



# SOCIAL PROBLEMS THEORY NEWS

Division of the Society for the Study of Social Problems

*SPRING 2015 NEWSLETTER*



**Remembering Joseph R.  
Gusfield**  
Pages 2 & 3

## MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR

I hope everyone is having a pleasant and peaceful spring. We're still a few months (and one more newsletter...) away from the 2015 annual meeting in Chicago. Look for the preliminary program from the SSSP in mid-May and more information about the Theory Division's sessions and business meeting in the summer newsletter.



This past January, Joseph R. Gusfield, a former President of the SSSP and a seminal figure in social problems theory, passed away at the age of 91. Information about Gusfield's life and a session at this year's conference to remember and honor him is included in this newsletter.

Also included is information about a new, special issue of *Qualitative Sociology Review*, edited by Donileen R. Loseke and Joel Best. Inspired, at least in part, by the 2013 SSSP meeting theme of "moving beyond" social constructionism, the issue includes 14 original articles on constructionism and social problems theory. Members can find Doni's introduction and a link to the issue inside.

Finally, I'd like to congratulate Donileen, who was recently elected the 2016-2017 President of the SSSP! This is a well-deserved recognition of Doni's contributions to the SSSP and to social problems theory and research.

As always, feel free to be in touch by email with questions about or ideas for the division. You can reach me at [jared.delrosso@du.edu](mailto:jared.delrosso@du.edu).

Jared Del Rosso

**THEORY DIVISION CHAIR**  
2014 - 2016

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### ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

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A Special Issue of *Qualitative Sociology Review*

### IN THE SUMMER 2015 NEWSLETTER

**Recent Member Publications**

**2015 Sessions & Award  
Winners**



## CONTRIBUTE TO THE NEWSLETTER

The Social Problems Theory Division is always looking for content to feature in the newsletter. If you have ideas for a brief essay or commentary that you would like to contribute, announcements about new publications that you would like to share with the division, a call for papers, or if you are working with a student whose research you think should be highlighted here, let me know by emailing me at [jared.delrosso@du.edu](mailto:jared.delrosso@du.edu). The deadline for submissions to the next issue is **June 30, 2015**.

The Division is also searching for a **newsletter editor**. If you'd like to be considered for this position, please send an email and a c.v. to [jared.delrosso@du.edu](mailto:jared.delrosso@du.edu).

# REMEMBERING JOSEPH R. GUSFIELD

## 1923-2015



*By Dr. Ákos Róna-Tas, Professor and Chair of Sociology, University of California, San Diego*

Joe was one of the giants of the great generation of sociologists that came to the discipline after World War II and whose work defined the discipline as we know it today. Joe was not just an outstanding, world renowned sociologist, one of the leading figures in cultural sociology, the author of such classics as *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement* and *The Culture of Public Problems: Drinking-Driving and the Symbolic Order* and countless other books and articles, but he was a true intellectual interested in a wide variety of subjects as befits someone who, as a young man, started out as a movie critic.

Joe was still teaching in the department when I got on board in 1989. He was skeptical about the kind of sociology I was trained in, preferring the humanistic bent of the discipline, but from the first moment he has been nothing but generous, warm and supportive of his young colleague. While I have never been to the races with Joe, (one of the few areas where Joe did connect with probability theory and quantification), I visited his home many times and we met at countless art exhibits and other cultural events. (It might have helped that I too started out as a movie critic.) He and his wife, Irma, who passed away exactly two years before Joe did, followed with great interest my wife's artistic career and even took interest in my son, Adam, who they knew as a small child.

The last time I met Joe was this August. He already had lived up in the Bay Area for several years. He came to ASA and we ran into each other at the hotel lobby. He was in a wheel chair, pushed by his computer scientist son. We went to have lunch at a small sandwich place nearby. Joe was in ill health but mentally he was still the old, brilliant Joe. He was curious, witty, engaging. We talked about the discipline, the department and we, naturally, gossiped. He said he was going to come down to La Jolla, in October, and I asked him if he would like to give a talk in the department. He immediately agreed. There was a book manuscript he was working on about sociology and the humanities. We shook hands, but he never came. He was too frail for the trip.

