

**You must SUBMIT!**

# Jack and the Glass Castle: The Legendary Tale of How Public Sociology Met Social Problems Theory

By J. William Spencer, Purdue University

As is my usual routine, I opened up my email inbox early in the morning to find solicitations for the latest hot stocks or male enhancement drugs. Amongst these was an email from Purdue's Office for Engagement asking me to consider giving a public talk at a local county library centered on a book titled *The Glass Castle*. I don't know about the rest of my social problems colleagues, but the idea of giving a "public talk" often terrifies me. In many ways, I see myself as the "theory guy" and even in my empirical work; I see what I do as far removed from the world outside of academia. How do I translate my work to non academics? How do I bridge the gap between our two agendas? Some years ago I had given a public talk and, frankly, I wasn't thrilled with the way it went. The crowd had been rather small and it hadn't gone the way I had planned. Put simply, the audience and I had different agendas. My agenda was to present my work on ambiguity in media constructions of youth violence; theirs was the local youth violence problem, and I wasn't sure why I was being asked to do this public talk. Sure, I studied homelessness, violence, and other social problems; but like many of my constructionist brethren my empirical focus had always been the media. What could I lend to a discussion of a piece of literary non-fiction? The librarian and I exchanged a few emails and talked on the phone. We negotiated an agenda for the "program." I was to guide a discussion of the book (most of the audience was to have read it ahead of time) and in one way or another work in my projects on ambiguity in public discourse on social problems. In what at the time seemed a fit of temporary insanity, I agreed to give the talk. After all, Purdue was offering moderate monetary incentives for such engagement activities. The librarian arranged to have a copy of the book sent to my office. When it arrived, I set about to read the book.

As it turns out, the book details the "adventures" of the author's family from the time she was a small child. By most conventional accounts, the family was "dysfunctional." According to the narrative, the family spent much of their time living out of their car. The parents spent much of the time unemployed and fighting with each other. The father dreamed of schemes of making a fortune prospecting for gold or inventing things. The mother read a lot and painted. The children routinely ate little or nothing and only sporadically attended school. With little supervision, the children sometimes suffered physical injury such as when the author, then a young child, suffered serious burns while trying to cook hotdogs. Sometimes they spent the night in the car in the parking lot of a bar while the father drank. I have to admit, while I enjoyed reading the book, I still had no idea what I was going to bring to this public talk.

However, the more I read, the more I realized that the ambiguity in social problems discourse I was studying in the media was right here in the book. What many would describe as abuse and neglect of the children was, in this family, considered lessons in self-reliance and "what doesn't kill you makes you tougher." The parents and their children both, most of the time, embraced this definition. The night of the presentation I arrived early to the library – in part because I still had two chapters left to read. I found an out of the way corner and finished the book, still wondering how to run the discussion.

Time came and a small group of people filtered into the room. Introductions were exchanged and we partook of some coffee and snacks.

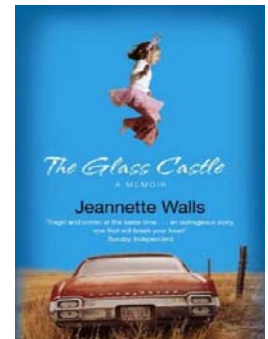
I began the discussion with a safe question – asking what they thought of the book. All considered it engaging and thought provoking. I asked them what it was about the book that was so engaging. Unanimously they replied, "It was a true story." Would the book have been as engaging if it were fiction? "No." What was it about the book they considered thought provoking? This began a long discussion of how the parents treated the children; the father's drinking; the mother's penchant for staying in bed for days at a time; the children's lack of formal education. Was the father an alcoholic? Everyone agreed he was. Was the mother suffering from bi-polar disorder? Again, everyone thought so. What kept coming up again and again was idea that despite all the hardships experienced by the children, they seemed generally happy and resilient.

Were the children abused and neglected? We weren't so sure. We all agreed that by today's legal standards, had they known, child protection services would have taken the children from the parents. The children didn't see doctors very often. They spent little of their childhood in school. On the other hand, they appeared to suffer no permanent injuries or traumas and generally didn't consider themselves abused and neglected. The parents loved their children and took care of them the best they could. They went on numerous "adventures" that most kids could only dream of. More to the point for the audience was their view that at least two of the three children grew up to become successful professionals.

