CHAPTER 1

Thinking about Social Problems

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, students should be able to:

1. Define the concept “social problem” and distinguish between objective and subjective elements of social problems.
2. Explain the concept of “structure” of a society and the following major elements of social structure: institutions; social groups, including the distinction between primary and secondary groups; statuses, including the distinction between ascribed and achieved statuses; and roles.
3. Define “culture” and explain the following major elements of culture and how they relate to social problems: beliefs; values; norms, including the distinctions between folkways, laws, and mores; sanctions; and symbols.
4. Explain the concept “sociological imagination” and discuss its relevance to the study of social problems.
5. Define “theory” and explain the significance of theory to understanding social problems.
6. Explain the view of society from the structural-functionalist perspective, the ideas of functional and dysfunctional social elements, and the conceptual distinction between manifest and latent functions.
7. Explain the two dominant theories of social problems that grew out of the structural-functional perspective: (1) social pathology and (2) social disorganization, including its concept of anomie.
8. Explain how the conflict perspective views society and how the ideas of Karl Marx contributed to this perspective.
9. Explain how the focus of macro sociology differs from that of micro sociology and the theoretical perspectives associated with each of these major orientations to sociological study.
10. Explain the symbolic interactionist view of social problems and the stages through which a social problem develops.
11. Explain the reasons for conducting scientific research of social problems and the steps involved in conducting research on social problems.
12. Describe the following methods of collecting data about social problems and explain their advantages and disadvantages: experiments; survey research, including interviews, questionnaires, and “talking” computers; field research; and secondary data research.

KEY TERMS

achieved status 4  
alienation 11  
anomie 9  
ascribed status 4  
beliefs 5  
culture 5  
dependent variable 16  
experiments 17  
field research 18  
hypothesis 16  
independent variable 16  
institution 4  
latent functions 9  
manifest functions 9  
norms 6  
objective element of a social problem 2  
primary groups 4  
roles 5  
sample 17  
sanctions 7  
secondary groups 4  
social group 4  
social movement 20  
social problem 3  
sociological imagination 7  
status 4  
structure 4
LECTURE OUTLINE

I. WHAT IS A SOCIAL PROBLEM?
   A. Objective and Subjective Elements of Social Problems
      1. Objective element: the existence of a social condition
      2. Subjective element: the belief that a particular social condition is harmful to society or to a segment of society and that the condition should and can be changed.
      3. Definition of a social problem contains objective and subjective elements: a social condition that a segment of society views as harmful to members of society and in need of remedy.

   B. Variability in Definitions of Social Problems
      1. Individuals and groups disagree about what constitutes a social problem due to differences in values, beliefs, and life experiences.
      2. Definitions of social problems vary within societies, across societies, and across historical time periods.

II. ELEMENTS OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND CULTURE
   Social structure and culture are distinct but inseparable elements of society that help us understand the root causes of social problems.

   A. Elements of Social Structure: the way society is organized
      1. Institution: an established and enduring pattern of social relationships
         a. Traditional institutions: family, religion, politics, economics, and education
         b. Other institutions important in modern society: science and technology, mass media, medicine, sports, military
      2. Social groups: two or more people who have a common identity, interact, and form a social relationship
         a. Primary groups tend to be small and are characterized by intimate and informal interaction.
         b. Secondary groups may be large or small and are task-oriented, impersonal, and formal.
      3. Statuses: positions within a social group
         a. Ascribed status is assigned on the basis of factors over which the individual has no control (e.g., sex, race).
         b. Achieved status is assigned on the basis of some characteristic or behavior over which the individual has some control (e.g., parent, college graduate).
         c. One’s ascribed status may affect the likelihood of achieving other statuses.
         d. Master status: the status that is the most significant in a person’s social identity
      4. Roles: the set of rights, obligations, and expectations associated with a status
         a. Roles guide our behavior and allow us to predict the behavior of others.
         b. A single status involves more than one role.

