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4

For a Cautious Naturalism

Jaber F. Gubrium

My reactions to Peter Ibarra and John Kitsuse's important paper come from one who is sympathetic to the point of view, and who indeed has framed much research in terms of social constructionism. Of course, like other frameworks, there are brands of constructionism and, to that extent, I have highlighted certain topics in my work and proceeded in my own fashion. I have not focused on claims-making activities—publicity—oriented to the state or public agencies, an emphasis that has come to virtually typify constructionist writing in the area. Rather, my instinct has been to consider the cultures of small worlds like support groups, psychiatric units, rehabilitation clinics, counseling centers, and nursing homes as a way of addressing the interactive and discursive features of personal realities (Gubrium 1989, 1991). Still, the analytic thrust of the research aligns with the spirit of Ibarra and Kitsuse's [originally Malcolm Spector and Kitsuse's [1977] (1987)] departure from the conventional position on social problems, one based on the understanding that social problems are accomplishments.

Ibarra and Kitsuse's paper, which is the latest formulation of this significant turn in social problems theorizing, centers my concern. As the authors make abundantly clear, to think of social problems as accomplishments implies that the problems are not objective conditions but are bound to the rhetorical claims-making activities of those who clarify, redefine, or counter the status of putatively objectionable conditions in society. The question is: Is the accent to be on how rhetoric *practically accomplishes* social problems, which Ibarra and Kitsuse repeatedly stress, or on the view that related rhetoric *is* social problems, which the authors seem to presume? In the following comments, I argue by means of a deconstruction of the paper's vocabulary that a perhaps inadvertent accent on the latter eclipses what Ibarra and Kitsuse refer to as *vernacular* constituents of moral discourse. While Ibarra and Kitsuse allege an interactionist focus and write about members and vernacular, their paper is

about publicity, conniving rhetoric, and practices that are neither "members" nor very vernacular.

The Sense of Agency

The question pinpoints the authors' sense of agency. With some telling exceptions, which I will take up later, their vocabulary reveals a world of wily, claims-making rhetoricians.

The Audience

Claims-makers do what they do with a certain aim (for all, or all those within a targeted category, to hear) and with a particular end (to convince everyone of their message). The audience is the public or publics at large, not small worlds such as households or friendship groups, nor delimited domains such as institutions or formal organizations. Whether the goal is to define a putatively objectionable condition or "condition-category" as a social problem or to defend the condition against such a status, messages are conveyed broadly, the more exhaustive the audience the better.

While Ibarra and Kitsuse do not expressly mention Ludwig Wittgenstein, they evidently have him in mind when they refer to a rather different sense of public, one referencing the social or dialogical, not uniquely private, character of discourse. Referring to the process they are studying, the authors state that it is "a language game into which actions are translated as publicly (and variously) readable expressions." To Wittgenstein, language games are not necessarily broadly public in the sense that they are governed by rules oriented to the public at large. Rather, regardless of the particular domain of application, language games are rules of speech and meaning that operate behind participants' backs, which participants' speech tacitly references and whose objects their speech realizes as they actively engage the game. In Wittgenstein's sense, language games are public because they do not uniquely belong to any one participant.

Ibarra and Kitsuse, however, privilege the public at large. As the authors note, "our field is fundamentally concerned with understanding the constitutive ('world-making') and strategic dimensions of claimants' discursive practices in demarcating moral objects of 'relevance' to a 'public.'" This public is the audience that reads newspapers and news magazines, and listens to the broadcast media. It is a decidedly media public, one whose received texts are to be studiously analyzed by the social constructionist for their reality-constituting features and by

products and not the more limited "publics" of smaller worlds. In describing the concept of "protection" as a rhetorical idiom, for example, the authors refer to Operation Rescue as "the name chosen by the now well-publicized antiabortion organization" (my emphasis). Later, speaking of the "rhetoric of unreason," they exemplify what they refer to as a "wide range of claims-making activity" in the following way: "teenagers adopt the destructive habit of cigarette smoking because of the way advertisers 'glamorize' it in targeted promotional campaigns" (my emphasis). Soon thereafter, in discussing the rhetoric of calamity, the "public press" itself comes to the fore, as in "a claim expressed in this rhetorical idiom may lend itself to garnering high degrees of serious and prolonged attention in the public press" (my emphasis). Even while a promotional campaign may be "targeted," the campaign is aimed at that particular, teenage public at large.

