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1 Troubles, problems, and clientization

Jaber F. Gubrium and Margaretha Järvinen

Two seminal texts flag the title and the purpose of this anthology. One is Robert Emerson and Sheldon Messinger's (1977) article "The Micro-Politics of Trouble." The other is Michael Lipsky's (1980) book *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. The first is interactional and poses *what* and *how* questions: What are ordinary troubles and how do they relate to the construction of serviceable problems? These are important, especially for the idea of clienthood, because it critically approaches that as a product of the clientization process. The second is institutional and poses a *where* question: Where is social policy and how does that relate to service provision? It's also an important question, as it extends the location of policy formulation from legislation to front-line ("street-level") service activities, in our case to everyday settings of the clientization process. The purpose of the anthology is to begin to view the complex challenges of that process at the discretionary border of troubles and problems (cf. Gubrium & Holstein 1997). The challenges stem from the inexorable interplay of troubles and problems in everyday life.

The world of troubles

Emerson and Messinger's article is about four decades old, but it remains relevant because it continues to affirm the fruitfulness of distinguishing troubles from the broadly shared and often professionally-defined problems that ail us. Emerson and Messinger begin by suggesting that it is quickly forgotten that whether what bothers us eventually becomes, say, psychological, medical, or criminal, it was once something else less formal and less well-formulated. At the time Emerson and Messenger wrote, the highly normative word "deviance" was commonly used for social problems in sociology.

Our argument assumes that any social setting generates a number of evanescent, ambiguous difficulties that may ultimately be—but are not immediately—identified as "deviant." In many instances what is first recognized is a vague sense of "something wrong"—some "problem"

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or “trouble.” . . . This [article] will explore the processes whereby troubles are identified, defined, responded to, and sometimes transformed into a recognized form of deviance.

(Emerson & Messinger 1977, p. 121)

Vagueness and noticing

The inspiration for the argument appears immediately. We are introduced to the idea that there is a world of troubles that is distinct from the world of problems. As evanescence would have it, the world of troubles is murky, not as settled or as clear-cut as the world of problems. Troubles’ key characteristic—*vagueness*—refers to something being wrong, but in that world it’s not clear what that is or why it is so. As troubles are not part of the world of deviance or problems, they are formally out of sight in professional understanding. If troubles are given any attention, they are anecdotal, newsy perhaps, but undisciplined and removed from trained sensibilities.

Emerson and Messenger provide familiar examples of troublesome experiences. If the definition of problems begins with formal procedures such as psychological assessment, medical diagnosis, or adjudication, the onset of troubles starts with noticing that something is wrong. *Noticing* is the parallel by-word to problem assessment. Vague as troubles might be, they are enduringly present in life and bothersome on many fronts, from the troubles of bodies, behaviors, and minds, to troubling relationships and groups. The authors explain:

The perception of “something wrong” is often vague at the outset: a woman notices that she is gaining weight, or that she is frequently depressed; a husband realizes that his wife is drinking more than usual, or is beginning to stay out later after work; parents see their daughter getting overly interested in boys, or their son starting to hang out with a tough gang of friends.

(Emerson & Messinger 1977, pp. 121–122)

Unlike formal procedures, noticing does not necessarily lead to assessment or intervention. A husband or a wife may notice something wrong with a family member, but keep it to themselves and do nothing about it. Or they may share it with each other. They might mention it to the subject of what is noticed. They may or may not bring it to professional attention. They might even dismiss and ignore what seemed to be wrong as insignificant and nothing to fuss about in the scheme of things. The important difference between troubles and problems on this front is that problem designations lead to a chain of relatively predictable responses that troubles commonly do not. Troubles are not driven by predesignated activities and formal missions. Troubles, of course, have a describable social organization, whose natural

history can be studied. Problems, in contrast, are more formally organized today than ever, which, as we will see, has been the rub of many social critics.

