand to other women. A man who is able to attract women must have attractive qualities that will be passed on, ensuring future reproductive success. Thus, it is argued, a woman sees the pre-selected man as attractive because he will enhance the probability that her offspring will reproduce and thus pass on her genes.

The logic of evolutionary theories can further be seen in the way the men who enter into the seduction community are instructed to construct stories to tell women. Stories should be told in a way that "demonstrates higher value" (DHV). These demonstrations are meant to reveal to women that the storyteller possesses the traits women supposedly find attractive. These traits are identified through their reading of evolutionary psychology. Thus, Ridley's (1994:268) statement that "Men pay more attention to youth and beauty, women to wealth and status" is taken as evidence that status and wealth are important attraction "switches" for women.

However, in order to demonstrate that he possesses these traits, the pickup artist must avoid the appearance of bragging or arrogance while subtly revealing his value. A man cannot simply state, "I have a great deal of money and enjoy high status" as this is a non-sequitur and demonstrates insecurity. Instead, this trait must be communicated as a by-product of the story as is demonstrated in this DHV story used by Savoy:

> I love New York, but I always thought there was something strange about the city. I think I know what it is now. It's mushrooms. I did a show there last week and afterwards a bunch of us went on a helicopter tour. It was really beautiful and all, but the weird thing was all the satellite dishes on the roofs. It was like a sea of little white patches, like the skyscrapers had all grown mold. So I figured it out. New York is strange because we're all living under giant mushrooms, just like the Smurfs. (Savoy 2007:152)

Savoy explains that while this story seems to be about how satellite dishes look like mushrooms when viewed from the sky, it subtly communicates two attractive qualities:

> 1. The narrator does "shows" in New York, among other places. This implies Status, and potentially Wealth. In reality, it can be a trade show for all it matters at this stage.
>
> 2. Helicopter rides are fairly routine for the narrator. To most women, this implies Wealth, and possibly Status. In fact, helicopter rides aren't all that expensive or a big deal; they just seem that way. Go take one so you can tell stories about it. (Savoy 2007:153)

However it is not enough to provide theoretical justifications for the solutions they provide. Members of the community are expected to "field test" the routines they offer up. Field testing plays a large part in how they construct the solutions embedded in their prognostic frame. It is the generally accepted method for creating new routines and refining the models of interaction between men and women they provide. Members of the community begin with inductive reasoning based on their past experiences and observations of women. These theories are then subjected to "field testing," whereby the routines are tried in "real" situations. The expectation within the seduction community is that any routine a member suggests or posts online for the rest of the community to see will have been successfully tried by the person making the suggestion. While some members may believe that a routine seems brilliant in theory, it may fall flat in practice. Likewise, routines that appear to have little chance of success may well turn out to be viable. Until one has field tested his routine, its validity is unproven, thus experience in the field is mandated by many pickup gurus:

> The Game [picking up women] is not played on a computer or the Internet. It's not played in a book. It's played in the real world, with real people and real situations. (Mystery 2005:37)

Another guru, known as Tyler Durden, makes a similar point in one of his instructional videos:

> What a lot of guys have is called the fallacy of the perfect approach. The fallacy of the perfect approach is where, what a guy will do is read, and read and read and read and watch videos and look at it, look at it, look at it, thinking that if he can create the perfect approach, that if he can go out one time, one shot one kill, and he can get the girl and he'll never have to approach another girl in his life . . . It doesn't work like that, there is not a case in history that worked like that. It will not work, you will have to go out, you have to take your lumps . . . You will not build the perfect approach so just get out there. . . . Just get out there, stop reading, stop watching, lets go . . . put the books down . . . ultimately the real learning is done in the nightclubs, malls and social gatherings. (Durden Unknown date)

Nevertheless, Internet message boards within the community are rife with untested routines. There are few barriers to participation in the online aspects of this subculture. As a consequence, anyone with Internet access and a competence at using search engines can post suggestions for new techniques or routines. Those who engage in posting untested routines are pejoratively referred to by members of the community as "keyboard jockeys" or in the local lair as "community guys:"

> In fact, if someone is ever reluctant to discuss his sticking points, then likely the person is not a venusian artist at all, but a ***keyboard jockey***. (Mystery 2005:206, emphasis in original)

> James: These guys came down from Robertsville, and they were just, [James rolls his eyes] dressed like geeks. They were really [makes quote signs with his fingers] community guys. You know what I mean? [Fieldnotes]

"Keyboard jockeys" and "community guys" are a source of aggravation for those within the community who are committed to actively practicing what they have learned. This was expressed at one of the lair meetings I attended:

> James went on to clarify one of the consequences of having a largely internet based community of seduction artists: "The problem is that the Internet attracts

> certain types of people to the community. Guys who make a lot of posts but never actually go out, guys who aren't having a lot of sex. Theory is useless without practical experience." [Fieldnotes]

In order for a contribution to have any value, it must be tested in the field. Only when one posts a routine and describes the results he received will the routine be treated seriously.

The routines suggested by others within the community provide the impetus for much of the field testing that members engage in. These suggestions become *de facto* hypotheses. When someone asks "Would saying 'I like your skirt, they're really popular these days' be a good neg?" they are generating a hypothesis: "Negging a woman in this way will yield the response I desire.

Replicability is also essential. Just as a researcher in a lab may falsify his or her research, so too can a pickup artist lie about the responses elicited by his new routine. Members of the seduction community are aware of this possibility and, as a consequence, place a high premium on replicability. A claim that a routine was successful will spur others to try it. If it fails to yield the same results, others may ask for elaboration on how the routine was delivered and the context in which it was used.

This sort of elaboration is frequently given to new members of the community who do not understand the subtleties of many of the routines. The concept of "negs," discussed earlier, is a useful example. Negs are meant to be delivered as playful teases, but this subtlety is often lost on neophytes who deliver it as an outright insult and receive a negative response. In the following example, Savoy points out the dangers of using a "neg" inappropriately:

> The problem with negs is that they can often backfire if used inappropriately and [thus] demonstrate low Social Intuition [an inability to properly read social cues and react appropriately]. (Savoy 2007:66)

Style too recognizes the challenges of "negs:"

> . . . when I first learned it, I thought it was about lowering her self esteem. It's not really about that. It's about raising your value and proving to her friends that you're not hitting on her. (Style 2005)

The confusion over the proper way to deliver a neg has led to several clarifications on how they should be delivered.

> People think that negs and disqualifications are hardcore, you're just flirting and it's fun. (Style 2005)

Once these subtleties are grasped, the new member is (hopefully) able to replicate the results.

When new routines have been field tested, they may be incorporated into the cannon of pickup artist theories and routines. There are several "stock" openers, games and lines that are widely known to yield positive responses from women. They have been tested and replicated so often that their validity is taken for granted, just as certain forms of knowledge become sedimented. Yet, on their own, these routines would represent a loose collection of behaviors. However, combined with the language and insight of evolutionary psychology, pickup artists are able to construct a prognostic framework through which they make sense of these actions. Through in-field experience and inductive reasoning, these men have come to understand *what* behavior will and will not be successful. By bringing evolutionary thought to bear on these experiences, they come to an understanding of *why* this behavior works. This theoretical reasoning and practical experience combine to form a relationship whereby theory informs the construction of

new solutions and in-field experiences are used to test these solutions. Through this process, members test and reconfigure their prognostic frame, offering up new solutions and approaches to understanding the problems of attraction and seduction between men and women.

Constructing Ownership

While identifying solutions is an important part of constructing prognostic frames, claimsmakers must also establish "ownership" of the problem. In examining how the seduction community constructs the advice they offer up as solutions to the seduction problem, we see also see the foundations of their ownership. Through their invocation of the science of evolutionary psychology and their emphasis on practical, in-field testing, they attempt to establish their ownership of the realm of seduction and attraction. This is achieved primarily by attacking competing sources of advice, especially the advice of women.

The influence of evolutionary science combined with their experiences and observations in the field has led members of the community to reject "mainstream" dating and relationship advice. They argue that it is based on politically correct reasoning that has never been tested in the field. Mainstream advice, from their point of view, has little to do with helping men find success and acts instead to keep people comfortable in the belief that they will find ideal mates who respect and admire them for their "true" selves. In their view, this advice is popular because it reinforces popular narratives about love and relationships, not because it is accurate or helpful.

