

MORE THAN A PANIC:  
CORRELATES OF THE IMPORTANCE OF DRUGS AND UNEMPLOYMENT

By

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There are thousands of events that a society may deem problematic, ranging from economic sanctions to razor blades in apples to meteors hitting the earth. This paper uses the theories of objectivism and contextual constructionism to explain why a problem becomes important to a society. While this type of research has typically been accomplished using moral panic theory, this paper argues for a modified research design for studying the importance of social problems, in particular, for the social problems of drugs and unemployment.

In many ways the concept of a disproportion between the objective harm of a problem and the importance of this problem drives moral panic research. It is the basis of the term 'panic' in this research. Bluntly, moral panics are cases of public ignorance: they should (or should not) be thinking something important but are duped into thinking otherwise. This, however, is valuative, assuming that harm and concern over this harm *should be* related. In assuming objectivism is generally true, moral panic research conflates the conflicting theories of objectivism and constructionism. Generally the harm of a problem correlates with the importance of this problem (objectivism), however, occasionally institutions 'exaggerate' the harm of the problem (constructionism), leading to an 'abnormal' amount of attention directed towards the problem.

Moral panic theory is misguided in conflating these two theories. Specifically, there is no reason to assume a priori the harm and the importance of a problem should be correlated. However, since moral panic research must theorize why a moral panic (constructionism) is not occurring, without this assumption moral panic research is not generalizable: if constructionism is correct, why would the harm and concern over this harm be related? Moreover, claiming a disproportion between harm and the concern over

harm (a failed test of objectivism) as evidence for the constructionist hypothesis is not valid. A lack of evidence for one theory is not evidence for some other theory.

This paper argues for a modified research design that independently tests the theories of objectivism and constructionism. For constructionism, generally, this paper argues for an end to a ‘constructionism of the gaps’ method of theorizing constructionism. For moral panic research in particular, instead of asking ‘why are people occasionally guided away from objectively harmful problems to other, objectively less harmful problems?’ we should be asking ‘do institutions lead to the importance of problems independent of the objective harm of problems?’ Using constructionism as a stop gap for objectivism inhibits the development of constructionism as a general theory. Moral panic theory also inhibits the development of the objectivism. If objectivism is generally correct, why bring in constructionism to explain a periodic lack of support for objectivism instead of theoretically developing the typically correct objectivism?

In conducting this modified research design, this paper finds that moral panics are not aberrations of a generally correct relationship between harm and concern over harm. Generally (from 1975 to 2006) the importance of the problem of drugs is correlated with institutions’ portrayals independent of the prevalence of the harm of drugs. Simply because there was more concern during the typically studied 1980’s ‘drug panic’ than other times does not mean something novel was going on regarding the relationship between institutions and the importance of the problem of drugs. Outside of this ‘panic’ the constructionist relationship remains.

However, this paper also finds that institutions’ portrayals of problems do not always lead to the importance of a social problem. The test of the social problem of

unemployment finds that the unemployment rate predicts the importance of unemployment controlling for news reports on unemployment. In this, the test of the importance of the social problems of drugs and unemployment show conflicting findings for objectivism and constructionism. Because each theory is treated independently, this paper then suggests internally consistent extensions of objectivism and constructionism that could explain the conflicting of drugs and unemployment respectively.

As an overview of the paper, after reviewing previous research on the correlates of the importance of the problems of drugs and unemployment, the paper criticizes moral panic theory. In particular, the assumption that the objectivist hypothesis should be true and contextual constructionist theory should be used to explain instances when it is not is criticized. A modified research design is then proposed, taking objectivism and contextual constructionism as two independent, separately generalizable theories. The test of the two theories controls for the other theory's variables for potential spuriousness instead of conflating the two theories. After reviewing the findings, where the test of unemployment supports objectivism and the test of drugs supports contextual constructionism, the paper proposes theoretical extensions for both contextual constructionism and objectivism to account for these conflicting findings. The implications for moral panic research and the correlates of the importance of social problems generally are then discussed.

### **Research on the Correlates of the Importance of Drugs and Unemployment**

First coined by Stanley Cohen (2002:1973), the concept of moral panics has yielded hundreds of academic articles as well as a great number of books (e.g. Critcher,

2003 and 2006; Glassner, 1999; McCorkle and Miethe, 2002; Welch, 2000; Young, 2004). Cohen (2002:1973) defines a moral panic occurring when “a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests” (1). Defined by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) in their review of moral panic literature, “in a moral panic, the reactions of (different institutions) and the general public are out of proportion to the real and present danger a given threat poses to the society” (156). Succinctly, moral panic research investigates when, why and how a social problem becomes important for reasons other than increases in the harm of this problem.

Although there have not been any moral panic studies on unemployment, there have been public opinion studies on the connection between the prevalence and the importance of the problem of unemployment. Very similar to this study, Behr and Iyengar (1985) examine the connections between news stories, economic indicators and the public’s perception of the economy and find that all three of the indicators are correlated for the problem of unemployment. They find that “public concern is directly affected by economic conditions” (50). More recently, Soroka (2002a; 2002b) shows that, in both the U.K. and Canada, while real world concerns influence the public’s perception of unemployment (controlling for news reports on unemployment), the media influence the importance of unemployment for the public during periods when the unemployment rate is low. These are some of the only studies to take on the question of the correlation between the prevalence and the importance of unemployment.<sup>1 2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> More have shown how the news reports more bad than good economic news (e.g. Goidel and Langley, 1995; Harrington, 1989; Nadeau, et al. 1999; Soroka, 2006). I do not use these here as this would be expected in both constructionist and objectivist hypotheses.

<sup>2</sup> Others show the relationship between the economy in general (including unemployment), economic news and the perception of the economy (e.g. Kleinnijenhuis and Rietberg, 1995; MacKuen and Coombs, 1981; Stevenson et al. 1994; Wu et al. 2002). The correlation between the news, the importance of the problem

Further evidence that objective threats lead to the importance of unemployment comes from Haller and Norpoth (1997). Examining whether people who do and do not watch economic news find business conditions more or less favorable than they were a year ago shows that almost half of the public admits to not getting any economic news, that aggregate opinions of ‘no-news’ respondents closely matches the opinion of those exposed to economic news, and further, both aggregates opinions are closely aligned with economic predictors. Though limited, this research provides evidence that the prevalence of economic problems, independent of the news, influence perceptions of the economy.

Similar to previous research, though more specific due to its focus on unemployment, this paper’s test of unemployment as an important problem to the public uses a data set spanning from 1970 to 2007, a much longer span of time than previous studies. Further, this study uses annual fluctuations as well as the previously studied historical trends. Though both are useful they are theoretically different (Batton and Jensen, 2002; Jensen, 1997 and 2007) as using fluctuations shows the correspondence of increments of variables while trends look at the correspondence of the rates of variables.

For the problem of drugs, one of the first pieces of research on the relationship between the prevalence and the importance of the problem of drugs was Howard Becker’s Outsiders (1963). He points out that there were few marijuana laws in the early 1930’s and the laws that did exist were weakly enforced. However, due to the efforts of ‘moral entrepreneurs’ who worked to create legislation and media campaigns to convince others that marijuana was an important problem, the Marijuana tax act was created in 1937. Of most relevance here, the public found marijuana to be an important social

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and objective economic measures varies depending on the measure, but are typically correlated. Though by no means irrelevant to this discussion, I focus specifically on the problem of unemployment here.

problem because of the portrayal of a contextual definition of the problem by institutions independent of the empirical prevalence of marijuana use.