The world of problems

Troubles are subject to the challenges of old, new, and dissenting problem categories and related social policies. Increasingly, institutions organize problem construction and manage the consequences (see Gubrium & Holstein 2000, 2001). Troubles are present across the life course; they are not the exclusive property of any stage of living. In contemporary society, troubles commonly are muddled and undefined until they are subjected to professional scrutiny. The “gaze” of experts transforms them into certifiable conditions, from specific diseases, disabilities, and dysfunctions, to particular crimes and transgressions (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer 2003). The idea of expertise itself is increasingly extending to the expert client and to expertly-informed laypersons in general (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer 2012).

Clarity and problematization

Human service professionals—counselors, schoolteachers, life coaches, nurses, doctors, physiotherapists, care assistants, social workers, psychologists, police officers, attorneys, judges, prison guards, and probation officers, among others—deal with a broad range of problems. Learning difficulties, child abuse, troubled youth, parenting issues, self-neglect and elderly care, sexual assault, mental illness, addiction, and unemployment abound in contemporary life. Troubling as these might be, they must be constructed as problems for professionals to appropriately respond to them. Human service provision starts from there. Still, in the everyday experience of those concerned, service providers and users alike, the related world of everyday troubles that is professionally undefined remains. It doesn’t disappear when troubles are turned into problems. It is a world whose troubles persist at the border of the acceptable and the unacceptable, the insistently normal and potentially problematic, the well-recognized and the murky. It is a world enormously important to service provision, but outside the formal purview of professional practice. It is a world that is enduringly part of life, serving as the existential basis of the challenges of clientization.

If a key characteristic of troubles is vagueness, its counterpart for problems is *clarity*. This isn’t to say that problems are clear from the start or that they are eventually completely clarified. Problems are continually subject to clarification, the paths of which are strewn with clarifying claims and counterclaims (see Spector & Kitsuse 1987, 1977; Schneider 1985; Best 2012). This is the stock-in-trade of social movements, from political and economic movements to newer identity movements. As far as clarity is concerned, the goal of social movements is to transform the vagueness of what is troublesome into what is clearly problematic. Whether troubles center on the body,

behavior, the mind, relationships, or groups, the mission is two-pronged: to establish the taken-for-grantedness of a problem in what is otherwise vaguely understood, and to marshal proof for making that evident. As John McCarthy and Mayer Zald (1977) instructed years ago, clarification is not just cognitive, but entails organization, without which the clarification process would falter or fail. This reminds us that problem clarification is tied to its mode and relations of production.

Challenges to problem clarity also are the stock-in-trade of social movements. This is evident today especially in challenges to the taken-for-grantedness of human service problems. Efforts to deproblematize troubles have emerged on many fronts, from the goal of deproblematizing drug use, body weight, and alternative sexualities, to the aim of deproblematizing particular groups and relationships. These also are two-pronged. Whether it is being overweight, having a mental illness, being addicted, or undesirable peer influences, the aim on one front is to question the assumption that these are self-evident problems and on the other to provide factual proof of that. "Naturalization," "normalization", and "neutralization" are common terms of reference for this (see Sykes & Matza 1957; Foucault 1977; Costello 2000). Wayne Brekhus (1998) would refer to this as the process of "unmarking" problems so that what was marked as clear and evident becomes virtually unnoticed and, by virtue of that, "unremarkable."

The world of problems extends beyond social movements to what is organizationally established and professionally relevant, the terrain with which this book is concerned. This part of that world has grown rapidly. Guiding texts, such as various editions of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)* of the American Psychiatric Association and the many versions of the *Big Book* of self-help addiction groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, are well-known and widely used. They concretely inform a huge public and a swath of service organizations of what is taken-for-granted as potentially problematic, not just troublesome, in our lives. *DSM* alone provides a problematizing system for virtually every conceivable form of conduct, quantitatively organized in terms of "too much" or "too little." It is just one of a panoply of texts whose discursive conventions are well-established, offering formal guidance for how to problematize troubles by eclipsing their vagueness. More and more, problematization is textually-mediated, as Dorothy Smith (1987, 1990) would put it, institutionally and professionally organized not only to categorize, but to actually write and read problems into troubled lives.