For pickup artists, the goal is to provide advice that has been shown to work in the field:

> Like when I do radio interviews and magazine interviews. It's so hard for me to explain. They're like "Of course just buy a girl a drink and be a gentleman." Well, you should, but it doesn't work. And you know, *we operate on what works.* (Style 2005, emphasis added)

Advice given by women is treated as especially suspect:

> I was doing this interview with this woman who had written her "perfect" system of attraction. . . . [She said] Men need to rate themselves and find a woman who matches. Men should not be dating out of their league . . . and what a load of shit . . . it's the type of bullshit that's fed to guys that makes them feel unworthy. (Style 2005)

From another guru comes this statement:

> Men that don't know what they're doing with women . . . they're probably listening to women's advice. The woman might tell you to be yourself, but if you're a needy and insecure guy, then being yourself is not gonna work. (Durden Unknown date)

And from an anonymous essay posted on a popular seduction website:

> One more thing...many guys make the mistake of listening to female romantic advice. Don't listen to them, THEY DON'T KNOW WTF [what the fuck] THEY ARE TALKING ABOUT, and they WILL steer you wrong. They will tell you what they THINK they want, instead of what they actually RESPOND to.

The last statement reinforces the importance the seduction community places on providing information that is based on what they consider solid reasoning and that has been tested in the field. It calls attention to the difference between asking people what they think they want versus observing what they respond to. Pickup artists often argue that people do not actually know what they want or what will elicit a response. To ask a woman what she finds attractive is bad methodology. They assert that men and women's answers to these questions are influenced by social conditioning and a desire to present a

socially acceptable presentation of self. What they "really" want is rooted within their psychology and evolutionary "wiring." Because most people are unaware of how their evolutionary programming informs what they "truly" find attractive, advice on attracting women should be based on techniques that are rooted in the insight these men have gleaned through their reading of evolutionary thinking and that have been appropriately tested in the "field."

DISCUSSION

Throughout the process of framing the "seduction problem" and constructing its solutions, the men of the seduction community entwine their experiences of "picking up" with their understanding of evolutionary psychology. The result is the construction of men's and women's sexual desires in terms of their evolutionary heritage. The strategies and advice these men offer is meant to be understand in the context of these constructions. Women (and humans more generally) are understood to have limited agency in many areas of behavior. They are presented as being programmed or hardwired to respond to certain traits. For example, at one lair meeting, the subject of why men should always wear a condom when having sex was brought up.

> A member confessed to not using condoms during sex. Upon hearing this, one of the leaders of the lair, John, explained why condoms are a necessity.
>
> *John*: The number of times I've had women here that in the morning . . . like just the other day, I had this girl leaving at 6:00 in the morning and as she was leaving, she was on her cell phone with her boyfriend telling him some story about what she'd been up to. *Women are programmed to cheat.* Even if you think you're in a monogamous relationship, you shouldn't take the chance." [Field Notes]

His statement about "programming" is a reference to the effect of evolution on the way women behave – they are biologically programmed. It is a type of thinking informed by pickup artists' understanding of work such as Baker's ([1996] 2006) *Sperm Wars*, which explores the evolutionary basis of infidelity. By choosing a hard working provider to raise her children while cuckolding him with a superior genetic alternative who may have better genes but may not be a better father, a woman may increase the survival possibilities of her offspring. This behavior is seen less as a conscious choice as it is a consequence of women's "programming."

This construction of women, derived from the literature on evolutionary psychology, permeates the theories of seduction and attraction within the seduction community. The male archetypes of the "alpha-male" and the culturally neutered "average frustrated chump" are rooted in evolutionary psychological ideas about what traits make men attractive (and how most men have not been taught to embody them). Pickup artists have made evolutionary psychology an important analytical tool for making sense of their experiences of picking up and seducing women. Their constructions of men, women and sexuality do not represent an alternative body of knowledge, so much as an avowal of the work of evolutionary psychologists and an attempt to practically apply it. Many of the claims to knowledge these men make about sex and attraction are informed by applying their understanding of evolutionary psychology to their experiences in the field. It serves as part of an ontological framework through which they create new theories and new understandings of their field of interest. Their usage of this body of knowledge reflects one of the unanticipated consequences of the study of evolutionary

psychology. It represents one example of the way in which scientific research and knowledge can diffuse into the popular vernacular, informing the way in which those outside the traditional boundaries of professional and academic disciplines construct their worldview.

Undoubtedly, the seduction community is a social world that lends itself to rich analyses from a variety of perspectives. A subculture of men who give advice on how to attract and seduce women is obviously laden with sexual politics. An examination of this subculture's role in promoting masculine hegemony and its emergence as a reaction to a perceived challenge to this hegemony would be a fruitful avenue of future research. This paper takes a different tack in examining the activities of these men. The objective of this paper is to provide a case study that examines how scientific discourse can be utilized as a resource in meaning-making activities and the construction of social realities. It takes a social constructionist approach in examining the role evolutionary psychology plays in the way the men of the seduction community 1) construct the "facts of the matter" about the romantic and sexual desires of men and women, 2) use these "facts" to frame the causes of heterosexual men's dissatisfaction with their romantic and sexual relationships and 3) construct prognostic frames that allow them propose solutions to the "seduction problem and discount "mainstream" relationship advice. In doing so, the way in which science is incorporated into the way in which the lay public constructs the world is explored. This is an important course to chart. In a time when issues such as global climate change, the genetic manipulation of embryos and the teaching of intelligent design in schools have become controversial subjects, examining the way in which

scientific knowledge is used by the lay public to construct meaning and understand action in their everyday lives is becoming an increasingly pressing issue.

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CHAPTER 4 – BEYOND ONTOLOGICAL GERRYMANDERING

Beyond Ontological Gerrymandering: New Challenges for the Constructionist Perspective on Social Problems

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Running Head = NEW CHALLENGES FOR CONSTRUCTIONISM

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author briefly examines current trends in the social constructionist approach to social problems, arguing that contextual constructionism has largely prevailed over strict constructionism in terms of how researchers who use this approach conduct their analyses. This is followed by a critique of contextual constructionism and an examination of two important questions that arise from the contextual constructionist approach. The first question deals with the epistemological issues involved in invoking context. The author argues that contextual constructionists have not established a cogent argument about what constitutes "good" or "convincing" evidence about context. Secondly, the boundaries around what constitutes legitimate constructionist research are examined. Although constructionist researchers seem to have a sense of what is "good" constructionist research and what is "bad," they are inconsistent in the application of their own criteria for making these judgments.

Strict constructionism is an unachievable ideal. All constructionist researchers are necessarily contextual constructionists in one way or another. These statements reflect the arguments made by Best (1993, 1995) in his discussions about the limitations of strict constructionism. Best makes a compelling argument that serves as the epilogue to one of the liveliest and most fruitful debates in the constructionist study of social problems. However, while the debate over whether or not context should be incorporated into constructionist research has settled with contextual constructionism seeming to be the norm, there are still questions to be asked about the consequences of accepting the use of context in constructionist studies. While constructionists must admit to objectively knowing some aspects of an external reality, at the very least about the context within which the definitional activities they are interested in studying are situated, there is variation in the ways context is invoked and used in constructionist analysis. This variation has consequences.

Few people have considered critically appraising these consequences beyond asking whether talking about context constitutes lapsing into objectivism (Woolgar and Pawluch 1985, Troyer 1992). In this paper I raise two questions that arise when the contextual perspective is adopted. The first deals with the epistemological implications of contextual constructionism, that is, if we are going to talk about context, *what can we claim to legitimately know about context?* The second question deals with the confusion that emerges as a consequence of the way contextual constructionists have defended the legitimacy of their work, that is *what research questions are legitimate questions for constructionists to ask?* These are difficult questions to which I do not claim to have

answers. However, I believe that posing them will stimulate further debate and provoke new thinking about constructionism.