James Hawdon (1996) showed that moral panics about drug use in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were waged after drug epidemics began to subside rather than during them, suggesting the importance of drug use varies inversely with the number of drug users. This goes against the objectivist hypothesis as a smaller amount of threat leads to a larger amount of public concern. Conversely, Goode (1990) shows a concomitant increase in drug misuse during the 1980's as the importance of the social problem of drugs increased, giving the best evidence for the objectivist argument. However, Beckett (1994) shows that this trend is not generalizable outside of this time span as in 1991 to 1992 drug misuse increased while concern over drugs decreased.

Studies showing the constructed nature of the importance of the social problem of drugs typically examine the escalation of concern over drugs in 1980's America. Most of these studies, some using regression and others discourse analysis, find that an increase in government and media accounts of the dangers of drug use led to greater concern over the problem of drugs independent of the prevalence of drug use (e.g. Brownstein, 1991; Hawdon, 2001; Orcutt and Turner, 1993; Reeves and Campbell, 1994; Reinerman and Levine, 1989). Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) give numerous explanations for the moral panic of drugs in the 1980's: the increase in knowledge about crack-cocaine, the death of athletes from cocaine, increased media coverage of the dangers of drugs, the general political climate, the 1986 congressional elections, and an increase in anti-drug spokesmen. In this, research has shown a lack of correlation between the prevalence of

drug use and the perception of drugs as a problem, explainable by an increase in institutions' portrayals of the importance of drugs as a social problem.

There are four ways this paper extends previous research of the correlates of the importance of the social problem of drugs. First, other than Hawdon (1996) and Beckett (1994), few studies have looked at predictors of the importance of drugs outside a particular era (i.e. a panic). This study analyzes correlates of the importance of drugs from 1975 – 2006. Second, outside of Beckett (1994), few studies have used time series analysis to examine predictors of annual fluctuations of the importance of the problem of drugs. Third, although many have pointed to a correlation between drug arrests and moral panics on drugs (Becker, 1963; Gilmore, 1999 and 2007; Miller, 1996; Pattillo et al. 2004; Western, 2006) few have taken the institution of law enforcement seriously as a predictor of the public's perception of the importance of drugs. Law enforcement arrests do not necessarily increase or decrease due to the prevalence of the problem. Law enforcement targets different problems at different points in time due to a contextual definition of what crimes are important: the institution of law enforcement portrays a contextual definition of the problem of drugs through arrests.

This study investigates whether drug arrests are a predictor, along with news stories on drugs in the previous year and the prevalence of drug use, for the importance of the social problem of drugs. The findings of this investigation suggest a significant relationship between the importance of drugs as a problem and drug arrests, but this relationship changes depending upon the number of news stories on drugs the previous year. Finding an interaction effect between two contextual constructionist derived variables is the fourth way this paper extends previous research.



## Criticism of Moral Panic Theory

### Objectivism

In investigating the importance of the social problem of drugs and unemployment, this paper provides a modified research design of moral panic research, arguing the best way to conduct research on the importance of social problems is to use objectivism and constructionism as two independent, internally consistent theories. Regarding these theories, the main quarrel between objectivism and constructionism involves a particular debate over essentialism (Sayer, 1997; Stein, 1992), that is, whether reality can be perceived objectively, independent from the context from which it is perceived. Moreover, the two theories disagree upon what constitutes a social problem, i.e. whether social problems exist due to the objective harm independent of the definition of such (objectivism) or due to the contextual definition of harm (constructionism). Instead of looking at the dispute over essentialism, or what constitutes a social problem theoretically, this study empirically investigates whether the prevalence of a problem (an argument derived from objectivism) or contextual definitions of problems, portrayed by institutions (constructionism), corresponds with the importance of social problems.

The theory of objectivism states that occurrences can be empirically verified independent of the context from which they are perceived. “The central use of the word ‘objectivity’ is to refer to what is true independent of any subject judging it to be true. It is an objective fact, for instance, that the Earth is the third planet from the sun” (Collier, 2003, 134). Rather than an object or event constituting a different reality depending on the context from which it is perceived (what constitutes a planet?), there is an objectively

true reality of the object or event independent of those who perceive it as such. In terms of social problems, objectivism, “a variant of the functionalist paradigm” (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994, 87), claims that a condition becomes a social problem because “it poses a significant threat to the well-being of substantial numbers of people” (McCorkle and Miethe, 2002, 5). The objectivist rejects the constructionist view that the reality of an occurrence as harmful to a society is dependent upon the context from which the occurrence is perceived. Social problems are empirically decipherable as harmful to a society independent of the context from which the harm is defined.

According to objectivism, the reality of harm need not be interpreted in an objective manner as the social problem harms individuals independent of how it may be interpreted. The importance of a problem need not correspond with the prevalence of the problem. However, since occurrences of a problem are actually harming substantial numbers of people, will not they be more likely to think of, and institutions more likely to portray the importance of, this problem as relevant compared to when many are not being harmed by the problem? Put succinctly, the objectivist derived hypothesis tested in this research design is that the effects of objectively harmful occurrences will generally make the problem important to individuals and institutions. Then, the problem becomes more or less important in a society when the harm (occurrences of a problem) is more or less prevalent. Although the importance of a social problem need not correspond with the prevalence of the problem for objectivism to be true (this is one of many potential objectivist derived hypotheses), if this is true it is evidence that social problems become important because they pose harm to substantial numbers of people.

### Criticism of disproportion

Typically moral panic research does not investigate the objectivist hypothesis, assuming it to be true a priori. Moral panic researchers are only interested in instances where the objectivist hypothesis is not supported. In their review of moral panic research Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) argue “if public concern is a logical, almost inevitable, product of impending or concrete, inflicted harm, then that concern is not problematic, not a phenomenon necessitating an explanation. If, on the other hand, objective harm and public concern vary in large measure independently of one another, then this concern demands an explanation” (152). While the constructionist hypothesis should be investigated, the objectivist hypothesis is unproblematic: it should be happening anyways. It is only in cases of a disproportion between harm and concern that moral panic researchers are interested.

Criticisms have been levied against the concept of moral panics, particularly in trying to measure the concept of disproportion – “the gap between the harm of a given behavior and the concern that that behavior generates in the public, the media, and among legislators and social movement activists and members of interest groups” (Goode, 2008, 535). The main criticism by Waddington (1986) argues that

without some clear criteria of proportionality, the description of publicly expressed concern, anxiety or alarm as a ‘moral panic’ is no more than a value judgment. It simply says that the person using the term does not believe that the particular problem is sufficiently serious to warrant these expressions of concern (257).

Cornwell and Linders (2002) also find the concept of disproportion problematic, claiming it conveys a sentiment of rational versus irrational actions. As they point out “moral panic theory, because of the emphasis on ‘panic,’” has trouble accounting for the essentially orderly process through which individual and collective reactions to perceived social

threats emerge and get translated into action” (308). ‘Moral panics’ are not irrational, but stem from general social processes that lead to the importance of social problems.

Goode (2008) responds to these critics saying that,

the nay-sayers’ critiques typically offer a logical contradiction in that they say disproportion is impossible to measure because concern and responses to that concern are incommensurable. But these critics also say that concern and fear to most conditions that generate panics are rational responses to a very real and present danger, as with LSD in the sixties. Logically, you cannot have it both ways; either the threat is incommensurable with concern, or the concern is a rational, measured response to the threat. (535-536)

This is true: when theorizing about the relationship between concern and harm, harm and concern cannot be both proportional and disproportional; claiming both to be true is a contradiction. However this means that, with moral panic research as well, logically, you cannot have it both ways: either the harm is correlated with concern or the concern is not a response to the harm of a problem. Assuming that harm and concern are correlated, but occasionally concern is not related to the harm of the problem is contradictory.

