CHAPTER 1

The Challenges of Conceptualizing Social Problems

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Abstract

The sociological study of social problems is reviewed in terms of the question of conceptualizing the key term *social problems* as a technical term in the discipline and beyond. Dilemmas brought by the very word *problem*, by who uses it and how, are considered. Against a dominant tradition of the sociologist using the term normatively, elements of the definitional approach proposed by Malcolm Spector and John Kitsuse are reviewed as the most analytically sound conceptualization of the last century, still offering promise. That argument is then linked to work in science studies and the respecification of sociology by Bruno Latour to suggest a revitalized study of social problems and sociology.

I write here having earlier spent many words on "social problems theory," shaped by Malcolm Spector and John Kitsuse's ([1977] 2000) influential *Constructing Social Problems*. But I am not interested in rejoining any of the debates that emerged in the wake of their provocative book (e.g., the so-called strict vs. contextual debate; see Ibarra 2008), and I do not review research and writing that have drawn on it. That work and the "social constructionist" tradition in social problems, and far beyond, have been quite thoroughly reviewed (see Holstein and Gubrium 2008; Holstein and Miller 1993). Moreover, Peter R. Ibarra and Michael Adorjan offer a chapter in this volume that brings that review and consideration up to date. I am, however, interested in foregrounding certain ideas and arguments central to Spector and Kitsuse's (hereafter S&K, unless as a citation) work that have shaped my own understanding of what social problems in sociology can be thought to be and that bear directly on this chapter's topic: conceptualizing social problems.

Conceptualization and Definition

The history of "social problems" in sociology is one that might best be characterized not by S&K's theory but rather more likely by C. Wright Mills's (1959) famous vision of the sociological imagination. Mills offered an accessible argument, distilled

from more complex European origins of sociology – Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and others – that has been used widely by subsequent generations of sociologists who have taken up social problems as a topic, especially so in the United States. His claim that this "imagination" could explain how "personal troubles" are a result of or emerge in the context of "social issues" was a clear and compelling statement for generations of sociologists. Social issues, for Mills, were thought primarily in terms of what he called "social structures," with particular attention to structured differences of power and income/wealth. Mills's brief but not simple claim has been at the heart of the understanding that sociology offers of itself as an intellectual and scholarly as well as a political pursuit, inclusive not only of "personal troubles" but of the full range of human sociocultural biography as it unfolds in culturesociety.

Mills may have been motivated in this by his review of social problems writing in sociology. In his "The Professional Ideology of the Social Pathologists" (Mills 1943), he offered a wide-ranging and detailed critique of the conceptualization of social problems in sociology textbooks up to the 1940s. While directed at the politics and ideologies of this work – Protestant, politically conservative, antiurban, middle class, functional, order/"balance," and assimilationist – he frowns perhaps as much on the relative or complete absence of attention to careful and consistent sociological conceptualization and definition. Social problems, or "pathologies" in those textbooks and professional publications, were conditions, practices, and, by extension, people that/who were seen by those authors as athwart these assumedly consensual "American" values and ways of life. Their personal but surely also socially and institutionally located moral commitments were the standards in terms of which social problems were defined. It was perhaps not so much that there was no "theory" in that work but rather that the theory and the moral/ethical commitments of the authors were the same thing. This fell far short of Mills's sense of what a legitimate theoretical sociology, focused on serious structural analysis and critique, should be.

To underscore the importance of his notion of structure, he also took to task William I. Thomas and Charles Horton Cooley for their focus on what he called "isolated situations," a "situational approach," the overstated importance of "a Christian-democratic version of a rural village" and "community" – and too much attention to "process," such that the central importance (to Mills) of the political and economic as "structure" is pushed out of view (Mills 1943, 10–11, 16). Ironically, Mills himself used a political/ideological/moral frame as one foundation of his own argument, although couched in a quite different sort of discourse from those he criticized. This kind of blindness, intentional or not, to one's own moral and ideological presuppositions, treating them as societally consensual and/or, vaguely, as "theory" – but as, in fact, untheorized – has a long history in the sociology of social problems.