ALL CONSTRUCTIONISTS ARE CONTEXTUAL CONSTRUCTIONISTS

Understanding the relevance of these questions requires one to understand why strict constructionism is an unachievable ideal and all constructionists are necessarily contextual constructionists. The debate over strict and contextual constructionism began with Woolgar and Pawluch's (1985) critical commentary on the way social constructionists went about conducting their analyses of claimsmaking. According to Woolgar and Pawluch, these analyses rely on "ontological gerrymandering" to illustrate the constructed nature of social problems claims. The typical constructionist analysis, they point out, begins with the analyst choosing a condition or behavior for analysis. Several different definitions of the condition or behavior in question are then reviewed. Once this is done, the implied, if not explicit argument is that while the condition or behavior has remained constant, the definition of the condition or behavior has changed over time. This is how analysts gain the leverage needed to make their point. Since the behavior or condition has not changed, the change in definition must be socially contingent or a function of how these behaviours are socially constructed. The definitions are products of social processes.

Woolgar and Pawluch go on to point out that taking this position involves a selective invocation of relativism. Constructionists are interested in examining claims and definitions as constructs emerging from social processes. The truth values of these claims

are treated as irrelevant and analysts are cautioned to refrain from making claims about these conditions themselves. As Spector and Kitsuse (1977) state:

> . . . the significance of objective conditions for us is *the assertions made about them*, not the validity of those assertions as judged from some independent standpoint, as for example, that of a scientist. (P. 76, emphasis in original)

Yet, as Woolgar and Pawluch point out, constructionists frequently make claims about the nature of a putative condition or behavior. Minimally, they are claiming that the behavior or condition, whether it exists or not, has *remained unchanged over time*.

Woolgar and Pawluch's critique touched off a lengthy debate about the role of context in constructionist research. This debate emerged in the published responses to Woolgar and Pawluch's paper. Schneider (1985a) argued that those who conduct constructionist analyses commonsensically believe that there are "real" phenomena out there. However, for the purposes of analysis, the analyst takes an agnostic position with respect to the truth value of the claims made about what is real. In a similar vein, Gusfield (1985) argues that most constructionists do take the existence of an objective world for granted. However, unlike Schneider, Gusfield does not see any problems with analysts making or disputing claims about what they know to be real. Some facts, he states ". . . are so radiant that they shine unaided through the foggy miasma of complex forms of communication" (p. 17) and those facts provide the analyst with the means to assess the validity of claims about problems. Questioning the truth value of claims is, of course, logically inconsistent with a perspective that has as its premise that "truth" is a matter of definition, but this inconsistency represents a minor problem for Gusfield. Fretting about ontological gerrymandering amounts to a "preoccupation with the logic of theory" (p. 17)

that does little to advance the perspective of constructionist sociology. He argues that the real value of the field lies in its power to challenge taken for granted assumptions about facts and to ask questions about the role of the social in building those things we consider "true." The inconsistencies in the theory we use to achieve these goals are minor and ultimately have little effect on our examination of the social construction of "facticity."

The question of how far one is willing to take concerns about logical consistency would come to define two "camps" within constructionist sociology. Best (1995) laid out the differences between those he called "strict" constructionists and "contextual" constructionists. Strict constructionists, Best argues, "avoid making assumptions about objective reality" (p. 341) and ". . . focus on claimsmaking; they seek to understand, but do not presume to judge the accuracy of the members' claims" (p. 342). Contextual constructionists, on the other hand, while similarly focused on claimsmaking, are willing to cede some knowledge of the social reality in which these claims are situated. These conditions can then be used to explain the success or failure of claims in terms of gaining purchase in the public psyche. Context is invoked to explain why claimsmaking efforts unfolded in a certain way.

During the period from 1985 to 1993, there were several exchanges about the merits of strict versus contextual constructionism (Best 1989, 1993, 1995; Gusfield 1985; Hazelrigg 1985; Holstein and Miller 1993; Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993; Kitsuse and Schneider 1989; Pfohl 1985; Rafter 1992b; Schneider 1985; Sarbin and Kitsuse 1994; Spector and Kitsuse 1987; Troyer 1992; Woolgar and Pawluch 1985a, 1985b). Since 1993, however, the debate has softly faded from view. Despite the problems connected

with it, contextual constructionism has come to be widely used in social problems research. And, as Holstein and Gubrium (2003) point out, this should not be surprising:

> . . . the contest was one-sided . . . since social context is the key exegenic construct in sociological explanation . . . While strict constructionists might command the high ground as being more theoretically "principled" than their competitors, contextual constructionists took the upper hand on practical grounds. Try as one might, it is difficult to conceive of sociological analyses completely purged of social context as an explanatory factor. (P. 189)

The debate now serves, more than anything else, as part of the tradition of constructionism explained to those being introduced to the perspective. The problem, though seemingly intractable, is one with which everyone interested in the perspective is expected to be familiar.

Indeed, it is the intractability of the theoretical consistency problem that may have contributed to the dissipation of the entire debate. Reflecting on a strict constructionist perspective, it becomes apparent that such a perspective may simply not be possible. From the very moment analysts begin to report on how claims are made, they fix themselves as knowers of things. They purport to know what claims and counterclaims were made. They purport to know who made them, when they were made and where. These things are treated as if they "really" happened. They become second order claimsmakers, people who make claims about claims. In order to analyze, they must admit that there are things to analyze. Claimsmaking and claimsmakers are taken for granted. In purporting to know something about them, social constructionists are saying that they have knowledge about objective realities and processes. Best (1995) summarizes the problem concisely:

> . . . however far analysts distance themselves from their subject matter, they can never jettison all assumptions. Analysis requires the analyst to use language, and a culture's assumptions are built into its language. As a result, all analysts, no matter how far they may distance themselves from their subject matter, can be attacked for ontological gerrymandering. (P. 344)

Since there is no way to avoid making assumptions of some sort about what is real, truly strict constructionism is an unachievable ideal.

NEW CHALLENGES FOR CONSTRUCTIONISM

Recognizing that strict constructionism is an unachievable ideal clears the way to move beyond concerns about ontological gerrymandering and to look at the epistemological and methodological issues that arise when context becomes an integral part of constructionist research. While anyone using the constructionist perspective must make assumptions about objective reality, this is not to say that all constructionists fix themselves in the same place ontologically. While Best's separation of constructionism into strict and contextual once served usefully and neatly to summarize the debate within social constructionism, it now belies the complexity of the perspective. While a "pure" strict constructionism free of any assumptions about reality may not be achievable, constructionists still differ on how many assumptions they are willing to make.

At one end of the spectrum we have the type of constructionism that tries to minimize its assumptions, such as the kind espoused by Ibarra and Kitsuse (1993). Ibarra and Kitsuse (1993) attempt to stay as close to the strict constructionist ideal as possible by focusing on claimsmaking rhetoric. They argue that the constructionist project outlined by

Spector and Kitsuse was about more than showing the socially constructed nature of social problems. It was interested in:

> . . . not how those definitions [of social problems] are produced by the sociohistorical circumstances in which they emerged, but rather how those definitions express the members' conceptions of 'the problem,' how they are pressed as claims, to who, mobilizing what resources, and so forth. (p. 28)

Constructionism, then, is about understanding the meaning making processes that go on in claimsmaking activities. Its focus is on how claims represent meanings and help actors to organize and make sense of the world. By focusing on rhetoric, the idioms, motifs and rhetorical strategies invoked by those making claims, Ibarra and Kitsuse argue that constructionist researchers can understand how claimsmakers influence how audiences make sense of the subject of claims without having to make any assumptions about the validity of the claims or the condition in question.

On the other end of the constructionist spectrum are those Best (1995) calls "vulgar" constructionists. These are the analysts who acknowledge one form of knowledge (official statistics, for example) to be representative of an objective reality and then use this information to debunk the claims of others. Consider, for example, Glassner's (1999) book *The Culture of Fear*. Glassner's research serves as a useful example of what Best would refer to as vulgar constructionism and how it differs from the constructionist project as most constructionists understand it. Glassner's argument is that Americans live in a state of fear about things that actually pose a minor threat to them while they ignore those things which are most likely to cause them harm. He makes frequent use of official statistics to make his case. For instance, he points to the fear that youth are becoming increasingly involved in violent crime. In Pasadena, three teenage

trick-or-treaters were killed when they were mistakenly shot by gang members from another neighborhood. Media reports used this incident as an example of the rise of youth violence throughout the city, especially in areas previously thought safe. While an awful incident, Glassner points out that it was an isolated one. Statistics indicated that violent crime was declining in the city. He goes on to explain how other fears, such as killer viruses, murderous schoolchildren, drug use epidemics, etc. pose very little danger, despite the prominent fear around these issues. Their supposed threat is merely a construction.

