The People and the Tasks in Constructing Social Problems

I'm eating my breakfast and watching the "Today Show." Katie Couric introduces a guest as an anthropologist who is an expert on the behavior of co-sleeping. Co-sleeping means that children sleep in the same bed as their parents. He said his research proved such children grow to be more well-adjusted in general than children who are banished from their parents' bedroom. Co-sleeping is good for the architecture of dreams, he says. Katie introduces another guest, an expert on family relationships who says the anthropologist is wrong: Her research proves that children who co-sleep are too dependent on their parents; they never become independent; they never learn to be self-comforting. Besides, she says, co-sleeping is bad for the parents' relationship. The two experts start to argue, but Katie stops them: It's time for a commercial.

We begin our tour through the world of constructing social problems by defining the key terms of claims (the basic tools of the social problems game), claims-making (the moves of the game), claims-makers (people who make claims), audiences (people who hear/see claims and evaluate them), and claims competitions (the obstacles to convincing audiences that a social problem is at hand).

CLAIMS AND CLAIMS-MAKING

Constructing a successful social problem requires that audiences be convinced that a condition exists, that this condition is troublesome and widespread, that it can be changed, and that it should be changed. We can't assume that the personal experiences of audience members will lead them to this definition because our world is too big. True, we can know if something affects us, but because a social problem is widespread, our own experiences aren't enough. As used in social construction perspectives, a
A claim is any verbal, visual, or behavioral statement that tries to convince audiences to take a condition seriously.1

Let’s start with verbal claims. When I stand in front of my Social Problems class and say to my students, “Almost half of all households with a single mother have incomes lower than the poverty level,” I’m doing social problems work by making a claim. When I give a lecture about “wife abuse” to the local Kiwanis Club, what I say are claims about wife abuse. If you write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper about the problems in your local school district, you’re doing social problems work and the contents of your letter are claims. Lawyers arguing their cases in court are making claims; so, too, are politicians who try to convince us that their plans and policies will solve social problems. These all are verbal claims, they are claims constructing meanings through words.

If you read your junk mail (I’m not suggesting that you do) what you’ll often find are claims about social problems. Yesterday the local post office delivered with my mail a bright yellow card with bold type: DO NOT ALLOW YOUR CHILDREN TO PLAY AROUND THE MAILBOX. THIS IS DANGEROUS. This is a claim about the safety of children when the mail carrier drives by. You can understand the nightly news as a series of verbal claims; verbal claims about all sorts of social problems are the regular fare of television talk show hosts (such as Jennie Jones), radio call-in shows (such as Howard Stern), and music (particularly rap music). Verbal claims are found on flyers distributed house to house as well as those tacked to the bulletin board at your local laundromat; they come in the form of mailings to voters from elected officials; they come over the phone. Verbal claims are found in textbooks and newspapers. They are all around us; they are a part of our daily lives.

Claims also are made through visual images. Remember that claims are those things that seek to persuade—and pictures can persuade. Indeed, in the social problems game, a picture can be worth a thousand words: A picture of a badly beaten child is an effective claim about “child abuse,” a picture of a dead or oil-drenched bird is an effective claim about “environmental ruin.” Such claims construct social problems through visual images. Because typifications of social problems are “pictures in our heads,” claims using visual images put these pictures directly into our heads. While these visual images are more difficult to analyze than verbal claims, such images are increasingly important because they are the primary content of television. Americans, it seems, aren’t particularly interested in programs featuring only talk (except, of course, television talk shows where the content of the talk is bizarre). “Footage,” accompanying visual images for the talk, often is required to obtain audience interest.

There also are behavioral claims, where the social problems work involves doing something rather than saying something or creating a visual picture of something. These claims sometimes typify a social problem condition (Viet Nam war protesters carrying coffins in a protest march), but often such behavioral claims rather seek to disrupt social life in order to convince audiences to listen to verbal claims, to see visual claims.

In this category of behavioral claims are clear examples from the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. During this era, Black Americans sat in the front of buses although they were permitted only to sit in the back; there were “sit-ins” at segregated cafeterias. Behavioral claims for other social problems include the activities of feminists disrupting the Miss America beauty pageant some years ago, and the activities of people who chain themselves to trees in order to make claims about the importance of preserving a forest. Behavioral claims include hunger strikes, labor strikes, and protest marches; they include the young man who, in 1989, stood in Tiananmen Square in China defying a military tank to run over him (which also was a powerful visual image), and people in the anti-fur movement in Europe who dump red paint or ketchup on mink coats worn by wealthy women. Behavioral claims include the dramatic and irreverent behaviors of people in ACT-UP (Aids Coalition to Unleash Power) who stage “die-ins” and carnival-like performances.2