Mainstream sociology in the United States has mostly offered an account of the individual in terms of the effects of such social structure or structures, although the Marxism in Mills's analyses certainly was not mainstream. This sociology sees social problems as "undesirable conditions" of shared or categorical human experience, defined as suffering, oppression, devaluation, and exclusion, or, leaning toward the "deviant," as criminal or nonconforming, that can be causally traced to particular structures of/within society and/or culture – and the claim that those structures and related practices themselves, e.g., modernity, capitalism, racism, sexism, colonialism, heteronormativity, and other forms of inequality, are also "the problem," calling for social-scientific study and criticism if not intervention.

Distinct from Mills's critique of the effects of the structure and operation of capitalism, and more influential in social

problems analysis at the middle of the last century, were the arguments made from theories of social disorganization and dysfunction (e.g., Merton and Nesbit 1971). These theories shifted emerging academic sociology away from making explicit moral judgments on the basis of the sociologist's personal commitments to seemingly neutral, theoretical accounts of such conditions as the result of a society or social system gone awry, out of sync with its better self, "disorganized" and "dysfunctional." Based nonetheless still on a moral preference – in this case for societal or system integration, order, and value consensus – social problems here are those social structural conditions that made it impossible for, or less likely that, certain categories of people could achieve success and personal fulfillment by conformity to the social expectations that they were taught and that were thought by the sociologist-analysts to define their society and/or social group.

Although such theories saw the source of problems to be social structural, given the liberal, neoliberal, individualist, and Marxist-phobic politics of the United States and of sociology as well, proposed interventions against such problems implied by sociological theory and research tended mostly to be attempts to help affected individuals deal with these structural effects. Policy-driven, more radical interventions in those structural arrangements thought to cause the personal troubles were less likely. Moreover, the institutional location of most sociologists in the United States, and the somewhat uncertain status of the discipline as a social science, likely militated against more politically radical critique. Sociology, even in its European origins, has often been seen as a kind of "social engineering" (Latour 2005); and Michel Foucault ([1978] 1991) suggests that social science disciplines such as sociology operate as part of what he called "governmentality." The politics of knowledge in which sociology finds itself is made more complex and fraught by the ideology that *veritas* and knowledge are other to power, which easily seems alive and well in sociology, even in the wake of Foucault's (1980) critique.

In this early, through-mid-twentieth-century writing, the concept of social problems is not much elaborated. While the moral/ethical/ideological *weight* of the term itself remains significant, still offered as a judgment and as a professional responsibility – social problems are "undesirable conditions," and it is the sociologist's job to study and work to eradicate them – the theoretical insight and elaboration of the term is limited. From the social pathologists to the social disorganization and functionalist analyses throughout the 1960s and into the early 1970s, there is little to advance our understanding of what one might mean by social problems *as a concept fit to direct productive empirical research*. As S&K write in their detailed critique, the concept was sometimes introduced and defined in an introduction, perhaps with an eye to conforming to "scientific" standards, and then not much mentioned again. The issues here are primarily methodological, although those are hardly separable from theoretical obfuscation, such that even if there were definitions of "social disorganization" or "dysfunction" or the absence of "functional prerequisites" for the "society" or "social system" in question, they were virtually impossible to define empirically in a useful and reliable way (Spector and Kitsuse 2000, 23–39).

Two Dilemmas in Social Problems Sociology

Sociologists who take up social problems as a topic of research and teaching face two questions – I will call them dilemmas – that turn on the concept itself, on who uses it and how. The first is that the word *problem* brings an evaluative judgment, even in the most mundane instances of its use, as in "You got a problem with that?" (e.g., Maynard 1988, 312; Schegloff 2005, 449). And the *social* problem requires a particular kind of

judgment in which the weighty and, simultaneously, light-as-a-feather concept "social" complicates matters significantly (Latour 2005). There are of course uses of the word *problem* that bring less explicit judgment, as in a "scientific problem," read as an "interesting puzzle to solve" or "the question before us," although, after Thomas Kuhn's (1970) study of science, we can see even this use as moral. Without the implicit or explicit use of some standard of evaluative judgment, the word makes little sense. A robust relativism, with some input from linguistics, tells us that nothing is *inherently* a "problem"; indeed, nothing is *inherently* anything. Without the interpretive frame, without judgmental meaning brought to bear, a problem does not exist (but see Schegloff 2005). This simple insight is, in a sense, where a "definitional approach" to social problems in sociology might be seen to have begun – in a kind of "common sense," in and of the world.

