

Social Problems Theory News

Society for the Study
of Social Problems



Message from the Chair

Theory Division Chair 2004-06

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The Society for the Study of Social Problems has offered a forum for alternative voices within sociology and the social sciences. We have served as a leading scholarly/activist organization in the social sciences, fighting for justice, freedom, and equity, sometimes against long odds. Through its annual meeting and its journal, Social Problems, SSSP has supported the best of scholarship, characterized by theoretical and methodological creativity and with a focus on key social issues. Moreover, SSSP is proud of its history as an open, progressive organization, committed to scholarly activism, and welcoming the participation of graduate students to distinguished senior scholars.

**Gary A. Fine, SSSP
President**

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Darin Weinberg did a wonderful job as our past division chair, and we all owe him our thanks. Sessions he had organized for the 2004 meetings were terrific. Thanks Darin! Following in your footsteps is a hard act, but I will try. We also thank the contributors and all who helped make San Francisco a success.

This newsletter provides you with information about the division. First is the **Student Paper Award (p. 2)**, the winners from last year and the call for nominations for the current year (**please nominate your students' best work!!!**).

Second is our plan for **sessions at the 2005 Annual Meetings** and a **2005 Program Participation Schedule (pp. 3-4)**. Again, success depends on your response. We hope for a good number of exciting submissions. I have also attached a call for submissions (**p. 3**) and a job ad one of you sent my way (**p. 2**).

Finally, I want to take the opportunity to comment on the **topic of institutions and reflexivity** and thereby to introduce myself to you. Allow me to tell you a personal story that helped to lay seeds of reflexivity. The research it led me to conduct might be considered 'normal science,' but it directs the lens of scholarship toward our own endeavors and the way they affect the world around us. I would be delighted, of course, to get your feedback (ideally per e-mail: savelsbg@atlas.socsci.umn.edu).

I first arrived in the U.S. as a 1982-83 German Academic Exchange Fellow at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Like Alexis de Tocqueville one and a half centuries earlier, I came to study an innovation in American criminal justice and ended up learning broader lessons. Curious about "community based crime and delinquency prevention," I discovered that the meaning of the concept had changed dramatically, away from programs that sought to provide legitimate opportunities for underprivileged minorities to programs of community organized control and sanctions (e.g., neighborhood block watch). I also

encountered, it seemed, a collective amnesia about the previous meaning of the concept, not just among practitioners but even among criminal justice scholars. I finally came to understand that knowledge about crime and punishment had changed in the public sphere as had the practice of punishment. Capital punishment had just been revived, and the almost 500% increase in imprisonment rates had begun. Why?

Over the years I found theories focusing on crime trends, strategies of conservative elites, labor markets and living conditions in late modernity to be useful but insufficient in explaining the changes of the 1970s and the horrific trends of the 1980s and 1990s. Conservative elites had come to power in many Western countries, deindustrialization and the 1973 oil shock had not just hit the United States, crime had increased elsewhere, and the signs of late modernity were felt in most Western countries. In my attempts at explaining the American situation, I began to focus on the institutional context of those who generate knowledge and make binding decisions. These institutions vary across societies and such variation seems to help account for cross-national differences. It turned out that more market driven American media are more inclined to sensationalize crime than media run through neo-corporate arrangements. Elected prosecutors and judges are more likely to respond to public opinion than their life-tenured civil servant colleagues in Germany. Primary systems and weak political parties make legislators receptive to wishes of their constituents, and the elected head of the executive branch is more open to the public than the prime minister/ chancellor in a parliamentary system. The difference between more market-driven American institutions versus more bureaucratized institutions in much of Europe thus appears to explain more dynamic trends of public opinion and punishment in the U.S. compared to more stable trends in Germany and other countries (Savelsberg, American Journal of Sociology 99/1994:911-943; Sutton, American Journal of

Sociology 106/2000:350-386). Important exceptions are those cases in which bureaucracy is coupled with strong centralization of political authority, for example in state socialism (Savelsberg, Punishment and Society 1/1999:45-70).

Like other sectors, American academia is more market driven than its European counterparts. This enhances second order institutional change as funding programs of political and policy institutions strengthen their position as interlocutors between political and science systems, and as academic institutions adapt to markets and to expectations of their political environment. National Science Foundation-funded analyses of sociology and criminology journals between 1951 and 1993 show that the effects on the institutional context in which criminological research is conducted and on knowledge produced are considerable, no matter if we apply a political sociology perspective (Savelsberg/King/ Cleveland, Social Problems 49/2002:327-348), neo-institutional thought (Savelsberg/ Cleveland/King, Social Forces 83/2004:1275-1302) or period-cohort models (Savelsberg/Flood, Criminology 42/2004/4/in press). It appears as though government funded research is more likely to follow trends set in the political world, and this effect is particularly strong in academic institutions that specialize on crime and criminal justice. This is of particular concern as parts of criminology may be at risk of being cut off from other sociological work, including theory, especially social problems theory (Savelsberg/Sampson, Crime, Law and Social Change 37/2002/99-106). In short, institutions matter, also in the world of academia. They affect our output, and, if what we do has any impact on the work around us, they also affect how we affect the world.

On page 4 of this newsletter I ask for brief contributions on the role of our Division in the game of knowledge production. Let's take a moment for self-reflexivity!

Joachim J. Savelsberg



Student Paper Award 2004:

The Winner!