Claiming something should or should not be happening a priori is valuative. The aforementioned criticisms against moral panic theory, particularly the gap between harm and concern, are similar to the point made by Weber (1949) in ‘Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy’, claiming that “scientific analysis can allow us to determine the suitability of a given range of means for the attainment of a determinate end. But no amount of scientific knowledge can demonstrate logically that a man *should* accept a given end as a value” (Giddens, 1971, 135). Showing the objective reality of something extremely harmful cannot demonstrate logically that one *should be* concerned about this harm. As such, claiming that a problem *should be* important at a particular point in time or more important than another less threatening problem, even when based on scientific evidence, is not possible. Since whether a problem should be considered important will

always be a value judgment, disproportion is valuative in making an assumption that the objectivist hypothesis, that harm and concern over harm is related, is generally true.

### Criticism of Moral Panics Theory's Research Design

The major problem with moral panic research is that neither objectivism nor constructionism is treated as independent, generalizable theories. In making the valuative claim that objectivism should be true then claiming constructionism explains why it is occasionally not, objectivism and constructionism are used in tandem to make moral panic research generalizable. This is despite the fact the two are contradictory, one suggesting harm and concern are correlated while the other does not. If we do not make the claim that objectivism should be true, moral panic research is not generalizable; there is no reason why constructionism and objectivism will both be true at different points in time. In sum, moral panic theory claims the objectivist hypothesis should occur, investigates instances where it does not, and develops a theory of constructionism based on instances where objectivism is not supported.

By conflating the two contradictory theories, as discussed below, moral panic theory provides evidence for contextual constructionism in way similarly problematic for strict constructionism. In his analysis of the uses of social constructionism, Ian Hacking (1999) shows that “studies on the social construction of X tend to hold that X, which appears to be inevitable, need not have existed; X is not determined by the nature of things” (6 and 12). Strict constructionism (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994, 94-96), or what Hacking calls universal constructionism (Hacking, 1999, 24-25), is the notion that it is impossible to know an objective reality since the perception of this reality is perceived in

different social contexts— the perception of reality is a social construction. Because any perception of reality is defined from a social context, measures of the perception of reality and the social relations that influence these perceptions cannot be used as support for the theory since these measures are also defined from a particular social context. As such, the only way to provide evidence for strict constructionism is to use a negative argument- to provide evidence for itself by failing to provide evidence for objectivism.

However, as Hacking (1999) points out, “no one has argued for a universal constructionism, only specific cases of such” (24). Although strict constructionism has not been used, more specific studies saying that X is not determined by the nature of things, like the concept of disproportion, in the same manner do not show what is determining its nature, only providing evidence for constructionism by showing a lack of evidence for objectivism. These studies use the negative argument of strict constructionism, which is problematic due to the invalidity of support for negative arguments generally, explained below.

Positive statements, those that propose that something is true, propose testable statements, analyzed with evidence, to show (or fail to show) the validity of the theory in explaining reality. Because it cannot be tested with evidence, strict constructionism relies on the negative argument that we cannot accurately perceive an external reality. However, not having evidence that we can accurately perceive an external reality (failing to support one hypothesis) is not the same as having evidence that we cannot accurately perceive an external reality due to some particular reason (supporting another hypothesis). For example, by saying our conception of gender is not based on objective categories of sexes does not tell us in itself that, among the wide variety of possible

alternative hypotheses, gender is socially constructed. This is an argument from personal incredulity, more specifically a ‘constructionism of the gaps’<sup>3</sup> approach to studying social constructionism: what does not support the objectivist hypothesis is socially constructed.

Although strict constructionism entails a negative argument, moral panic theory uses the positive theory of contextual constructionism (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994, 96) by making the ontological assumption that an objective reality can be perceived independent of a social context. Succinctly, it argues that “while deviance and social problems are the results of ‘claim making’ activities, the ‘objective’ dimension can be assessed on the basis of some scientific evidence (Ben-Yehuda, 2001). Although an objective reality can be deciphered empirically, the positive empirical statement can be made that contextual definitions of social problems, portrayed by institutions, lead to their importance.

Although contextual constructionism is a positive argument, the criteria (evidence) for contextual constructionism in moral panic research is negative: a lack of evidence for objectivism (disproportion) is evidence for contextual constructionism. However, failing to provide support for the objectivist hypothesis is not evidence for the constructionist hypothesis. A disproportion between harm and concern over this harm only indicates a lack of support for a hypothesis of what is happening – not providing evidence for any hypothesis of what *is* happening. Disproportion, a lack of evidence for the objectivist hypothesis, is never valid evidence for a theory since the only hypothesis it tests fails – simply showing what, of the many potential hypotheses, is not happening.

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<sup>3</sup> This comes from the ‘God of the gaps’ conception: God is whatever science cannot explain about nature. (e.g. Drummond, 2007:1904, p. 333-334).

Even more, using a disproportion between harm and concern over this harm as evidence for contextual constructionism limits contextual constructionism to cases where disproportion is shown. That is, assuming objectivism is correct and contending a lack of evidence for objectivism is evidence for contextual constructionism inhibits the generalizability of contextual constructionism: contextual constructionism is only correct when support for objectivism is not found. Like the strict constructionist argument, it is not only erroneous to claim a lack of evidence for objectivism as evidence for contextual constructionism, but using contextual constructionism in this manner leads to a 'contextual constructionism of the gaps' theory of contextual constructionism. By doing this, contextual constructionism is merely a stop gap for instances when objectivism is not supported rather than a general theory in its own respect.

In sum, assuming objectivism should be true is a valuative claim. By assuming that objectivism is true, moral panic research conflates the two contradictory theories of objectivism and constructionism: the objectivist hypothesis should occur but occasionally does not due to moral panics (contextual constructionism). In this, two contradictory theories can be true at different times and the general theory of moral panics can remain true. In using contextual constructionism as an explanation for a lack of evidence for objectivism, moral panic research erroneously uses a disproportion between harm and concern as evidence for contextual constructionism. In doing this, contextual constructionism is turned into an intermittent theory, relevant only due to the fact there is a lack of homogenous support for the assumed to be true objectivist hypothesis. To alleviate these issues, this paper suggests a more appropriate research design treats the harm and concern over harm as an empirical issue. In doing this, this paper investigates



contextual constructionism and objectivism as two independent theories, generalizable in an internally consistent manner.

### **Current Study**

#### **A Modified Research Design**

This paper uses the theories of objectivism and contextual constructionism to explain why a problem becomes important in a society. For instance, does unemployment become more important when there is more unemployment (objectivism) or when unions demand more benefits and the business owners publicize the dangers strikes pose (constructionism)? This study investigates whether the social problems of unemployment and drugs become important due to a heightened prevalence of the problem or a contextual definition, portrayed through institutions, of the problem as important.

In order to overcome the aforementioned problems of moral panic research, this study independently tests the theories of objectivism and contextual constructionism. Instead of conflating the two theories, each theory's variables are tested for the other theory's variables for potential spuriousness. In this, the objectivist derived hypothesis tested in this research design is that the effects of objectively harmful occurrences will make the problem important to individuals and institutions, controlling for independent effects of relevant institutions' portrayals of the importance of the problem. Put another way, the prevalence of the problem will correlate with the importance of the social problem, controlling for institutions' portrayals of the problem.