Clientization

This brings us to those whose troubles are turned into problems in human services—the clients of service provision—and the clientization process. The term "clientization" was coined by Clifford Geertz (1978) to describe the peasant market relationship he was studying while doing fieldwork in Sefrou,

a Moroccan town. As Geertz explains, the bazaar economy has few if any fixed prices, but like most markets the principle of selling high and buying low applies. Sellers want the highest price they can muster, and buyers want the lowest price they can get. But, as Geertz points out, this is vague and precarious, with few if any rules about what price level to begin bargaining. An effective solution to the problem comes in the form of clientization. In repeat transactions, there is a tendency to establish clear relationships between sellers and buyers about how high and how low bargaining is expected to transpire in particular cases. The result is that "clientization reduces search to manageable proportions and transforms a diffuse mob into a stable collection of familiar antagonists" (p. 30). Geertz states that this does not establish a dependency relationship, but merely provides for rationalized competition: "Clientship is symmetrical, equalitarian, and oppositional" (p. 30).

Globalized dependency and rationalization

The term as it's come to be used in human service does connote dependency, something closer to the idea of the role of a client or clienthood in relation to provider roles, which resonates patronage. Unlike bazaar economies, human service relationships and transactions operate within bureaucracies. As Smith (1987, 1990) would have it, these are relationships of ruling; they have built-in dependencies. The client of an attorney depends on the attorney for legal advice and adjudication, not the other way around. The client of a social worker depends on the worker for needs assessment and service intervention, not the other way around. The relationship is asymmetrical. If we combine this meaning with Geertz's, the outcome has an added value as far as problem clarification is concerned. Being a client or clienthood enhances both the clarity that reduces the murkiness of fleeting relationships and the directional clarity that hierarchical exchange provides. Put into action, the relationship is a one-way street that is well-signposted for all concerned to make their way. This describes the traditional bureaucratic model of the human service encounter.

According to prominent social critics, the world of troubles has been unwittingly flooded, if not displaced, by the world of problems. Some argue that the matter of turning troubles into problems has been unfolding for decades and is now complete. Denizens of the world of troubles have become "clientized" and, as a result, that world has disappeared. This has transpired before an unknowing public, who have been lulled into its naturalness, so it seems. Infused with rationalization and dependency, we have become the clients of a world we have been complicit in creating. The critique began in earnest after World War II with the rise of the welfare state and the rapid proliferation of human service professions. These observations are significant, as they alert us to the alleged global proportion of the trends.

On one side of the Atlantic and early on, David Riesman (1950) focused on the rapid displacement of an inwardly-driven American character by an

outwardly-responsive one. Americans have become a nation of individuals attuned to the influence of others, Riesman argued, in particular the identity-defining agents who are increasingly prevalent in American life. As if to bring into view who these agents are, a decade later Erving Goffman (1961) featured the asylum-like characteristics of what he called “total institutions.” In focus were the organizational influences of displacement, much of these products of human services. “Totality” and “totalization” became popular buzzwords for the condition of society, hardening the case for globalized clientization, even while Goffman’s (1983) concurrent sense of the “interaction order” stood to unravel it. Adding to the mix, a decade afterward and alarmed by the proliferation of the service professions, Christopher Lasch (1977) captured the popular imagination by lamenting the displacement of what he called a “haven” or private familial world by the public clienthoods of the human services. One of the most recent American critics and equally popular, George Ritzer (1993) applied a business metaphor in depicting what he calls the “McDonaldization” of society, a condition favoring predictability, calculability, and control.