Targeted or not, the audiences to whom Ibarra and Kitsuse refer, and whom many constructionists study through media analysis, are a socially nebulous lot. While they may be teenagers, we are not invited to get a glimpse of the everyday worlds within which such an audience receives the rhetoric of claims-makers. Because the audience is a public at large, we are hardly apprised of the who, where, when, or how of what this alleged public does with the rhetoric of its forthcoming, shifting, or fictional social problems. The audience seems to be, well, "just there," mostly larger than life, resembling the conceptually fictive public that Herbert Blumer (1969, pp. 195-208) once railed against as an artifact of public opinion research.

I do not mean to suggest that fictive publics are not real in that they do not concretely enter into everyday experience. The conformist culture of teenage life makes what the public or "others" think weigh heavily on comportment, just as the widespread recognition of Alzheimer's disease has made older persons circumspect about forgetfulness in a way they might not have been if the disease had not become such a public issue. Rather, Ibarra and Kitsuse's agent speaks to an audience that is mainly just there to receive, internally undistinguished.

To be fair, Ibarra and Kitsuse do respond to Gusfield's observation about the almost exclusively public affairs focus of constructionists. The authors "broaden the subject matter" of social problems by arguing "for a reconsideration of the kinds of activities worth attending to as claims-making, extending them beyond the 'legal-rational' and state-centered realms." Yet audience still remains nebulous, for what broadening means in the text following this statement is an expansion of the research agenda to include diverse claims-making styles, variously appropriate to particular issues or appealing to particular audiences, among them the scientific (or styleless) style of persuasion, the comic, civic, journalistic,

legalistic, and subcultural styles. The realms to be considered are stylistic, not the realms of interaction ostensibly promised by the "interactionist-based" program said to comprise Spector and Kitsuse's ([1977] 1987) original statement of the constructionist approach. Accordingly, we are not as much to be apprised of how, say, scientists and their audiences articulate and respond to diverse rhetorical idioms in practice, as Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar (1979) describe for laboratory life, but rather how scientists, like other claims-makers, communicate with publics at large to specify or discount the problematic character of select social issues. For example, the disinterested, sober scientific style might be analyzed as a usage to convince the public that, indeed, *the data do clearly* speak for themselves in order to show that the ozone layer is being depleted and that, moral considerations notwithstanding, on *objective* grounds alone, there is reason to be alarmed.

The Rhetorician

Ibarra and Kitsuse's vocabulary conveys an agent who not only makes claims to publics at large, but does so as a complete rhetorician. The so-called objectivist concern with the object of a social problem and the conditions that bring the problem about gives way to a "different subject matter for the sociology of social problems" (Spector and Kitsuse [1977] 1987, p. 39). Analytically center stage are those who are engaged in "proposing or contesting the designation of a category of putative behaviors, expressions, or processes as 'offensive,' about which something of a remedial nature should be done, i.e., 'claims-making and responding activities'" (Ibarra and Kitsuse, quoting Spector and Kitsuse, [1977] 1987, p. 76).

But we do not encounter the actual claims-makers, only their claims, and counterclaims of course. Ibarra and Kitsuse's analytic categories are not behavioral, interpersonal, or situational; they are rhetorical. The categories serve to catalog very public speech, not conduct. Indeed, the speech is passive in the sense that its data are textual. As the authors note regarding the strict constructionist, who "never leaves language," "Whether s/he is paraphrasing members' arguments or recording their deeds, s/he is always in the realm of the textual." For Ibarra and Kitsuse, textuality refers to concrete texts—primarily the related contents of the print and broadcast media. The rhetorician is not an active persuader, who stands next to, over and above, or beneath his or her audience.