That does not mean the absence of these words should be taken as a comment on the conditions under which people live. We have plenty of evidence of "undesirable conditions" and/or practices with long histories about which there is no empirical evidence of such public claims being made. Such absence in these instances no doubt reflects "political" realities having to do with who has "voice" to speak publicly and who is heard and listened to by various others when and if they do speak. And that is not to say that oppressed, exploited, and abused people don't, at the least, *feel* their lives in ways linked to these words of complaint, quite aside from what they might or might not think and say, and even write, about them. Of course, one of the contributions of sociological research, which might not frame its topic by a serious use of this concept "social problems," has been to call attention to the study of such conditions and the contexts in which they emerge and exist (cf. Latour 2005).

The choice for sociological study of "social conditions" by the *analyst* based on his or her own sense or feeling or certainty that the matter is a "social problem" takes us to the second dilemma or question: who is making the judgment about said conditions *and then using this term* to characterize the phenomenon? Such judgments and usage made "as a sociologist" are of course the focus. While we who are sociologists surely make evaluative judgments in our lives, those judgments are not therefore sociological. The question becomes one of the *sociological* or theoretical "warrant" that supports such a claim. What does the theory (or ideology) being used require in terms of bringing definition and candidate empirical instances of "social problem" together? What does the theory say the world is and should be? Where, in particular, does the sociologist, "as a sociologist," stand on this moral terrain when he or she says "social problem"?

If you have come to social problems by way of studying deviance, you may hear in that question the distant echo of Howard S. Becker's writing that launched the so-called labeling tradition. Confronting and engaging this second dilemma, Becker (1963, 9, emphasis original) boldly wrote, more than fifty years ago, that *"social groups create deviance by making rules whose infraction constitutes deviance*, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders." He did not write "sociologists of deviance create deviance by making judgments about the conditions, conduct, and persons before them" and then studying their own creation, although as his troublesome "secret deviant" category made clear, he perhaps was not as certain about his own claim as S&K later could be, thanks to his problematic "fourfold table" and Melvin Pollner's (1967) critique (Becker 1963, 20). Sociologists could use *deviant*, then, not as a member's term but as a "technical term," a concept in sociology. The theory he wrote warranted this use based on what the analyst could see of what people were doing and saying. Becker's claim about the creation of deviance should have been taken as a guide for sociologists of social problems. Both terms, full of moral judgment, insist that we be clear about who is using them, and how.

"Whose Side Are We On?" The Normative Stance of the Social Problems Sociologist

Becker's (1967) recommendation on how to proceed "as a sociologist" in a "political situation" involving deviance, where "sides" – usually more than two – already have been marked publicly by the people involved, is instructive. Facing such pointed political lines, which is where one likely would *begin* in the study of social problems, Becker urges us to choose a side or set of sides and, as carefully and accurately as we who are trained in science can manage, tell an empirically grounded and analytic story from those perspectives chosen. In this, we of course inevitably entwine *their* stories and *our* sociological story. The latter foreground the question of conceptualization or theory, but not, hopefully, as themselves more important than the stories of the "side" we have chosen to tell, which is one of Latour's (2005) chief criticisms of what he calls the "sociology of the social."

In making this choice, we are seen typically by those on the "sides" of the situation that we do not tell, or do not tell "properly" or "correctly," as "biased" or worse. Becker insists that since we cannot tell some "complete" or truly "balanced" and distanced (aka big O "Objective"), or "God's-eye" or Archimedean story – impossible, he says – we choose a side, make the data the best we can, and be on the lookout for the effects of our own always present sympathies, political, ethical, and moral as they will be. We offer our sociological analyses of people's stories and see what our colleagues, the people studied, and others have to say in response. In a valuable relativist insight, Becker treats the charge of "bias" as a claim of resentment rather than as a matter of accuracy or as a methodological misstep. The sociologist charged with bias is thus said to have told the "wrong" story ("not ours").