Regardless of whether claims are verbal, visual, or behavioral, they are the social problems work of claims-makers who want to convince audiences how to think about social problems and how to feel about these problems.3 Some claims focus on constructing the logical (reasonable, rational) reasons why audiences should define a particular condition as troublesome. These claims might be in the form of statistics showing how the condition is widespread; they might be in the form of scientific studies showing the kinds and quantities of harm created by the condition. But claims appealing to logic often aren’t enough, because social problems are evaluated as morally troublesome conditions and we feel about morality every bit as much as we think about it. Claims encouraging audiences to feel in particular ways (anger about the condition; concern, sympathy, sadness about victims) are critical. My point: Regardless of the form of claim, claims seek to persuade audiences to think and to feel in particular ways.4

Before we leave this topic of claims, I want to call your attention to something that’s very important. So far, I’ve been talking about claims and I’ve argued that the goal of claims-making is to construct claims that audience members believe. An alert reader might well wonder: What about the truth? Notice that the term “claims” conveys no meaning about their truth. Within this terminology, claims include statements such as “The holocaust didn’t happen,” “People die from AIDS,” “Our politicians are controlled by alien beings,” and “Many schools are too crowded.” This is disturbing because some of these claims are obviously true and some obviously false. But social construction perspectives don’t lead us to focus on the truth
because, simply stated, interest is in which claims are believed (and which aren't). So, while I don't like the fact that it's this way it remains that the truth doesn't matter in the social problems game. What matters is what audiences believe is true. I'll leave it to those studying social problems as objective conditions to tell you what is and what isn't true in the objective world, and I'll only say that while matters of truth certainly matter in many ways, they do not matter in the social problems game. All that matters is whether or not audiences evaluate the claims as true.

Now let's look at the players in the social problems game. We'll start with claims-makers: Who makes claims and why do they do this?

CLAIMS-MAKERS

If we start most broadly, you and I and all of us are social problems claims-makers. After all, because a claim includes any statement that tries to persuade, we're making claims every time we state our opinion on any social problem condition or person in it. Of course, we think of this merely as talk; we don't think of ourselves as making claims. But if you start to really listen to the talk around you, you'll notice that social problems claims saturate daily life. We use words for social problems conditions (words such as crime, poverty, child abuse) and people in those conditions (words such as criminal, victim, welfare mother, abused child) without even thinking about it. Although we usually don't think of ourselves as claims-makers when we engage in this talk, we each are claims-makers in our daily lives.

Sometimes in our daily lives we set out explicitly to make claims. If you have talked on a radio call-in show or written a letter to the editor of a local newspaper, you've been a claims-maker. If you've signed a petition (impeach the city council, save the whales), your signature is a voice (even if very small) constructing a social problem. We can become more explicit claims-makers when we go out on strike and carry signs that say UNFAIR LABOR PRACTICES or when we wear T-shirts (or have bumper stickers on our cars) that carry messages ("Ban Guns: Make the Streets Safe for a Government Takeover").

Even more obviously, we become claims-makers when we send our money to support social change groups. These are groups of people who organize themselves in order to convince others that a harmful condition is at hand and that something must be done. Many churches and synagogues are social change organizations with active agendas. There also are social change groups such as Save Our Schools, National Organization for Women, Students Against Drunk Driving, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the National Rifle Association.

When we give our money to such groups we personally remain silent (make no claims) but our money pays others to make claims for us.

Finally, as practical actors, we become the most explicit social problems claims-makers when we become active in these social change groups. If you stand on a street corner asking passersby to sign a petition for NORML (National Organization for Reform of Marijuana Laws), or do fund-raising for GLARP (Gay and Lesbian Association of Retiring Persons), or CURE (Christians United for Reformation), this is the most obvious claims-making for Americans in general. In such social change groups, the small voices of isolated individuals become magnified and therefore more powerful.

I want to emphasize how claims-making is done in daily life and that when individuals band together into social change groups the claims can become successful because of the sheer loudness of collective voice and activity. It's important, then, that we understand terms such as the woman's movement, the civil rights movement, or the disability rights movement to be about the claims-making activities of people. Often these are regular people who do claims-making after they finish their regular jobs. A large part of what such groups have accomplished (for the good and for the bad) are consequences of claims-making activities of many people who work together.

People who work actively in social change organizations therefore are one of the most important categories of claims-makers. In turn, social change groups are one part of a larger category called the social problems industry.

The Social Problems Industry

I think that the social problems industry in the United States probably employs more people and is more economically important than the automobile and airline industries put together. Think about the money associated with social problems; think about the number of people whose work involves doing something about social problems; think about what would happen if all social problems magically disappeared.