In a conversation, Joe described Erving Goffman, a friend, he wanted to hire at UCSD in 1969, as a "brilliant scholar and a mensch." If I had to describe Joe in four words, I would just repeat what he said about Goffman: "brilliant scholar and a mensch."

In a 2006 interview Joe offered this insight: "As a sociologist I have always been interested in how things become problems. My interest has been in the contexts of problems—how they come to be matters of public concern and how they become defined. I like to say that if I am pressed to the wall, and asked, 'How do you solve this problem', I say, 'Why do you ask?'"

Dr. Gusfield served as SSSP President during the 1988-1989 term.

*Photograph and obituary reprinted with permission of the SSSP.*



# REMEMBERING JOSEPH R. GUSFIELD

## 2015 SESSION

### CHICAGO, IL

#### **REMEMBERING AND HONORING JOSEPH R. GUSFIELD (1923-2015)**

Organizer: Peter Conrad, Brandeis University

Time & Room: TBD

#### **Reflecting on Joe Gusfield**

Peter Conrad, Brandeis University

#### **Joe Gusfield at UCSD**

Chandra Mukerji, University of California, San Diego

#### **Joe Gusfield and Social Problems Theory**

Joel Best, University of Delaware

#### **Joe Gusfield as a Mentor**

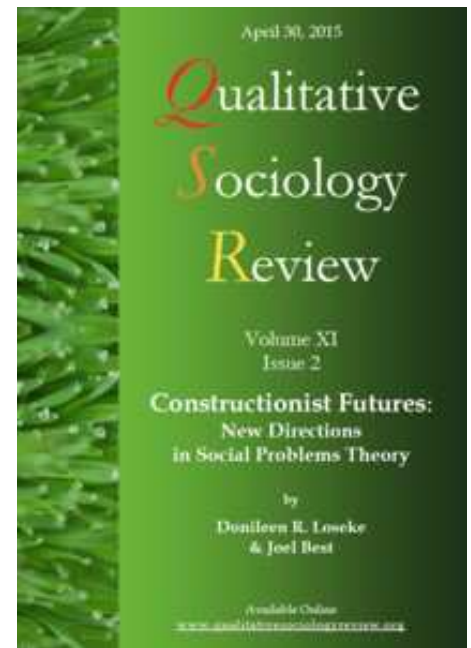
Hank Johnston, San Diego State University

**There will be time for remembrances and appreciation of Joe and his work.**



# CONSTRUCTIONIST FUTURES: NEW DIRECTIONS IN SOCIAL PROBLEMS THEORY

Division members Donileen R. Loseke & Joel Best recently edited a special issue of *Qualitative Sociology Review* on social problems theory and social constructionism. The issue contains fourteen original articles and an introduction by Donileen. The issue can be accessed online at <http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/volume33.php>.



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- ⇒ **"Constructionism and the Textuality of Social Problems,"** Jared Del Rosso & Jennifer Esala
- ⇒ **"Towards a Theory of Interest Claims in Constructing Social Problems,"** Patrick Archer
- ⇒ **"Regulating Pornographic Sales to Juveniles in Japan: Cycles and Path-Dependence of a Social Problem,"** Manabu Akagawa

## DEVELOPING UNDERSTANDINGS OF CONTEXTS

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- ⇒ **"Constructing Crime in a Database: Big Data and the Mangle of Social Problems Work,"** Carrie B. Sanders, Tony Christensen & Crystal Weston

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# INTRODUCTION TO CONSTRUCTIONIST FUTURES: NEW DIRECTIONS IN SOCIAL PROBLEMS THEORY

BY DONILEEN R. LOSEKE, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA

Published in *Qualitative Sociology Review*, 2015, Vol. XI, Issue 2, P. 6-14. Access @ [qualitativesociologyreview.org](http://qualitativesociologyreview.org).

I am delighted to introduce this special issue of *Qualitative Sociology Review* that Joel Best and I edited. Devoted to exploring opportunities for developing constructionist approaches to social problems, this issue contains articles representing the thoughts of a variety of both young and established scholars whose perspectives reflect academic and social environments in North America (Canada and the United States), Europe (Great Britain, Sweden, Denmark), and the East (Japan, Hong Kong, China). In this introduction I will first locate constructionist perspectives on social problems within academic, theoretical, and social contexts and then introduce the articles that follow.

