SOCI 202
Constructing Social Problems

INSTRUCTOR: Professor Hier

Course Description

Why are terrorist attacks in London instantly problematized and addressed in terms of military fortification, while the impact of terrorism in Nigeria and Yemen barely attracts attention? Why did the worldwide indignation that broke out in September 2015 in response to the civil war in Syria virtually disappear from western media? Why does teen ‘sexting’ sometimes take on a greater urgency than structural forms of violence against women? Why do we worry about the undesirable health effects associated with second hand smoke more than the damage caused by inhaling automobile exhaust fumes? Why do we drink water from plastic bottles when we enjoy easy access to some of the safest public drinking water systems in human history? Why has combatting campus sexual assault become a priority for politicians and university administrators over the past few years when sexual violence has occurred on campuses for decades?

Sociology 202 examines how social phenomena, sometimes having persisted for decades (e.g., premarital sex, domestic violence, workplace bullying, sport concussion), become popularly understood as social problems only at certain moments in time, in particular places, and among members of specific social groups. The course focuses on the ways in which social phenomena, once widely recognized as social problems, are sustained over time through a variety of human activities, strategies, and interactions (e.g., reports, advertisements, websites, mass media stories, social media conversations, documentaries, celebrity activism). The course also focused on how perceived problems that at certain times occupy a considerable amount of attention and debate decline in importance (only to be replaced by other issues that become widely perceived as significant social problems).

The course will likely be divided into two units. The first unit will examine what is meant by the term ‘constructing social problems.’ The second unit will likely focus on moral panics as a special kind of social problem frame.

Evaluation and Reading

Neither the evaluation structure nor reading list for this course has been determined.

** A more detailed course outline will be distributed to students during the first week of classes.**