   B. Elements of Culture: the meanings and ways of life that characterize a society
      1. Beliefs: definitions and explanations about what is assumed to be true
         a. Beliefs influence whether an individual or group views a particular condition as a social problem, and the existence of the condition itself.
      2. Values: social agreements about what is good and bad, right and wrong, desirable and undesirable
         a. Conditions are considered social problems when they are incompatible with values
b. Values also impact the development of the social condition itself

3. Norms and Sanctions: socially defined rules of behavior
   a. Folkways: customs and manners of society
   b. Laws: norms that are formalized and backed by political authority
   c. Mores: norms that have a moral basis
   d. Sanctions: social consequences for conforming to or violating norms
      i. Sanctions may be positive or negative, formal or informal

4. Symbol: something that represents something else
   a. Cultural symbols: language, gestures, and objects whose meaning is commonly understood
   b. Sometimes people attach different meanings to the same symbol.

III. THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

A. The sociological imagination: the ability to see the connections between our personal lives and the social world.
   1. Understanding causes of social problems by relating elements of social structure and culture to personal troubles that are shared by others in society.

IV. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

A. Structural-Functionalist Perspective
   1. Defines society as a system of interconnected parts that work together to maintain a state of balance and social equilibrium; focuses on how each part influences and is influenced by other parts.
   2. Effects of social elements on society
      a. Functional effects: contribute to social stability
      b. Dysfunctional effects: disrupt social stability
      c. An element of society, such as crime, can be both functional and dysfunctional
   3. There are two types of functions:
      a. Manifest: intended consequences that are commonly recognized
      b. Latent: unintended consequences that are often hidden
   4. Two theories of social problems grew out of structural-functionalism
      a. Social Pathology: problems result from elements of social structure or culture that no longer perform properly
         i. Due to inadequacies in our institutions or improper socialization
      b. Social Disorganization: rapid social change disrupts norms in society
         i. Anomie (normlessness) results when norms become weak or are in conflict with each other.
         ii. Social problems may be solved by slowing social change and strengthening social norms.

B. Conflict Perspective
   1. Views society as comprised of different groups and interests that compete for power and resources.
   2. Examines which groups have power and benefit from a particular social arrangement.
   3. Two types of conflict theories of social problems
      a. Marxist theories: social problems result from class inequality inherent in a capitalist system.
         i. What benefits the “haves” in society often creates poverty and other social problems for the “have-nots”
         ii. Corporate violence: harm inflicted on consumers, workers, and the general public
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resulting from decisions by corporate executives or managers

iii. Alienation: powerlessness and meaningless in people’s lives
- Workers feel sense of powerlessness due to lack of control over jobs
- Specialized nature of work requires repetitive tasks, which may feel meaningless

b. Non-Marxist Conflict Theories: conflicts arise when groups have opposing values and interests.
   i. Different values result in different definitions of what constitutes a social problem
   ii. Sometimes the social problem is way the conflict is expressed (e.g., pro-life advocates who shoot doctors who perform abortions).

C. Symbolic Interactionist Perspective
   1. Micro sociological perspective: concerned with the social-psychological dynamics of individuals interacting in small groups
   2. Views human behavior as influenced by definitions and meanings created and maintained through social interactions
      a. W. I. Thomas suggested that humans respond to their definition of a situation rather than the objective situation itself; therefore, situations we define as real become real in their consequences
      b. Cooley stated that we develop our self-concept by observing how others interact with and label us; we see a reflection of ourselves called the “looking-glass self.”
      c. Weber argued social scientists must use empathy to see the world through the eyes of an individual or group to understand behavior; he called this approach Verstehen, which in German means empathy.