## Academic Contexts

Constructionist perspectives are found throughout the social sciences, natural sciences, and humanities. *The Handbook of Constructionist Research* (Holstein and Gubrium 2008), for example, contains chapters about constructionism in anthropology, communication, education, management, nursing, psychology, public policy, science and technology, and sociology. Constructionist perspectives also are found in the professions, including law (Amsterdam and Bruner 2000), medicine (Brown 1995), and psychotherapy (Miller 1997; Neimeyer and Raskin 2000). Yet despite this presence across a range of academic disciplines and professions, it is most common for constructionists who are interested in the particular topic of social problems to write as sociologists. Tellingly, the beginnings of this volume were in the 2013 meetings of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP) in New York City, an organization that coordinates its annual meetings with those of the American Sociological Association, and whose journal, *Social Problems*, is promoted as a journal of sociology.

Constructionist approaches to social problems tend to be dominated by sociologists, and, within sociology, there is further segregation. A section in the *Handbook of Constructionist Research* (Holstein and Gubrium 2008) titled “The Social Construction of What?” contains chapters on constructionist examinations of bodies, emotion, gender, sex, race/ethnicity, medical knowledge, therapy, and history. Despite this diversity of topics of interest to constructionists, those interested in social problems tend to draw insights primarily from others likewise engaged in the study of social problems.

The first context of the papers in this volume therefore is the academic world where social constructionist perspectives on social problems tend to be dominated by Sociologists who draw inspiration primarily from others who likewise explore constructionist questions about social problems. This context leads several of the contributors to this volume to argue there would be multiple advantages of drawing insights from disciplines outside sociology as well as from a wider range of topics inside sociology.

## Theoretical Contexts

Stretching back to Descartes, social construction has a long history as both a theoretical perspective and a methodological orientation (Mosen and Knutsen 2007; Weinberg 2008, 2014). Sociologists, however, tend to ignore this long history and cite the beginning of constructionist perspectives as the 1966 publication of *The Social Construction of Reality* by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. Sociologists exploring the construction of social problems tend to cite an even more recent beginning, the 1977 publication of *Constructing Social Problems* by Malcolm Spector and John Kitsuse.

There is no doubt that *Constructing Social Problems* is a masterful work. Produced in a time of near hegemony in sociology of Parsonian structural functionalism and a domination of natural science/positivist models of research, *Constructing Social Problems* was a forceful presentation of a new vision of how to think about social problems and how to do research with these new ways of thinking. As the statements on the back cover of the 1987 re-issue testify, *Constructing Social Problems*





became “the major and originating statement of the social constructionist perspective on social problems” (Joseph Gusfield), and the “seminal contribution to the study of social problems” (Dorothy Pawluch). Generations of constructionists working on questions about social problems continue such praise by referencing this book as the theoretical scaffolding for their empirical research.

*Constructing Social Problems* was a brilliant call for new ways to conceptualize social problems, it was not a development of a theoretical framework. While others since have demonstrated how elements from symbolic interaction, pragmatism and ethnomethodology were foundational components in the framework of *Constructing Social Problems* (e.g. Best, 2008; Miller and Holstein 1989, Schneider, 1985, 2008; Weinberg, 2008, 2014; chapters in Holstein and Miller, 1993a), this theoretical development was *not* a part of the book itself. Rather, just as “qualitative” sociology often justifies its value by dramatizing the failures of “quantitative” sociology, *Constructing Social Problems* justified constructionism primarily as a corrective to the many problems of conceptualizing social problems as objective conditions in the environment. Yet regardless of the lack of an explicit theoretical framework, it is not all that uncommon for *Constructing Social Problems* to be the sole theoretical citation in modern-day empirical work. In consequence, several manuscripts in this volume spotlight the importance of more explicit attention to elaborating theoretical frameworks underlying constructionist perspectives on social problems.