First, there are social problems claims-makers working in government at all levels (local, state, regional, national, international). These obviously include politicians. Indeed, watch what happens during the next election. I predict there will be increased talk about social problems of many kinds. Why? Because "political campaigning" is another way of saying "claims-making activities." What politicians do is construct social problems (here is what our trouble is) and solutions to social problems (here is what I will do if elected).

In the realm of government and politics there also are political lobbyists who just as clearly do the social problems work of making claims. These
persons are paid by others (social change groups, segments of the economy such as health, real estate, cigarette manufacturers) to make claims about social problems to politicians in order to influence social policy. At times, these folks make claims to create social problems. So, for example, a lobbyist for the AARP (American Association for Retired People) might lobby (make claims to) congressional members that there is a social problem of elderly people not being able to afford increases in their medical insurance premiums. At other times these lobbyists might make claims that a social problem doesn't exist: A lobbyist for the cigarette industry might try to convince officials that there is not a problem of that industry targeting young children for their advertisements. Political lobbyists certainly are claims-makers. It's their job, they're paid to do it.

The social problems industry also includes many people who work for television or radio stations, those who write plays or music with social problems themes, and people who write about social problems for newspapers and magazines. At times, these people can be called secondary claims-makers: What they often do is translate and package for their audiences claims made by others (politicians, social change activists, academic researchers). At other times, people in these jobs are primary claims-makers: They construct social problems themselves. Indeed, we have to include in the social problems industry many of the people whose job it is to entertain the American public. Jenny Jones wouldn't have a job without social problems; social problems are often the topic of made-for-television movies. The proliferation of shows such as "20/20," "60 Minutes," "America's Most Wanted," or "Nightline" is an indication of the American public's zeal to be entertained by social problems. If social problems went away, shocks would be felt throughout the entertainment industry.

The social problems industry also includes organizational sponsors for social problems. These are organizations initiating considerable claims-making themselves and they also can lend their name, money, and organizational skills to claims-making activities started by others. In this category we would include common sponsors of social problems such as the AMA (American Medical Association), NASW (National Association of Social Workers), AAUP (American Association of University Professors), PHA (Public Health Association), NOW (National Organization for Women), NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), Christian Coalition, and NRA (National Rifle Association). When you hear social problems claims, you'll often hear about such organizational sponsors.

Then there are the places that are a part of the troubled-persons industry. "Troubled persons" are people involved in social problems conditions; they are what social policy analysts call the target populations for policies to do something to resolve social problems. This troubled-persons industry includes all those places designed to help victims of social problems or to rehabilitate or punish offenders. In the United States today, this includes everything from prisons and jails to shelters for battered women, from psychiatric hospitals to programs of Methadone treatment, to programs for teenage mothers. Most clearly, these places (and the categories of people working in them) don't share many characteristics. But what they do share is that each is in business because a particular type of person (be they victims or villains) has been constructed as troubled and in need of some type of social service. Many differences, to be sure, but what workers in all of these places have in common is that their jobs depend on continued success of the social problem. We'll return to the work of these places in Chapter 7.

In this social problems industry we also must include people whose job it is to educate others about social problems. Teachers (especially those who teach courses in social problems), researchers who supply evidence for social problems claims, and authors of books on social problem topics (including me) most certainly are in the social problems industry.

The social problems industry also includes places and people who make products that are sold to consumers. I saw a sign on a telephone pole on my way to work one morning: "Buy two home security systems, get the third free, only $199 each and $19.95 a month monitoring charge." I wonder how much money is legally made from worry about the social problem of crime. Or, what about the companies that make Methadone? If heroin went off the list of social problems (if it were legalized), then companies producing Methadone would be out of business. What about the companies selling home kits for parents to test their children for drug use? If we didn't worry about the problem of children using drugs we wouldn't need this product. Or, what about companies selling fingerprinting services so that anxious parents can have a record in case their child is abducted? That company exists only because of worry about missing children. Likewise, there is a segment of the employed population that depends on the continued existence of government programs attempting to resolve the social problem of poverty: Physicians make money from Medicaid, grocers from food stamps, apartment owners from housing subsidies, and so on.

When looked at this way, the social problems industry is huge, and it can be very profitable for people who make money because audiences believe one or another condition is a social problem. But you might have had trouble with my listing of people in the social problems industry. I set this up saying that social problems are profitable. Certainly, you might argue, concern about social problems isn't only because they're profitable. Isn't there more to social problems than money? It would be hard to
believe that workers are drawn to working in rape crisis centers (or many other such places) by the minimum wages they are paid; teachers in inner-city schools aren’t profiting from poverty. And, you might rightfully ask, what about all those regular people who don’t get paid a penny yet who volunteer their services and work diligently on behalf of others? What about the people in the civil rights movement who died trying to achieve equality for Black Americans? These are good observations so we’ll go to our next question about social problems claims-makers: Why do these people take time and energy to do social problems work?