D. Symbolic Interactionist Theories of Social Problems
   1. A condition must be defined or recognized as a social problem for it to be a social problem
      a. Blumer suggested social problems develop in stages.
         i. “societal recognition”—the process by which a social problem is “born.”
         ii. “social legitimation”—the social problem achieves recognition by the larger community, including the media, schools, and churches.
         iii. “mobilization for action”—individuals and groups become concerned about how to respond to the social condition.
         iv. “development and implementation of an official plan” for dealing with the problem.
      b. Labeling theory
         i. A social condition or group is viewed as problematic if it is labeled as such.
         ii. Resolving social problems sometimes involves changing the meanings and definitions that are attributed to people and situations.
      c. Social constructionism: reality is socially constructed by individuals who interpret the social world around them
         i. Society is a social creation rather than an objective given.
         ii. The media, universities, research institutes, and government agencies are often responsible for the public’s initial “take” on the problem under discussion.

V. SOCIAL PROBLEMS RESEARCH
   A. Stages of Conducting a Research Study:
      1. Formulating a research question
         a. Question may come from the researcher’s own life experiences, test a sociological theory, or reflect current events or concerns of community/activist groups
      2. Reviewing the literature: review of published material on the topic to find out what is already known
      3. Defining variables
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a. Variable: any measurable event, characteristic, or property that varies.
b. Operational definition: specifying how a variable is to be measured.

4. Formulating a hypothesis
   a. Hypothesis: prediction about how one variable is related to another variable
   b. Dependent variable: the variable the researcher wants to explain
   c. Independent variable: the variable that is expected to explain change in the dependent variable
   d. Researchers often assess the effects of several independent variables on one or more dependent variables.

B. Methods of Data Collection
   1. Experiments: assess causation by manipulating the independent variable to determine how it affects the dependent variable.
      a. Requires one or more experimental groups that are exposed to the experimental treatment(s) and a control group that is not exposed
      b. Major strength: provides evidence of causal relationships
      c. Major weakness: results from small samples and artificial laboratory settings; may not be generalizable to people in natural settings
   2. Surveys: eliciting information from respondents through questions.
      a. Requires a representative sample: a portion of the population selected so that the information from the sample can be generalized to a larger population.
   3. Interviews: use trained interviewers to ask questions
      a. Advantages: interviewers can clarify questions and follow up on answers
      b. Disadvantages: Cost; Lack of anonymity that may result in respondents refusing to participate or concealing or altering information
   4. Questionnaires: mail or personally administered
      i. Advantages: Less expensive and time-consuming; Provides privacy and anonymity to the respondents
      ii. Disadvantage: difficult to obtain an adequate response rate
   5. “Talking” Computers
      a. A new method of conducting survey research through computer interviews.
      b. Method affects reliability of data gathered.
   6. Field Research: observing social behavior in its natural setting
      a. Two types of field research:
         i. Participant observation: researcher participates in the phenomenon being studied so as to obtain an insider’s perspective on the people and/or behavior being observed.
         ii. Non-participant observation: researcher observes the phenomenon begin studied without actively participating in the group or activity.
      b. Sometimes sociologists conduct in-depth detailed analyses or case studies of an individual, group, or event.
      c. Advantage: Provides detailed information about values, rituals, norms, behaviors, symbols, beliefs, and emotions of those being studied
      d. Disadvantages: Researcher’s observations may be biased; Findings may not be generalizable due to small samples.
   5. Secondary data research: analyze data already collected by other researchers or government agencies (e.g. historical documents, police reports, hospital records)
      a. Advantages: Researchers avoid time and expense of collecting data; Often based on large, representative samples.
      b. Disadvantage: Researcher is limited to the data already available.

VI. TEN GOOD REASONS TO READ THIS BOOK
A. **Provide an integrated theoretical background**: social problems usually have more than one cause.