"Vulnerability and Convergence in the World Trade Center Disaster: Social Management of People-Types in Crisis"

The first place winner of this year's SSSP Theory Division student paper award was **Jeannette Sutton** (University of Colorado). The committee states that her paper, "Vulnerability and Convergence in the World Trade Center Disaster: Social Management of People-Types in Crisis" was a very nicely crafted empirical piece examining how people responding to the World Trade Center bombing made sense of victims." The second place award went to **Jason W. Moore** (Berkeley) for his paper, "Conceptualizing World Environmental History: The Contribution of Immanuel Wallerstein."

The student paper award committee was chaired by **Donileen R. Loseke**. It further included **Brenda Solomon** and **Kathleen Lowney**.

2005: Call for Nominations!!!

The Social Problems Theory Division of the SSSP invites papers for its annual **Student Paper Competition**. To be eligible, papers must be authored or co-authored by students, have relevance to social problems theories, and cannot have been accepted for publication. Papers co-authored with faculty are not eligible. Please limit manuscripts to 25 pages. The 1st place winner will receive \$150 and the 2nd place winner will receive \$100. Both winners will have their meeting registration fees paid and receive a banquet ticket for the 2005 Annual Meeting. The **deadline** for submissions is **April 1, 2005**.

Send *electronic submissions* as a Word attachment to lara-foley@utulsa.edu. If you *do not* have e-mail access, submit 3 copies of the paper to:

Lara Foley
Assistant Professor
Department of Sociology
University of Tulsa
600 S. College Ave.
Tulsa, OK 74104
Fax: 918-631-2057

The Student Awards Committee consists of Lara Foley (chair, University of Tulsa), Josh Gamson (University of San Francisco), and Karen Lutfey (University of Minnesota).

Position Announcement

The following position announcement reached me with a request to publish it in the newsletter:

Family Studies and Social Work: Assistant or Associate Professor to teach undergraduate social work courses; advise students; conduct programmatic research; seek external funding; provide service to the university, community and profession; coordinate the practice field experience component of the social work program; provide support for students in field placements; implement field supervisor orientation sessions. Require: Ph.D., ABDs will be considered, but doctorate must be earned by date of appointment; master's of social work degree; minimum of two years of post-MSW practice experience. For appointment to rank of Associate Professor, require strong publication record. Desire: Ph.D. in social work; higher education-level teaching experience; familiarity with the structure and function of practice skill instruction; knowledge of CSWE accreditation standards; ability to teach undergraduate and graduate courses in family studies and serve on family studies graduate committees. For appointment to rank of Associate Professor, a demonstrated record of acquiring external funding is desired. Send letter of intent, curriculum vitae and three letters of reference to Dr. Glenn Stone, Miami University, Department of Family Studies and Social Work, 451 McGuffey Hall, Oxford, OH 45056. Contact phone number is 513-529-2323; email is stoneg@muohio.edu. Screening of applications begins December 1 and will continue until the position is filled.

Miami University is an Equal Opportunity employer offering full same-sex domestic partner benefits. Women and minorities are encouraged to apply.



Social Problems Theory Division Call for Papers 2005 Annual SSSP Meetings

This year we submitted four session proposals to the organizing committee.

The first is our **thematic session**. It builds on the theme of the meetings (Unintended Consequences of Social Problems Solutions) but asks presenters to think about the social construction of problems solutions. Successful and failed constructions and their (intended and unintended) consequences are at stake.

1. Thematic Session: "Constructing Social Problems Solutions: Successes, Failures, and Unintended Consequences"

Organizer:

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Sessions 2 and 3 are based on ideas by volunteer organizers whose initiative is greatly appreciated.

Session 2, organized by Ted Goertzel, seeks papers that examine what is specific to social problems theory versus sociological theory generally. This question seems important as ASA's narrow view of the 1950s, that prompted the creation of SSSP, has broadened considerably.

2. "Social Problems Theory and Sociological Theory: Differences, Specifications, Relationships"

Organizer:

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Session 3, organized by Jack Spencer, asks for the role of emotions in Social Problems Theory.

3. "Anger, Love, and Company: Extending the Role of Emotions in Constructionism"

Organizer:

J. William (Jack) Spencer
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Finally, **Session 4** addresses the institutions with which constructors of social problems have to work. Internationally comparative work would be terrific for this session. But work on the processing of claims making through different types of institutions, for example public versus private news media, would also be most welcome.

4. **“The Nature of Institutions and Claims Making: Public versus Private Mass Media and other Comparisons”**

Organizer:

Joachim J. Savelsberg (address see above)

2005 PROGRAM PARTICIPATION SCHEDULE

January 31, 2005: Deadline for electronic submission of papers/proposals to session organizers.

February 21, 2005: Date by which participants must be notified by the session organizer of acceptance or referral of paper proposal.

March 1, 2005: Date by which sessions/paper titles and contact information for each author must be in the executive office.

May 16, 2005: Date by which preliminary programs will be mailed to current members.

August 12-14, 2005: Annual Meetings, Crowne Plaza Hotel, Philadelphia, PA.

CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS TO OUR NEWSLETTER

I wrote above about the role institutional arrangements play for the production of scholarly knowledge. SSSP and its Theory Division are specific institutional arrangements. I would like to invite you to send brief notes (not more than 150 words) **on the specific role you think SSSP and the Theory Division play vis-à-vis social science theorizing** that occurs elsewhere, for example in ASA's Theory Section. What particular type of theory has a better chance at being produced here – and why? Or, more provocatively, what would be lost if our SSSP Theory Division disappeared? I would like to publish such notes in the upcoming newsletter. J.J.S.

