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## Social Problems as Constructs of Social Reality<sup>3</sup>

### Abstract

Social problems are perceived situations incompatible with the values of a significant number of people, which lead to negative social and economic consequences. Their basic characteristics are: that they are predominantly caused by social factors, mass, awareness of their existence and that they can be eliminated by social measures and interventions.

The paper analyzes whether social problems are objective social facts that are not questionable or whether social constructs are based on perception, interiorization and cultural diversity. In particular, the influence of social constructivism on the relation of social workers and users, i.e. understanding of the nature of social needs, is pointed out.

Social problems, become part of human reality through the processes of externalization, objectification and internalization, which indicates that they can to a significant extent be considered social constructs. This can explain why some of the phenomena, which from the point of view of objective criteria represent social problems in some societies and they are perceived as such, unlike others. In this sense, social problems are not only “objective social facts”, but also social artifacts, products of cultural, value and historical exchanges among people.

By rejecting a linear approach in interpreting unsatisfied social needs and introducing the approach of “ignorance” of social workers, i.e. “subjectivity” expressed in the user’s perception of the problem, social constructivism em-

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phasizes the approaches to empowerment, participation and involvement. Language as a social construction in the understanding and explanation of reality and processes in social work introduces terms of strength, resources, assessment and reflection.

**Key words:** social problems, social constructivism, objectivity, subjectivity, social work.

## The Concept and Characteristics of Social Problems

Poverty, unemployment, crime, domestic violence, corruption are some of the first associations for social problems. What makes them social problems? What characteristics should a situation have to be labeled with this term?

The concept of a social problem was created within the framework of social medicine and organicist positivist sociology. This term was used to denote massive organic or mental diseases (tuberculosis, alcoholism, infectious diseases) that were created as a result of unfavorable economic and social living conditions (Milosavljević 2003: 18). With the development of social policy and social protection, social problems are increasingly associated with the so-called social cases, i.e. objective events that adversely affect individuals, social groups and communities, preventing them from adequately meeting personal and collective needs, which requires them to have adequate institutional and systematic support. Although there are various interpretations of social problems, most authors agree that they are: an integral, though unwanted part of social processes, that they are socially conditioned, that they affect a large number of people and cause consequences that are contrary to the values of a significant number of people.

In this sense, the basic characteristics of social problems are:

1. Continuity, presence in all socio-economic systems.
2. They arise primarily due to the action of social factors.
3. Massiveness, they cause adverse economic, health and emotional consequences in a significant number of people.
4. There is awareness of the majority of citizens about their presence and the consequences they are causing.
5. Preventably, social measures can eliminate or reduce their detrimental effect.

These elements indicate that social problems can be viewed as a combination of objective circumstances and their subjective interpretation (Mooney, Knox and Schacht 2006: 3). What makes them objective? Of course, the fact of continuity, a constant presence in all economic

epochs. For example, poverty, as a classic social problem, changes its contents and forms, but it is a persistent, multidimensional, mass social phenomenon, which is constantly reproduced. It arises with the first forms of economic stratification, the division into the rich and the poor. In this sense, it is primarily conditioned by social factors, and it is also logical that by the action of these same factors it can be eliminated. Social problems cause different negative consequences for individuals, groups and society as a whole. It seems that this view should not be questioned and can be considered objective. However, functionalist-oriented theorists believe that socially negative phenomena have two dimensions: manifest and latent. Thus, poverty, unemployment, crime, prostitution are manifestly negative, as they appear as such in the consciousness of most people. Still, from a standpoint of stability, integrations and development of society, their latent function is positive. Thus Emil Durkheim, the founder of functionalism, argued that crime is a useful social phenomenon, as it strengthens collective consciousness (social norms, values and perceptions), and causes a social reaction of condemnation, which in turn strengthens collective values and morality. Durkheim, among other things, considers that positive (normal) social phenomena are the ones that are average (common) for a certain type of society in a certain developmental phase (Dirkem 1961). The fact that they are usual according to Durkheim indicates their usefulness to society, otherwise they would not survive. From similar points of view Kingsley Davis (1961) also explains the positive latent function of prostitution that is reflected in the control and direction of sexual instincts, i.e. needs (Davis 1961). From the point of view of these interpretations, social problems have not only negative but also objectively positive consequences, bearing in mind the functioning of the whole society, and not just the welfare of individuals. In this context, the view that the unemployment rate of up to 5% can be considered prosperous (Milosavljević 2003: 81) can be interpreted in similar way, as it strengthens competitiveness and provides “reserve workforce” for less paid and unattractive jobs. Functionalists actually point out the difference between form and function. The form refers to the shape, something that is visible (manifest), and the function to a purpose, which does not have to be easily visible, but can have its own hidden (latent) function. Still functionalists agree that there must be awareness that a certain phenomenon is manifestly negative. Consciousness is thus one of the basic determinants of social problems, since its existence indicates the presence and spread (certainty) of a certain unwanted phenomenon.