To the extent public texts become publicity, they affirm the presence of the agent. When there is a great deal of publicity for or against a putatively objectionable condition, Ibarra and Kitsuse's social constructionist subject is being loudly, and it is hoped clearly, heard. When there is

little publicity, the social problem under contention hardly exists. When there is no publicity, the agent is analytically nonexistent, even while there may be actual proponents or opponents of the objectionable quietly, but "silently," festering somewhere, perhaps in laboratories, in households, in community interest groups, in political organizations, among other not so public forums.

This raises an important methodological issue. If the existence of the agent is bound to publicity, then the social constructionist who cannot find related data in public texts must conclude that there is no social problem under construction. The concrete social relations that produce public texts are irrelevant, since the relations only gain their significance in respect to putatively objectionable conditions when publicity textualizes and broadcasts the reality of the conditions. Thus a social problem is constructively born, and only then. Events leading up to the decision to "go public" are given short shrift. Strictly speaking, the events are analytically silent, not gatherable as constructionist facts because they are not publicized. We cannot know how a public social problem affects the everyday lives of those who suffer its objectionable conditions until their lives are broadcast.

When publicity is the criterion for the birth of agency, the hard work of nonpublicly formulating putatively objectionable conditions into problems is lost. Fleeting as it might be, publicity must be about something and requires some form of evidence of the objectionable to be available to go public about, even while the "evidence" may be socially constructed and suffused with rhetoric in its own right. Except for public hoaxes, whose facts are otherwise real enough before they are revealed and accepted as hoaxes, a reality that can be convincingly conveyed as "observable" in circumstances of everyday life is required for there to be a social problem. Discerning reality by publicity, however, suggests problems are purely rhetorical on the large scale. Even Baudrillard's (1988) simulacra represent something and thus require the practical work of generating facsimiles (without reference to an actual source).

My own constructionist experience studying and analyzing the Alzheimer's disease movement has shown that the movement's publicity is linked to related, nonpublic neurophysiological, cognitive, and behavioral facts in a complex way (Gubrium 1986). Accompanying the movement's publicity, which began in 1979, was a new reading of neurophysiological and psychological facts in "senile" materials and data. There was, and now to a lesser degree continues to be, nonpublic controversy, mainly in academic journals, about whether the facts of senility are those of extended normal aging or disease. At this level, it is unclear whether or not there is a social problem in the related, putatively objectionable conditions. [But see Hernandez (1991) and Russo, Vitaliano,

and Young (1991) for controversy even at the level of what is to be considered objectionable.]

Knowingly or unknowingly, the movement has chosen to categorically separate normal aging and disease and their related facts so that it is forcefully claimed that "Alzheimer's disease is *not* normal aging!" Interestingly, the movement's success in turning public, political, and financial attention to the objectionable "disease" (not normal) facts has been accompanied by a lessening of the debate in academic texts. The point is that the hard, nonpublic side of the movement worked up what was needed for purposes of publicity, making it possible for certain scientific facts to be selectively and publicly referenced as the concrete neurophysiological and behavioral grounds of a disease. In turn, the academic controversies surrounding the facts are hardly, if ever, publicized. (My study itself remains academic and even rather esoteric at that.) This relatively unpublic activity is an important part of what Gale Miller and James Holstein (1989) generally call "social problems work."

While I have no reason to believe that the suppression of factual neurophysiological and psychological material has occurred in the Alzheimer's disease movement in order to sustain the public purity of the disease as a category separate from normal aging, limiting constructive agency to publicity does keep sociologically hidden what is publicly hidden. A good deal of what Ibarra and Kitsuse's social constructionist takes to be real as far as social problems are concerned might be the result of the less public work of concertedly or inadvertently insulating ontologically controversial material. It could very well be in the interest of the rhetorician of the putatively objectionable not to go public about such matters, that is, the difficult epistemological issues surrounding the nature of the reality that ostensibly is objectionable and that the rhetorician aims to call or not call a social problem, as the case might be. Evidence of this might be sociologically available in relatively nonpublic texts if not in the otherwise "hidden" confines of organizations linked in various ways to the putatively objectionable.