For the contextual constructionist hypothesis, in previous moral panic research designs using disproportion, a failed test of objectivism is used to provide evidence for contextual constructionism. Instead, a test of the contextual constructionist hypothesis should state that we fail to accept the hypothesis that objective harm is influencing the relationship hypothesized by contextual constructionism. Then, in this research design the objectivist hypothesis is controlled for when testing the contextual constructionist hypothesis to show that a supported contextual constructionist hypothesis is not spurious: institutions' portrayals and the importance of social problems both caused by the prevalence of the problem. Succinctly, this paper tests the contextual constructionist hypothesis that contextual definitions of a problem, portrayed by the institutions of the news and (for the problem of drugs) the police, corresponds with the importance of a social problem, controlling for the prevalence of the problem.

This research design is very similar to Beckett's (1994) paper where constructionism is treated as a separate, general theory. Beckett's (1994) paper also tests two competing theories of cultural constructionism, where public sentiment leads to institutions' portrayals, and elite constructionism, where institutions' portrayals lead to public sentiment, which this paper does not do. Somewhat similar to Beckett's (1994) case study method findings, this study shows that the number of news stories on drugs the previous year is a significant predictor of the importance of drugs, giving evidence for elite constructionism. However, since drug arrests and news for unemployment does not show to be significant when lagged by a year in either direction, this study cannot conclude causality of the constructionist correlations. It is not shown empirically whether the 'most important problem' survey responses are an outcome or an explanatory

variable. I take the elite constructionist stance regarding the importance of social problems, treating the importance of a problem as an outcome variable.

The lack of analysis of causality is particularly problematic for drug arrests. The direction of causality in who influences arrests and whether arrests influence others is unclear. The importance of drugs may lead to same year drug arrests rather than arrests influencing the importance of drugs. I take the elite constructionist stance for police arrests since decisions to arrest are typically based on contextual, rather than democratic, decisions. However, assuming the direction of causality for the correlation between drug arrests and the importance of drugs is still controversial since it is not tested explicitly here. Future research should investigate both claims of causality.

Along with posing a new research design, this paper contributes to previous research on the importance of the social problems of unemployment and drugs. For the social problem of unemployment a much longer span of time (1970-2007) is used and, along with the previously used general historical trend, annual fluctuations are used. For the problem of drugs, this paper investigates the importance of the social problem of drugs outside of a particular era (1975 – 2006), uses time series analysis to test the two theories, uses arrests as an indicator of an institution's portrayal of the importance of the problem of drugs, and finally, finds an interaction effect between the contextual constructionist derived variables of drug arrests and news stories on drugs.

This study defines the importance of a defined social problem through the Gallup Poll's 'Most Important Problem in America' survey. The number of stories of the problem on network TV news broadcasts and drug violation arrests (for the problem of drugs) are used as measures of institutions' portrayals of the problem as important.

Finally, this study defines the prevalence of a problem through the unemployment rate and amount of teenage drug use, as shown by the ‘Monitoring the Future’ survey.

### Measures

This study uses five data sets. The importance of social problems is based on the Gallup Poll’s reoccurring national survey asking the opened question “What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?”<sup>4 5</sup> The surveys are conducted periodically, though at least once per year. When more than one survey occurs per year, as is typically the case, the results for each month are averaged. The survey is based on personal interviews with a national sample of between 1,000 and 1,600 adults, typically more towards the latter.

Institutions’ portrayal of the problem is based on data from the Vanderbilt Television News Archives. The data set includes a phrase search with no commercials in this database with the number of stories on the issue per network per month. The data set includes three network news broadcasts: ABC, CBS and NBC. For unemployment the data set includes results from a search of ‘unemployment’, excluding instances that were unrelated to unemployment or about the unemployment of another nation without referring to US unemployment. For news stories on drugs the data set includes results from the same search method searching for ‘drug\*’.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Surveys such as the Gallup Poll’s have a sampling bias, tending to under-represent low income individuals. As such, the issue of unemployment may be skewed due to less unemployed individuals being surveyed; this means, for unemployment, the MIP is a conservative measure when testing objectivism.

<sup>5</sup> As an open ended question, the Gallup Poll survey generalizes responses. Categories such as ‘drugs’ are difficult to compare to actual occurrences; Cocaine use, for example, would be better responses to compare with actual events. However, I find drug use a good correlate for the meaning of drugs as a problem. Also, the survey is not done at the same time each year, so I average each instance in a year for all measures.

<sup>6</sup> There were many considerations that had to be dealt with: Well over half of the stories were regarding the sale, trafficking, and use of illicit drugs: these were all counted. Medical marijuana, drug testing, treatment

Institutions' portrayal of the problem of drugs is also based on the total number of drug violation arrests. This is measured by the number of drug use violation arrests as put out by the FBI's annual Uniform Crime Reports (UCR): Crime in the United States (FBI, 1975 - 2006). The arrest totals are national estimates based on the arrest statistics of all law enforcement agencies that provided data to the UCR Program.

To measure the empirically verifiable prevalence of unemployment this study uses the unemployment rate, as measured by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. To measure the empirically verifiable prevalence of drugs this study use the Monitoring the Future survey, specifically the number of 12<sup>th</sup> graders who have used any illicit drugs in the past 30 days. For the Monitoring the Future survey, each year approximately 50,000 8th, 10th and 12th grade students are surveyed about their values, attitudes and behaviors.

Regarding the time frame, for the problem of unemployment all variables go from 1970 to 2007, for the problem of drugs all variables go from 1975 to 2006.

### Method

This study conducts time series analyses to test the aforementioned theories. There has been a tendency in time series analysis to always compare data sets in terms of differences in neighboring year data points as opposed to within year comparisons since the latter comes with problems of autocorrelation and non-stationarity. However, as has been pointed out (Batton and Jensen, 2002; Jensen, 1997 and 2007), when a theory

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of addiction, deaths, and the contraction of AIDS from drug use (but not the drugs that fight AIDS) were also counted. Further, stories showing illicit drugs are not as bad as previously thought and attempts to legalize the illegal drugs are counted as well. Many that were not included related to prescription drugs, however, stories dealing with the illicit abuse of prescription drugs were counted. Cigarettes, alcohol and over the counter drug stories were not counted. Finally, and controversially, I decided not to include steroids; I felt it was a qualitatively different issue and those saying drugs were the most important problem facing the nation would not being saying this due to steroid use.

explains historical trends, analyzing annual fluctuations is theoretically misguided; the detrended data removes the data's historical nature in favor of annual fluctuations despite neither being objectively preferred. Since objectivism and constructionism do not specify a time scale, this study uses both trend and annual fluctuation data.