From the point of view of psychology, consciousness can be defined in the most general sense as the universality of one's own psychic experiences (feelings, perceptions, memories, thoughts, ideas, associations, feelings, needs, etc.) that we are able to directly see by introspection and relatively clearly describe or express in a different way. In sociology, it would represent a system of beliefs, ideas, attitudes, values and knowledge, created under the influence of tradition and sociocultural factors (Vidanović 2006: 209.).

In this sense, awareness of the existence of a social problem arises as a result of our psychic experiences, i.e. beliefs and attitudes that some kind of phenomenon is unwanted and massive. Its formation is influenced by tradition and socio-cultural factors, which can imply that an identical phenomenon is observed and evaluated differently in different societies. Take, for example, obesity. For many years this phenomenon was not considered unwanted, even considered a desirable, indicator of wealth and "health". Today, the obesity epidemic is one of the most prevalent social problems, with many not yet aware of its existence and its negative consequences. According to the World Health Organization, body mass index (BMI) of 25 to 30 indicates overweight, while values over 30 are considered obesity. According to the same organization in the world, 39% of adult males and 38% of adult women have an overweight (BMI of over 25), of which 15% of women and 11% of men are obese (WHO 2016). In the United States, 72.8% of the population is overweight, of which 33.6% are obese. In Europe, Malta, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Andorra are dominant, with over 25% of the overweight population, in South America Argentina with 26.7% and Chile with 24.8%, in the Middle East Saudi Arabia with 28% obesity, while Australia has 27.6% (WHO, 2016)). In Serbia, in 2013, more than half of the population (56.3%) were overnourished, 35.1% preobese and 21.2% obese Institut za javno zdravlje „Dr Milan Jovanović Batut 2014). From 2006 to 2013, there was an increase in the percentage of obese people from 17.3 to 21.2. According to official statistical data in Serbia without Kosovo and Metohija, there are 7,498,001 inhabitants (Republički zavod za statistiku 2015), which would mean that 2.624 300 is preobese, that is, 1.574.580 are obese. Obesity causes numerous unwanted health effects, costs of treatment, productivity, quality of life. McKinsey Institute's 2014 report states that obesity costs \$ 2 trillion worldwide, which is 5% less than smoking and armed violence, war and terrorism, 600 billion more than alcoholism, or 2.8% of global GDP expenditure (McKinsey Global Institute, 2014). For example, according to estimates in Serbia, about 627,000 are poor (Tim za socijalno isključivanje i smanjenje siromašt-

va, 2015, about 620,000 are unemployed persons (Nacionalna služba za zapošljavanje 2017), there were 1926 sentences for criminal offenses against minors in 2015 (Republički zavod za statistiku, 2016), while, as stated, about 1.574. 580 citizens of Serbia are obese. By comparing the data, we can conclude that obesity is an even more massive phenomenon, which causes numerous harmful consequences, but most Serbian citizens would not recognize or identify it as one of the key social problems. How then do social problems arise, i.e. awareness of their existence, if it is obvious that objective indicators are not sufficient criteria? The teachings of social constructivism offer possible explanations.

### **Social Constructivism**

The term construction is derived from the Latin word *construere*, which denotes a process by which a whole is assembled from parts (elements) or is the result of such a process (Vujaklija 1980: 325). In this sense, constructivism would have the meaning of a process in which a certain phenomenon occurs through the action of various elements.

Constructivism as the theoretical concept rests on the starting points that each person defines his own reality, and the way of acquiring knowledge is unique to each individual. Knowledge is not acquired passively, but is the result of the activities of constructing a person who learns (Glaserfeld 1995: 56). Constructivists do not confuse objectivism by subjectivism, but by emphasizing the importance of participation they try to overcome the dualism between subjective and objective (Ajduković 2008). The emphasis is on subjective reference frames, own perceptions and interpretations, so sometimes the very possibility of the existence of an independent reality is denied (Burr 1995). Kuhn, who by many opinions was the founder of this direction, thought that theories and scientific knowledge were created in the function of changing and developing social consciousness and values, depending on the different periods of social development. He rejects the division into theoretical and empirical knowledge, pointing out that the meanings of scientific expressions are determined by theory and practice, and the experiential facts are not independent, but arise under the influence of theoretical meanings and interpretations. Through the term 'contextual relativism', he explains that truth is neither in the outside world, nor in man, but in the interaction between man and the world (Kuhn 1974: 176). In this sense, the conditions under which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically placed exchanges among people, while

knowledge is one of many coordinated activities of individuals that is subject to processes of change through communication, negotiation, conflicts, as well as any other human interaction (Gergen 1985: 63).