In between those who try to minimize their assumptions about objective reality and the vulgar constructionism identified by Best lies the bulk of constructionists, delineated by their willingness to say different things about the role of context in claimsmaking and, perhaps more importantly, to use context to answer different types of questions. The dominance of the type of research associated with the label of contextual constructionism in the discipline today could be seen as a triumph. Contextual constructionism has allowed constructionist research to flourish, opening up new possibilities for inquiry that are not possible under the rubric of strict constructionism. However, there are two important questions, one epistemological and one methodological, that contextual constructionists have yet to address:

1. What can we claim to legitimately know about context?
2. What research questions are legitimate questions for constructionists to ask?

WHAT CAN WE CLAIM TO LEGITIMATELY KNOW ABOUT CONTEXT?

While constructionists have made persuasive arguments about *why* it is important (and even necessary) to examine the context in which claims are situated, discussions of *how* context can be examined have been lacking. How can questions about context be legitimately asked? Are there any boundaries on questions about context that can be legitimately asked and, if so, where do the limits lie? In what way, if any, are constructionist analysts qualified to make any claim to knowledge about contextual factors?

To illustrate this problem, I will use the work of Loseke (2000, 2003a, 2003b). Loseke argues that, in making claims, claimsmakers do more than make claims about putative conditions. She states ". . . that rather than a social problems discourse, there are interconnected discourses that rhetorically constitute categories as residing within folk universes of morality and emotion" (2003a: 121). Claimsmakers tie their claims to notions of right and wrong, innocence and harm and a variety of other discourses. They do so in order to gain resonance with those who hear their claims. Understanding the strategies they use and the stories they tell about conditions that concern them requires an understanding of what Loseke calls "cultural themes." These are ". . . beliefs about how the world should work" (2003b: 63). Beliefs about what is right or wrong, who is deserving and who is not, what is appropriate in which circumstances, etc, are all embedded in cultural contexts as cultural themes. These themes, of course, are relative to

particular cultures. What Loseke is addressing here, though she does not put it in these terms, are various aspects of the context within which claims are being made.

Loseke's work demonstrates one way in which context can be used in constructionist research. However, her formulation also illustrates constructionism's weakness in defining how analysts can speak authoritatively about context. She states (2000: 42) that she is interested in answering "Why are some claims about social problems more successful than others in convincing audiences that a problem is at hand?" This question invites one to consider contextual factors, particularly relevant cultural themes. For example, in order to understand why certain claims about child abuse resonate, one needs to be cognizant of the significance in contemporary Western culture of values related to the family, parenting, innocence and punishment. Likewise, understanding why claims about the abuse of husbands by their wives may fall flat requires an understanding of current conceptions of masculinity, femininity, power and marriage as they exist in North American culture. In order to evaluate why a claimsmaking campaign succeeds or fails, or even to understand the choices claimsmakers make with regard to the strategies they use in their claimsmaking campaigns, the analyst needs to invoke aspects of the broader social context.

But on what basis can it be argued that certain cultural themes exist or characterize particular cultures? Are there certain indicators one can look to? Should the analyst be considered a cultural insider who knows what cultural themes exist based on his or her experiences in that culture? It is tempting to argue that cultural themes are revealed through the success of claimsmaking campaigns, that if certain claims resonate,

they do so because they touch on cherished cultural values. However, this is circular logic. One cannot simultaneously state that a claimsmaking campaign was successful because it appealed to cultural theme *x* and that cultural theme *x* exists because, in appealing to it, a claimsmaking campaign was successful.

Further, the notion of a "successful" claimsmaking campaign is a contestable one. "Success" itself is a constructed category itself. One need only watch the aftermath of a political debate to see an example of this. Regardless of what occurred during the debate, all parties involved will claim success and victory. Claimsmakers have an interest in appearing to be successful and may claim some form of success regardless of the outcomes of their claims. How does one know when a campaign has been successful? Is it dependent on whether "official" action is taken or on the number of people who now perceive the putative condition to be a problem? If one campaign is successful, does that mean that counter-claimsmakers were unsuccessful or can a claimsmaking campaign be partially successful?

Loseke's work on the construction of putative people, emotions and morality has opened up new avenues of research in social constructionism, but it also illustrates some of the problems involved in invoking context, something that is rarely talked about: About which contextual elements can analysts claim to have authoritative knowledge? Speaking to the value system of an entire culture, for example, should be met with critical questions about the basis on which the analyst has ascertained these values. And where is the line drawn between those things one can claim to be part of the context based simply

on commonsense or experiential knowledge and those claims about context that need to be substantiated with some form of evidence?

Best (1995: 346-347) takes a pragmatic position with regard to claims about context. He argues that making assumptions about context is not damaging to the analysis in and of itself. Assumptions are only damaging if they can be shown to be incorrect via the use of "convincing evidence." But what form of evidence can be used to substantiate or debunk claims about context? Loseke (2003b) neatly summarizes some of the problems in answering this question:

> . . . once we argue that it is acceptable for analysts to bring statements about objective conditions into their examinations, where do we draw the line? How many assumptions or statements about the existence of conditions do we allow? Also, and critically, if we allow analysts to compare claims and assess their truth value, what guidelines can be used to judge truthfulness? Will government statistics simply be accepted as truth and not examined for their socially constructed nature? Or, conversely, will claims made by powerless people simply be accepted as truth? (P. 199)

While there are many advantages to allowing assumptions about context in the analysis of the construction of social problems, it places constructionists in an odd position *vis-à-vis* vulgar constructionism. The broad consensus among constructionists is that the focus should remain on the process of making claims, not on proving or disproving the claims being made. However, if assumptions are going to be made about the context, analysts must be prepared to provide justification for these assumptions should anyone provide "convincing evidence" to the contrary. Consider Best's (1995) example:

> Imagine, for example, an analyst who describes growing concern about illicit drug use and then assumes that 'Illicit drug use remained constant.' A critic who argues that illicit drug use probably did not remain constant – and who can offer

> convincing evidence to that effect – can argue that the analysis is flawed, that the assumption has damaged the analysis. (Pp. 346-347)

Analysts who have evidence they believe justifies the assumptions they make will use this evidence in response to such criticism. However, whether the evidence takes the form of official statistics, word of mouth, ethnographic inquiry, personal experiences or anything else that is considered "convincing," the analyst ends up providing an argument that concern about illicit drug use is unjustified, it is *just* a social construction. The fact that the researcher's focus is on other matters, such as the process of constructing the illicit drug problem, does nothing to change the fact that he or she is debunking claims that illicit drug use is on the rise. On what basis then, can constructionists like Best criticize vulgar constructionism when they themselves produce analyses that invoke context in a way that debunks claimsmakers claims? This leads me to the second of my two questions.

WHAT RESEARCH QUESTIONS ARE LEGITIMATE QUESTIONS FOR CONSTRUCTIONISTS TO ASK?

Beyond the question of how context can be objectively known, how such knowledge is used poses a difficult problem. Contextual constructionists have been cautious in specifying how knowledge about context is to be used in constructionist analysis. Best (1993, 1995, 2003) feels it is reasonable to accept some claims as true so long as the focus of the research remains on the construction of social problems. He warns against engaging in debunking claims or "vulgar" constructionism. But why should debunking claims be avoided? One reason is that this falls outside the parameters of the constructionist approach as defined by Spector and Kitsuse (1977).

Glassner's (1999) work on *The Culture of Fear*, described above, serves as a useful example. In some ways, *The Culture of Fear* fits within the constructionist mould as laid out by Spector and Kitsuse. He examines the process by which claims about dangerous things have gained the attention of the public. What many constructionists may object to is his use of contextual elements to argue that some claims are false. Some constructionists would argue that Glassner is lapsing back into objectivist sociology and is outside of the confines of constructionism laid out in *Constructing Social Problems*. However, if contextual constructionists can speak factually or make assumptions about context, why condemn those who take those "facts" one step further and use them to debunk the claims of others? Why reserve the pejorative label "vulgar" only for those who use what "we all know to be true" to debunk?