Motives and Claims-Makers

First, we might become active in the social problems game because of our subjective values, the moral beliefs we personally hold. Because “social problems” is a name we use to note that something is wrong, our beliefs that a condition is wrong and in need of change might well lead us to want to do something. Certainly Mother Teresa dedicated her life to helping others and there are countless others like her who self-sacrifice in order to do something about social problems. People do this because they believe that others in troublesome conditions must be helped. The extent to which people define a condition as morally offensive is the extent to which we might expect them to do the work required to change the condition.

At times, the subjective values of claims-makers are the result of their personal experiences. The social change group called MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Drivers) was started by a woman (Candy Lightner) whose own child was killed by a drunk driver. John Walsh (now the host of “America’s Most Wanted”) originally became a social problems claims-maker for the problem of “missing children” when his son, Adam, was abducted by a stranger and brutally murdered. Christopher Reeve, the former Superman of movie fame, has become a primary spokesperson for Americans with disabilities because he himself now is paralyzed. Likewise, I read about a woman in my town who has quit her job in order to do full-time claims-making about the social problem of “shaken babies” (a type of child abuse where babies are shaken so hard that their brains become dislodged). She’s doing this work in the memory of her own granddaughter, who died from this. When such personal tragedy leads to claims-making, we can understand the depth of concern claims-makers can feel about the need to do something about the condition.

Second, we might become claims-makers because of our personal objective interests. “Objective” means real and tangible, “interests” means what benefits us personally. The social problems game is about winning and losing and more is won or lost than simply making the world more compatible with our personal values. The concept of objective interests draws our attention to the very real world and what can be won or lost in this world. Most obviously, there are people working in the social problems industry who might lose their jobs if a social problem failed. In this case, their objective interests can be measured in terms of dollars and cents.

Objective interests include more than the obvious money that can be made because of social problems. For example, good health is important to each of us, so I could argue we each have an objective interest in things leading to good health (such as a clean natural environment and good health care). Or, if I commute to work each day you could say I have an objective interest in those things that might make my commute faster (the problems of too-low speed limits, potholes, or too-crowded roads). Or, if I’m the mother of a small child you could say that I have an interest in safe streets (to protect my child) and in good schools (to educate my child).

When we say that people make claims because of their objective interests it’s important to recognize that we each have multiple forms of such interests—the kinds of things that will make life better for us or for our loved ones.

Third, we can become involved in the social problems game for reasons having little or nothing to do with our values or our interests. Claims-making, at times, can be fun; it can offer people a community; it can be a way to show others that we are caring people. College sororities and fraternities, for example, often choose a cause to support and hold dances, raffles, car washes, and so on to earn money for that cause. In these cases, individuals might be working toward doing something about a social problem but they might be doing it because it’s fun, or because that’s what their friends are doing. Claims-making also can be a way to show others that you are a nice person who cares. I also think about United Way campaigns in workplaces. Where I work, this campaign every year is set up as a competition between departments. People might give to this campaign not because they particularly care about the organizations it will support but because giving is a way to demonstrate pride in the work group.

So, when we ask why claims-makers take their time and energy to do social problems work, we can look at their subjective values and their objective interests as well as how claims-making is a social activity that allows people to belong to a community while feeling good about themselves. But now I’ll say that it’s not so easy to make such simple distinctions about “why” we do things such as social problems claims-making: We tend to value things that are (objectively speaking) good for us; we tend to do things we more or less believe in; we might enter a social problems game primarily because that’s what our friends are doing but then start to deeply care about the social problem condition; we might begin by caring deeply about the problem but remain primarily because we have developed social relationships with others in the group, and so on.
Trying to separate interests and values often is a hopeless task. Indeed, I'll go one step further and claim it's impossible to answer this question about why claims-makers do social problems work. When we ask why people become involved, we're asking about their motives. Motives are reasons for actions, and such reasons lie inside our heads. How would we know someone's true motives? We could ask them, of course: "Why are you doing this?" And they might offer us a reply: "Because we care." But then couldn't we say, "No, you don't really care. You just want to make your own life a bit easier," or "You don't really care, you're only doing this because everyone else is." Who's right? We'll never know because we can't ever know what's going on inside someone's head.