B. **Develop a sociological imagination**: helps you see the link between private troubles and public issues.

C. **Understand globalization**: social problems in one part of the world affect other parts of the world.

D. **Increase awareness about solutions**: fixing one problem might create others.

E. **Increase optimism**: positive changes and solutions are profiled throughout the text

F. **Be empowered with knowledge**: accurate information shows that we have solutions

G. **Increase self awareness**: using the Self and Society exercises.

H. **Increase empathy and compassion**: using *The Human Side* features.

I. **Learn the basics of scientific research**: in *Social Problems Research Up Close*

J. **Make a difference in the world**: through individual and collective action.

**VII. UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL PROBLEMS**

A. **All Social Problems Have an Origin, Consequence and Solution.**

1. Sociologists have been studying social problems since the Industrial Revolution
   a. Industrialization brought about massive social changes.
   b. Increases in crime, pollution, divorce and juvenile delinquency

2. Field of sociology developed to find solutions to these issues.

3. No single agreed upon definition of what constitutes a social problem.

**ACTIVITIES AND ASSIGNMENTS**

**STUDENT PROJECTS**

**The History of Activism**

The history of social movements in the United States has involved a number of people we do not traditionally hear about. Assign each student to write a one-page profile of an important activist. Post the profiles on a class webpage or distribute them to all students so everyone will have an easy reference to important reformers.

**Local Organizational Activism**

Instruct students to contact a local organization that is working to remedy a social problem. Request the students to report the following information about the organization they select:

a. What is the name, address, and phone number of the organization?

b. With what social problem is the organization concerned?

c. What is the organization doing to remedy the problem?

d. Is the group part of a larger organization, e.g., state or international?

e. Does the group or organization consist of paid employees, volunteers, or both?

f. What are the sources of funding for the organization?

f. How successful has the organization been in reaching its goals?

**College Student Activism**

Instruct students to find a listing of student organizations from a university website and to select one organization that is concerned with a social problem. Request the students to contact someone from the organization and obtain and report the following information:
a. What is the name of the organization and the university with which it is affiliated?
b. Is the organization part of a larger organization, e.g., state or international?
c. With what social problem is the organization concerned?
d. What activities of the organization are directly concerned with the social problem?
e. How successful have these activities been in fostering understanding or a solution to the social problem?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Culture and Social Problems

Divide the class into small groups and ask each group to choose a social problem (or the instructor can assign a problem). Request the students to brainstorm possible cultural causes of the problem (using the elements of culture described in the text) and possible social structural causes of the problem (using the elements of social structure described in the text).

Analyzing Social Problems from Different Sociological Perspectives

Choose a widely publicized event related to a social problem, such as school shootings. Divide the class into small groups and instruct the students to brainstorm possible causes of the social problem using each of the three major theoretical perspectives in sociology: structural-functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. Then engage the students in a general class discussion of these causes and possible solutions from the different sociological perspectives.

International Solutions to Social Problems

Divide students into small working groups that they will be in for the semester. Assign groups various regions of the world and have them report on how countries in that region deal with the social problems being discussed in the classroom.

Recognizing Problems Associated with Solutions

Divide students into small groups. Give each group one of the lists of solutions to social problems from the exercise above. Instruct students to brainstorm a list of the problems associated with each solution. For example, what are the difficulties involved in implementing each solution? Do the proposed solutions contribute to other social problems? Request a spokesperson from each group to describe the problems associated with the solutions to the class.

Applying the Sociological Imagination

Divide students into small groups. Assign each group a personal trouble (e.g. Harold is unemployed, Susan abuses prescription drugs, etc.). Instruct the groups to use their sociological imaginations to explain how their personal trouble would be viewed as a social problem. A spokesperson from each group can describe how their personal trouble would be viewed as a social problem to the class.

INTERNET ASSIGNMENTS

Applying the Sociological Imagination to Personal Stories
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In order to get a sociological perspective on current events, have your students follow the blog, This Week in Sociology (http://www.thisweekinsociology.com) and report on three events throughout the semester. Have them summarize the story and connect it to theories from the textbook.

Increasing Political Awareness and Participation

Instruct students to explore the website of Project Vote Smart at http://www.vote-smart.org to learn about their local and state elected officials and their officials’ positions on social problems. Request the students to write a short paper explaining the position of one of their elected officials towards a social problem.

