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Social problems in the UK: an introduction

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I Introduction

'Social Problems, no thanks!' Ten years ago, this was the response of most academics to the idea that we could usefully investigate UK society through the lens of social problems. Although this way of investigating the social was common in the US, in Britain approaching society as a 'problem' was taken as wrongly implying that all social issues could, therefore, be 'solved'. It was argued that this point of view was also a negative and simplistic way of examing complex social institutions, structures and circumstances. Fast forward ten years and now most social science departments have some sort of Social Problems module on their first year undergraduate courses.

So, why the change?

Well there are a number of reasons but the first has to be that it came to be seen that a Social Problems perspective was a lot more useful and sophisticated than initially thought. Much of the ground breaking work for this view came in the shape of a social policy textbook produced by academics at London Metropolitan University (then the University of North London). In May et. al. (2001) *Understanding Social Problems: Issues in Social Policy*, a way of studying social problems was set out that avoided the trap of treating society as one big pathological problem that could be remedied. In particular, the methodological framework of social construction was used which pointed out a way of being able to study social issues in an appropriately academically thorough manner. This also satisfied a second concern of those who were sceptical about a Social Problems perspective, namely that it individualised social issues, moving away from a critique of broader structural concerns such as inequalities, social justice and racism. In fact the social constructionist approach used by May et.al. illustrated that far from looking at social problems merely in terms of discrete social groups, intensely political and ideological arguments could be presented. A social problems perspective enabled both academics and students to articulate strong positions relating to fundamental social values without undermining the academic rigour of investigating a range of issues.

Social Problems in the UK: An Introduction continues to develop the platform set down by our former colleagues at Londonmet at the beginning of this century: with one big change. A social problems perspective is now no longer solely the preserve of social policy. Throughout the UK social problems is taught on sociology, social policy, criminology and applied social science degrees. This textbook is the first on contemporary social issues to situate social problems within all these disciplines. Drawing from the research and teaching experience of academics in these areas, this textbook brings together a comprehensive range of expertise to guide students and to aid lecturers in their teaching.

The central aim of this book, then, is to contextualise contemporary social problems in the broader social sciences, using the methodology of social construction. At the same time a key motivation for this text is to bring teaching to the page. That is to be to be an accessible study aid to students that introduces them to applying a methodological perspective to familiar issues. You will find within these pages a great deal of pedagogic content. Rather than relating reams of quantitative material in relation to each of the social problems, links and text boxes are used to direct the student to sources that will help them keep up-to-date. Examples that relate to classic works in the field, important historical moments, key figures and key concepts are also highlighted in textboxes. At the end of each chapter there are revision notes, coursework questions, seminar tasks and further reading. All this draws from

over a decade of teaching social problems. At the heart of this teaching has been the desire to lead students from a 'common sense' experienced-based approach to a more critically engaged approach utilising social research and theory to come to conclusions.

In chapter II the book opens with a general methodological and theoretical chapter on understanding and defining social problems. This chapter introduces students to the 'common sense' view, the social construction approach and related theories drawing upon some case studies. This is an on-going feature of the book, to tie theory and practice to guide students into understanding the applied character of this type of study. The overall purpose of this chapter on definitions and approaches is to try to convey to the student the importance of having methodological and theoretical tools, rather than the over-elaborate explanation and evaluation of such tools.

Chapter III is critically important to the pedagogic aims of this book. Foley has been working as an academic librarian in the social sciences for many years. She understands the difficulties first year students experience when given coursework . This is often related to a lack of understanding of the sources available and of how to find & evaluate those sources. Understanding the types of material available, as well as learning how to locate, evaluate & use these materials in their studies and coursework is crucial to student success. However, the skills & knowledge necessary to learn these are all too often taught in isolated library induction sessions. Research has shown that embedding this knowledge and skill within a subject context, in a seamless union of learning & researching, has a higher chance of success. In this chapter Foley combines the core areas of subject knowledge with the library research skills necessary for students to confidently & independently research social problems.
Common problems addressed in this chapter include the confusion that often arises about journals and journal articles, citing & referencing sources, plagiarism, and how to transfer the skills learned when researching one area to researching another. Finally, teaching staff may also find this chapter useful as a readymade guide when negotiating this area.

Chapter IV starts us off on the material situated around particular social problems. In keeping with the rest of the book, Isaacs examines the social construction of poverty, drawing from the perspectives of sociology, criminology and social policy. It is argued that debates about poverty often demonise the poor themselves, blaming them for their own circumstances as well as sometimes wider economic and social welfare failings. The chapter moves on to analyse New Labour's social exclusion policies. To look at the assumptions embedded in these policies and whether or not they held any successes in alleviating poverty. New Labour's policies were the most recent example of a comprehensive, reasonably resourced government initiative to try to deal with the manifold issues associated with low income and underachievement. Analysing their success and failures helps us to think more clearly about this social problem. As a case study the chapter ends with a discussion on homelessness. The main question here is, to what extent is homelessness is caused by poverty and social exclusion? Isaacs maintains that rather than being a peripheral social problem for a few, homelessness is a fundamental social issue that affects the whole of society.