The other side of the Atlantic had its own critics, characteristically steeped in history and philosophy, more abstruse and less folksy, perhaps, than the other side, but offering a parallel and equally popular argument. Michel Foucault was one of the most prominent and continues to inspire commentary on the condition of society, both its global “disciplinary” trends and the organization of institutional particulars. Foucault’s book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977 [first published in French in 1975]) was exemplary. The operating concept pertinent to the condition of society was “discourse.” Foucault argued that the condition of society as we know it was given birth centuries ago. Along with the associated birth of professions and bureaucratic organizations, the discursive horizons of troubles gave way to the world of problems, reflexively transforming “something wrong” into something remediable. From Germany, Jürgen Habermas’ (1984, 1987) magnum opus *Theory of Communicative Action* took its point of departure from the life world, a world we might figure deploys troubles, among other murky social forms. Habermas argued that this world has been “colonized” or disabled by regulatory processes such as clientization, whose interpretive practices work against the regulatory ideal of open and democratic communication. In the United Kingdom, Nikolas Rose (1989, 1993, 1996, 2006; Miller & Rose 2008) brought forward what Foucault saw coming long ago to argue that the current condition of society extends to “life itself.” Especially pertinent was Rose’s argument that troubled identities have become the complete clients of the “psy” disciplines, which not only “govern” our souls, but combine expertise, subjectivity, and organization for its identities.

Turning troubles into problems

Characteristically, such critics take a macroscopic view of the conditions of society, of clientization in our case. They form their arguments at a considerable distance from the lived experiences and concrete relationships of those concerned (cf. Kerr 1999). “Trendy” as they are, the changes are popularly heard as total, unidirectional, and irreversible, even while close readings of their texts are not that clear-cut. This is understandable, given the grand sweep and moral tenor of their depictions. But as empirically-sensitive as they claim to be, they fail to give equal attention to the gamut of untidy practical variations in the trends. Capitalizing on assumptions of central tendency, trendy arguments hide important differences in the particulars of what the trends are about. The utility of incorporating a microscopic perspective stems from opening to view, from the ground up, the complex challenges of the clientization process on the front lines of service provision, at the discretionary border of troubles and problems.

The where question

This brings us to the *where* question and the other seminal text that flags the title and purpose of this book—Lipsky’s (1980) *Street-Level Bureaucracy*. Lipsky encourages us to explore places we might not have considered looking if the conditions of society were as general as the critics claim them to be. Lipsky advises us to open to view the murky, front-line activities of the conditions of society, which “are not reducible to programmed formats.” He encourages us to look in order to see how policy is realized at the “street-level” in the discretionary flux of service provision. If social conditions, their trends, and their policies are seemingly total and unidirectional, Lipsky suggests that the local challenges of practice move in many directions. The new *where* at the street-level stands to make visible the clarifying practices of society on the ground, where diverse particulars are as important to clientization as the general and global. Presenting the central argument of his book and ending with a suggested focus on the challenges of “client-processing,” Lipsky writes:

The book is grounded in observations of the collective behavior of public service organizations and advances a theory of the work of street-level bureaucracies as individual workers experience it. I argue that the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, effectively become the public policies they carry out. I maintain that public policy is not best understood as made in legislatures or top-floor suites of high-ranking administrators. These decision-making arenas are important, of course, but they do not represent the complete picture. To the mix of places where policies are made, one must add the crowded

offices and daily encounters of street-level workers. Further, I point out that policy conflict is not only expressed as the contention of interest groups, as we have come to expect. It is also located in the struggles between individual workers and citizens who challenge or submit to client-processing.

(Lipsky 1980, p. xiii)

At close range, turning troubles into problems is not as rationalized as globalized social trends would have it. If there are trends, they are the “trends” of practice, whose methodical and artful constructions move in many directions. At close range, we find that both service providers and service users may be expert in how the dominance of pertinent discourses affect their work and lives, responding to that in common at times by organizing alternatives, blurring their differences. Some troubles may not be problematized. Some problems may be deproblematized. Both troubles and problems are subject to the ever-present categorical activity, deployed discourses, invoked expertise, organized contexts, stakes in the matter, imaginings, negotiations, and resistances of everyday life (Gubrium & Holstein 2001). The life world is still there, its vagueness continually working its way into, out of, or around the problems that engage it. The life world is not historical. If it is increasingly colonized, its discursive practices remain. Turning troubles into problems is rendered problematic by the influence and collaboration of professionals and laypersons alike. Warrantable intelligence and definitional skill combine with the contingencies of circumstance to effect or elide relevances in the practices of clientization (Garfinkel 1967; Holstein & Gubrium 2000).