Practically, the tests of objectivism and constructionism will be the same, testing the prevalence of the problem, institutions' portrayal of the problem and the publicly defined importance of the problem. This is due to a research design where each theory's predictors are controlled for the other theory's predictors for potential spuriousness. However, each theory will interpret the results in different ways. This study also investigates both lagged and non-lagged effects and investigates interaction effects between variables to find the best models. For the problem of unemployment this study analyzes whether the unemployment rate and news stories on unemployment predict the number of responses of unemployment on the 'most important problem' survey. These models with trends and annual fluctuations are specified below (respectively):

$$\text{UnemployMIP} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * \text{UnemployRate} + \beta_2 * \text{UnemployNews} + \text{AR}(1) + e$$

$$\text{UnemployMIP } t_i - t_{(i-1)} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * \text{UnemployRate } t_i - t_{(i-1)} + \beta_2 * \text{UnemployNews } t_i - t_{(i-1)} + e$$

For the problem of drugs this study analyzes whether the prevalence of drug use, drug arrests and the previous year's news stories on drugs (and the interaction between news stories and drug arrests) predicts the number of responses of drugs on the 'most important problem' survey. These models with trends and annual fluctuations are specified below (respectively):

$$\text{DrugMIP} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * \text{DrugUse} + \beta_2 * \text{DrugArrests} + \beta_3 * \text{DrugNews } t_{(i-1)} + \beta_4 * (\text{DrugArrests} * \text{DrugNews}) + e$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{DrugMIP } t_i - t_{(i-1)} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 * \text{DrugUse } t_i - t_{(i-1)} + \beta_2 * \text{DrugArrests } t_i - t_{(i-1)} + \beta_3 * \text{DrugNews } t_{(i-1)} - t_{(i-2)} + \\ & \beta_4 * (\text{DrugArrests } t_i - t_{(i-1)} * \text{DrugNews } t_{(i-1)} - t_{(i-2)}) + e \end{aligned}$$

## Results

### Unemployment Results

Using data with historical trends (**Table 1**), the multivariate model indicates that the unemployment rate significantly predicts the perception of unemployment as the most important problem in America while controlling for news (which is not a significant predictor). For every one percent increase in the unemployment rate there is a 6.05 increase in the percent saying unemployment is the most important problem, controlling for news stories on unemployment. Since there is autocorrelation in this equation, as indicated by a low Durbin Watson statistic of 1.16, I utilize an autoregressive model in order to control for unexplained serially correlated errors.<sup>7</sup> The interpretation of the results is not affected. The relationship between the perception of unemployment as a problem being predicted by the unemployment rate, controlling for news, persists when including an autoregressive variable. The R<sup>2</sup> without the autoregressive variable is 0.8057, and since the R<sup>2</sup> with an autoregressive variable is 0.8409, the variable only explains 3.5% more of the variation in the perception of unemployment as an important problem. Though this is statistically significant, the added value is small relative to the explanatory value of the model.

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<sup>7</sup> Future research could investigate why a current year's publicly defined importance of unemployment is continually correlated with the preceding year's defined importance of unemployment.

Multicollinearity may be a problem in that the correlation between news stories on unemployment and the unemployment rate is 0.764. However, the variance inflation factor (VIF) for both independent variables (since there are only two) is 2.403 while the rule of thumb for problematically high colinearity is a VIF of 10 or larger (Miles, 2009). Further, modeling these two predictors on the public’s perception separately, the bivariate model using the unemployment rate explains 80.5% of the variation while the bivariate model using news stories on unemployment only explains 45.5% of the variation in the public’s perception of unemployment as the most important problem in America.

**Table 1**

Predictors of public's perception of Unemployment as the Most Important Problem (Historical Trends)				
<u>MIP predicted by news and rate</u>				
	<u>Coef</u>	<u>SE</u>		
Intercept	-25.77	6.85	Root Mean Squared Error	: 4.199
Unemployment News Stories	0.05	0.063		$R^2$ : 0.8409
Unemployment Rate	6.05	1.29 ***		n = 38
AR(1)	0.47	0.18 *		
<u>MIP predicted by news</u>				
	<u>Coef</u>	<u>SE</u>		
Unemployment News Stories	0.27838	0.05079 ***	Root Mean Squared Error	: 7.549
				$R^2$ : 0.4549
				n = 38
<u>MIP predicted by rate</u>				
	<u>Coef</u>	<u>SE</u>		
Unemployment Rate	6.5693	0.5383 ***	Root Mean Squared Error	: 4.511
				$R^2$ : 0.8054
				n = 38



**Table 2**

Predictors of public's perception of Unemployment as the Most Important Problem (Annual Fluctuations)			
MIP predicted by news and rate			
	<u>Coef</u>	<u>SE</u>	
Intercept	0.1736	0.793	Root Mean Squared Error : 4.812
Unemployment News Stories	0.07858	0.07019	R <sup>2</sup> : 0.6834
Unemployment Rate	5.85798	1.60105 ***	n = 37
MIP predicted by news			
	<u>Coef</u>	<u>SE</u>	
Unemployment News Stories	0.29445	0.04424 ***	Root Mean Squared Error : 5.599
			R <sup>2</sup> : 0.5587
			n = 37
MIP predicted by rate			
	<u>Coef</u>	<u>SE</u>	
Unemployment Rate	7.3648	0.8703 ***	Root Mean Squared Error : 4.83
			R <sup>2</sup> : 0.6717
			n = 37

Using between year differences of the variables rather than using each year on its own (**Table 2**), we see the same relationship (though with a smaller R<sup>2</sup> of 0.6834) between the perception of unemployment as a problem, the number of news stories on unemployment and the unemployment rate. The multivariate model shows the unemployment rate significantly predicting the perception of unemployment while controlling for news, which is not a significant predictor. For every one percent increase in the unemployment rate there is a 5.858 increase in the percent saying unemployment is the most important problem, controlling for news stories on unemployment.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> There are no real problematically influential data in these models on unemployment. One exception is this model with differenced data, where the difference from 1974 to 1975 is more influential than others on the unemployment rate due to the somewhat dramatic jump from 5.64 to 8.475 in these years.

Again, there is multicollinearity in the model with annual fluctuations as well. However, the VIF for both independent variables is 3.409, suggesting that collinearity is not highly problematic. The differences in predictive power between the bivariate models is much smaller but still in the same direction, as the unemployment rate explains 67.2% of the variance and the news stories on unemployment explains 55.9% of the variance in the perception of unemployment as the most important problem facing the nation.

This evidence supports the objectivist hypothesis that the prevalence of the problem (unemployment) corresponds with the importance of the problem. Both data with trends and annual fluctuations show that the prevalence of unemployment predicts the variation in the perception of unemployment as importantly problematic better than the news coverage about unemployment. Considering the fact that the constructionist hypothesis would not predict the unemployment rate as significant when controlling for the news, and that the objectivist hypothesis would still be supported even if the news was a significant predictor, the objectivist hypothesis is better at explaining the importance of the social problem of unemployment than the constructionist hypothesis.

### Drug Results

As in the unemployment models, using year to year data and data showing annual fluctuations produced similar results for the importance of the problem of drugs. In both models there is a significant relationship between the public's perception of drugs as a problem and drug violation arrests, but this relationship changes depending upon the number of news stories on drugs the previous year (interaction effect).<sup>9</sup> When there are

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<sup>9</sup> When modeling the previous year's news stories by the MIP survey and drug arrests, for both trend and annual fluctuation data, the previous year's news predicts both responses to drugs as the most important

more news stories on drugs the previous year, drug arrests will be associated with a higher percentage of people finding drugs to be an important problem compared to when there is a lower number of news stories on drugs the previous year. **Table 3** shows the results of the model predicting the perception of drugs as the most important problem using year to year data while **Table 4** shows the model using data as annual fluctuations. Both models show news stories on drugs and drug violation arrests are significant predictors, while drug use is an insignificant predictor, of the percent saying drugs are the most important problem facing the nation.