Given the focus on criticizing “objective condition” approaches to examining social problems, it is expectable that the central mandate in *Constructing Social Problems* is bracketing all attention to social problems as “objective conditions” in order to attend to the process of meaning-making activities leading to subjective definitions of conditions as morally troublesome and in need of repair. Yet in 1985, Stephen Woolgar and Dorothy Pawluch advanced a persuasive argument, backed with considerable evidence, that actual social constructionist studies of social problems failed to do this. Because they cited multiple examples of explicit or implicit references to “objective reality” throughout constructionist work, they speculated that it was not possible to offer convincing constructionist arguments without referencing the realities of objective conditions underlying subjective definitions. This challenge coming from constructionist insiders yielded many lively sessions at SSSP sessions, as well as two edited volumes of manuscripts dedicated to theoretical debates about constructionism (Holstein and Miller 1993a; Miller and Holstein 1993). An important practical consequence of both the Woolgar and Pawluch challenge as well as the responses to it was that constructionism became partitioned into two types: While what came to be called “strict” constructionism forbid any reference—implicit or explicit—to objective reality (the foundational statement is Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993), by far, the most common variety of constructionism goes by the name of “contextual.” Contextual constructionism remains tightly focused on the process of meaning construction, yet careful references to objective reality can enter into the analysis (the foundational statement is Best 1993).

This, then, is the theoretical context of articles in this current volume. Constructionists continue to develop the theoretical framework for constructionist perspectives on social problems and have moved beyond attempting to ignore all questions and assumptions about “objective reality” (something that proved not possible to do). As articles in this volume demonstrate, there is considerable interest in the “objective realities” posed by the historical, social, political, and technological contexts of social problem construction.

### Social Contexts

Social construction perspectives have been, and continue to be, very popular for many topics, inside and outside sociology. Observers have argued that constructionism has achieved “phenomenal success in capturing the imaginations of ... researchers throughout the social sciences” (Weinberg 2014:x), constructionism has been called a “triumph for sociological theory” (Best 2003:137). Likewise, constructionism is a very popular approach among researchers studying social problems. An entry on “social problems” in the *Encyclopedia of Sociology*, for example, argues that the subjectivist, constructionist approach has “provided a robust alternative” to traditional objectivist approaches to social problems (Mauss and Jenness, 2000:2760). Yet regardless of this success, constructionist perspectives on social problems have faced—and continue to face—challenges that form another type of context for the authors of manuscripts in this volume. These challenges stem from methodological and political criticisms as well as from unfortunate consequences from constructionism’s popularity.

One context of constructionist examinations of social problems is that of methodological criticisms. Spector and Kitsuse (1977) promoted constructionist methodology as *more* scientific than approaches examining social problems as objective conditions. Yet the primary interest in meaning-making has led, predictably, to an empirical orientation favoring a case study method and qualitative data—the types of data and method that often are criticized for not leading to the generalizable knowledge valued by those who mimic the methods of the natural sciences (see Moses and Knutsen, 2007 for the constructionist vs. naturalist philosophies of science). While most constructionists no longer feel obligated to engage in this tired “qualitative” vs. “quantitative” debate, the importance of being reflective about methodology and striving for methodological excellence is very much evident in the manuscripts in this volume.

Far more troubling criticisms of constructionist approaches to social problems are political and accuse the perspective of not being relevant for, or even as being opposed to, the moral needs for social action and social change (see Loseke, 2003 for a review). The seeds of this criticism also are contained in *Constructing Social Problems* which formulates constructionism as a route to build knowledge of how public worry is a human creation. By placing knowledge building, rather than social action and social justice, in the center of interest, it is true that Spector and Kitsuse formed constructionism as an academic, rather than political, enterprise (see Gusfield 1984 for an early statement of the practical advantages of *not* taking sides in public debates; conversely, see Becker, 1966 for the necessity of taking sides). At the same time, several manuscripts in this volume demonstrate that while constructionist analyses *can* be done without attention to questions about social justice and social change, constructionism *in practice* often does examine topics and ask questions that are of immediate practical, political relevance. Furthermore, even if questions about social change are not driving empirical work, constructionist findings often have very practical implications for social action (see Loseke 2003 for a review).

Another context of social constructionist examinations of social problems results from constructionism’s popularity. As measured by how often it is referenced in academic work, constructionism is very popular. Yet, for two reasons, academic mention of constructionism is a very cursory indication of its importance. First, there are concerns that the popularity of constructionist perspectives on social problems is limited to scholars: Observers note that constructionist perspectives are not important outside academia (Best 2003), and indeed, have not even found their way into undergraduate social problems textbooks (Mauss and Jenness 2010).