But now I will say (claim) that it's not a problem that we can't ever be sure of the motives of people making claims. Within constructionist perspectives, these aren't problems because it doesn't matter. Within constructionist perspectives all that really matters is whether or not the claims are believable by audiences. Do claims move others to do something about troublesome conditions? Questions about the motives of claims-makers matter only if these motives become important to audiences. This primarily happens when audiences discount claims because they believe claims-makers are acting out of pure self-interest. To use the clearest example, it's fairly easy to discount claims that "smoking isn't harmful" when claims-makers are a part of the tobacco industry. But even here, it doesn't matter what the claims-makers motives "really" are: what matters is what audiences believe their motives are.

This takes me to our last question about claims-makers. Audiences judge claims and audiences tend to be biased in how we make our evaluations. Who makes the claim is important.

The Hierarchy of Credibility

The social problems game isn't fair because not all claims-makers are equal in their perceived credibility. While skills and luck are a part of the social problems game (and the topic of the next chapters), audiences for social problems claims often are biased toward believing some claims-makers and toward disbelieving others. This is called the hierarchy of credibility.

The hierarchy of credibility means that we can look at different categories of claims-makers and predict how likely it is that others will take their claims seriously. While in the next section we'll look at how audiences differ in their evaluations of claims-makers, here I'll make a general point about social problems reaching the attention of the national media or those that are the topic of national political debates. For these problems the audience is the most general—the American public—and in these cases there's a tendency for claims made by some categories of people to be taken seriously and for claims made by other categories of people to be ignored or at least discounted.

Americans in general believe in research and science and we therefore tend to believe claims made by scientists and others displaying lofty academic credentials. Notice when you see or hear claims how often the claims-maker is introduced with a title such as Doctor or Professor. The title is important because who makes claims matters. Because we tend to believe that scientists base their work on scientific criteria, it follows in the reasoning of practical actors that claims made by these people are truthful; such claims are believable.

So the American public in general tends to believe scientists as claims-makers. Is this faith misplaced? Sometimes. Scientists are people, too. Not all are competent, the claims of others can be bought. But that's not the interesting part of the story. The intriguing issue of relationships between scientists and social problems claims-making relates to the inherent contradictory nature between this thing we call "science" and this thing we call "social problems." In particular, when we think of science we think of objectivity—how what scientists do has nothing to do with what scientists as people believe in. But remember that social problems are about moral evaluations. To say something is wrong is to take a moral stand. Issues of moral evaluation always and necessarily lie behind any claims—be they made on the basis of scientific research or not. Scientists make moral distinctions when they decide what to measure, how they will measure it, and where they will go to obtain their measurements. What this means is that equally good scientists can come up with far different kinds of research findings.\footnote{11}

My point here is about the hierarchy of credibility: Large segments of the American public (as well as the critical audience of social policymakers) tend to believe claims made by people who are scientists. While I am not claiming that you should disbelieve claims made by scientists, what I am saying is that we shouldn't forget when we're evaluating claims about social problems that issues of morality underlie all claims—including those made by scientists. This can be difficult to remember because most often scientists aren't explicit about telling us why they decided to measure one thing (and not another), why they gathered their data in one place (and not another).

But, again, it doesn't matter whether audiences' faith in scientists is misplaced or not. All that matters is that at the top of the hierarchy of credibility are scientists and academics in general who enter the social problems game with the distinct advantage that audiences tend to believe their claims. It's like starting a game of Monopoly with more money than other players.
In going down the hierarchy of credibility a bit we find a range of professionals who often enter the social problems game with distinct advantages. “Urban planners,” for example, are powerful claims-makers in questions about development; physicians (who also carry the respected title of Doctor) are powerful claims-makers in various questions of health, and so on. But these are somewhat localized positions of power. The power of specific types of professionals is not as global as that accorded to scientists in general. Stated otherwise, scientists always are at the top of the hierarchy of credibility; various other categories of professionals might be at the top. The hierarchy of credibility in the middle can simply depend on the specific case in point.

Finally, at the bottom of the hierarchy of credibility we again see generalized perceptions. Yet there’s little to say about claims-making at the bottom because few observers care about claims made by people entering the social problems game with the disadvantage that they tend to be not believed. The lack of attention to claims made by the least powerful makes sense because, after all, what’s important is who wins the game and disadvantaged players often don’t win. Our question—Why do some conditions fail as social problems?—sometimes has a simple answer: A condition can fail to capture the imagination of the general public simply because of who is making claims. I don’t think I need to say much about this because the story is predictable. The rules of the social problems game are the rules for social life in general. The categories of people likely to be socially ignored in general are the categories of people at the bottom of the hierarchy of credibility in the social problems game.