We made our way (or rather I nudged them) into a discussion of conventional public images of these issues or problems. What *is* homelessness? What *is* child abuse and neglect? How do we come to *know* these things? Most in the audience were parents; some were teachers or administrators in public schools. We talked about how the "system" (read: schools, child welfare) didn't really meet the needs of children who were having problems. We talked about how conventional public images of these problems didn't really capture the complexity of lived experience so we should be skeptical of them – to question them. These images might, in fact, be harmful – they produce and reinforce stereotypes and get in the way of understanding kids. As we pondered these questions, I considered the following section from our section's "Just World" statement:

We can also educate outside the classroom, especially by teaching others about the public value of theoretically motivated empirical research. While justice can be affected through just and compassionate policy and law, it can also be brought about through the subtle and indirect influences that individuals exert as they raise children, make decisions to hire, fire and promote, write letters to editors, or debate social issues over coffee. Encouraging rigorous thinking about alternative ways of seeing and interpreting "facts" might well stop us from plunging into future wars that are not justified by those same "facts." We should strive to educate everybody, everyday, everywhere.

(continued next page)



*(Jack and the Glass Castle continued)*

It occurs to me that this experience with public engagement represents the kind of education that is being described in this passage. Feedback from the librarian suggests that the talk was not only enjoyable for the audience, but they tell her they came away from it having learned some "things." It has engendered further conversation among them. I have no illusions that I have created lay constructionists nor even sparked critical sensitivities that were not already present. I do feel, though, that for a short time I, as a constructionist social problems theorist, connected with people outside of academics and that we both learned from the experience.

I came away from the experience having learned something of substance. While I didn't realize it until some time later, I learned some things about the cultural context I am always trying to connect to my analysis of media constructions of social problems. At least among this audience, there is a depth of caring about children that I think we often either dismiss or underestimate. There is also a level of skepticism regarding collective representations of social problems that, while just below the surface, is easy to unearth if we only dig a little. This would suggest that we might be mistaken when we take media, and other public constructions of social problems, and assume the general public automatically buys into them. For example, people seem aware of the disconnect between these media representations and their lived experiences with these problems. They already know that lived experience is considerably more complex and ambiguous. It would seem that our task of educating the public – of "encouraging rigorous thinking about alternative ways of thinking" – is not as hard as we might suspect.

I suspect that I came to realize that as an academic-based social problems theorist I really do have something of value to offer to non-academics – and they are not only receptive to the message, they are already thinking about it. ■

## CHAIR ELECTION Final Call for Nominations

My term as chair will run out after the 2008 Annual Meetings. We are thus moving toward the election of my successor.

It is my understanding that for the first time, this election will take place electronically. Thus, in or around January, you will be provided information on the candidates and on how to cast your ballot by email, and/or an "election edition" of our newsletter.

Nominations were requested initially at the Divisional Meeting in August, and then via email to the membership in September.

This is the Final Call for Nominations. You can nominate yourself or others by emailing me at [mitch.berbrier@uah.edu](mailto:mitch.berbrier@uah.edu). The deadline is December 15, 2007.

Mitch Berbrier

## 2008 Student Competition Call for Papers

The Social Problems Theory Division of the SSSP invites papers for its annual Student Paper Award Competition. To be eligible, papers must be authored or co-authored by students, have relevance to social problems theory, and cannot have been accepted for publication. Papers co-authored with faculty are not eligible. Self-nominations are welcome. Please limit manuscripts to 25 double-spaced pages (not including references). Subject to budgetary approval, the 1<sup>st</sup> prize winner will receive \$150, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> prize winner will receive \$100. Both winners will also have their meeting registration fees paid and receive a banquet ticket for the 2007 Annual Meeting.

Please send submissions as email attachments to the Student Paper Competition Committee Chair, Wayne Brekhus (U Missouri), [brekhusw@missouri.edu](mailto:brekhusw@missouri.edu). The other members of the committee are Donileen Loseke (U South Florida) and Frank Young (Cornell U).

Deadline for submissions: April 1, 2008.

### From our Archives:

"While reality is multiple in the Schutzian sense it does not follow that it is infinite. I don't think we can dispense with older theoretical perspectives. We tend in sociology to follow a natural science model (or our view of that model) in which new theories drive out old ones. We shall have to find a better way of adding than subtracting."

