



GREY MATTERS

A Guide to Collaborative Research with Seniors

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Appendix 10

Examining Social Problems

(From Chapter 1 of Donilee Loseke's
*Thinking about Social Problems: An Introduction to
Constructionist Perspectives*)

It's 8:45 a.m., September 11, 2001. I'm thinking about examples of social problems to use in my class today while drinking coffee and watching the Today Show. This program is loaded with possibilities. Al talked about a tropical storm heading for my home in Tampa. Matt talked with a scientist about the health problems of elderly people who can't afford their prescription medications. Katie talked with a representative of a group trying to stop the government from opening up huge areas in Alaska for oil drilling. I've seen a commercial for an

upcoming *Dateline* challenging the effectiveness of school vouchers in giving students better education. So many possible examples of social problems. But in the middle of a sentence quizzing Congressman Condit's lawyer about a missing congressional intern, Matt stops. The picture changes: a burning World Trade Center is on the screen. What are we watching? No one knows. I forget my thoughts about the social problems of hurricanes, medical insurance, environment, schools, unethical politicians. Horrified, I watch and by 11:00 a.m. I can't think. I feel only horror, panic, fear. We can't think about it until we make sense of what is happening.

Loseke's book is about social problems so I will begin simply with a question for you, the reader of these lines: What do you think are the ten most important social problems in the United States today?

Most certainly, since September 11, 2001, your list probably includes the multiple problems of war and terrorism. Your list also might include AIDS, crime, credit card theft, identity theft, child abuse, wife abuse, sexual abuse, alcohol abuse, drug abuse, animal abuse, homosexual rights, ability-impaired people's rights, laboratory animal rights, racism, sexism, ageism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, unemployment, poverty, increasing college tuition, welfare, affirmative action, global warming, acid rain, toxic landfills, sport utility vehicles that use too much gasoline, tires that fall apart when driven at high speeds, illegal campaign contributions, voting machines that don't work, corrupt politicians, divorce, men who don't pay child support, single mothers, teenage pregnancy, schools that don't teach, schools that don't have money to hire teachers or buy computers, a lack of affordable child care, housing or medical care, medical malpractice, smoking, drinking, Satanic cults, obesity, teens who gun down classmates.

There are four important lessons in this small exercise in naming social problems. First, what we call "social problems" is *not* a stable category. In my newspaper delivered early in the morning on

September 11, 2001, there were many articles and opinion pieces about problems with the social security system, too costly medical prescriptions for the elderly, voting machines that don't work, crime, and school failure. My paper on the next day included nothing about any of these. The social problems of one day simply disappeared the next as all attention was riveted on terrorism, national security and war. It is likely that by the time you read these lines the list of things we worry about will have changed. Today's worries are not necessarily tomorrow's worries.

Second, there seemingly is no end to conditions in America that might be called social problems. Granted, crime and poverty tend to remain on the public's and policymakers' lists of problems, and racial inequality often is called this country's most enduring social problem. But after these, the list is all but endless. Given time, you could think of more than ten problems confronting the United States today, and if you compared your list with those made by others, the number of items would grow. What we call social problems range from conditions isolated within one or another community (there tend to be large forest fires each year in Malibu, California; moose from the Adirondacks in Northern New York sometimes wander into small towns creating much havoc), to those affecting particular states (the budget problems in Florida because the state's economy depends on tourists who stopped traveling after the terrorist attacks), to those in particular regions of the country (flooding in the Midwest, migrant workers in California, Texas, and Florida), to problems found throughout the entire nation (AIDS, inequalities, lack of low-cost day care for children), to those crossing international borders (human rights, world hunger, refugees without homes, overpopulation). The list is seemingly endless, ever changing.

A third lesson from this simple exercise in naming social problems is that social problems are about *disagreements*. You might believe that some of the problems I offered are not social problems at

all, or that I failed to mention others that are far more important. Or, you and I might be thinking about very different things even if we did agree to include something on a list of important problems. If there is a problem called “homosexual rights,” for example, is this a problem of too many rights or too few? Is the problem of school prayer a problem of too much prayer or too little? Or, we might disagree on what, particularly, should be included in the problem. So, for example, we hear about the problem of “teenage pregnancy.” A married nineteen-year-old college student is a “pregnant teen,” but do we include such a woman in our worry? Or we might agree or not agree that something is a problem, we might agree on what should be included in this problem, but still not agree about what causes it and therefore, what should be done to resolve it. Is the problem of teens who gun down their classmates a problem of schools? Parents? Mentally unbalanced teens? Peer pressure? A mass media saturated with violence? Guns? Social problems are about disagreements.

A fourth lesson from this simple exercise of naming social problems is that social problems are about conditions *and* they are about people in those conditions. A social problem called crime is about criminals and victims of crime. A social problem called poverty is about poor people. Terrorism involves terrorists. Whether explicit and obvious (the condition of unemployment and unemployed people) or implicit and subtle (the deindustrialization of America, which implies unemployed or underemployed workers), social problems are about conditions (*something*) and they are about people (*somebody*).