Children aren’t allowed to make their own claims. Social problems involving children always are constructed by adults (typically professionals and scientists) speaking on behalf of children. Poor people (especially members of minority groups) likewise rarely make claims that are heard by middle-class audiences. Poor people’s claims are important only if they are important to more powerful claims-makers (such as politicians, social workers, or teachers). The claims made by women typically aren’t heard. These claims often are dismissed as “gossip” or “idle chatter” unless they are made by powerful women (or their male supporters) in public life. Who speaks for the average housewife? Indeed, consider the claims made by regular folks in general. Their claims often are dismissed as “mere common sense.” If we think of claims-making as pervasive in modern life then we have to ask why we hear so few claims. Those we hear typically are made by the kinds of people audiences are prone to believe, while claims made by others simply aren’t heard. Those at the bottom of the hierarchy of credibility do make claims, but because these claims aren’t heard, the claims are silenced.

Claims-makers are one category of people involved in constructing social problems. The second category is the audience, the people who hear the claims and do the social problems work of deciding which claims are believable.

**AUDIENCES**

Although most academic research on the social problem process looks at the characteristics of people making claims, we shouldn’t forget the importance of audiences for these claims. Simply stated, a social problem is created when audiences evaluate claims as believable. In the metaphor of the social problems game: Who wins and who loses depends on how the audiences vote; audiences are the judges and juries for social problems claims.

Notice that I’m using a plural term, audiences, and this is important. While often times we hear the phrase, “the” American public, this is misleading because there are many types of people hearing/seeing social problems claims. I’m making claims now, so you are my audience. Different segments of the public read different kinds of magazines (Ladies Home Journal, People, Money), watch different kinds of television programs ("Men Behaving Badly," “The Brady Bunch”). Some people seek out social problems claims by attending public lectures, others don’t. We could go on but my point is simple: The social problems game is won by convincing people that a condition exists and that something needs to be done, but this doesn’t mean that the entire American public needs to be convinced. This is important because we live in a complex world where differing experiences likely will lead to very different evaluations of claims. Consider a social problem we might call “police brutality.” One audience likely interested in this social problem would be poor (especially minority) men, who often are the targets of something that could be called “police brutality.” Another audience might be members of police oversight committees charged with the responsibility of making sure the police do their job correctly. Obviously, these are different audiences who might well find far different types of claims to be convincing. The claims made by rap music, for example, might be convincing to audiences of people experiencing “police brutality,” but the members of police review boards likely would not find the claims made in such music particularly believable. Indeed, members of police review boards might believe rap music itself is a social problem rather than a claim about the problem of “police brutality.”

The first characteristic of audiences for social problems claims is that not all audiences are the same. Good claims-makers know this, and use it to their advantage. When Bill Clinton took his presidential campaign to MTV he talked only about those things likely to be important to people who watch MTV. He tailored his remarks (as well as his clothing, speaking style, and posture) to his image of the particular audience composed of the categories of people likely to be watching MTV. While audiences are the
judges and juries for deciding which social problems claims are successful (and which will fail), we can’t assume all audiences are the same. Audiences obviously differ in their personal experiences and therefore they differ in how they morally judge the world.

Audiences also differ in how likely it is that they can be convinced; audiences differ in how much they care. Claims about social problems are all around us but how many do we actually hear or see? We can’t assume that a claim made is a claim heard; we can’t assume that a claim heard is a claim thought about or acted on. So, although a bit later I’ll make claims about the importance of the mass media in claims-making, we can’t assume that the audiences for these claims are necessarily affected in any particular way. Many people do look at television shows where social problems claims are regularly made, but we don’t always watch or attentively listen. Television for many people serves as a form of moving wallpaper; it’s something to gaze at while cooking dinner, thinking about something else, or carrying on a conversation about the day’s activities. Political observers also regularly condemn the American public for failing to read newspapers or to watch the nightly news. Claims are made in these places, then, but they might not be seen or heard. And, even for those of us who do read a newspaper, we might spend most of our time with the sports, food, horoscope, and comics rather than on other sections containing claims about social problems. So, audiences are not all the same because they differ in the extent to which people in them care. People who aren’t paying attention can’t be convinced. A pastor can preach but that doesn’t mean that anyone is listening.

Audiences differ in their evaluations of morality, they differ in how much they care. Audiences also differ in their power: Just as claims-makers can be ranked in terms of their likely power to convince, not all audiences to social problems claims are equally important. The social problems game is not like political elections, where we each have one vote and where each vote counts equally. The votes in the social problems game can be weighted with some worth more than others. Indeed, it’s possible to win the social problems game with a very small number of votes as long as they are from powerful segments of an audience. What is “powerful” depends on the issue at hand. For example, if I believe that the social problem of “gang-related crime in schools” can be reduced by making all students wear uniforms, I must convince school board members because they are the people who can make a new rule that students must wear uniforms. I don’t need to convince students, their teachers, or their parents. In this instance, the audiences of parents, students, and teachers matter only if they start to make claims that uniforms aren’t good and school board members find their claims more compelling than mine. So it goes with social problems in general. Convincing many people can yield a powerful claim (“Everyone agrees with me,” “It’s the public’s wish to do this”), but this often is not necessary to effect social change: Desegregation started in the South because of federal laws; many Whites living in the South at that time didn’t agree. Convincing many people also can be not enough—the majority of the American public was against the war in Viet Nam for several years before the war ended.