Ibarra and Kitsuse's rhetorician also is calculating. The language here is quite telling. The rhetorician not only is in the business of persuading or influencing, as a dictionary definition informs us is his or her stock in trade, but does so with guile. A social problem resembles a public chess game, with moves, gambits, and countermoves. As the authors write,

When viewed in general terms, the social problems process resembles a kind of game whose "moves" are perennially subject to interpretation and reinterpretation, whose aims are subject to dispute, whose players are ever shifting, whose settings are diverse, and whose nominal topics

stretch as far as the society's classification system can provide members with typifications of activities and processes.

Later, in describing "naturalizing" as a counterrhetorical move, they write that "the user of this *gambit* runs the risk of being labeled a 'cynic' or 'pessimist' (my emphasis).

Yet, it is a very strange chess game because the players constantly change and so do the aims. The imagery of the game regularly gives way to a sense of cabal with plots, intrigue, and schemes as the undergirding of publicity. Curiously, the very public text or publicity that is the admittedly limited area of the strict constructionist has a hidden agent, one that is not at all public in the sense of being evident in the media, whose texts are read by both the public at large and the constructionist. This wily hidden agent is read for us in the publicity by the strict constructionist, presenting the social movement to us as a "put on" or public drama of the objectionable. There is something not so textual that, by implication, animates the word, as if to inform us that the text really has no life of its own.

The Contrasting Tone of the Vernacular

This sense of the agent and the audience contrasts with the ontological tone of other terms—vernacular, mundane, member, and practical—telling exceptions to the foregoing vocabulary. It is not that these terms cannot refer to publicity and the rhetorician engaged in ordinary and practical activities, as agents might appear if conduct were analyzed as the everyday work of constructing social problems. However, the very public texts and wily rhetoricians inhabiting Ibarra and Kitsuse's social problems world do not appear to be featured in the vernacular, even while the term is assigned special significance because it appears in the title of their paper. It is said that moral discourse has "vernacular constituents," which I take to mean native and natural. As the authors point out, "Analysis consists of reconstructing the vernacular, not downgrading it or leaving it unexplicated."

The Mundane

In the context of this vocabulary, the mundanity of social problems activity is highlighted. Following Pollner's (1978, 1987) usage, Ibarra and Kitsuse urge us to feature the construction of social problems, not the conditions presumed to generate them, not acting as if the problems were categorically distinct from their production. We are to look upon those engaged in the construction of social problems as *orienting* to the

world, specifically, orienting to its more or less objectionable aspects as real and separate from themselves. As Ibarra and Kitsuse explain, this is

predicated upon what Pollner (1978) has called "mundane ontology," which entails a strict demarcation between the objects in the world, including the moral objects studied by sociologists, and persons' "perceptions," "beliefs," and "ideas" regarding those objects.

The orientational, not objective, quality of the demarcation is underscored as Ibarra and Kitsuse add, "What authorizes, idiomatically, the social problems process is the mundane *claim* that objects and their qualities have an existence independent of their apprehension" (my emphasis).

But in what sense can the mundane appear on the surface of the public texts and in the purview of the public at large, which are taken to constitute the ordinary actors and interactions of social problems formation? Are they not mere words in media? Are they not bereft of the practical activities—interpretation, definition, perception, ad hocing, categorizing, concrete denotation—that constitute texts and publicity? Where is the hard reality work that generates the publicity, belying the "moves" and "gambits" that media audiences hear or read about?