**Table 3**

Predictors of the Public's Perception of Drugs as the Most Important Problem (Historical Trends)			
MIP predicted by interaction between news & arrests			
	<u>Coef</u>	<u>SE</u>	
Intercept	5.426	5.403	Root Mean Squared Error : 2.321
Drug Use	0.054	0.1131	R <sup>2</sup> : 0.905
Stories on Drugs (Previous Year)	-3.152	0.551	*** n = 32
Drug Arrests	-0.0000069	0.0000021	**
News*Arrests	0.0000040	0.00000047	***

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problem and the drug arrest rate. As such, the relationship between the public's perception of drugs and drug arrests may be spurious, both being caused by the previous year's news. However, since I find an interaction effect, that the effect of the previous year's news on drug responses to the most important problem depends on different levels of same year arrests, the model here gives a better prediction of the most important problem than the effect of news independent of drug violation arrests.

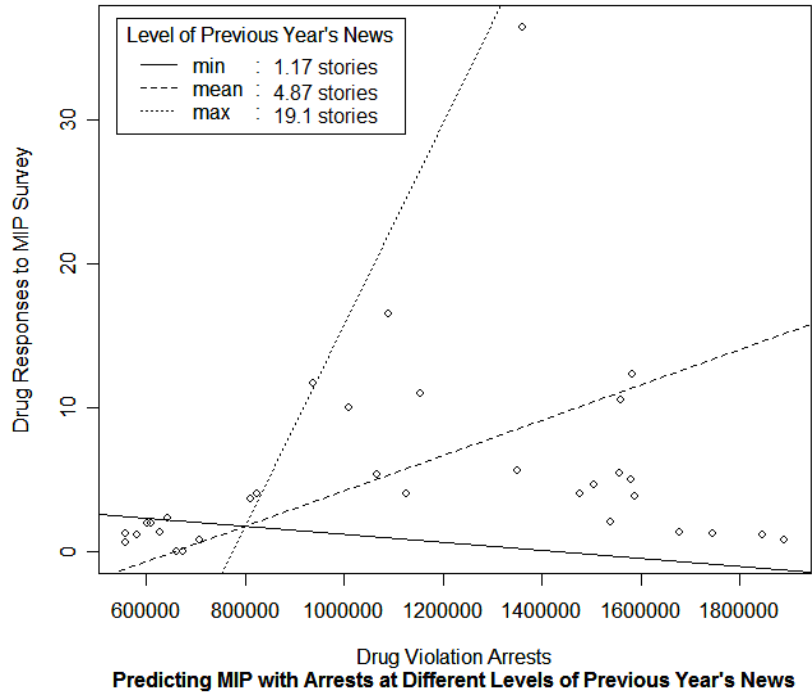
**Table 4**

Predictors of the Public's Perception of Drugs as the Most Important Problem (Annual Fluctuations)			
MIP predicted by <u>interaction between news &amp; arrests</u>			
	<u>Coef</u>	<u>SE</u>	
Intercept	-1.471	0.5021	Root Mean Squared Error : 2.488
Drug Use	-0.0938	0.2194	R <sup>2</sup> : 0.8738
Stories on Drugs (Previous Year)	0.4824	0.181	* n = 31
Drug Arrests	0.000039	0.0000050	***
News*Arrests	0.0000068	0.00000012	***

**Figure 1** shows the interaction effect described above. When news reports on drugs are at a very low level, as drug arrests go up the perception of drugs as a problem actually goes down. This negative correlation between arrests and drugs as an important problem is only at very low levels of news reports on drugs, changing to a positive correlation when there are 1.172 news stories (the point of inflection) or more. For example, as shown in Figure 1, when news reports on drugs are average (4.87 stories per network per month) or at their maximum (19.06 stories) more drug arrests lead to more people claiming drugs as the most important problem. Similarly, **Figure 2** shows a negative relationship between changes in arrests and changes in the importance of the problem of drugs when news stories have significantly reduced. However, if the reduction in news stories per network per month is 5.64 or less (or they increase) from the previous year then the relationship between drug arrests and the number claiming drugs as the most important problem is positive.

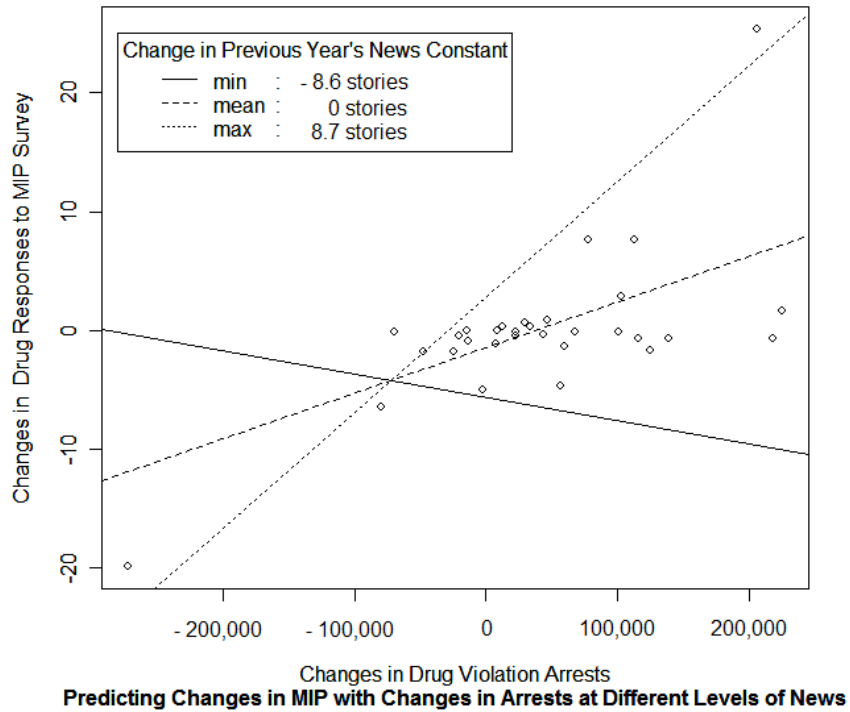
**Figure 1**

**Drugs as a Social Problem: Historical Trend**



**Figure 2**

**Drugs as a Social Problem: Annual Fluctuations**



As might be expected from the studies on the 1980s ‘drug panic’, there are some issues with influential data points. In the historical trend model, 1989 is the most influential point, influencing the slopes of news stories, particularly the interaction between news stories and arrests, and the model in general<sup>10</sup>; 1990 is problematically influential for the model in general as well.<sup>11</sup> A similar problem emerges in the model with annual fluctuations. The difference from 1987 to 1988 is particularly problematic, disproportionately influencing the slopes of arrests and the interaction between arrests and news. The difference from 1989 to 1990 is also influential in this regard but to a lesser degree.<sup>12</sup> The difference between arrests in 1987 and 1988 was 217,800 while the difference in 1989 and 1990 was a reduction in 272,200 arrests, both relatively large, suggesting a rapid proliferation of drug violation arrests in 1988 then rapid decline in 1990.<sup>13</sup> Though these models can still be generalized despite these data points<sup>14</sup>, these influential years should be noted as anomalous.

These models support the constructionist hypothesis that the portrayal of the problem (drugs) by institutions’, controlling for the prevalence of the problem, corresponds with the importance of the social problem. In both models with annual fluctuations and changes over time drug use was insignificant while drug violation arrests and the number of news stories on drugs the previous year were significant in predicting

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<sup>10</sup> For 1989 the *dfbeta* (measuring the influence of an observation on each slope coefficient) is - 3.26 for news and 4.11 for the interaction between news and arrests and has a Cook’s distance of 3.38, suggesting significant influence over these slopes and the model in general.