Social Problems in the News

Instruct the students to use an Internet search engine to find the web site of a major newspaper, such as the New York Times, Washington Post, or Chicago Tribune. Request the students to bookmark the website of their selected newspaper and to visit the site weekly to find news articles that relate to social problems. The students should keep these articles in a file and share the information from the article with the class when that topic is discussed. Request the students to submit their file at the end of the semester.

Campus Activism

Instruct the students to go to the Internet site at www.campusactivism.org and choose an issue, social movement, or activist organization of interest to them. Request the students to link to the resources given about this issue, movement, or organization. Instruct students to then use their college or university website to investigate the presence or absence of movements or organizations that address the same issue on their own campus. Instruct students to write a short (2-3 page) explanation of their findings and prepare to present their findings to the class.

Government Initiatives on Social Problems

Instruct the students to choose a social problem and do an Internet search for either federal or state government initiatives to solve the problem. Have the students report on these initiatives in class and engage the class in a discussion of the potential effectiveness of these initiatives.

Sociology and Activism

Instruct student to go to http://college.cengage.com/sociology/shared/videos/template24.html. There, they can watch a video about how sociologists can impact social change. Ask students to brainstorm a list of ways they can might like to impact one of the problems on the syllabus.

VIDEO SUGGESTIONS

Dreamworlds 3: Desire, Sex and Power in Music Video

Documentary that examines the impact of music videos in shaping attitudes toward femininity, masculinity, sexuality and race. Relates to the concept of culture and could also be used to demonstrate the sociological imagination because it shows how individual thoughts, perceptions and behaviors are shaped by social institutions, culture and society.
Discussion Questions:
1. How are women and men portrayed in the videos examined in the film?
2. How do these portrayals impact people’s perceptions of gender, sexuality and race?
3. We typically think of our thoughts, perceptions and behaviors as being private and personal, but this video challenges us to think about how they are impacted by society. How does this relate to the sociological imagination?

**Hate.Com: Extremists on the Internet**

Documentary that examines racist, anti-Semitic, and heterosexist hate websites and their consequences. Video includes interviews individuals who promote these websites, including adults and children. This video relates to the topic of culture by illustrating subcultures that exist on the internet and the impact of technology on the recruitment of individuals into hate groups.

Discussion Questions:
1. What are some of the consequences of hate websites?
2. Do you think the websites shows in the video should be censored? Why or why not?
3. What elements of U.S. culture make these websites possible?

**Made in L.A.: Hecho en Lost Angeles**

This documentary shows working conditions of immigrant women who work in the garment industry in Los Angeles. It follows a 3-year battle fought between workers and workers rights advocates, and a popular clothing chain, Forever 21. It provides an example of social activism and resistance.

Discussion Questions:
1. What kinds of working conditions led to the lawsuit against Forever 21? Explain the controversy surrounding which company is responsible for the working conditions. Who do you think is responsible?
2. What actions did the workers take to try to gain rights? How effective were their actions?
3. What rights do you think undocumented workers in the U.S. should have?

**The Up Series (1964-2005)**

This classic documentary by Michael Apted follows children in England, interviewing them every 7 years about their current lives, hopes for the future and long term dreams.

Discussion Questions:
1. What do you think should determine whether someone reaches their long-term dreams and goals?
2. How are the people in the film similar to you? How are they different? Which person did you identify with most?

**RELATED SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**

Social Justice: The Society for the Study of Social Problems (http://www.sssp1.org/) is an organization that uses sociological research to work for social justice.

Public Sociology: One of the ways that sociologists make their work impact social issues is by practicing public sociology where they intentionally design research projects which will inform the public debate
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about social issues. You can find the ASA section page for Public Sociology here: http://sspps.wordpress.com/. Make sure to check out their blogroll on the right hand side of the page.

SOLVING SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Idealist.org is a good place to go if you’re interested in a career that deals with social issues. They will match you up with job, internship and volunteer openings working with issues that you care about across the country. Locally, you can always start with a Boys and Girls Club or a United Way agency to get hooked up with local issues. Also, you could look into becoming a Big Brother or Big Sister.