The "At What Cost" Defense

Vulgar constructionists could well use the same "at what cost" defense employed by contextual constructionists when defending the value of their work from the criticisms of other constructionists. The "at what cost" defense was most clearly articulated by Rafter (1992b) and Best (1993). In 1992, Rafter (1992a) had published a case study examining claimsmaking in the first U.S. eugenics campaign. She asks three questions, "How was 'feeble-minded woman' constructed as a eugenic threat in the late nineteenth century? Why . . . did the first eugenics campaign concentrate on women? And why was the campaign successful?" (p. 18) To answer the first question, Rafter reconstructs the campaign using various archival records. In answering why the campaign concentrated on women, she calls on the accounts of historians to reconstruct the broader context in which

the eugenics campaign was occurring. She argues that the campaign occurred after a period where the meaning of gender had changed substantially. The eugenics campaign was an attempt to control women's sexuality and reproductive capacity in response to their increased independence.

Troyer (1992) used Rafter's work to make an argument about the downfalls of the contextual constructionist approach. According to Troyer, by asking *why* the eugenics campaign took the form it did, Rafter had pushed beyond examining the definitional activities taking place. To answer *why*, she had to assert that certain conditions existed and that they were the cause of the claimsmaking campaign, thus moving her into an objectivist position. This type of analysis, he argues, ". . . lose[s] sight of the original constructionist goal of focusing on definitional activities." (p. 35) and ". . . seems to lead back to the older tradition, one that . . . offers less theoretical potential" (p. 37).

Rafter's response to this critique was to use what I refer to as the "at what cost" defense. Rafter (1992b) argues that strict constructionism puts too costly a constraint on the types of questions a researcher can ask. She states that if we adhere to the tenets of strict constructionism ". . . we will get an unsullied 'theory *of* social problems'. But even if such salvation were possible, would it be worth the price" (p. 38, emphasis in original). Best (1993, 2003) takes a similar line in a later paper. "Analytic purity . . . can come at a terrible cost" (2003: 143), he states. This cost is the inability to say anything of use or interest about the creation of social problems.

Neglecting vulgar constructionism "at what cost?"

The danger of the "at what cost" defense is that it stymies any attempt to place boundaries around what constitutes legitimate questions for researchers to ask. Some constructionists see vulgar constructionism as lying outside the realm of legitimate constructionist research. As Best (1989) states:

> Debunking is the crudest form of constructionism. In fact, strict constructionists would argue that debunking should not be considered a form of constructionism . . . since the debunker's focus is the actual nature of social conditions, rather than the claimsmaking process. (P. 246)

The key issue seems to be whether the analyst focuses on the process of claimsmaking. What is the rationale for making the process and the process alone the analytical focus? One might argue that this is the consensus that most people who call themselves constructionists have reached, that regardless of strict/contextual differences, most constructionists have agreed that this is the key concept to emerge from Spector and Kitsuse's *Constructing Social Problems.*

Yet there seemed to be consensus about what constituted legitimate questions for constructionists to address before the strict/contextual debate erupted. Once it did, Spector and Kitsuse's writings began to be used as the benchmark for what questions it is appropriate for constructionists to ask. Troyer uses Rafter's work as an example of how contextual constructionism has ". . . derailed the promise of the theoretical project outlined by Spector and Kitsuse" (1992: 35). Contextual constructionists, like Best, however, make similar arguments about vulgar constructionism. Vulgar constructionists have strayed from the mandate that ". . . the analyst's focus remains the construction of social problems" (Best 1993: 139). In the same way that critics such as Troyer and Ibarra

and Kitsuse argue that contextualists have lost sight of what social constructionism is supposed to be about, Best asserts that vulgar constructionists have done the same thing.

In response, vulgar constructionists could easily echo the argument of contextual constructionists before them. Constructionists of both the strict and contextual variety are imposing boundaries that prevent vulgar constructionists from attempting to answer the questions they find interesting, but at what cost? A vulgar constructionist might argue that assessing the truth value of claims is interesting and rewarding, and that therefore, such questions can and should be asked. When the "at what cost" defense becomes acceptable, it can be used by anyone whose interests it severs. It becomes difficult to establish boundaries on what constitutes "legitimate" questions for constructionists to ask. Any attempt to argue that a piece of research addresses questions that are not "really" constructionist can easily be countered by arguing that critics are applying too strict a reading of constructionism. One can argue that there is merit in the questions being asked, even if they do not follow the programmatic statements of one constructionist or another.

Complicating the issue further is the fact that the benchmarks with respect to what sorts of questions define constructionism keep moving. As constructionist research and writing in the last twenty years has evolved, there have been lines of inquiry proposed that have gained widespread acceptance as useful and productive directions to pursue, though they seem to lie outside the realm of what Spector and Kitsuse envisioned for the study of social problems. Holstein and Miller's (1993, 2003) notion of "social problems work" serves as an example. Social problems work refers to ". . . those practices that link public interpretive structures to aspects of everyday reality, producing recognizable

instances of social problems" (2003: 71). Holstein and Miller argue that there is more to social problems than the campaigns to bring attention to a particular condition. Social problems, they argue, are constituted in everyday interaction by people attempting to make sense of the world around them.

Holstein and Miller draw on ethnomethodological and Durkheimian thought in developing their arguments. Ethnomethodology focuses on local practices of enactment, the ways in which people go about making sense of the world around them with each other. However, ethnomethodologists shy away from addressing the patterns they see in people's interpretations of the world around them. Miller and Holstein want to address these patterns, especially with regard to the definition of something or someone as a concrete instance of a social problem in everyday interaction. To do this, they draw on Durkheim's notions of social forms and collective representations.

They roughly equate collective representations to Schutz's (1970) "schemes of interpretation." These schemes are frameworks people use to make sense and categorize their experiences of the world. These schemes are learned through experience. The notion of collective representations enters when we recognize that most people within a culture have similar schemes of interpretation despite slight individual variations stemming from varying personal biographies. The link between collective representations and ethnomethodological notions of practices of enactment in social problems work ". . . involves procedures for expressing and applying these culturally shared categories to candidate circumstances" (Holstein and Miller 2003: 72). Social problems work involves

using culturally understood notions of things that are social problems and applying them to some person or thing via interpretive processes.

In making this argument, Holstein and Miller offer a broader and more nuanced notion of who claimsmakers are and what actions constitute claimsmaking. This broader conception of claimsmaking links social constructionism with its roots in phenomenology, ethnomethodology and symbolic interaction and extends the constructionist study of social problems in new directions. Yet, one could argue that the concept of social problems work is broadly defined and falls outside the lines around the clear subject matter that Spector and Kitsuse were aiming for. This is not a criticism of the value of Holstein and Miller's work, it is an observation about the fluctuating criteria by which critics evaluate what constitutes legitimate constructionist work and about how judgements regarding what falls within or outside of its boundaries are made. If the key criterion for determining whether or not an analysis constitutes constructionism is its focus on the process of construction social problems, does Holstein and Miller's notion of social problems work fit? Social problems work seems to be less about the creation of social problems and more about the application of social problems definitions *after* they have become collective representations. Holstein and Miller's work is inextricably tied to the project laid out in *Constructing Social Problems*, but then, so too is the work done by vulgar constructionists such as Glassner. Why, then, does vulgar constructionism carry a pejorative label while concepts such as Holstein and Miller's notion of social problems work does not? And why does it matter?

Why should we care about legitimate questions?

Trying to categorize ideas and their authors as examples of a particular theoretical or methodological paradigm is a common pastime in academic circles. Our theoretical and methodological preferences often become identified with who we are. In fact, it can become the defining characteristic by which other academics classify one another. Our theories and our methods become important to each of us. We come to associate these things with particular types of research, particular types of questions and particular ways of speaking about the world and we become invested in these associations.

The debate over strict and contextual constructionism illustrates what can occur when others pick up the theoretical and methodological mantles we have come to associate ourselves with and push them in directions we do not want them to go. But why we should care when people, who call themselves constructionists, carry out research that seems to fall outside the boundaries of what constitutes constructionism? After all, if researchers ask interesting questions, adequately justify their methodology and acknowledge any logical inconsistencies (which every social theory has) implicit in their research, whether or not the research is "really" constructionist, "really" postmodernist, or any other theoretical paradigm should not matter. Spector and Kitsuse observed that, in objectivist studies of social problems, the "social problem" label was superfluous, ". . . what is added to our understanding of crime by pointing out that it is a social problem? Nothing is added . . ." (1977: 2). The same could be said over debates of whether or not some research is "really" an example of a particular theoretical paradigm. Withholding or

applying the label changes nothing about the research and what it contributes to knowledge. The label is superfluous.