Another important lesson about social problems is not obvious from this exercise because I started by asking you to list important problems in the *United States now*. A critical characteristic of social problems is that each is located in a particular time and place. Social problems in the United States change: People in the late 1600s worried a great deal about the problem of “witchcraft.” We no longer have that problem but we worry about the problem of “mental

illness.” Likewise, social problems are located in particular cultures. For example, although the United States and Japan both are industrialized, urbanized countries, social problems in these places are not the same. Consider how children who refuse to go to school in the United States are believed to have a personal problem. This same condition, children refusing to go to school, is called “school refusal” in Japan and people believe it is the consequence of bad schools and bad teachers. Likewise, while the federal government in the United States has taken a major role in combating child pornography, the Japanese government has not taken on such a role.

As another example, consider the behaviours of “uncivil and aggressive behavior in workplaces.” We certainly have such behaviour in the United States, but it is not generally accorded the status of a social problem. Yet in Great Britain such behaviours receive considerable attention and “bullying” is an important social problem. In brief, what is – and what is not – a social problem, and how the problem is responded to, depends on when and where the condition happens.

Let me ask another question. Think of your list of the top ten American social problems. What do all of these conditions have in common? What do conditions as diverse as illegal drugs, unemployment, child abuse, and environmental ruin share? Stated otherwise, what *is* a social problem?

What Is a Social Problem?

While we rarely ask in our daily life what the term *social problem* means, studies conclude that Americans in general do have somewhat specific notions about the characteristics of conditions that should be categorized as social problems. There are four parts to this common public definition.

First, we use the term *social problem* to indicate that something is *wrong*. In popular understanding, a social problem is not

something like happy families, physically fit people, or schools that teach children to read. This is common sense: The name is *social problem* so it obviously refers to conditions evaluated as wrong because they create harm.

The second part of the definition of social problem sounds harsh and uncaring: To be given the status of a social problem the condition must be evaluated as *widespread*, which means that it must hurt more than a few people. If I lose my job, that is a personal trouble. It is a problem for me but it is not necessarily a problem for you or for anyone else. But if something causes many of us to lose our jobs, then it is a social problem. I think Jeffrey Dahmer can illustrate how we use the term *social problem* to categorize conditions we think are widespread. Jeffrey Dahmer was a man who killed – and then ate – young boys. Certainly we all would agree that killing and cannibalism are wrong. But Americans never mention the problem of cannibalism when polled about the country's problems; cannibalism never is mentioned in social problems texts, it is not debated in the halls of Congress, we do not have social services to reform cannibals, we are not asked to donate money for the cause of stopping cannibalism. Why not? Because as hideous as it was that Jeffrey Dahmer killed and ate young boys, one cannibal among us is not enough to make cannibalism a social problem. Social problems are troublesome conditions we believe affect a *significant number of people*.

Third, the definition of social problem contains a dose of optimism. *Social problem* is a name we give to conditions we think can be *changed* by humans. Consider the condition of death. This certainly is a troublesome and widespread condition. But humans will die and that cannot be changed. Death is not a social problem. At the same time, there are many conditions associated with death that *could* be changed and therefore can be talked about as social problems: We could change *when* people die (disagreements about using medical technology to extend life or assisted suicide to end life) and

how people die (the problems of care in nursing homes for elderly people, the problems of automobile and airplane crashes that cause early death). Likewise, earthquakes, hurricanes, and tornadoes are not social problems because nothing can be done to stop them. But there are many actual and potential social problems surrounding natural disasters such as the cost of insurance, failures of early-warning systems for disasters, and the response of officials to such disasters. Social problems is a term we use when we believe the troublesome condition *can be fixed*.

A social problem is a condition evaluated as wrong, widespread, and changeable. The fourth and final component of the definition is that social problem is a category for conditions we believe *should* be changed. This is very logical: If the condition is evaluated as wrong, if it occurs frequently, and if it can be changed, then it follows it should be changed. To say that something is a social problem is to take a stand that *something needs to be done*.

In our daily lives, we tend to use the term *social problem* to categorize conditions that we believe are troublesome, prevalent, can be changed, and should be changed. When I write *social problem* from now on this is what I mean.

With this basic definition, we can go on to the next question: What should we *study* about social problems? This question does not have a simple answer because social problems are about *objective* conditions and people (things and people that exist in the physical world) *and* they are about *subjective* definitions (how we understand the world and the people in it). Because it is not immediately apparent why the objective and subjective aspects of social problems can be separated, I will discuss each of them. I begin with the commonsense framework of a type of person I will call a *practical actor*, a term I will use throughout this book to refer to a type of person like you or me in our daily lives. As practical actors, we go to school or work, we take care of our children (if we have them), and pay our bills (the best

we can). Unlike scientists and other academics who study the world, we live in the world. While we might not have the education or intellect of a nuclear physicist we are logical and try to make sense of our world. Practical actors most often are concerned with social problems as objective conditions.

