Chapter 1:
Thinking About Social Problems

“Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to be better. It’s not.” – Dr. Seuss, The Lorax
Chapter Outline

• What Is a Social Problem?
• Elements of Social Structure and Culture
• The Sociological Imagination
• Theoretical Perspectives
• Social Problems Research
• Understanding Social Problems
Thinking About Social Problems…

• In a 2011 Gallup poll, a random sample of Americans were asked, “What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?”

• Common answers included the economy, war and terrorism, health care, immigration, unemployment, government corruption, family decline, poverty, and crime and violence.

• Only 19% of Americans were satisfied “with the way things are going in the United States at this time.”
What Is a Social Problem?
Objective Elements of Social Problems

• Awareness of social conditions through life experiences and through reports in the media.
  – We see the homeless, hear gunfire in the streets, and see battered women in hospital emergency rooms.
  – We read about employees losing their jobs as businesses downsize and factories close.
What Is a Social Problem?
Subjective Elements of Social Problems

• The belief that a particular social condition is harmful to society or to a segment of society and that it should and can be changed.
• We know crime, drug addiction, poverty, racism, violence, and pollution exist.
  – These are not considered social problems unless a segment of society believes these conditions diminish the quality of human life.
What Is a Social Problem?

Objective and Subjective Elements of Social Problems

• By combining the subjective and objective elements, we arrive at the following definition:

• A social problem is a social condition that a segment of society views as harmful to members of society and in need of remedy.
What Is a Social Problem?
Variability in Definitions of Social Problems

• Some Americans view the availability of abortion as a social problem, others view restrictions on abortion as a social problem.

• Variations in what is considered a social problem are due to differences in values, beliefs, and life experiences.
What Do You Think?

• Research indicates that traditional media sources (like local newspapers) are having a difficult time holding on to their consumers.
  – If your local print and/or online newspaper folded, where would you go for your news?
  – What role do the various media play in our awareness of social problems?
  – Will definitions of social problems change as sources of information change and, if so, in what way?
Debating Social Problems

- Some individuals view homosexuals as a social problem while others view homophobia as a social problem.
- Here, protestors both for and against the repeal of Proposition 8, which banned gay marriages in California, await the appellate court’s decision.
Elements of Social Structure and Culture

Elements of Social Structure

• The **structure** of a society refers to the way society is organized.

• Society is organized into
  – Institutions
  – Social groups
  – Statuses
  – Roles
Elements of Social Structure and Culture

Elements of Social Structure

- An **institution** is an established and enduring pattern of social relationships.
- The five traditional institutions are:
  - Family
  - Religion
  - Politics
  - Economics
  - Education
Elements of Social Structure and Culture

Elements of Social Structure

- A **social group** is defined as two or more people who have a common identity, interact, and form a social relationship.
  - **Primary groups** are characterized by intimate and informal interaction.
  - **Secondary groups** are task oriented and characterized by impersonal and formal interaction.
Elements of Social Structure and Culture

Elements of Social Structure

• **Statuses**: A status is a position that a person occupies within a social group.
• The statuses in a family may consist of mother, father, stepmother, stepfather, wife, husband and child
• Statuses can be either ascribed or achieved.
Elements of Social Structure and Culture

Elements of Social Structure

• **Ascribed Statuses**: An ascribed status is one that society assigns to an individual on the basis of factors over which the individual has no control.
  
  – Examples: child, teenager, senior citizen.

Characteristics like age and race are ascribed statuses.
Elements of Social Structure and Culture

Elements of Social Structure

• **Achieved Statuses:** An achieved status is assigned on the basis of some characteristic or behavior over which the individual has some control.

  – **Examples:** college graduate, spouse, parent, bank president

Achieved statuses can be negative as well…like convicted criminal.
Elements of Social Structure and Culture
Elements of Social Structure

• **Roles**: The set of rights, obligations, and expectations associated with a status.
• Roles guide our behavior and allow us to predict the behavior of others.
Elements of Social Structure and Culture

Elements of Culture

• **Culture** is defined as the meanings and ways of life that characterize a society including beliefs, values, norms, sanctions, and symbols.
Elements of Social Structure and Culture

Elements of Culture

- **Beliefs** are definitions and explanations about what is assumed to be true.
- **Values** are social agreements about what is considered good and bad, right and wrong, desirable and undesirable.
Elements of Social Structure and Culture