Unfortunately, labels carry meanings for others. The term constructionism carries connotations for other constructionists inside and outside of sociology; it has connotations for other academics who do not use the perspective and for people outside of academia altogether. Best (2003) points out the consequences that differing views of constructionism can have. The common association of the term "social construction" with falseness or myth has given people a negative image of constructionism. If references to the social construction of pedophilia lead the public to assume that the existence of pedophilia is being questioned, the negative reaction should not be surprising. Drawing boundaries, arguing that certain research is or is not constructionism becomes important to us. But if we are to do this, where we draw these boundaries and who gets to draw them become important questions. They are difficult questions. Any attempt to push another's research outside of the constructionist umbrella is likely to be met with resistance. Such resistance was demonstrated in Rafter's (1992b) response to Troyer:

> Hoping to build 'a distinct theory of social problems,' self-appointed members of the constructionist elect have excommunicated all those guilty of what they deem objectivist sins. Mistakenly equating objectivism with functionalism and moralism, they have drawn up a list of prohibitions. (P. 38)

No matter where we choose to draw the boundaries, one can always point out that constructionism is not a club from which one can be expelled. Further, the "at what cost" response can always be invoked.

Further compounding the problem is the quandary constructionism faces as its single key insight becomes "boring" (Best 2003). Spector and Kitsuse seemed to lay out a

well defined subject area, which, over time, has been continually expanded. Even with this expansion, it runs the risk of withering. In order to promote interest, new questions need to be asked. Doing so will necessarily threaten the somewhat fuzzy edges of what constitutes constructionism. It is clear that many constructionists have a sense of whether or not something "really" is good constructionist work. What is needed is a clear articulation and critical examination of those "gut feelings" we get when we read the research of others.

CONCLUSION

In an attempt to stimulate debate within constructionist circles, I have examined two questions that I believe emerge as a consequence of accepting contextual constructionism as the dominant form of constructionist analysis:

1. *What can we claim to legitimately know about context?*
2. *What research questions are legitimate questions for constructionists to ask?*

I have reviewed some of what I consider to be the most interesting and valuable work to have emerged from the contextual constructionist paradigm since 1993. I have also asked some critical questions of these works. This commentary is not meant to be an indictment of these works or of contextual constructionism more generally. However, I do suggest there are consequences to accepting contextual constructionism which have not been fully discussed. If analysts insist on invoking context to better grasp the process of creating social problems, they position themselves as experts not only on this process, but also as experts about the context. Positioning oneself as an expert on context is no easy thing and

raises the question of how the social context can be objectively ascertained. Further, the strategies contextual constructionists have used in defending themselves from questions about the theoretical consistency of their approach has made it difficult to draw boundaries around what kind of research questions constructionists can make. Until the impact of contextual constructionism on the key principles of constructionist research is considered, there will continue to be confusion around what constitutes constructionist research and reasoning. It is my hope that asking these questions will generate new thought and debate in an approach that has great appeal and, perhaps, has not yet reached its full potential.

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CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSION

In the introduction, the broad strokes of the social constructionist approach to studying social problems were laid out. Each of the preceding papers was informed by or connected to social constructionism in some way. In this conclusion, I focus on those points of connection and highlight the contribution each essay makes to the social constructionist literature. In particular, I highlight the way in which claimsmakers establish the grounds of their claims and construct the frames that structure reality. I also consider areas of future research suggested by these essays.

ESSAY 1

The first essay examined how sociologists and criminologists who use the concept of techniques of neutralization in their research construct the nature of deviance and those who engage in it. In unpacking the assumptions that are made about deviant motivations and desires by the analyst, the essay speaks to the concerns of the social constructionist approach in several ways. It illustrates how sociologists and criminologists, as much as other social actors, engage in the construction of reality. From constructing people to establishing diagnostic frames, these academics are involved in their own version of the social problems game.

In this essay, the analysts' involvement in claimsmaking is most clearly evident in how their research subjects are constructed as "putative people." Recall that Loseke (2003) refers to constructing people as a process by which claimsmakers tell the stories of the subjects of their claims. The subjects of these claims become archetypical characters that embody certain traits. Certain putative facts about these characters are treated as

relevant while others are pushed to the background as irrelevant. The claimsmakers attribute certain motives and desires to the subjects of their claims. By doing so, they aim to reorient the audience's understanding of these people so that their nature is understood "properly." Once this is accomplished, the audience will make sense of these putative people's action in a way that is aligns with the claims being made.

Throughout the essay, I offered examples of how neutralization researchers construct people while conducting their research. For these researchers, techniques of neutralization are understood to be the methods by which those who engage in deviant acts attempt to mitigate their feelings of guilt by generating explanations, rationalizations and justifications for their actions. Yet, in identifying these techniques, analysts make assumptions about the way their subjects view "conventional" morality and the moral status of the behavior in which they engage. These assumptions structure the ways in which subjects of this type of research are constructed and how what they have to say is interpreted by analysts. When viewed through the frame offered by analysts, interpreting the talk of social actors as a technique of neutralization makes sense. As such, this interpretation is offered as an explanation as to why certain individuals are able to engage in habitual deviance. Thus the construction of deviants feeds into the diagnostic frame proffered by the analysts. By understanding their moral commitments, we understand the causes behind their neutralizing speech and their engagement in deviant acts.

Having constructed the deviant's motivations and moral commitments, analysts must then construct the grounds of conventional morality. In order to make sense of speech as a neutralization, the analyst must convince his or her audience that the act being

neutralized is one the research subject should, ordinarily, feel shame about. As was described in the essay, analysts establish these grounds through several methods, such as detailing prevailing negative perceptions of the act, establishing the harm caused by the act or by explaining institutionalized ethical and legal proscriptions of the behaviour. Having constructed the subjects of their research as committed to conventional morality and then establishing the boundaries of that morality, sociologists and criminologists are able to claim that the speech they observe coming from their subjects constitutes neutralizations.

The essay points out that these constructions come at a price. The consequence of the framing of deviants and their motives is the tacit endorsement of the deviant label. The speech of those they study is treated not as an alternative understanding of the moral order, but instead as the words of individuals trying to escape the consequences of their action. Analysts cast their subjects in many lights. In some cases they appear as what Sykes and Matza referred to as "apologetic failures," repentant sinners who know they have done wrong. In other cases, those being studied are cast in a less sympathetic light, as individuals unable to cop to their crimes. Either way, the analyst has already taken a position on the deviance of his or her subjects, as well as their acts.

That this facet of the neutralization concept has not been discussed before, despite the ontological gerrymandering critique leveled by Woolgar and Pawluch (1985), illustrates that there is still little attention paid to how sociological analysts themselves engage in claimsmaking when they construct their explanations for social phenomena. That reality is constructed via concepts such as techniques of neutralization is particularly

illustrative as the concept fits neatly within the interactionist approach to studying deviance. Interactionist approaches to deviance, claiming their heritage from Becker's ([1963] 1991) work on the effects of deviant labels, have positioned themselves as sympathetic to subjectivist definitions of deviance and the socially constructed nature of reality. That even these sociologists end up formulating and using conceptual frames that so clearly construct conditions, situations and people in a way that places them "on the side" of a consensus view of morality and deviance is telling. It underlines how difficult and, perhaps, impossible it is to avoid claimsmaking in the process of generating sociological knowledge and highlights the need to be more aware and reflexive about our own claimsmaking.

ESSAY 2

As with the first essay, the second examines the activities of a group of claimsmakers. It presents an empirical application of the constructionist perspective to a group of men who identify themselves as pickup artists and members of a "seduction community." The essay examines how these men construct their reality, in particular, the nature of relationships between men and women. Pickup artists draw on the science of evolutionary psychology to explain their methods and make sense of their successes and failures in doing "pickup." In relation to the constructionist perspective, the essay examines how members of this community establish the grounds of their claims through the use of evolutionary psychology, how they use these grounds construct to people through their claims about the sexual desires of men and women and their use of

prognostic frames to discount the advice given by counter-claimsmakers who approach dating and sex from a different point of view.