Social Problems as Objective Conditions

When members of the American public use the term *social problems*, we most frequently are interested in these as objective characteristics of the environment. “Objective” means real, tangible, measurable. Within this *objectivist* perspective, social problems are about things we can see; they are about measurable and widespread conditions in the environment and they are about the living, breathing people who are hurt by these conditions (people we evaluate as victims) or who create these conditions (social structures, social forces, or people we evaluate as villains). Within this perspective, poverty is a condition where people do not have enough money to live a decent life, while poor people are people living in this condition; drunk driving is a condition where people with a high blood alcohol count drive, and drunk drivers are the people who do this. A series of practical questions emerge when we think about social problems as real conditions and real people: Who or what causes the condition? Who is harmed by it? What harm do they suffer? What can be done to stop this harm?

When experts study social problems in this way, they rely on *objective indicators*. These indicators include statistics about the condition (such as the number of school children who cannot read, the number of crimes committed, unemployment rates) and the people in it (measures such as the age, ethnicity, or gender of people causing social problems or harmed by social problems). At times, objective characteristics of people appear as complex psychological profiles: people who commit crimes are given various psychological tests and

a profile of “criminals” is constructed; tests are given to heterosexuals to measure their “homophobia”; women victims of “wife abuse” are given tests and, from this, psychological profiles of “battered women” are constructed, and so on.

Such objective indicators are the basis of discussions in most social problems textbooks. Such texts most often are arranged in a series of chapters with titles such as problems in the economy, problems in government, problems of inequality (poverty, ethnicity, age, gender), and problems of deviance (sexual behavior, drug use, crime). Each chapter in these texts tends to contain a more or less standardized treatment of the problem at hand. Readers see objective indicators describing the extent of the problem (how widespread it is), what types of people are victims or villains, and the consequences of the problem for the victims. Various theories are used to explain the causes of the problem and this leads to statements about what can be done to resolve it.

While it makes sense to examine social problems as objective conditions involving flesh and blood people, we cannot stop there because it is not enough. Social problems are about things and people we *worry* about, and when we talk about “worry” we go beyond objectivity into *subjective definitions*. But you might ask, so what? Don’t Americans worry about things we should worry about? To answer this question we must leave the concerns of the commonsense practical actor in order to examine the confusions in this thing called social problems.

Objective Characteristics and Subjective Worry

We cannot simply assume that we worry about things we should worry about, because there is no *necessary relationship* between any objective indicators (statistics, results of tests) of social problem conditions and what Americans worry about, what politicians focus on, or what

television, newspapers or magazines tell us about. This means there is no necessary relationship between the measurable characteristics of any given condition or the people in it and a definition of that condition as troublesome. For example, there can be *objective conditions without subjective worry*. Earthquake experts, for example, often talk about the potential damage of earthquakes throughout the United States. Yet the condition of earthquakes typically receives notice by the public or social policymakers only for a brief time after there has been an earthquake, people continue to live in areas prone to earthquakes, and they often fail to even buy earthquake insurance. In this case, there are objective indicators that a condition exists, but there is little public worry. People's *ideas* about risk matter more than the actual risk measured by objective indicators.

Conditions creating harm can exist without public worry. Americans also can start to worry about a condition when objective indicators seem to show that the *condition is not new*. For example, the historical record (an objective indicator) shows that what we now call child abuse always has been part of human existence. Indeed, the historical record can be used to argue that what we now call child abuse was much more common in the past than in the present. Yet the term *child abuse* did not appear in the United States until the 1960s. In this case, the behaviors now called child abuse are *not* new, the worry *is* new. Or, how long did slavery exist before it was called a social problem? In these examples, objective indicators about the troublesome nature of conditions were available long before there was any worry about them.

Likewise, Americans can begin to worry about something when objective indicators seem to show that the condition is actually *getting better*. For example, there was much public and political concern about poverty in the 1960s, but this was a time when objective indicators were showing rates of poverty were declining. Concern about poverty began as the objective condition of poverty was getting

better. Or, we can begin to worry about something where there is *no objective indicator* pointing to the presence of a prevalent condition. For example, fear about the safety of children trick-or-treating on Halloween was based on very few incidents. Yet these few incidents led to a generalized fear that many children all over the United States were being victimized by Halloween sadism. In the same way, the condition of “crack cocaine” received incredible attention in the United States beginning in 1986. Yet at that time there were no objective indicators that the use crack cocaine was widespread, nor did objective indicators support the image that this drug was “instantly addicting.”

In brief, it is not possible to argue that Americans worry about what we should worry about. It is not enough to examine social problems as objective conditions because there is no necessary relationship between what we worry about and what exists in the objective environment.

Note: This chapter does not include the full set of notes as published. Please refer to the full text in D.R. Loseke, *Thinking about Social Problems: Introduction to Constructionist Perspectives*, 2nd ed., 3–24 (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2007) for full details.