On the ground, old understandings may share the constructive stage with new and controversial approaches, obviating the condition of totality (see Peyrot & Burns 2010, for example). Some approaches come close to abrogating the traditional sense of serviceable problems, leaving problem construction to users’ discretion and individuals’ ostensibly rational choices in the matter (Järvinen 2008; Järvinen & Miller 2010). Neo-liberal developments are significantly softening the border between the world of troubles and the world of problems. More and more, we are witnessing new and controversial social policy developments influencing, but not displacing, the front-line practices of what is and isn’t a serviceable problem. At the same time, distinctive populations expand problem categories culled from cultural difference. Some say that this has produced a sense of crisis in the meaning of intervention (Fabricant & Burghardt 1992; Bloom & Farragher 2011).

But the crisis is overdrawn. The crisis is political, not existential. As long as experience is centered in both the vagueness of troubles and the clarity of problems, the challenges of turning troubles into problems won’t go away. On this front, we might usefully take up a version of the advice Kaspar Villadsen (2012) applied to his own project: “We may hardly hope to suspend or resolve [the paradoxes] once and for all, but should rather look for ways

of rendering them productive” (p. 63). The life world may be complicit in its colonization, but it isn’t displaced by it. The lived border between troubles and problems remains an integral challenge of experience. It is an equally integral part of service provision. Service crises come and go; the construction and reconstruction of experience, clientization in particular, remain (see Gubrium & Holstein 2000, 2001).

The title *Turning Troubles into Problems* is not meant to imply direction. If it weren’t so awkward, the title might more properly have been written as a set of empirical questions about whether and, if so, how, when, where, why, and with whom are troubles turned into problems. Further to these, which troubles and which problems? The contributors of the book take up such questions as they focus at close range on the institutional and the personal sides of the matter. While social policy and the broader scheme of things lead the way, facts on the ground serve to document the particulars—the confirmations, the exceptions, the paradoxes, and the alternatives. The complexities of the answers as they bear on clientization are front and center.

This book extends the microscopic consideration of the challenges of clientization initiated by two other edited books. The first to appear was titled *Listening to the Welfare State*, edited by Michael Seltzer, Christian Kullberg, Søren Peter Olesen, and Ilmari Rostila (2001). It’s an important volume because it brings us close to practice by featuring various forms of conversation and discourse analysis as they bear on the construction of client identities in human service. What are aptly called the “micro-landscapes” of human service provision are center stage. The second book to appear was titled *Constructing Clienthood in Social Work and Human Services*, edited by Christopher Hall, Kirsi Juhila, Nigel Parton, and Tarja Pösö (2003). Its importance derives from a concern with the categorical activities of the clientization process, showing us, as the earlier volume does, that clientization doesn’t just simply occur and develop, as a trend approach might suggest, but rather involves everyday work, is methodical in practice, and can produce counterintuitive results.

Challenges of clientization

The chapters of *Turning Troubles into Problems* add to the microscopic mix by highlighting the surprising local complexity of the clientization process when compared to the depiction of globalized trends. It is surprising because what is critically represented as ubiquitous and emergent, is locally diverse, contentious, and even contradictory. The book presents the challenges of clientization on four fronts: individual challenges, collective challenges, competing perspectives, and contending clienthoods. These are not fully separate and distinct; several chapters take up challenges falling on more than one front. Chapter placement, rather, is a matter of emphasis or point of departure.