Just as the sociologists and criminologists in the first essay construct the nature of conventional morality as part of the grounds of their claims, this essay also illustrates the process of grounds construction. For the men involved in the seduction community, the claims being made deal with the sexual desires of men and women. The grounds for these claims are rooted in their understanding of evolutionary psychology. Sexual desires are understood to be the products of evolution. Women are spoken of in terms of their evolutionary "programming" and many of the concepts they employ speak to this understanding. Thus, in the terms used by one of the gurus of this community, "attraction is not a choice." Instead, attraction is an instinctual compulsion rooted in this evolutionary programming. Through these types of statements, members of the seduction community have identified sex and attraction as phenomena to be understood through the lens of evolutionary psychology. These statements serve as what Best (1990) calls "orientation statements." They define the "type" of problem we are being faced with.

Through these types of statements, pickup artists not only engage in the construction of grounds, but also in the construction of people. A premium is placed on understanding the motives and desires of women in selecting a mate. In order to be successful in doing pickup, the men who participate in this community must understand the "proper" construction of men and women's sexual desires. Women seek "alpha-males" because these men will provide offspring with "good genes." They seek men who have confidence, ambition, wealth and status because these men will likely be able to

provide for the offspring of the coupling. Of course, these drives are understood to be the deep seated, subconscious consequences of the evolutionary pressures associated with the risks of bearing children. Pickup artists argue that while many of these risks may not be the realities women face today, their biological wiring has not "caught up" to current social realities. Thus, women still seek the traits of the protector and provider in men. This construction of women provides the context within which their methods are meant to be understood. If women's desires are understood "properly," one will come to understand why pickup artists espouse their methods of pickup and seduction.

The construction of people and grounds done by members of the seduction community are more than an attempt at borrowing the rhetoric of evolutionary psychology. Evolutionary psychology serves as an organizing principle. It brings coherence to their theories and structures not only in how they interpret both their own experiences of doing pick up, but also in their interpretations of the experiences of other men "in the field." This intersection between the orientation statements these men offer up and their interpretation of everyday lived experience serves an example of social problems work (Holstein and Miller 2003:71), ". . . those practices that link public interpretive structures to aspects of everyday reality, producing recognizable instances of social problems." Thus when members of the seduction community discuss their dating histories before they joined the community, they often frame their failures in terms of being beta-male "nice-guys." By doing so, the claims being made about the nature of women's desire for the alpha-male are brought down to the level of everyday life. Similarly, when John talked about his experiences with women who were cheating on

their partners, he mentions how women are "programmed" to choose infidelity. Their understanding of their current and past experiences is expressed in terms of the grounds that have been established regarding human sexuality and evolutionary psychology. Their practice of testing theories "in field" requires them to move from abstract theoretical claims to concrete application of these concepts in everyday interaction. These actions demonstrate the way in which claims about the nature of a phenomena impact the construction of everyday lived reality by social actors through the process of social problems work.

The orientation statements given by members of this community serve a purpose beyond structuring their interpretations of men and women's actions in everyday life. By constructing sex, seduction and attraction as matters of evolutionary psychology, these men construct a "prognostic frame" (Loseke 2003; Snow and Benford 1988) that positions them as knowledgeable speakers on how to attract women. This frame also provides the basis for their denunciation of other forms of sex and relationship advice, especially that given by women. One particularly vitriolic statement summarizes this sentiment:

> One more thing...many guys make the mistake of listening to female romantic advice. Don't listen to them, THEY DON'T KNOW WTF [what the fuck] THEY ARE TALKING ABOUT, and they WILL steer you wrong. They will tell you what they THINK they want, instead of what they actually RESPOND to.

Advice that approaches the topic of seduction from outside the framework established within the community is viewed as irrelevant and misleading. In this case, the advice of women is deemed untrustworthy because what women perceive themselves as being responsive to is different from what they actually respond to. For pickup artists, women's

perceptions of their own desires are mediated by social pressures. They have been "socially programmed" to say they want one thing while they've been "biologically programmed" to respond to another. Since women's advice emerges from this socially programmed framework rather than the prognostic frame constructed within the seduction community, women's advice is viewed as flawed.

While the paper contributes several examples of constructionist concepts, it is also meant to complement the previous essay on techniques of neutralization. The techniques of neutralization paper showed how sociologists use the talk of individuals in a way that reinforces the deviant label. One of the intents of the essay on the seduction community was to demonstrate that an analysis that does not make any claims that reinforce a characterization of social actors is possible. The analysis of how pickup artists understand men and women and the behavior these men espouse does not take a position on, or make a judgment about who these pickup artists are; that is without constructing them as particular kind of people (good/bad, moral/immoral). Whether one wants to produce the kind of analysis that remains ambivalent about the question of the morality of those being described or the accuracy of the claims they make is a question analysts must answer for themselves, but the possibility of such an analysis is one of the objectives I aimed to demonstrate through this essay.

ESSAY 3

The final essay in the dissertation is an examination of the constructionist approach to social problems itself. The paper is driven by two concerns. The first of these

deals with the epistemological consequences of contextual constructionism. The essay first argues that the strict/contextual dichotomy in constructionism is a false one. It points out that constructionist researchers must always situate themselves as people who can speak with authority about some aspect of reality. Constructionist researchers are claimsmakers about claimsmaking. They make "factual" statements about the claims they have observed and thus cannot ". . . avoid making assumptions about objective reality" (Best 1995:341). The problem then becomes: if all constructionist researchers are contextual constructionists, what knowledge can we claim to have about the context in which claims are made?

Within constructionist circles, the epistemological "ground rules" of the approach have never been deeply examined. Instead, a sort of common-sense approach about what can legitimately be said about context has prevailed. What has emerged from this are several seemingly useful theoretical concepts, such as "cultural themes" (Loseke 2003), whose empirical groundings are somewhat murky. The result of this "common-sense" approach to defining what can and cannot be said about context leads to the second problem the essay examines, an examination of the boundaries of what is considered "legitimate" constructionist research.

While constructionists such as Best (1995; 2003a; 2003b) argue for a contextual approach that allows the researcher to admit to certain facts about the nature of the problems being studied, there has been some debate over how this type of information should be used. Those who use constructionist thought and reasoning to demolish certain claims they happen to disagree with is castigated by Best (1995) as "vulgar

constructionism." Yet it is unclear why the practice of vulgar constructionism is viewed in such pejorative terms. The essay points out that the practice of vulgar constructionism seems a logical result of admitting that we can admit to the facticity of certain claims being made by the players in the claimsmaking game.

In examining the distinctions being made between strict, contextual and vulgar constructionism, we again see the process of constructing grounds. Strict constructionists attempt to avoid any sort of stance on the claims being made by claimsmakers. Contextual constructionists, such as Best and Rafter (1992), feel it is reasonable and even necessary to accept some claims as true. Doing so, they argue, allows us to ask interesting questions that strict constructionism will never deal with. However, to debunk the claims of certain groups is too much, and should be avoided. With these statements, constructionists engage in making "domain statements" (Best 1990) of their own.

As was discussed earlier, domain statements establish what phenomena constitute the subject of claimsmaking activities. The essay examines the arguments being made about what constructionism should accomplish and what should not be done. The strict/constructionist debate then, serves a boundary setting function. A line is drawn about the appropriate way to use these "facts." Contextual constructionism is positioned as a sensible middle ground between strict constructionism, which unnecessarily limits the usefulness of the constructionist approach and vulgar constructionism, which uses constructionism as a hammer to shatter claims the analyst may not like. By establishing the premises of the constructionist perspective, these researchers establish the way in which phenomena should "properly" be talked about. The grounds that have been laid out

by constructionist theorists place boundaries on what types of questions may be asked and what type of knowledge claimed. In violating these boundaries, "vulgar" constructionists challenge constructionist control over their own knowledge and strict constructionists threaten to squelch the contribution contextual constructionists feel the constructionist approach could make to the study of social problems.

COMMON THEMES

Each of the preceding essays illuminates various facets of the constructionist approach. Together they examine the various ways claimsmakers frame the conditions and people they study and the impact these frames have on the way social reality is constructed. Through the process of constructing people and grounds, the claimsmakers discussed in these essays frame the subjects of their study in ways that construct how both they and their audiences are to understand or make sense of their realities. In the first essay, criminologists and sociologists using the concept of neutralizations understand deviants in terms of their commitment to conventional morality. Once these grounds have been established, interpreting the speech of their subjects as an effort to maintain their non-deviant self images and mitigate the guilt felt over violating their moral commitments makes sense.