Elements of Culture

• **Norms**
  – Socially defined rules of behavior. There are three types of norms.
    • **Folkways** - customs and manners of society.
    • **Laws** - formal norms backed by authority.
    • **Mores** - norms with a moral basis.
Elements of Social Structure and Culture

Elements of Culture

- Sanctions
  - Consequences for conforming to or violating norms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Sanctions</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>Being praised by one’s neighbors for organizing a neighborhood recycling program.</td>
<td>Being criticized by one’s neighbors for refusing to participate in the neighborhood recycling program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>Being granted an award for organizing a neighborhood recycling program.</td>
<td>Being fined by the city for failing to dispose of trash properly.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Elements of Social Structure and Culture

Elements of Culture

• **Symbols**
  – Language, gestures, and objects whose meaning is commonly understood by the members of a society.
Sociological Imagination

• The **sociological imagination**, a term C. Wright Mills (1959) developed, refers to the ability to see the connections between our personal lives and the social world in which we live.

• When we use our sociological imagination, we are able to distinguish between “private troubles” and “public issues” and to see connections between the events and conditions of our lives and the social and historical context in which we live.
Theoretical Perspectives
Structural-Functionalist Perspective

• Society is composed of parts that work together to maintain a state of balance.

• Two types of functions:
  – latent - Consequences that are unintended and often hidden.
  – manifest - Intended and commonly recognized
What Do You Think?

• In viewing society as a set of interrelated parts, structural functionalists argue that proposed solutions to social problems may lead to other social problems.

• For example, urban renewal projects displace residents and break up community cohesion. Racial imbalance in schools lead to forced integration, which in turn generated violence and increased hostility between the races.
  – What are some other “solutions” that lead to social problems?
  – Do all solutions come with a price to pay?
  – Can you think of a solution to a social problem that has no negative consequences?
Theoretical Perspectives
Structural-Functionalist Theories of Social Problems

• **Social pathology** - Social problems result from “sickness” in society.

• **Social disorganization** - Rapid social change disrupts norms in society.
  – When norms become weak, unclear, or are in conflict with each other, society is in a state of **anomie**, or normlessness.
Theoretical Perspectives

Conflict Perspective

• Views society as composed of groups and interests competing for power and resources.

• Explains various aspects of our social world by looking at which groups have power and benefit from a particular social arrangement.
Theoretical Perspectives
Conflict Perspective

• Karl Marx

  – The origins of the conflict perspective can be traced to the works of Karl Marx.
  – Marx suggested that all societies go through stages of economic development.
  – Industrialization leads to two classes: the *bourgeoisie*, or the owners of the means of production; and the *proletariat*, or the workers who earn wages.
  – The bourgeoisie use their power to control the institutions of society to their advantage.
Theoretical Perspectives
Conflict Theories of Social Problems

- There are two general types of conflict theories of social problems:
  - Marxist Conflict Theories focus on social conflict that results from economic inequalities.
  - Non-Marxist Conflict Theories focus on social conflict that results from competing values and interests among social groups.
Theoretical Perspectives
Conflict Theories of Social Problems

• Marxist Conflict Theories:
  – According to Marxist theorists, social problems result from class inequality inherent in a capitalistic system.
  – Marxist conflict theories also focus on the problem of alienation, or powerlessness and meaninglessness in people’s lives.
Theoretical Perspectives
Conflict Theories of Social Problems

• Non-Marxist Conflict Theories:
  – Concerned with conflict that arises when groups have opposing values and interests.
    • Antiabortion activists value the life of unborn embryos; pro-choice activists value the right of women to control their reproductive decisions.
    • These value positions reflect different subjective interpretations of what constitutes a social problem.
Theoretical Perspectives
Levels of Analysis

• **Macrosociology** - Looks at the "big picture" of society and suggests how social problems are affected at the institutional level.

• **Microsociology** - Concerned with the social psychological dynamics of individuals interacting in small groups.
Theoretical Perspectives
Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

• A basic premise is that a condition must be defined or recognized as a social problem for it to be a social problem.
Theoretical Perspectives
Symbolic Interactionist Theories of Social Problems

• **Blumer’s Stages of a Social Problem:**
Herbert Blumer suggested social problems develop in stages:

1. Societal recognition is the process by which a social problem, is “born.”
2. Social legitimation takes place when the social problem is recognized by the larger community.
3. Mobilization for action that leads to the development and implementation of a plan for dealing with the problem.
Theoretical Perspectives
Symbolic Interactionist Theories of Social Problems

• **Labeling theory**: A social condition or group is viewed as problematic if it is labeled as such.