Individual challenges

The chapters of Part I focus on the individual challenges of clientization. This refers to the everyday moves that individual clients make or don't make in shaping clienthood. As the chapters show, these are active agents in developing their place in the clientization process. Jens Kofod shows in his chapter on daily life in elderly care homes that being passive can be a strategic form of activeness used by elderly residents to avoid being ignored or worse. Not infringing on staff work routines may be the best strategy residents have to maintain their autonomy and, as a result, get their way with staff members. Activeness also comes in the form of direct challenges to clientization. As Maarit Alasuutari describes in her chapter on parent constructions of problem location and clienthood in child welfare services, parents are not passive bystanders in assessments of, and interventions in, their children's problems. If some bemusedly comply with professional assessments, others actively discern clienthood on their own terms, which can include the clientization of service providers. Margaretha Järvinen's chapter extends this to the active agency of drug users who are variably successful in resisting institutional identities. As she points out, resistance need not lead to service backlashes or expulsion, but can be accommodated in the tolerant interstices of institutional routine.

Collective challenges

The chapters of Part II deal with collective challenges of clientization. This refers to the co-ordinated actions that service users take in forming communities of clienthood at odds with professional understandings. Darin Weinberg's chapter on psychiatric diagnosis as collective action opens to view how clients in a residential therapeutic community virtually replace psychiatric designations of mental illness with "life issues," becoming clients and therapists of their own troubled lives. In her chapter on what she calls "wild girls," Kathrine Vitus points us to the possibility of creating and maintaining physical, not just communal, space within the welfare system for living together on deproblematized terms. The chapter contributed by Nanna Mik-Meyer describes how weight loss counselors and the overweight clients they serve in a weight loss program collaborate to reproduce what is locally imagined to be the psychology of weight gain and loss. These clients participate side-by-side with other accepted, if annoying, overweight clients who strategically ignore what is otherwise imaginatively reproduced by strictly focusing on the caloric side of the problem. The globalized trend of clientization within these settings moves in different, even oppositional directions.

Competing perspectives

Part III's chapters feature the competing perspectives that commonly bear on specific service problems. The perspectives can contrast mightily in their

constructions of clienthood. The chapter by Tova Band-Winterstein, Israel Doron, and Sigal Naim compares social workers' and older persons' perceptions of elder self-neglect. What social workers prioritize as unhealthy and in need of intervention contrasts with older persons' views of things. For the elderly, help with issues of neglect, not self-neglect, can entail assistance in living, but not changes in a longstanding way of life. Erika Gubrium's chapter on participants in a labor activation program describes what it means in their own terms to move along a trajectory toward work. Participant comments and concerns illustrate that the value of working and holding jobs continuously relates to other life priorities, complicating the idea of what activation outcomes are in the scheme of things. Thomas Ugelvik's chapter takes us inside a remand prison and presents "the system" from the inmates' point of view. Ugelvik argues that inmate descriptions should be understood in relation to their social location in the prison and the prisoner's moral culture, not in terms of the descriptions' accuracy in depicting imprisonment.

Contending clienthoods

Closing the book, the chapters of Part IV deal with contending senses of clienthood operating in the same service context. Lara Foley, in her chapter, presents us with the job dilemma facing sexual assault nurse examiners, who in gathering evidence for or against assault must wend their way between viewing and responding to it as evidence of legal assault on the one hand, and seeing to the extra-legal care needs of the assaulted on the other. Clienthood is continually implicated along the way. In his chapter, James Holstein shows how the issue of mental hospitalization in commitment hearings fluctuates in discursive practice between contending options for clienthood. On the one side is the option of tenable community living, and on the other side the option grave disability. One leads to a return to the community, the other leads to institutionalization, both subject to the related definitional work of clientization. Finally, Richard Tewksbury and David Patrick Connor's chapter on sex offender registration and notification describes the consequences of rampant clientization, illustrating what can happen after adjudication when clients, in this case sex offenders, are so fully and continuously clientized that they are virtually pushed out of society. They are not just sexual offenders but social pariahs, problems for everyone in every place.

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