Joseph R. Gusfield,  
"The Current State of Social Problems Theory."  
*Social Problems Theory Division Newsletter.*  
December 1983



# THE 2008 CALL FOR PAPERS SOCIAL PROBLEMS THEORY DIVISION SESSIONS IN **BOSTON**

Papers are due at midnight EST on January 31, 2008, and must be submitted to the Session Organizer(s), using the SSSP Online Submission procedures ([www.sssp1.org](http://www.sssp1.org))



*Boston Harbor*

## THEMATIC SESSION

### Crossing Your OWN Borders: Theorizing Across Substantive Sections of SSSP

Organizers:

**Mitch Berbrier**

University of Alabama in Huntsville  
[mitch.berbrier@uah.edu](mailto:mitch.berbrier@uah.edu)

**Michelle Corbin**

University of Maryland  
[mcorbin@socy.umd.edu](mailto:mcorbin@socy.umd.edu)

Within our discipline, angst is almost ritually expressed about the sectioning of sociology into Divisions (in SSSP) and the dividing of sociology into Sections (in ASA). We thereby request theoretically-oriented papers explicitly run against these trends, crossing those intellectual borders. We imagine that these papers would creatively engage two or more theories or orientations that are ordinarily confined within substantive areas. Our hope is that such cross-fertilization can yield interaction, discussion, and contestation which may in turn yield advances in social problems theory.

## THEMATIC SESSION

### Claims-Making Plus: Advancing the Constructionist Project by Building Bridges to Other Approaches

Organizers:

**Mitch Berbrier**

University of Alabama in Huntsville  
[mitch.berbrier@uah.edu](mailto:mitch.berbrier@uah.edu)

**Donileen Loseke**

University of South Florida  
[dloseke@cas.usf.edu](mailto:dloseke@cas.usf.edu)

Within the Social Problems Theory division, angst has lately been almost ritually expressed about a lack of theoretical dynamism, **and** about the compartmentalization of the various forms of social constructionism. We thereby request papers that creatively engage two or more "constructionisms," broadly defined, in the hope that this will yield the kinds of interaction, discussion, and contestation that can in turn yield dynamic advances in social problems theory.



## THEMATIC SESSION

## Tourism and Globalization: Sanitizing vs. Problematizing the Past

Organizer:  
**Lara Foley**  
University of Tulsa  
[lara-foley@utulsa.edu](mailto:lara-foley@utulsa.edu)

**Description:** What is accomplished by sensationalizing the past for the gaze of visitors or tourists? Can tourist attractions that problematize rather than sanitize the past fit with economic and developmental goals of impoverished nation-states? From slave castles and Holocaust museums to ecotourism and disaster tourism (e.g. Ground Zero, the Lower Ninth Ward), we seek papers that relate social problems theory (or theories) to international tourism, theorizing the complex relationships between commerce, development, education, "heritage," "healing" and "authenticity." If you are studying tourism and globalization and addressing theoretical questions, why not submit a proposal for this session?



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## *Telling Social Problems: Exploring the Role of Narrative and Dialogue in the Construction of Social Problems*

Organizer: **Larry Nichols**  
West Virginia University  
[larry.nichols@mail.wvu.edu](mailto:larry.nichols@mail.wvu.edu)

How are social problems constituted via narrative and dialogue? How are outcomes influenced by contests among competing narratives? How do social problem narratives become institutionalized? How do they influence policy choices? How are social problem narratives modified over time, and with what consequences? We hope that this session will appeal to the full range of SSSP-ers, including not only traditional constructionists, but also colleagues with applied and/or conflict orientations who are interested in narration and claims-making.

**and OUR CO-SPONSORED SESSIONS**

## Teaching Social Problems Theory for Social Problems Courses in the Core Curriculum

(Co-sponsored with the Teaching Social Problems Division)



Organizer:

**Kathleen Lowney**

Valdosta State University

[klowney@valdosta.edu](mailto:klowney@valdosta.edu)

**Description:** Social problems courses are often a part of the general education distribution (or core) curriculum. As many of us know, this can be challenging: How can we teach social problems theory to majors (and potential majors) in a manner that also engages students who may never be able to take another sociology course? Which are the best teaching practices to serve both these student constituencies? Similarly, how can we balance the theoretical depth that we feel ethically compelled to convey with the topical breadth that is more attractive to students? For this session, then, we ask that you please share your tensions, ideas, and tips about teaching social problems in the core. Don't be shy!