Second, the sheer popularity of the perspective leads to questions about what, specifically, is being cited. Hacking (1999:vii), for example, complains that the term, constructionism, is both “obscure and overused” and that this leads to a great deal of vague thinking; Maines (2001), describes constructionism as an “empty rhetorical device.” In the introductory chapter of the *Handbook of Constructionist Research*, Gubrium and Holstein (2008:5) maintain that the term, constructionism, has come to “virtually mean both everything and nothing at the same time.” They maintain that constructionism all too often is “thoughtlessly adopted and carelessly applied” (5), that manuscripts referencing constructionism too often “display...either a profound ignorance of or a disregard for the epistemological, ontological, methodological, and practical foundations of constructionism that distinguish it from other approaches” (5).

This, then, is another social context for manuscripts in this volume: Constructionism is a very popular theoretical approach to social life in general, social problems in particular. However, it is not certain that those citing the perspective know much about it. This was most obvious in sessions at the 2013 SSSP meetings which were organized around the theme, “Re-Imagining Social Problems: Moving Beyond Social Construction.” Thematic sessions included several speakers who felt comfortable criticizing constructionism although they freely and explicitly admitted being not familiar with the perspective. All too often it seemed that those criticizing constructionism knew little other than the mandate to “bracket objective definitions.” Further, some speakers seemed to not apprehend the meaning of that directive: Rather than understanding the mandate for what it is—a methodological tool allowing researchers to focus on examining the processes of meaning making—they seemed to believe the mandate was to deny the realities of harmful conditions. Such a misunderstanding, of course, yields the evaluation that the theoretical perspective of social constructionism—and, by implication—social con-



structionists, are immoral. This, then, is another context of constructionist examinations of social problems: Yes, the perspective is very popular yet it is not always clear what, specifically, people understand.

The theme of the 2013 meetings, “moving beyond” constructionism, therefore contained multiple occasions where constructionism was criticized. While much of this criticism was superficial and primarily reflected the ignorance of those making the criticisms, this meeting theme gave constructionists a good reason to organize. With the help of 2013 Theory Division Chair, John Barnshaw, we organized a series of gatherings dedicated to exploring the current state of constructionist theory. Our questions were quite practical: In what ways should/could *Constructing Social Problems*, published in 1977, remain the foundational theoretical statement of constructionist perspectives on social problems? In what ways has our computerized, mass mediated, globalized world changed the processes and tasks of meaning-making? What kinds of assumptions associated with North American, democratic social environments are buried within constructionist theory? Can we move beyond the limitations of single case study approaches? In brief, while constructionists attending these meetings certainly did *not* believe it was time to “move beyond” constructionism, our conversations led us to realize that it *was* time to do some thinking about theory. This volume began with those conversations.

### Organization of this Volume

We cast a wide net in soliciting papers for this volume and asked only that manuscripts be focused on theory, relatively short, and written in ways making them accessible to a wide audience. We were most impressed by both the quality of papers we received as well as by how these authors met deadlines and graciously responded to suggestions. Deciding how to present papers, of course, is a challenge because, as constructionists, Joel and I are well aware of the arbitrary nature of categorization systems. In this case, many papers cover similar themes such as the importance of context, and the need to expand constructionist horizons, so “sorting” them into one or another category can be misleading. Hence, although we categorize these 14 papers into one of four themes, other sortings would make just as much sense.

Part I, “Expanding Studies of Claims-making,” is a logical place to start because most constructionist empirical examinations are case studies of claims-making. Each of the four papers in this section suggest ways that traditional case study methods profitably can be extended. Joel Best begins with calling attention to the practical problem: We need to move beyond case studies of individual social problems. He proposes a meta-analytic framework for thinking systematically about making connections among claims about different conditions. Next, Jared Del Rosso and Jennifer Esala offer a different sort of suggestion: Claims-making often depends upon enduring texts—and these texts are a “reality” of claims-making. Using a variety of examples, Del Rosso and Esala demonstrate how examining textual realities offers unique vantage points on social problems. This is followed by Patrick Archer who advances yet a different agenda. According to him, constructionists would benefit by redirecting our attention from the traditional focus on constructions of problematic *conditions* to constructions of actors’ *interests*. Finally, Manabu Akagawa uses a case study of pornocomic sales to juveniles in Japan to develop a model of how social problem claims are path dependent: What claims can be made depends, on part, on what claims were made in the past, on how publics responded to similar issues in the past.