<sup>11</sup> The *dffit* (measuring the influence of an observation on the predicted value of the dependent variable) is problematic for 1989 and 1990, with a score of 5.388 and -3.119 respectively.

<sup>12</sup> Like the model with trends, 1988-89 is somewhat influential for the news variable with a *dfbeta* of -1.29.

<sup>13</sup> Taking a variable into account which also rapidly rose in 1988 then declined in 1990 to explain these phenomena would lead to a better model. Presidential addresses on the issue of drugs might be an example.

<sup>14</sup> A model with historical trends excluding the years 1989 and 1990 has the same results as the reported model. A model with annual fluctuations excluding 1987-88 and 1989-90 also has the same results as the reported model.

the perception of drugs as the most important problem. Further, and somewhat unexpectedly, institutions' portrayals (drug arrests and news stories on drugs) interact to affect the perception that drugs are the most important problem.

### **Discussion**

This paper gets past problems coming from the moral panic research design by independently testing objectivism and constructionism as internally consistent, generalizable theories. However, the findings in this paper show that neither theory is supported by both empirical tests. The conflicting findings indicate that, as is, neither objectivism nor contextual constructionism are theories that can be generalized to explain the importance of the social problems of both unemployment and drugs.

The findings on the problem of unemployment agree with previous research (Behr and Iyengar, 1985; Haller and Norpoth, 1997; Soroka, 2002a; 2002b) supporting the objectivist hypothesis. Using data from 1970 to 2007, analyzing both trends and annual fluctuations, the unemployment rate significantly predicts the perception of unemployment as the most important problem in America while controlling for news, which is not a significant predictor.

Conversely, agreeing with previous research on the problem of drugs (Beckett, 1994; Brownstein, 1991; Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Hawdon, 2001; Orcutt and Turner, 1993; Reeves and Campbell, 1994; Reinerman and Levine, 1989), using data from 1975 to 2006, using both trends and annual fluctuations, there is support for the constructionist hypothesis. Contextual definitions of the problem of drugs, as portrayed by the institutions of the news media (stories) and police (arrests), correlate with the

percent claiming drugs as the most important problem in America, independent of the prevalence of the problem of drug use. This study also extends previous research, showing that, for the problem of drugs, institutions' portrayals lead to the importance of the problem outside of specific eras known as panics. These findings also extend research on which institutions have a significant correlation with the importance of the social problem of drugs. The police's portrayal of drug use, by way of arrests, correlates with the importance of the problem of drugs. Further, this institution's portrayal of the problem of drugs interacts with the news media's portrayal of the problem. The more news stories the previous year, the more drug violation arrests affect the number claiming drugs as the most important problem.

More than extending previous research on the correlates of the importance of the problems of drugs and unemployment, this research design gets past the problems of measuring disproportion. As there is no reason to assume a priori a correlation between the prevalence and the importance of social problems, the importance of the problem of drugs is much more than a panic. Contextual definitions of drugs, portrayed by institutions', correlates with the importance of the social problem of drugs controlling for the prevalence of drug use. Similarly, the findings on unemployment are not proportional in an objective sense, but proportional in terms of a theory of correlation that may or may not be supported by evidence. By deriving positive empirical statements from both objectivism and contextual constructionism we can investigate what does, rather than what should and may not, predict the importance of social problems.

As each test supports a different hypothesis, as they exist, the theories of objectivism and constructionism are not generally supported. The social problems of



unemployment and drugs tested here are quite different, the importance of which caused by different processes. However, each theory would claim that the importance of these problems is caused by the same underlying process. Since each problem shows different results, perhaps these differences can point to modifications for both constructionism and objectivism in predicting the importance of social problems generally.

Moral panic theory would suggest the presence of folk devils (a person or group portrayed as deviant) is the major variable separating these two problems: while one could argue the problem of unemployment does not involve folk devils, with drug related moral panics, “sellers or dealers are always folk devils” (Goode, 2008, 537). However, like the concept of disproportion, to use folk devils as an explanation one would need to talk about how concern over folk devils correlates with the rise and fall of concern over social problems generally, not only when what ‘should be happening’ is not. Unless they are tied into the theory of objectivism, folk devils cannot be constructionist aberrations of the assumed to be correct objectivist hypothesis. How folk devils influence social problems needs to be connected to an internally consistent theory.

### **The Context of the Positive**

This paper does not extend moral panic’s folk devil idea. However, it does attempt to extend the objectivist and constructionist hypotheses to incorporate the conflicting findings. The conflicting findings of this study indicate that the importance of a social problem occasionally depends upon the problem’s empirically verifiable prevalence but other times may depend upon institutions’ portrayal of the problem. Then, there are two modified hypotheses that can be derived from this study: (1) the prevalence

of problems corresponds with the importance of problems, but institutions' may affect this relationship; (2) institutions' portrayals correspond with the importance of problems, but the prevalence of problems may affect this relationship. These are derived from the objectivist and contextual constructionist theories respectively.

Taking the modified objectivist hypothesis, as stated above, social problems may be problems independent of the perception of them as a problem. Therefore, the objective harm of a problem may increase, however, the importance of this harm may be reinterpreted through institutions' as some other problem. Increases in the importance of the social problem of drugs, for example, may actually stem from increases in violent crime or homelessness<sup>15</sup>; however, these objective social problems may be reinterpreted through institutions such as the news media or law enforcement as a problem of drug use. If this were the case, the empirically verifiable prevalence of homelessness or violent crime (for example) would correlate with the importance of drugs. This differs from past moral panic research as the objectivist hypothesis is maintained: the prevalence of the problem leads to the importance of the problem but institutions' portrayal of the problem effects this relationship.

As it stands contextual constructionism does not theorize how the empirically verifiable prevalence of a problem affects contextual definitions of social problems despite an ontological assumption that reality can be empirically verified. Though theoretically sound, the contextual constructionist theory can be extended to include how the empirically verifiable prevalence of a problem affects contextual definitions of this problem as important. Specifically, a hypothesis can be posed about how the prevalence

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<sup>15</sup> These are hypothetical; I find no evidence here to support this extended objectivist hypothesis.

of a problem affects the relationship between contextual definitions of a problem, as portrayed by institutions, and the importance of a problem in a society.

Contextual definitions of the importance of social problems, as portrayed through institutions', are intrinsically linked to the perception of, and potential to portray, reality through particular social contexts. The importance of a social problem may change depending on the interpretation of occurrences as problematic.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the importance of a problem may change depending on how institutions portray reality. For example, in the context of an experiment, psychological studies asking whether objects or events are importantly problematic will reveal a large number of affirmative responses to these artificially triggered problems, even when the importance of the problem is unconsciously triggered (e.g. Bargh, 1994; Bargh and Pietromonaco, 1982; Greenwald and Banaji, 1995). A problematic event in a certain context, even when previously unimportant, may become important when something primes the individual of its importance. Many times priming, and the resulting importance, of a problem is accomplished by institutions, organizations and mechanisms such as social movements, 'moral entrepreneurship', education and cultural production.