The basic principles of constructivist approaches can be summarized in the following (Burr, 1995: 33-35):

1. **Knowledge is not reliable.** Truths are products of human interpretation and acceptance, which does not mean they are forever unchangeable. The usual division of people is by gender (men - women), but it could also be by some other categories (tall-short, skinny-obese). Social constructivism requires that we critically consider the claims that our understanding of the world is reliable. We must be suspicious of our own knowledge, because the categories and terms we use do not necessarily imply real divisions.

2. **The understanding of the world is historically and culturally specific.** Understanding reality, processes and phenomena depends on certain cultural values and historical periods. Thus, obesity can be viewed as a disease, a social problem, dependence on excessive food consumption, or an indicator of wealth and well-being.

3. **Social processes are the basis of knowledge.** Current knowledge and truths are currently accepted ways of understanding the world, the products of existing social processes and interactions, and not the results of objective observation of the world. Obesity was once an indicator of wealth, today is an unwanted phenomenon, tomorrow it may be one of the key social problems.

4. **Knowledge and social action are inseparably linked.** Human consciousness and interpretation of truth change under the influence of social reaction. It was once considered that homosexuality was a mental illness, and is now seen in most countries as a product of the dual sexual nature of man. These persons should not be treated, but they should be allowed to exercise rights as all citizens, because minority sexual orientation is only one of human specificities, as there are many others.

Constructionists believe that people together create and maintain social phenomena through different interactions. Berger and Luckman (Berger and Luckman 1992: 34) point out the key processes that shape and update human knowledge: externalization, objectification and internalisation.

*Externalization*, denotes the expansion, or the enrichment of an idea. For example, people have the idea that smoking is harmful to health. They externalize it by doing research on harmful consequences, writing books and scientific studies. In time, the idea begins to “live”, enters the domain of social, people read books, articles, get informed, learn

about the harmful effects of cigarettes. So the idea becomes object, purpose, what exists by itself, which signifies the process of *objectification*. In the end, the idea is *internalized*, becomes part of the consciousness of the majority, the truth that is not widely discussed, which at a given historical moment is not called into question. Although the abuse of cigarettes can undoubtedly lead to harmful health consequences, this fact was not visible and sufficiently accepted in earlier periods. Forty years ago, smoking was commonplace, behavior that was favored the public and mass media. Only after the idea of harmfulness has passed through the abovementioned processes, it is not suspected of negative consequences, it is seen as a social problem, and the social reaction is aimed at reducing the number of addicts.

Having everything in mind, it seems that it becomes clear that social problems are to a considerable extent social constructs, products of human perception and interpretation of reality, which is not always in relation to objective indicators.

### **Social Problems as Social Structures**

Criteria for defining social problems have an objective and subjective dimension. If persistence, social causation, negative consequences, and even massiveness can be classified into objective indicators, awareness of their presence is certainly a subjective factor. How could one otherwise explain the fact that all objective indicators can be present, and that a phenomenon is not observed or only partially observed as a social problem. Consciousness seems to be a key determinant in the interpretation of social problems, and consciousness or our knowledge of something is nothing but a socio-psychological construct, which is formed on the basis of perception, i.e. beliefs, attitudes and values that arise under the influence of tradition and sociocultural factors. In this sense, social problems are social constructs, because the knowledge of their existence is formed through the three aforementioned processes: externalization, objectification and internalization. We will illustrate this understanding in two examples.

It seems that in Serbia no one else raises the question that domestic violence is a social problem. But, was it like that 20 years ago? The first complex and multidisciplinary research on domestic violence and violence against children was carried out in 1996 (Milosavljević 1998). During this period, violence was not registered in the records of the social work centers, and therefore it is not surprising that some social



work centers reported that they did not have cases of domestic violence (Milosavljević 1998). Among the citizens, too, there was no developed awareness of the extent of this phenomenon. Domestic violence has always existed, but the absence of a social reaction and appropriate research, the absence of media attention along with traditional patriarchal attitudes about the roles of men and women have led to this phenomenon not being recognized until the end of the 1990s, or the beginning of this century. Starting from this research, many others were realized. The number of non-profit organizations working on this topic has increased, prevention of domestic violence has become a discourse of political parties, strategies and laws aimed at combating this phenomenon have been adopted. Domestic violence has passed through all the stages of the cognitive process. Externalization through research, publishing publications, informing the public, making legal solutions. Listening, reading, exchanging information, people have objectified this phenomenon and eventually internalized, in terms of developing awareness of its presence, massiveness and harmfulness.

