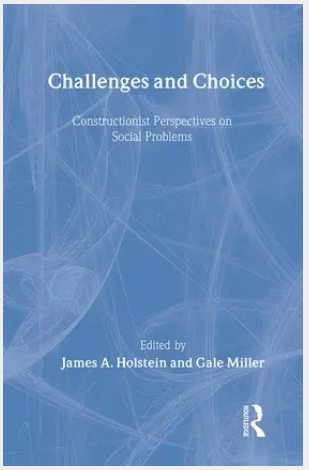
Holstein / Miller

Challenges and Choices

Constructionist Perspectives on Social Problems



The social constructionist perspective has revolutionized the way that social scientists investigate social problems. Constructing Social Problems (Spector and Kitsuse [1977] 2001) offered the guiding statement of the approach, which both transformed and revitalized the sociology of social problems, propelling it into a quarter century of exciting and innovative empirical research. John Kitsuse and Malcolm Spector challenged conventional approaches to the field; they insisted on treating social problems as social constructions--as the products of claims-making and constitutive definitional processes. The purpose of this book is to highlight contemporary challenges to the social constructionist perspective on social problems. In 1993, two collections of essays, Reconsidering Social Constructionism: Debates in Social Problems Theory (Holstein and Miller 1993) and Constructionist Controversies: Issues in Social Problems Theory (Miller and Holstein 1993), brought a wide variety of constructionist challenges into focus. Challenges and Choices attempts to distill these debates, and offers some compelling suggestions for how challenges may be met and where constructionist studies might proceed in the future. While each of the essays in this volume deeply appreciates the constructionist approach, each of them points to issues and choices that social constructionists must confront if the perspective is to continue to be a vital part of ongoing debates on social problems. The essays critique previous constructionist formulations; make suggestions for advancing, expanding, or diversifying the constructionist agenda; and challenge the perspective to move in new directions. They remind us that social constructionism is an ongoing, not a finished, product, and the essays point to some of the choices available to social constructionists in moving their projects into new, even uncharted, territories. James A. Holstein and Gale Miller are professors in the Department of Social and Cultural Sciences at Marquette University.

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