Although audiences do the social problems work of judging claims, audiences aren’t all the same. Different kinds of audiences will see the world in different ways, not all audiences can be convinced, not all audiences need to be convinced.

CLAIMS COMPETITION

To be successful, claims-makers must convince audiences that a social problem is at hand and that something must be done about it. But two types of competitions can make this goal difficult to obtain.13

Social Problem Claims and Daily Life

Audiences for social problems claims are not similar to audiences of people attending a movie, concert, or hockey game. In those instances, people in the audience most typically choose to attend and therefore have shown an interest in the activity at hand. Much social problems claims-making, on the other hand, takes place in daily life, where audience members might—or might not—be attentive. Why might audiences be inattentive? While some observers argue that Americans have become too inner-focused and therefore simply don’t care about harm experienced by others, there is another very practical reason why we’re often inattentive to social problems claims: Social problems compete with our activities of daily life.

If you think about it, claims-makers are asking a great deal when they ask us to define a condition as a social problem. They’re asking us to take a condition seriously, to worry about it, to give them our money or our time. But how much time and money do we have to spend on social problems? How much concern do we have to spend on these conditions that often affect others but not us? Social problems compete with activities of daily life (going to school and work, doing our laundry, fixing our cars), they compete with our personal worries (about our own health, our own relationships, our own futures). To spend time reading or listening to social problems claims is to not spend time doing other things. In the terminology of a social construction approach, we have a limited carrying capacity for social problems. We can only think about so many things at the same time; we can only worry about so many things at the same time.
Likewise, social problems claims compete with the rest of life in public arenas, the important places where social problems claims are made. An important public arena is the mass media (television, radio, magazines, newspapers, movies) because it promises a large audience. Another important public arena is the court system, which has the power to make laws. Of course, the arena of politics is important because that is where public policy is made. Yet each of these arenas has a limited carrying capacity: Newspapers and magazines contain only so many inches of space; television and radio are limited to twenty-four-hour days; courts can select only a small number of cases; Congress has only so much time for debate, and so on. In all these sites, social problems compete with everything else. So, for example, although television produces shows with social problems themes, these compete with others—there are comedies, soap operas, and game shows. Television news presents social problems claims but also contains the sports, weather, and human interest stories. Newspapers are sites for social problems claims, but they also print comics, sports, crossword puzzles, and recipes. On an individual level and in public arenas, social problems claims compete with all other aspects of life.

This competition sometimes can mean that claims are ignored simply because of bad timing. The most obvious example is “Super Bowl Sunday” every year. What audience is there for social problems claims made on that day? Or, a few years ago when the United States engaged in the Persian Gulf conflict, television, newspapers, and magazines all but suspended attention to everything but that war. All other social problems simply disappeared. Likewise, sustained national attention to such people as O. J. Simpson or Monica Lewinsky is at the expense of other social problems. When people are thinking about one thing we’re not thinking about another; when the mass media or Congress attends to one thing, they can’t attend to another. This is the problem of competition between social problems and the rest of life.

**Competition among and within Social Problems**

Social problems compete with all other aspects of life, and they also compete among themselves. How many possible social problems are there at any one time for any given audience? Countless. How many of these can be the subject of attention? A very limited number. Simply stated, the carrying capacity of practical actors or of specific public arenas is limited, so social problems compete among themselves. When members of Congress are spending their time on the problems of poverty, they aren’t spending their time on the problems of crime. When I give my money to help the local humane society, that’s money I don’t give to the local food pantry. Even if we devoted all of our time, attention, and psychic energy to the category of social problems we couldn’t resolve each and every problem.14

There’s also competition within social problems. For example, what is the problem of poverty? Claims-makers aren’t united in their definitions. Some claim that poverty is a problem of people who don’t work hard enough; others claim that poverty is a problem of an economic system that discriminates against poor people. There are different ways to frame (categorize) particular problems and these can compete with one another. This is the topic of the next chapters.