On the other hand, obesity is, according to all of the above indicators, a social problem. But it's just in the phase of externalization. This is increasingly being written about, discussed and explored. The idea is not yet objectified in the minds of the majority, which is the prerequisite for internalization - the existence of a fact that is not widely discussed. When this happens, we will be able to conclude that in Serbia obesity is a social problem too, because it meets the required objectives, and above all subjective criteria.

### **The Effect of Social Constructivism On Social Work**

The perception that each person defines their own reality and develops unique ways to acquire knowledge has also influenced the understanding of the nature of social work, that is, the relationship between professional aides and beneficiaries.

For a long time, in the field of social work unsatisfied needs and problems have been interpreted from the point of view of linear approaches, causes and consequences, predictable in outcomes and events (Milosavljević, Brkić 2010: 63). The social worker occupied the position of an independent, value-neutral expert whose basic task was determining the dysfunctions, which were usually found in the sphere of the personal. Applying appropriate measures and procedures they should socialize beneficiaries or isolate them in dedicated objects, if they are estimated



to be insufficiently productive from the point of view of functioning of the society. The terminology taken from medicine (anamnesis, diagnosis, therapy, rehabilitation, prognosis) was not only an expression of underdevelopment of the conceptual-categorical apparatus, but also an indicator of goals and contents of social work in that period (Milosavljević, Brkić 2010: 64). In the focus was the individual -client, who does not function in accordance with the expected social roles and who for this reason should be “treated”. His “disease” is caused by dysfunctions and disorganizations that primarily originate from the sphere of the personal, not from the environment (Milosavljević, Brkić 2010: 64).

User position was passive. A value-neutral professional is the one who, with his professional expertise, determines the causes of the problem and the most suitable ways to eliminate them, i.e. reduce the harmful consequences. The user was rarely asked about his vision of the problem, the reasons and the possibilities for solving it.

With the development of radical, ecologically-systemic theories, action research, postmodernist perspectives, movements for the promotion of human rights, there is increasingly frequent criticisms of the basic postulates of positivism: objectivity, exactness, value neutrality. The questions that can be summarized in the following are formulated: how is it possible to help a man without taking into account his attitudes, ideas, his own understanding of reality? Can any change be made without the active involvement of the interested, an agreement on joint action, which arises as a product of dialogue, appreciation, and complementary interactions?

Over time, it becomes clear that only a strong person, who uses his potentials, with the support of the social worker, as an active participant, can cause and sustain the desired changes. Such empowerment, partnership, participation and division of responsibilities become basic principles of social work. Postmodernism and social constructivism introduce the notion of “ignorance” into social work, which does not signify the value neutrality or negation of the previously learned, but critical reflection of what we think we know (Anderson 2009). The idea that each person has the right to their own understanding of the truth requires a social worker not to favour his knowledge in relation to the user’s knowledge, but to constantly find himself in learning processes, sharing experiences, seeking for common solutions. This is only possible through the exchange of information, experiences, “own truths”, what Moser calls *discourse* and represents a permanent active interaction in decision-making processes about goals, the choice of priorities, planning, management and realization and evaluation of social actions (Milosavljević, Brkić 2010: 161). All this requires the use of a different

language, that is, terminology, which does not only denote dysfunction, disorganization, pathology, but above all strengths and potentials. The so-called **constructivist social work** was developed on the basis of these interpretations (Parton 2002).

Instead of discovering causes, formulating expert evaluations and implementing solutions in advance, in constructivist social work, the user and social worker strive to create a meaningful language of understanding, as part of the process of solving problems and creating a change (Brkić 2010: 47). The user has the right to his own view of the problem, to suggesting ways to solve them, including those that he had previously used, but did not for any reason give the desired results. In this way, he externalizes the problem. Through conversation and interaction with a social worker, he constructs a shared reality, knowledge as a common product, a kind of a factual existence or truth (Ajduković 2008: 409). Thus, the problem is *objectified*. Finally, through joint action for the purpose of change, the problem is *internalized*, becoming an integral part of the cognitive and active component of the social worker and the user.

Social constructivism pointed to the importance of critical review of reality, thought exchange, experiences, as a way of looking at new truths and ways to solve problems. With the idea of “ignorance” along with postmodernist approaches, it has been pointed out that all those who deal with the transfer of knowledge, whether teachers or so-called “assisting professions” should encourage dialogue, exchange of thoughts and critical thinking, as this is the only way to authentic understanding of truths. Only an empowered man, aware of himself and his own potentials is able to understand, make decisions and carry out actions, based on argued reflection and perception of the environment.

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