Like the public that is a thing at large, not a feature of language, and like the agent whose ordinary psychology is inferred from beneath cabalistic texts, the mundane in Ibarra and Kitsuse's framework is something vividly extraordinary. The strange chess game that is the construction of social problems is the work of actors without a concrete world, who, while the authors take the actors to be oriented to reality, are presented to us as oriented purely to publicity, to what can be put over on anyone suggestible enough to believe public claims.

But there is a vernacular world of the real even among the actors of this strange chess game, which Ibarra and Kitsuse's concentration on publicity does not open to view. The real is made up of potential-realities-for-their-more-or-less-wily-agents, among these the "angles," "stories," "images," "presentations," "reports," and other scenarios that are worked up to encapsulate what is intended for publics at large (see, for example, Altheide 1976, Tuchman 1978). The hyphenation is meant to underscore the intentionality of the real, where practice is part and parcel of the objects of production. Practice of the mundane is totally lost to inspection in exclusive attention to by-products such as publicity. As Marx noted in his reference to commodity fetishism in the economic analysis of products, we are not apprised of the social relations of production and how relations enter into the products of labor. We cannot escape the real (and its conditions), even while the real may be claimed to be images.

Members

Is the public, in general or in particular, simply a nebulous mass of receptive agents? This brings us to another term—member—which Ibarra and Kitsuse use extensively. For example, they write with regard to their perspective, "If then we change our perspective and assume the gaze of *members*, 'social problems' appears in a different light" (my emphasis). The world of social problems formation is peopled by members, which one would understand to include the public. Shortly thereafter, the authors further specify membership as practical in their view, stating that the constructionist's methodological stance "transforms members' practically based resources into researchable topics."

The term *member* is borrowed from ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967; Heritage 1984) and it is important to stress that, like the term *vernacular*, member implies member-of-something. In ethnomethodological usage, it highlights the contextuality of the actor's orientation to everyday life. As members, actors orient to objects, events, and information in terms of the concrete business at hand they have in the world, which is a way of calling attention to its mundane quality. It is sometimes said that these objects, events, and information are "indexical," their reality-for-the-actor indicative of his or her membership in a particular context of the real, with no irony intended. Contexts might otherwise be called the "language games" in which the actor participates.

Ibarra and Kitsuse's borrowing has special implications for the connotation of the public. If those who receive and respond to claims are members, which we would presume all actors to be in the authors' framework, there can be no practical public at large, select or otherwise. In practice, there are only mundane members of this or that circumstance to whom claims are made. In the vernacular, members are to be taken as native to their worlds, which, in turn, present natural objects and borders of life, as mundanely extraordinary as those natural objects and borders might sometimes be.

My studies of the Alzheimer's disease movement can shed concrete light on how membership mediates the public reception of disease claims (Gubrium 1986, 1991). The Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Association (ADDA) has mounted an extensive media campaign to tout and inform the public about the so-called disease of the century. Diverse images and detailed depictions of both the victim's and the caregiver's (the "second victim") experiences are publicized through a variety of mediums, from television programming to educational videotapes and chapter newsletters. I have been interested in how a particular public, namely, family members and significant others, responds to the publicity, especially how organizations and circumstances mediate the

interpretation of public claims about the disease and its typical care experiences.

Support groups for caregivers and local chapters of the ADRDA were observed over a three-year period in two North American cities. Some groups were closely affiliated with the ADRDA through a local chapter; others were not. Although all groups to some extent made use of ADRDA educational materials and usually were aware of ADRDA publicity, member responses to ADRDA claims and information depended on a group's culture of disease experiences. A few groups were decidedly self-help entities and could be stridently antiprofessional, at such times claiming that only laypersons with hands-on caregiving experience could know "what it's like," not the professionals. On these occasions, members tended to look upon professionally sponsored ADRDA claims with skepticism, preferring to see what was or was not disease, or disease related, in their own terms. Other support groups' memberships readily accepted information provided in educational material and encountered in the media, identifying and organizing the interpretation of their personal experiences according to the patterns and schemes presented.