Played within the ongoing social order, the game of constructing social problems is complex. The goal is to convince audiences that a social problem is at hand and that something must be done. Audiences are not all the same, and there is much competition. This brings us to the topic of the characteristics of successful claims. How is it and why is it that only a very small number of social problems become extremely successful and are the topics of political debates and mass media attention, while others arise to prominent interest only in particular localities or only among limited audiences? Why do the vast majority of conditions potentially called social problems remain on the extreme margins of interest? What are the differences between successful and unsuccessful claims? In the next three chapters we’ll look at some of the characteristics by asking questions often asked by audience members: Why is the condition troublesome (Chapter 3)? What are the characteristics of the condition and who’s involved as victims and villains (Chapter 4)? What should be done (Chapter 5)? While we’ll do this one chapter at a time, it’s important to remember that claims about morality, conditions, people, and solutions form packages of claims; successful packages are those that are convincing to audiences. But let’s start with social problems work of constructing the immorality of social problem conditions.

**NOTES**

1. The term *rhetoric* is a good substitution for the term “claim.” Although rhetoric most often refers to words and while I will consider visual images and behaviors as well as words, both rhetoric and claims share the characteristic that they seek to persuade.

2. Adrienne Christiansen and Jeremy Hanson (1996) explore how the comedic antics of ACT-UP members are meant to shock and encourage audiences to change perspectives in order to support claims that more must be done to resolve the social problem of AIDS.

3. Students of communication might recognize this thinking/feeling distinction as Aristotle’s logos/pathos. While I won’t develop this here, ethos (morality), logos (rationality), and pathos (feeling) are, in daily life, inextricably related. While our Western society tends to elevate the importance of logos and degrade pathos, logos is not enough. According to Craig Waddell (1990), who interprets Aristotle,
rational appeals tell us only about the obvious; rational appeals can lead to agreement but not conviction; rational appeals can lead to conclusions that are morally or emotionally unacceptable. See his examination of rationality and emotionality in scientific policies surrounding the problems raised by DNA research.

4. According to Doyle McCarthy (1989), our current world is in "an age of emotions." Because thinking is increasingly relativized (the problem of the fragmentation of knowledge), we are more and more tending to trust our emotions. Outside social constructionist perspectives are many questions about the lived feelings of particular emotions. Inside constructionist perspectives are other questions about how claims-makers attempt to direct their audiences' emotions. These are claims telling audiences how they should feel. Claims such as "Only the hard-hearted could ignore this problem" or "All Americans share the pain of the families of the Oklahoma bombing victims" are claims encouraging audience members to feel in particular ways.

5. One of my goals in writing this book was to convince readers that we respond to conditions as social problems because people have said and done things to convince us that a morally troubling condition exists and that something must be done. This leads me to de-emphasize the importance of social movements, or what I’m calling social change groups. See Ronald Troyer (1989) for the argument that social problems can’t be understood outside a social movement perspective. See also Vicki Rose (1977), who argues that the social problem of “rape” should be understood as a by-product of the feminist social movement.

6. The distinction between primary and secondary claims-making is more fully elaborated by Joel Best (1991). He argues we shouldn’t merely assume that the mass media’s role in constructing social problems is limited to packaging and transmitting claims made by others. Using the empirical example of the 1987 “freeway shootings” problem in Los Angeles, he demonstrates how television workers themselves created the public perception of a social problem. See also Mark Fishman (1978) for an empirical example of how media can create social problems and Ray Surette (1998) for an exploration of differences between media images of “crime” and the reality of “crime.”

7. Social problem experts (scientists, academics, other professionals), are increasingly important as our world becomes more complex and knowledge more specialized. Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones offer several examples of how major changes in public policy surrounding problems of divorce, drug use, and mental illness have been the consequences of “quiet and often unnoticed changes in professional norms” (1994:56).

8. As a side note, I’ll mention that not all Americans with disabilities want Christopher Reeve as their spokesperson. While we might appreciate his relentless activities to “get better,” not all Americans with disabilities can “get better” and become nondisabled. There is concern among some people with disabilities that audiences of nondisabled people will believe that disabled people should “get better” rather than asking for changes in the social environment that would make it easier to live with disability. Such disagreements among claims-makers are a topic for the next three chapters.

9. Observers of social change groups have empirically examined the reasons why people join these groups. Of particular interest recently has been the impor-
14. The question about why some conditions—and not others—receive attention as social problems is becoming more important because competition is increasing. As our world becomes increasingly available to us through proliferating mass media and the World Wide Web, competition for our time, concern, and resources increases. In an analysis of forty years of “Gallup Poll Most Important Problem” questions, Maxwell McCombs and Jian-Hua Zhu (1995) found evidence of an increasing diversity of problems and an increasing lack of public agreement on what important problems are. This, in turn, leads to a faster rate of issue turnover.

Constructing Successful Packages of Claims