The second essay analyzes how pickup artists construct women and men through the lens of evolutionary psychology. They understand sexual and romantic desires to be "programmed" through the process of natural selection. The consequences of this construction of women is seen in one pickup artist's explanation of why women cheat on

their partners. Women cheat because of an evolutionary imperative that leads them to seek out men with certain characteristics.

The third essay illustrated how the sense-making process is a feature even of those sociologists who study claimsmaking itself. By making assertions about what questions constructionist studies should ask and the way in which those questions should be answered, constructionists establish the grounds by which they evaluate what does and does not constitute legitimate "constructionist" knowledge. Social problems researchers see "vulgar" constructionism as an attempt to leverage constructionist thought to serve an ideological agenda. The construction of people and grounds frames phenomena and directs claimsmakers' understanding of social phenomena.

While in each of these cases the framing of the issues contextualizes action and directs the way in which the meaning of the phenomena is constructed, the frames themselves are reinforced by the meaning making activity of the claimsmakers who use them. The very process of "social problems work," by which concrete examples of social problems categories (or, more appropriately for this dissertation *knowledge categories*) are produced in everyday life is an exercise in finding evidence that confirms the validity of the category. For instance, when analysts interpret certain speech as "neutralizations," they reinforce the veracity of the neutralization concept. By defining speech in this way, analysts produce evidence that neutralizations are indeed used by those engaging in "deviant" behavior and that "deviants" do feel guilt over their behavior. Why else would they be uttering neutralizations? The success of pickup artists at picking up women validates their construction of the sexual desires of men and women. While, in each case,

there are alternative ways of making sense of and understanding the phenomena in question, the successful application of the knowledge categories created by these claimsmakers is simultaneously the result of and support for the frames they have constructed to make sense of the world around them.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The issues raised in this dissertation suggest several areas for future research. The first essay on techniques of neutralization unpacks the process by which analysts frame the speech of their subjects. However, I propose no alternative within the essay. In future work, I aim to examine how the speech normally treated as a form of "techniques of neutralization" can be understood as what Mead (in Maines, Sugrue, and Katovich 1983) refers to as "symbolic reconstructions of the past." For Mead, the past is not the obdurate facts of history, but a socially re-constructed understanding of past events embedded in the present situation. How an actor views the past is influenced by the context of the present situation. The recollection of events leading up to the current moment, the recollection of others, the people present, the definition of the situation and countless other factors each play into how actors will recollect the past and imbue it with meaning. Thus, when analysts look at the "neutralizations" actors offer, they can be understood as narratives that give past actions meaning that has utility in the present context. By viewing accounts in this manner, analysts are able to avoid speculating about the inner states and motives of an actor, to which they have no access. Accounts thus become an interactional achievement, a construction of a world view.

The second essay illuminates how science is employed as a resource in claimsmaking activities. I intend to pursue a research agenda that will tie this line of inquiry to a broader concern about the way science is used by claimsmakers to construct arguments about social problems and how science is discounted or delegitimized by those who oppose these claims. Control over the use of scientific facts is an important part of the process by which social problems and deviance are defined. Conflict over the merits of scientific claims can be seen in debates surrounding the teaching of evolution, anti-smoking lobbying, campaigns for and against stem cell research and in various other social problems arenas.

Lastly, I see these essays as an entré into a broader project that examines the linkages between the constructionist approach to social problems, symbolic interactionism and the sociology of knowledge. In recent years, some constructionists have warned that the constructionist approach to studying social problems was teetering on the brink of academic oblivion:

> . . . those declaring that constructionism has become the leading approach to studying social problems cannot afford to be smug. If constructionist analysis is to have a future, it must continue to evolve in new directions, to broaden its perspective to become more comparative and to strengthen ties to other sociological specializations, as well as to scholars in other disciplines. (Best 2003b:148-149)

Loseke and Berbrier (2008) argue that this process has already begun:

> Can I add that the theory is insular? No one references it except people explicitly claiming to be doing work on the social construction of social problems. And, those folks rarely use the ideas of constructionists working in areas outside social problems. So, the theory is stagnant and insular—a recipe for failure.

According to Best, Loseke and Berbrier, those working within the constructionist tradition on social problems need to engage interests outside of the study of social problems.

One way to make the constructionist approach less "insular" is to explore links to what others within sociology are doing and where there is much interest. Symbolic interactionism, a tradition out of which social constructionism was generated and one which continues to inspire new insights is one direction to pursue in this vein. Claimsmaking is indelibly tied to the process of meaning-making. The construction of grounds and frames direct how we are meant to *understand* the phenomena being constructed. Meaning-making activity is a fundamental interest of symbolic interactionists. In speaking about claimsmaking, constructionists are able to speak to the process by which social structure can take on new forms, thus altering the way we make sense of the world. Within the interactionist view, patterned, structured behaviour emerges because people approach the world with similar conceptions of how it works (Fine and Kleinman 1983; Fine 1991; Maines. 2001). Through claimsmaking activities, we can understand the way social actors acquire new "stocks of knowledge" (Schutz 1962) that are brought to bear on their everyday lived reality. The process of claimsmaking represents one of the ways in which actors work to reconfigure the meaning making activities of claimsmakers. Thus, while symbolic interactionism attempts to understand the everyday lived realities of social actors and the process by which they come to understand their world, understanding claimsmaking activities allows

us to understand the process by which these same actors acquire the symbolic resources they call on to make sense of their moment to moment experiences.

There are also links between the constructionist approach to social problems and the sociology of knowledge, particularly the project laid out by Berger and Luckmann ([1966] 1985). By focusing on the way people create and maintain the categories and meanings that order the world around them, Berger and Luckmann argued that knowledge of the world was a social product. The constructionist approach to social problems may be able to provide new insights into Berger and Luckmann's vision of the sociology of knowledge, particularly on the question of what passes for knowledge in pluralistic societies. Berger and Luckmann argue that most modern societies are pluralistic, composed of a "core" symbolic universe and several "partial" universes ". . . coexisting in some state of mutual accommodation" (p. 142). Social problems research shows that this state of mutual accommodation is often more contested than Berger and Luckmann suggest. By constructing grounds and frames, claimsmakers place boundaries around phenomena and establish the "proper" way to interpret their meaning. These "partial universes" often become the object of competitions through claimsmaking and counterclaimsmaking as claimsmakers attempt to gain larger domains of relevance.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I don't act upon reality as it objectively exists, I act upon my map of reality as I perceive it exists. When you have two people come together and interact, . . . what's important isn't whether those belief systems are true or false. What's important is that you have a situation where someone who has a weak sense of reality is with someone who has a strong sense of reality and it gets absorbed into that, because the person has a stronger frame.

Lovedrop

The constructionist approach to social problems has more to offer than an examination of problematic or troubling behavior. It examines the processes by which we all create our "maps of reality." The above quote, by a pickup guru known as "Lovedrop," speaks to a broad belief within the seduction community, a belief that women are attracted to men whose conviction in their understanding of reality is compelling to the point that it leads other people to conform to it. It also speaks to a belief that has long been held among constructionists, that we can never objectively know if our perceptions of reality are a reflection of the "true" nature of an external world, as we form and re-form our understandings of everyday social life. Our knowledge and perception of reality are rooted in social processes.

This dissertation is about understanding how those who make claims to knowledge subtly construct the frames through which we are meant to view the world, to understand how we are "absorbed" into their frames. It examines how claims to knowledge about the world are substantiated through the construction of people and conditions in ways that support these claims. The central concern throughout has been on the construction of the "maps of reality" that others will use to navigate their understanding of the world around them.

The essays have demonstrated how social problems concepts are used to understand the way framing processes impact understanding and make sense of a variety of phenomena. The work of criminologists, pickup artists and social constructionists themselves illuminate the pervasive role claimsmaking plays in constructing everyday lived realities. In our interactions with one another, we are constantly in the process of engaging in social problems work, calling on the construction of grounds, people and phenomena that have been provided to us by the claimsmakers we have encountered in our schools, workplaces and in the media. In examining these processes, we come to realize that claimsmaking and constructionism are the most pervasive and common acts of seduction to be found.

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