In "choosing a side," the choice made so often by sociologists is to tell the story of those Becker called "the underdog" – those who variously suffer the inequities produced by those structures that sociologists and others foreground and, we feel sure, whose stories are not, or are only rarely, told publicly. I don't mean to say that *all* sociologists are either sympathetic in these ways or necessarily foreground the influence of sociocultural structures as primary. But whether pointing to the common labels for dominant structures in American society – class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age – as accounting mechanisms for the existence and nature of conditions of injustice and inequality or "choosing a side" in Becker's more ambiguous terms, such choices of what to study and how to study it rely on use of an explicit norm or moral standard, even when that is not mentioned or taken as given and when the language or discourse used discourages such a reading. I am sure this is not news to you, and I suspect that you, very likely, share with me these arguably liberal or leftist moral/political sentiments. It's using them as grounds for defining a social problem "as a sociologist" that I call into question (and see Latour 2005 on "critical sociology").

The point to consider – looking back as well as forward to what is offered today as social problems sociology – is what this move implies for the status of a distinct sociological subfield called "social problems" understood in the same way that, say, a sociology of social movements, deviance, sexuality, family, or stratification/inequality might be seen. The aim is, as offered by S&K, a sociological subfield framed by research guided by a conceptualization that is less about the personal politics of the researcher/teacher and more an attempt to discern how people collaborate with others to make something "new" and keep it going – or challenge those attempts. If whether we have a "social problem" to study is contingent on the political and ideological sympathies of the sociologist proposing the study, then, at least in terms of conceptualization, we have made little progress over the last century. This is not lost on our undergraduate students, and while the politics may fit (or not) their own sympathies,

it often leaves them – among others – unsure about just what constitutes a sociology of social problems (if not sociology itself). This matter of the normative stance taken by the sociologist is a major source of the claim that opens Spector and Kitsuse's (2000, 1) book: "There is no adequate definition of social problems within sociology, and there is not and never has been a sociology of social problems."

Recent Candidates for a Sociology of Social Problems: Public Sociology, Service Sociology, Social Justice Work

Despite the critique of a normative approach to theorizing social problems, it remains highly popular among sociologists and, I suspect, nonacademic analysts and commentators as well. In view of that popularity, I briefly consider three lines of work that either present themselves or can be suggested as relevant to the study of social problems by sociologists. All three take an explicitly normative stance to the definition of social problems. The three journal articles on which I rely primarily for these following comments appeared in *Social Problems*, the journal of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP); two of them were presented earlier as presidential addresses for that society, whose membership comprises primarily sociologists.

Public Sociology

Michael Burawoy (2005a, 2005b), in a series of influential papers and talks (see Hartmann, forthcoming), has proposed what he calls "public sociology" as a way to revitalize and recenter the original "moral commitment" and drive for "moral reform" that characterized the origins of the discipline, from its European founders to its early Chicago activists (Burawoy et al. 2004, 103). In a symposium with colleagues, he stories the familiar tensions between those themes of an explicitly moral or normative sociology of social problems and the rise of a more explicitly scientific version, which allowed, in the early part of the last century, US sociologists to take their place in the academy along side other, already institutionalized "social science" disciplines. While the end of "sociology's moral prehistory" was triumphantly declared by leading figures in the early 1960s, Burawoy notes that this was indeed a premature claim, as the events and developments within and outside the profession in the ensuing decades make clear. Think the civil rights movement and the anti–Vietnam War protest, not to mention Watergate. He suggests that the attempt to banish this moral commitment as a defining quality of sociology will recurrently fail – as he says it has done – and that the liberal, leftist, and humanist values that fueled the emergence of sociology in the United States will not remain repressed for long (see Calhoun 2007a, 2007b). He proposes that such an attempt to repress explicit moral commitment in the name of science is ill conceived, limiting to the discipline, and, finally, unnecessary. What if, he asks, "we were to give it room to breathe, recognize it rather than silence it, reflect on it rather than repress it?" (Burawoy et al. 2004, 104). The benefits of this embrace, he argues, are worth whatever risks it might bring to the discipline's future.

Toward this end he offers the notion of public sociology: "a sociology that seeks to bring sociology to publics beyond the academy, promoting dialogue about issues that affect the fate of society, placing the values to which we adhere under a microscope" (Burawoy et al. 2004, 104). Burawoy's vision of sociology is inclusive and multiple in terms of the kinds of work to be encouraged – both inside and outside his proposed category – and, as he notes, it is consistent with Mills's vision. Burawoy sees early-twenty-first-century sociology as having four component sociologies. In addition to public sociology, he describes a policy sociology, a professional sociology, and a critical sociology. The job of public sociology is both to take the accomplishments of professional or more academic sociology to

a range of relevant publics outside the university; and to pursue sociological research shaped specifically to address the interests and issues that these diverse publics confront – ranging across the full expanse of familiar divisions in the society.