In Chapter V McDonough analyses work as a social problem by setting out its social construction from a number of different perspectives. He discusses the underlying discourses which create assumptions about our role as workers. In particular he examines why the 'work ethic' seems to be such a strong moral imperative in the UK. Following this examination the author offers alternative ways of understanding what we might mean by 'work'. Closely related to work is, of course, unemployment, a perennial social problem in the UK as it is

globally. As with the notion of work, what we characterise as 'unemployment' cannot merely be taken at face-value, as a 'common sense' given. The ways in which unemployment is socially constructed is, therefore, analysed. This throws some light on to the stratified character of work and how it affects various social groups (understood as 'ideal types') in different ways in relation to   gender, social class and ethnicity. McDonough concludes that unemployment and responsibility for finding work is often constructed in political and media debates as an individual issue; as the responsibility of the individual alone. However, his analysis argues that in fact it relates to a whole set social circumstances beyond the individuals capabilities to control

Prof. Ginsburg has been teaching, researching and publishing in the area of migration and 'race' for nearly three decades. Unlike a straight-forward sociology of 'race' approach, Chapter VI looks at the issues of migration, asylum, multiculturalism and 'race' through the perspective of various socially constructed debates in the UK. These are set out very clearly and thoroughly in a series of case studies. The chapter highlights the links between politicised debates about migration and racism. For example, indicating how tough talk from politicians and sections of the print media on limiting immigration may have a negative effect on discourses around 'race'. In this way the chapter explores the sub-text of integrationist policies and hardening attitudes to immigration. On the other hand, Ginsburg also points out the burgeoning ethnic diversity in the UK and the more wide-spread acceptance, awareness and sensitivity to issues of 'race'. He goes on to point out the way that this issue has recently shifted towards the migration of EU citizens from central and eastern Europe. Arguments regarding overcrowding, increased pressure on public services, reduced employment opportunities for British workers and so on, have all been deployed to construct an anti-immigration discourse. However, many of these arguments do not stand up to critical scrutiny, despite the portrayal of migration as a threat to British culture. Despite this the reality on the ground is that new migrants have often experienced a tolerant and friendly welcome, particularly from employers who understand the value of their contribution.

In Chapter VII on childhood and education, Blundell starts by stating that, 'No social group figures as consistently or frequently in the discussion of social problems as do children'. In this way the author points to one of the main ways in which the social construction approach helps us to take one step back from many other social science perspectives. Rather than immediately situate his account of education in debates about standards, changing policies, issues of class, gender or ethnicity, Blundell insightfully pieces together how it is that 'the child' is constituted in various discourses that then inform these debates. As he points out these discourses are part of an historical legacy that form various ideological assumptions behind many current education policies and proposals. The construction of the child as both 'angelic' and a potential 'danger' is de-constructed here and the impact this has upon young people themselves as well as wider policy implications. It is argued that children are overly burdened as a source of hope in the search for solutions to many social problems. It is in the system of education and the institutions of schooling where many issues of social concern are presumed to be 'solvable'. This includes not only educational achievement but the future of the UK's economic success, health problems, issues relating to social cohesion and crime, particularly gangs and drug related crime.

Fundamentally, then, this chapter explores where our ideas about children and childhood come from and why childhood and education have become so closely identified as means to solve society's problems.

The criminology dimension of this book becomes writ large in Chapters VIII and IX. In the first of these Dr Daniel Silverstone, who is a leading expert on issues of drug use and drug dealing within the night-time economy, looks at the social construction of organised crime and its policing as a social problem. This involves enquiring into the social construction of offenders, including discussions in relation to defining organised crime, measuring its effects on society and the 'moral panics' that are sometimes created around 'knife and gun culture'. He goes on to explore the impact of policing strategies and criminal legislation including that on drugs and firearms. Overall this chapter aims to explore emerging organised crime trends and 'gang families' in the context of policing policy. Although this penultimate chapter is situated on the territory of criminology it relates back to issues of poverty, unemployment, migration and the construction of childhood already discussed. In this way the themes of the book are maintained and this chapter and the next serve to illustrate how social problems can be used to unify studies across the social sciences.

The final chapter looks at the various constructions of youth gangs, in the media and public debates. Young begins the chapter by giving an overview of the theoretical debate about the character of gangs. This begins in the US but quickly relates to the UK, which has an altogether different construction of these debates. Drawing on her work in London (particularly in Camden) as a senior research fellow at Londonmet, Young moves from theory to discussing the experience of 'gangs' and 'gang culture' as a very real social problem for many teenagers and young adults. She looks at how the problem of the gang has been constructed in contemporary society and reviews how collections of individuals come to be defined as 'gangs' and by whom. Young argues that political viewpoints influence the way in which debates about gangs as well as gun and knife culture are disseminated in society. Moreover, the construction of 'gang culture' in the UK is itself a means of social control which engenders a widespread fear of young people and a growth in punitive sanctions against them.