Part II, “Developing Understandings of Contexts,” engages the topic that was most salient among constructionists in our conversations during the 2013 SSSP meetings: In broad strokes, while the primary constructionist mandate is to bracket questions about objective conditions in order to focus on subjective definitions, claims-making can be understood only if it is placed within the historical, social, and political contexts within which it occurs.

Each of the four manuscripts in this section explore how more attention to the contexts of claims-making can enrich constructionist understandings of the social problems process. The manuscript by Lawrence Nichols is first in this section because it offers a theoretical overview of how we should think about contexts. Arguing that contexts are themselves social constructions, he demonstrates how “context work” is done by both claims-makers and analysts and must be examined dialogically. Frank Furedi then turns our attention to the importance of locating central concepts—in this case, the concept of authority—in history. Arguing that the problem of authority dominates the discipline of sociology as well as the terrain of social problem construction, he shows how locating claims-making within various epochs of authority will more securely situate our understandings of why some claims likely will be evaluated as both believable and important. The next paper,





by Jun Ayaukawa, offers a moral tale: When constructionists do cross-cultural studies we must be particularly attentive to language because concepts regularly entering into social problems claims—such as the central concept of “human rights”—can have far different meanings in different languages. Ayaukawa’s manuscript also is a demonstration of why it is necessary for constructionists to extend our visions beyond national borders: Because international communities can have power in shaping domestic policy, domestic claims-making must be situated within international perspectives. This section concludes with Jianhua Xu’s case study of media constructions of a state policy to ban motorcycles in China. While media in Western, democratic countries typically enjoy considerable freedom in making claims, in China many media are state controlled. Rather than acting as claims-makers, Xu argues they act as “non-issue” makers, neutralizing the negative consequences of state-imposed policies. Yet some media do circumvent this state control and become claims-makers, criticizing state policy and Xu explores how this is.

Part III contains three manuscripts that each explore the consequences of technologies that did not exist when Spector and Kitsuse published *Constructing Social Problems* in 1977. First, R.J. Maratea explores relationships between social problems claims-making and the Internet. Using the example of the National Rifle Association and gun advocacy in cyberspace, he shows how the internet *has* revolutionized the ways claims can be made, yet has *not* been the great democratizer it is often assumed to be. While Maratea is about the revolutionary potential of the internet in claims-making, Michael Adorjan and Ho Lun Yau show how social media—Facebook—was remarkably effective in student groups in Hong Kong fighting a proposed national education curriculum. The last manuscript in this section, by Carrie Sanders, Tony Christensen and Crystal Weston, looks at “big data,” in this case, crime data generated by police. In examining the interplay between social problem construction and technology they show how technology can transform the social problems process: Police use these data to predict future problems and construct and implement solutions.

Manuscripts in the final section, “Enlarging Constructionist Agendas,” each offer testimony about why constructionists should extend our interests beyond that of initial claims-making about social problems. The manuscript by Margaretha Järvinen and Gale Miller is first in this section because it offers a strong argument about the benefits of taking constructionism outside the halls of academia into professional practice. Demonstrating how narrative therapists in drug treatment centers in Copenhagen are “applied constructionists,” they show a practical application of constructionism. Following this is Maria Nissen’s work examination of the construction of images of social problems in the everyday work of social workers. In focusing on how Danish social workers perceive problems, she shows differences between the practical world of social workers and the academic world of social problem analysts. Last, but certainly not least, Katarina Jacobsson and Malin Åkerström examine the world of the deaf in Sweden and show how the idea of “crisis,” a Westernized, psychologically oriented concept, is used in a variety of imaginative and inventive ways by parents of deaf children as well as by professionals offering services.

During the 2013 SSSP meetings, many constructionists convened to consider the current health of constructionist perspectives on social problems. As repeatedly demonstrated by the vibrancy of ideas in these manuscripts, it is most obviously *not* the time to “move beyond constructionism,” as directed by the meeting theme. It is, rather, time for constructionism to move into the future. The manuscripts in this volume offer a wealth of ideas about routes to doing precisely that.

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