This indeed has been an aim of sociology from its beginning, although the question of who should take up the responsibility for the translation and connection between professional or academic sociological knowledge and those diverse publics is central for public sociology rather than, as often has been the case, usually left unasked, on the academic assumption that "application" is the job of others. For public sociologists thus conceived, this work of connection and translation that make it "successful" are part of the project from the outset. This explicitly widens the scope of what sociology is and what sociologists are responsible for doing compared to traditional, professional/academic practice. On the other hand, it is equally possible to argue, as these authors do, that it reaffirms what sociology, from its beginnings, was intended to be and do.

Burawoy calls public sociology the "conscience" of *policy* sociology (cf. Hartmann, forthcoming), keeping in the foreground the question of who is served by sociological knowledge and how; a question that should be addressed before, or as directly as, questions of who pays for the research in question and who are the most important clients – always the most "powerful"? – to be served. Similarly, he calls *critical* sociology "the guardian of the discipline and the conscience of *professional* sociology" (Burawoy et al. 2004, 105). This critical sociology, he adds, has moral values at its core, is addressed to one's academic colleagues, and "often veers toward ideology and utopia." His notion is that professional or academic sociology, with its abstractions and technical sophistication, is "balanced" by its trio of siblings so that it remains relevant to the needs and interests of the publics beyond the academy.

In Burawoy's characterization, professional sociology typically fails to maintain a critical reflexivity about its own foundations and assumptions, whereas critical sociology, especially, brings these questions to the foreground. He writes: "Reflexive knowledge holds instrumental knowledge up for examination in the light of its presuppositions, often challenging those presuppositions as arbitrary, and even proposing alternative principles" (Burawoy et al. 2004, 105). Notwithstanding this picture of a dynamic balance and exchange across the tensions of these four sociologies, which is, he admits, much more complex and fraught than his model suggests, Burawoy writes that, warts and all, "the fact is that today without professional sociology there can be no other sociology" (Burawoy et al. 2004, 105).

Service Sociology

In his 2011 presidential address to the SSSP, A. Javier Treviño (2012, 3) champions what he calls "service sociology," "an ethos . . . distinct from other sociologies . . . that . . . emphasizes its moral character." In the context of "economic downturn and divided government" of today, Treviño proposes a voluntarism by all citizens, including academics, as the opportunity "to play active roles in the amelioration of social problems." Announcing a "new era" in the United States characterized by "a culture of service," Treviño (2012, 2) argues that various collective forms of citizen service can be effective "to ease or mitigate the predicaments and uncertainties caused by poverty, hunger, racism, sexism, epidemics, calamities, and so on." Rehearsing US sociology's origins as intimately involved with "applied social reform and philanthropy," this vision of a service sociology, as with Burawoy's argument for public sociology, is seen to revive what defined the discipline in its earliest academic forms, at both Chicago and Columbia.

Treviño draws several "principles" from these origins to guide this new ethos. These include "*neighborliness*, fellow feeling"; "systematic coordination of services" in the name of efficiency; "communal *reciprocity*" among those involved; and a

commitment to eventual "self-reliance or *sustainability*" (Treviño 2012, 6; emphasis in original). He names additional, more recent work that supports service sociology, found in "humanist/libertarian sociology," "communitarianism," and "public sociology" (Treviño 2012, 7). From these latter three traditions, Treviño says we learn the importance of developing "empathy" with those to be served; a commitment to "social *justice*" that grows from the sociologist's deepened appreciation of the effects of oppression and the value of equality; how *"community service and civic involvement"* serve the "common good"; and our role in conveying sociological knowledge to communities to protect "against predatory business practices and government abuses" (Treviño 2012, 10).