Generally, institutions prime a particular problem as important to the public. Although the definition of what constitutes a problem depends on a particular context, institutions exposing individuals to representations of a contextually defined problem will

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<sup>16</sup> Though I do not investigate or theorize how or why something is interpreted as a problem, a change in interpretation of an event from unproblematic to problematic may also affect the importance of social problems. Future research could examine two related constructionist hypotheses of how events become problematic: (1) institutions affect the definition of problems by convincing the public a previously unproblematic occurrence is problematic. That is, institutions may not only influence the importance of problems (tell the public what to think about), but may also influence what constitutes a problem (tells the public what to think); (2) since the context from which events are perceived affects the definition of the event as problematic, changes in the contexts from which institutions' portrayals of the problem are perceived may lead to changes in the interpretation of events as problematic (e.g. an increase in anti-drug institutions, situations, roles and activities means more people perceiving events from an anti-drug context).

make the problem important. Analogous to institutions exposing individuals to representations of a problem, the occurrence of the problem may expose individuals to the problem as well. That is to say, occurrences defined as problematic in particular contexts may also become important through the direct exposure of the occurrence to these particular contexts. For example, if a murder occurs to someone close to the victim or if someone's neighbor is a drug user, when these occurrences are contextually defined as problematic, homicide and drug use may become more important respectively. Generally, occurrences of murder and drug use are not experienced directly, but become important indirectly through institutions' portrayals to those who would find them problematic.<sup>17</sup> However, the direct portrayal of an occurrence to someone who defines the occurrence as problematic will prime this individual to find the problem important as well.

Since the occurrence of a problem may expose individuals to a problem, when experienced directly by those who find the occurrence problematic, the empirically verifiable prevalence of a problem should be somewhat correlated<sup>18</sup> with the number of people claiming a problem important. In effect, when experienced directly, the empirically verifiable prevalence of a problem will act like an institution portraying the reality of the problem. The effect of the prevalence of a problem on the relationship

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<sup>17</sup> This is similar to a dependency theory of the news effects - individuals will be more dependent on media for information on issues they do not experience directly. (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976; Zucker, 1978)

<sup>18</sup> Though the occurrence of a problem may make the problem important, the problem only becomes important to those who do not directly experience the occurrence through institutions. Due to differential access to portraying reality through institutions, the prevalence of a problem will generally be uncorrelated with the importance of a problem in society: more people experiencing a problem directly will not necessarily lead institutions to portray the problem as more important. Compared to those without access to institutions, if a small number of people directly experience an occurrence they find problematic, and they have a substantial ability to portray their contextual definition of the problem as important through institutions, they will typically be able to affect the publicly defined importance of social problems. Still, the objective prevalence of the problem may affect the hypothesized contextual constructionist relationship.

between contextual definitions of problems portrayed by institutions' and the importance of social problems varies depending on two criteria: (1) differential exposure: whether occurrences are directly experienced by individuals and (2) differential interpretation: whether the directly experienced occurrence is interpreted as problematic. Putting these together, when individuals who find an occurrence problematic directly experience the occurrence, the empirically verifiable prevalence of the problem will affect the relationship between institutions' portrayals and the importance of social problems.

Although this paper cannot empirically test this hypothesized effect of the prevalence of the problem on the contextual constructionist hypothesis because of the data used, this paper theoretically tests this hypothesized effect using the social problems of unemployment and drugs. Theoretically, those who find drug use problematic are not the ones experiencing drug use directly as drug users do not tend to find drug use problematic and drug use is typically done away from those who would find it problematic: those who find drug use problematic do not directly experience drug use. Also, theoretically, those who find unemployment problematic experience unemployment directly<sup>19</sup>: those who find unemployment problematic are directly experiencing unemployment. As such, this study theoretically splits these problems into those who find the occurrence problematic directly or only indirectly experiencing the occurrence.

Theoretically, the findings support this theory. The empirically verifiable prevalence of unemployment affects the relationship between contextual definitions of the problem portrayed by institutions and the importance of social problems while the prevalence of drug use does not affect this relationship. Future research could investigate

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<sup>19</sup> This point is somewhat analogous to the popular debate in political science asking, "when assessing leaders, do voters look to the national economy (sociotropic) or to their pocketbooks (egocentric)?" (Lebo and Box-Steffensmeier. 2008, p.21). This hypothesis would argue there is an interaction effect.

whether those who find occurrences problematic that experience the problem, either directly by way of actual occurrences of the problem or indirectly through institutions' portrayals of the problem, find it importantly problematic compared to those who do not experience the problem.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this paper generally agree with previous research on the importance of the social problems of unemployment and drugs, but also extend this research, using trend and annual fluctuation data and an extended time frame. Further, drug arrests have not been used, nor has an interaction between institutions' portrayals been shown, as a predictor of the importance of the social problem of drugs.

The findings show that the unemployment rate is correlated with responses of unemployment as the most important problem facing the nation. This relationship holds when controlling for news stories, which are insignificant. Further, there is a significant relationship between the number of responses of drugs as the most important problem facing the nation and drug violation arrests, and this relationship changes depending upon the number of news stories on drugs the previous year. Both arrests and news stories are significant for the problem of drugs, unlike the prevalence of drug use.

In independently testing the theory of contextual constructionism, the constructionist hypothesis is generally supported in describing the correlates of the social problem of drugs but unsupported in describing unemployment. The correlation between institutions' portrayals and the importance of the problem of drugs is not an aberration of the objectivist hypothesis but a general trend. Conversely, in independently testing the

theory of objectivism, the objectivist hypothesis is generally supported in describing the social problem of unemployment but unsupported in describing drugs. In this, independent tests of the importance of the social problems of drugs and unemployment show conflicting findings for constructionism and objectivism. In light of these findings, this paper suggests extensions of objectivism and constructionism that could explain the conflicting findings of drugs and unemployment respectively.

Several critical issues can be raised about this study. For the unemployment model, there is an unexplained predictor showing why the importance of unemployment is continually correlated with the preceding year's socially defined importance of unemployment. Also, in the models about drugs, there are some influential data points: 1989 and 1990 were influential for the slope of the news predictor while the fluctuations between 1987-88 and 1989-90 were influential for the slope of the arrest predictor. Also for the model on drugs, the drug use variable only records high school seniors. Further, I use a small number of variables, making this study vulnerable to spuriousness. I only use one variable to test the objectivist hypothesis for drugs (drug use) and the constructionist hypothesis for unemployment (news). Demographics such as age, race, sex, or location are not tested as predictors either. Finally, this paper assumes that the correlation between drug arrests and concern over drugs means that arrests lead to concern over drugs rather than concern over drugs leading to arrests. When possible, future research should investigate both directions of causality for any constructionist relationship.

Along with the results, this paper argues that moral panic studies, and social constructionism generally, can not use negative arguments to provide evidence of their validity: a lack of evidence for objectivism is not evidence for constructionism. The

preferred method of researching the importance of social problems would investigate a positive argument, testing whether contextual definitions, portrayed by institutions, organizations and mechanisms are causing the importance of the social problem, controlling for the empirically verifiable prevalence of the problem for potential spuriousness. By utilizing a positive argument, contextual constructionism can be liberated from the ‘constructionism of the gaps’ approach.

Using constructionism solely in a negative fashion is not productive for the constructionist argument. Contextual constructionism should be an independent theory, not just an explanation for what objectivist hypotheses fail to explain. As a positive argument, we can begin expanding the contextual constructionist argument as a general theory of the importance of social problems. This study attempts to show this potential as the contextual constructionist extension proposed develops the theory in a positive direction. Although this extended hypothesis may not be verified in further research, this paper is a call to develop a theory of the reality, rather than ‘misperceived’ reality, of the constructionist argument. As previous research generally remains valid, the purpose here is not to criticize per se but to develop methodologically rigorous positive hypotheses as a way to investigate the reality of constructionism: the futility of the negative must be taken seriously if we are to better understand the context of the positive.



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