## Social Problems and Theories of Identity: The Global Borderlands of Race, Gender, and Sexuality

(Co-sponsored with the Racial and Ethnic Minorities Division)

Organizers:

**Michelle Corbin**

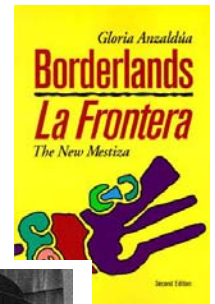
University of Maryland, College Park

[mcorbin@socy.umd.edu](mailto:mcorbin@socy.umd.edu)

**Melinda Messineo**

Ball State University

[mmessineo@bsu.edu](mailto:mmessineo@bsu.edu)



*"The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy. . . I am a border woman. I grew up between two cultures, Today we ask to be met halfway. This book is our invitation to you—from the new mestizas." (Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderland)*



This session seeks papers that address social problems at the intersections of multiple axes of power in the global present where the struggles at the borderlands have only intensified. These papers should explore how working at the borderlands of identities, structures, disciplines and paradigms can serve to dismantle and challenge the ongoing boundaries separating our movements. Such papers might address the intersections of race/class/gender/sexuality/nation.

Such papers might also address the interconnections between social problems usually theorized as separate but instead interrogated as multiply connected; the complexities and difficulties of border crossings that examine social problems in these ways; and the challenges facing scholars who are themselves unequally located in the relations of power that these borders create and enforce.

**THEMATIC****Border Control / Social Control:  
Theorizing Immigration as a Social Problem**

*(Co-sponsored with the Racial and Ethnic Minorities Division)*

**Organizers:****Kirsten Hunt**

Columbia University

[keh2010@columbia.edu](mailto:keh2010@columbia.edu)**Melinda Messineo**

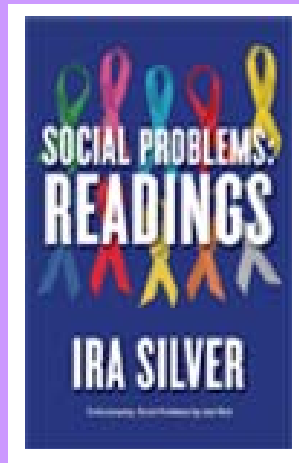
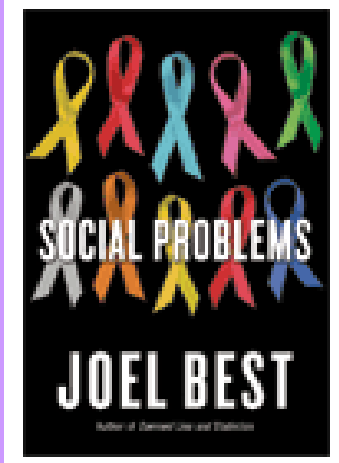
Ball State University

[mmessine@bsu.edu](mailto:mmessine@bsu.edu)

We seek submissions attuned to the local and global dynamics of border control as a mechanism of social control and the role of scholarship and research in both reproducing and challenging hegemonic constructions of immigrants. How do immigration policy and social problems scholarship intersect? Do rhetorical productions of immigrants as 'Other' legitimize and facilitate discriminatory practices and policies based on race and ethnicity? What historical and sectional interests are represented in social constructions of immigration as a social problem? For instance, what interests are being served by constructions of particular immigrant groups as constituting a security problem? What role do social problems analysts play in the construction of citizenship and how does this discourse produce and reproduce ideology and hegemony which justifies new local and global divisions, hierarchies, and relations of domination and subjugation?

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

*They're here – and just in time for Christmas...*



Spice up your consumerism with a little constructionism.

## PLEASE CONTRIBUTE TO OUR NEWSLETTER!

Submissions of all sorts are welcome! From comments and calls for papers, to brief analyses and critiques related to Social Problems Theory. Let us know your reactions to this newsletter, to events at the annual meetings, or inform us of your new work so we can help spread the word!

Mitch Berbrier, [berbrim@uah.edu](mailto:berbrim@uah.edu)