This vision of sociology and of social problems sociology in particular offers a prime example of what S&K mean by a normative stance. Treviño (2012, 10) specifically comments that "the main problem of social problems theories is [and has been] that they are deficient in rectifying troubling situations" and have done a "poor" job "of offering practical remedies; remedies that have to do with useful diagnosis and control." Crediting theories of social problems with "splendid" work at "explaining the origins and natural histories of social problems," but adding that they have "failed miserably" in "developing an analytical framework for meeting the urgent needs of people," it is clear that Treviño's (2012, 10) service sociology seeks to elaborate these aspects of the discipline, widening significantly the work and responsibilities, not to mention the training and skills needed, beyond what has been the case. Service sociology is, as he says, "a problem-solving endeavor" (Treviño 2012, 11).

Social Justice Work: Purpose-Driven Scholarship

Commitment to and advocacy for social justice occupies an important place in Treviño's conception of service sociology and is easily seen as also part of Burawoy's public sociology, at the least. JoAnn Miller (2011), also in a presidential address to the SSSP, foregrounds this as what social problems sociology, at its best, should be. As do public sociology and service sociology, social justice work premises its definition of social problems on normative grounds that are embraced by the sociologist; and it is defined by an explicit commitment to social justice and to the amelioration and removal of conditions and practices that challenge or diminish it. Citing the particular history of the SSSP and its commitment to bring sociology to bear on the amelioration of human suffering and exploitation believed due to social and cultural structures and institutions, Miller, like Treviño, sees the job of the social problems sociologist to include activism to "do something" in the face of problems. Distinguishing "discipline focused, or dispassionate social science," somewhat pejoratively, from social justice work, Miller (2011, 3) calls the latter "problem driven scholarship. That is, the social problem addressed by the scholarly work is the answer to the question 'why do it?'" She allows that in this work, understanding is of course necessary, but that it is where this work *begins*. Social justice scholarship is seen in "whatever advocacy or activist actions are necessary to provoke change . . . [It] is action focused" (Miller 2011, 3). For Miller (2011, 4), the motivation of the social justice sociologist is important; "professional promotion or publication in an academic discipline's 'top' journal" as a prime motivator of one's work is not itself valued.

Miller's examples of what she considers social justice sociology virtually all – and more explicitly so than Treviño's illustrations of his service sociology – story sociologists doing what might be called academic or professional research on contentious matters involving a range of instances of human suffering, inequality, and injustice. They then take various steps to speak or write that relevant knowledge to various audiences or publics positioned to help improve, reduce, or erase these circumstances and the suffering they bring. As with Burawoy's public

sociology and, to a lesser extent, with Treviño's service sociology, we here can see the sociologist as the expert, choosing to bring that expertise to bear in a variety of institutional and community arenas.

Beyond writing and speaking through various media and in person to various groups or publics, one example of social justice work that Miller (2011, 3) foregrounds is the work of sociologist Michael Radelet, whom she calls a "scholar-activist-advocate." Radelet has brought his voluminous research – which, surely, has been peer-reviewed and thoroughly vetted in the most "traditional" academic ways – to bear as grounds for the critique of capital punishment in the United States. Miller (2011, 3) reports that he "has testified in seventy-five death penalty trials and before U.S. House and Senate committees" and has "documented 350 cases of innocent persons who were convicted of first-degree murder." Surely, one must see this as a prime example of how academic or professional sociology can be and has been turned successfully toward making the world a better place. I applaud it unequivocally.

But Whither Social Problems as a Concept?

These examples of recent work that might be seen as social problems sociology are of course too limited to represent adequately the many varieties of research and writing that use a normative commitment as grounds for defining conditions as problems and thus warranting study and/or intervention/solution. Much could be written, for instance, about the way that Marxism (see Manza and McCarthy 2011) and feminism (Clough 1994; Collins 1991) along with theory and research on race and ethnicity (Collins 2007; Winant 2007) have made important contributions to this kind of analysis in sociology. As is the case with earlier parallel work, much of the most consequential and insightful writing in the history of the discipline is found here. But again, the contributions made, whatever considerable merits they offer, have arguably added little to the conceptualization of social problems as a "technical term" in sociology. Juxtaposed to the work of S&K and the elaborations that Ibarra and Adorjan detail, the three lines, too briefly described above, do not strike me as instructive about how to think theoretically about social problems. I am not sure the authors cited would themselves claim that they are writing primarily about social problems as a sociological concept. But given the history of social problems in sociology, the perspectives they suggest are familiar as that.