It was often claimed that the caregiver goes through distinct stages in responding to the mental demise of a loved one, usually a spouse or parent. While this was very public information, the claim took on its meaning in the context of its reception. In support groups whose members were positively disposed to the educational materials and ADRDA publicity, members tended to interpret their own and others' disease experiences according to received experiential chronologies. Their individual problems and caregiving histories accorded with the personal side of the social problem the disease was claimed to be. In groups emphasizing self-help, members were more likely to scoff at any received pattern for the disease experience, especially on occasions of decidedly antiprofessional sentiment (Gubrium 1987b). Individual experiences, it was locally claimed, were too complicated to be captured by formulas. Group differences suggested that membership was more than a matter of the mundane, constructing reality on membership's own terms, including what is or is not a problem of everyday life.

For a Cautious Naturalism

If we are to attend to the process of social construction, as rhetorical as it might be, and if we are at the same time to treat the process as mundane and undertaken by members, we must attend to interactional practice. Practice provides an analytic context that tolerates simul-

taneously both Ibarra and Kitsuse's vocabulary of agency and their contrasting overture to the vernacular (see Bourdieu 1977, ch. 2). On the one hand, the language of rhetoric, publicity, and publics at large tends to decontextualize and deconcretize the social construction process in order to highlight its idiomatic quality, emphasizing its concertedly public discourse. On the other hand, the language of mundanity and membership concretizes and contextualizes, stressing what might be called the ordinary life worlds of publicity—the production, management, and consumption of images, slogans, and scripts. The view to practice centers on an agent whose enduring project is to resolve the seeming contradiction, displacing the contradiction from being theoretical to being a problem of everyday life.

We can think of the agent as a practitioner of everyday life (Gubrium 1988). As agent, the practitioner is located somewhere and therein is engaged in a project of meaning attuned both to the local conditions of his or her activity and the overall products of the enterprise. The conditions can be thought of as the *embeddedness* of the social construction process (Gubrium 1988; Gubrium and Holstein 1990), stressing the formal and informal organizational parameters of meaning that impinge on the agent or, putting it in reverse order, that provide the agent with interpretive resources. The agent's constructive activity is embedded in a context of interpretation. For example, whether or not the putatively objectionable condition of Alzheimer's disease home care is construed as a problem depends on the caregiver's interpretive resources. A support group whose local culture provides a well-articulated reading of disease and caregiving embeds the caregiver in a different understanding of what is going on at home than a support group that defends participants from the dubious interpretive claims of professionals. There are, of course, other layers of embeddedness, from the mediating conditions of gender (Smith 1987) to the categorical diversities of history and society (Foucault 1973), that figure in the social construction process. Yet location and embeddedness do not determine the social construction process. The practitioner of everyday life is a "bricoleur" in Levi-Strauss's (1962) sense of the term, making use of the bits and pieces of available interpretive material and rules of understanding to attach meaning to experience, as Weber (1947, p. 88) puts it. It is in the presentation, not the process of attachment that Ibarra and Kitsuse's rhetorical framework comes to the fore, providing a rich and intriguing set of categories for analysis.

The ordinary, practical quality of constructive agency requires one to methodologically tolerate the tension between culture and nature, attending to the mundane resolutions of practitioners. While on the one hand Ibarra and Kitsuse seem to catapult squarely into persuasive cul-

ture to argue their brand of social constructionism, their accompanying attraction to the language of the ordinary, on the other hand, suggests that a cautious naturalism is indicated. To put it simply, features of everyday life are treatable as natural and native, even if they are constructed. Members' projects take the things for granted as real and immutable. Thus what is understood as nature fixes culture, until it seems natural to undo or reinvent what was, as Garfinkel (1967) might put it, unnatural "all along." To conflate the vocabularies of rhetoric and the mundane as Ibarra and Kitsuse do, without a clear appropriation to interpretive practice, commits the kind of error that Norman Denzin (1970) made years ago in tying wholesale symbolic interaction to ethnomethodology (Zimmerman and Wieder 1970).

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