In the remainder of this chapter I aim to make a case for the singular contribution S&K make to the task of taking social problems seriously as something more than sociologists' moral, ethical, and ideological/political judgments about undesirable conditions. I hope this juxtaposition of arguments from their work and the recent candidate examples of what might pass for social problems sociology are provocative of a continued conversation about the ways we sociologists theorize this topic. The elements of S&K's contribution, in my view, remain viable and productive resources for subsequent theory and research focused specifically and intentionally on this concept. If we can take it as an index of relevance, their book, first published in 1977, has been reprinted twice, most recently in 2000, and has been continuously in print for almost forty years.

The Mostly Radical Claims of a Seriously Conceptual Approach to the Study of Social Problems

S&K saw their proposal for a theory of social problems as "radical." As a social-scientific argument, of course, it was hardly that. They were trying to bring theoretical and methodological order and consistency to the sociological study of social problems, where, in their view, these had been absent from the start; a modicum of disciplinary respectability for this subfield was their aim. "We have argued for the importance

of a theoretically defensible, methodologically specifiable, and empirically researchable definition of social problems" (Spector and Kitsuse 2000, 27). Eschewing a "grand theory" of social problems as part of an encompassing systems or societal model and a normative stance, they focused much more narrowly.

Instead of social problems as "undesirable conditions" defined as such by the sociologist, the "social causes" of which are then the sociologist's responsibility to determine, Spector and Kitsuse (2000, 75, emphasis original) insisted that it is members' collective "definitional activities" of claimsmaking and responding *"with respect to some putative conditions"* that constitute the appropriate subject matter of social problems theory. This reflects their intellectual preference (and yes, that, too, is normative) for a more dynamic, interactional view that takes language and discourse seriously, with an unmistakable ethnomethodological flavor of seeing the social as built constantly in situ and from local resources (with more than a little skepticism for the "givenness" of "shared values"; and see Maynard 1988; Gubrium and Holstein 2012; Lynch 2008; Pollner 2012; Zimmerman 2005). Sociologists here are not in the position of being the moral "conscience" of, or arbiters for, "society" or various categories of people; or acting as the stewards of its moral terrain (a responsibility that had been taken up by the functionalists Merton and Nesbit and others; also by those offering normative definitions from the opposite political pole, such as Mills; much still apparent; see Burawoy's definition of public sociology, above). Foregrounding members' definitions as central to what social problems are was not a new idea when S&K proposed it. Clifford Case, as early as 1924, made it an essential element of his definition and it is reiterated in the work of Willard Waller (1936), Richard Fuller and Richard Myers (1941), and others across the following decades (Spector and Kitsuse 2000, 40–58).

What was arguably radical, and a direct challenge to conventional thinking in social problems work is their insistence that such definitions are both the *necessary and sufficient* grounds for the existence of a "social problem" as a technical term in sociology. Their theoretical argument insisted that these seemingly essential "undesirable conditions" were not admissible in their definitional analysis *except as referenced in those member claims* (see Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993). The important question for them was not the validity of those claims but rather their *viability*. This is signaled by their provocative use of the adjective "putative," which, in effect, shifts these "conditions" as actual, material phenomena out of the sociologist's legitimate consideration.

If member definitions as "grievances" are the essence of the concept social problems, they said, then attention to so-called conditions separate from those member definitions could only deflect theoretical and research attention from what social problems are. When that happens, they had seen, members' definitions typically are then treated as "reactions to threats" caused by these conditions, and "The independent significance of the definitional process fades from sight" (Spector and Kitsuse 2000, 45). In this, their theory disallows such conditions as causes of member definitions, a standard sociological as well as commonsense generalization but one they saw as empirically flawed.

Why people make claims, not unlike the question of why people "break rules" in the earlier research on deviance, is discouraged on similar grounds. Instead, the analyst seeks to describe and trace the emergence, organization, and movement of such claimsmaking or definitional activity as it occurs and/or in various records of that occurrence (Spector and Kitsuse 2000, 83). Examples of such claims, a commonsense, members' category, are: "demanding services, filling out forms, lodging complaints, filing lawsuits, calling press conferences, writing letters of protest, passing resolutions, publishing exposés, placing ads in newspapers, supporting or opposing some governmental practice or policy, setting up picket lines or boycotts" (Spector and Kitsuse 2000, 78–79). But the prime evidence of such claims'