• **Social constructionism**: Argues that reality is socially constructed by individuals who interpret the social world around them.
| **TABLE 1.2** Comparison of Theoretical Perspectives |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| **STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALISM**       | **CONFLICT THEORY**               | **SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM**      |
| **Representative theorists**        | **Society**                       | **Society**                       |
| Emile Durkheim                      | Karl Marx                         | George H. Mead                    |
| Talcott Parsons                     | Ralf Dahrendorf                    | Charles Cooley                    |
| Robert Merton                       |                                   | Erving Goffman                    |
| **Society**                         | **Individuals**                   | **Individuals**                   |
| Society is a set of interrelated    | Individuals are socialized by    | Humans are interpretive and      |
| parts; cultural consensus exists    | society's institutions;          | interactive; they are            |
| and leads to social order;         | socialization is the process by   | constantly changing as their      |
| natural state of society:          | which social control is exerted; | “social beings” emerge and are    |
| balance and harmony.               | people need society and its       | molded by changing circumstances. |
| **Individuals**                     | **Cause of social problems?**     |                                   |
| **Society is a network of         | Rapid social change; social      |                                   |
| interlocking roles; social order    | disorganization that disrupts the| Different interpretations of roles; |
| does not lead to social order;     | harmony and balance; inadequate   | labeling of individuals, groups,  |
| natural state of society:          | socialization and/or weak         | or behaviors as deviant; definition |
| imbalance.                         | institutions.                     | of an objective condition as a    |
| **Cause of social problems?**      |                                   | social problem.                   |
| **Society**                         | **Social policy/solutions**       |                                   |
| Rapid social change; social        | Repair weak institutions; assure  | Reduce impact of labeling and     |
| disorganization that disrupts the   | proper socialization; cultivate   | associated stigmatization;        |
| harmony and balance; inadequate     | a strong collective sense of      | alteration of what is defined as  |
| socialization and/or weak           | right and wrong.                  | a social problem.                 |
| institutions.                      |                                   |                                   |
| **Social policy/solutions**        | **Criticisms**                    |                                   |
| Repair weak institutions; assure    | Called “sunshine sociology”;     | Concentrates on micro issues only;|
| proper socialization; cultivate a   | supports the maintenance of the   | fails to link micro issues to     |
| strong collective sense of right    | status quo; needs to ask         | macro-level concerns; too         |
| and wrong.                         | “functional for whom?”; does not  | psychological in its approach;    |
|                                   | deal with issues of power and     | assumes label amplified problem. |
|                                   | conflict; incorrectly assumes a   |                                   |
|                                   | consensus.                        |                                   |
| **Criticisms**                     | **Utopian model; Marxist states   |                                   |
| Called “sunshine sociology”;       | have failed; denies existence of  |                                   |
| supports the maintenance of the     | cooperation and equitable         |                                   |
| status quo; needs to ask            | exchange; cannot explain cohesion |                                   |
| “functional for whom?”; does not   | and harmony.                      |                                   |
| deal with issues of power and       |                                   |                                   |
| conflict; incorrectly assumes a     |                                   |                                   |
| consensus.                         |                                   |                                   |
| **Utopian model; Marxist states     |                                   |                                   |
| have failed; denies existence of     |                                   |                                   |
| cooperation and equitable exchange;|                                   |                                   |
| cannot explain cohesion and         |                                   |                                   |
| harmony.                           |                                   |                                   |
Social Problems Research

Stages of Conducting a Research Study

1. Formulating a research question.
2. Reviewing the literature.
3. Defining variables.
4. Formulating a hypothesis.
Social Problems Research
Stages of Conducting a Research Study

• **Formulating a Research Question** – A research study usually begins with a research question.

• **Reviewing the Literature** – After a research question is formulated, researchers review the published material on the topic to find out what is already known about it.
Social Problems Research
Stages of Conducting a Research Study

• Defining Variables:
  – A variable is any measurable event, characteristic, or property that varies or is subject to change.
  – Researchers must operationally define the variables they study.
    • An operational definition specifies how a variable is to be measured.
  – Operational definitions are particularly important for defining variables that cannot be directly observed.
Social Problems Research
Stages of Conducting a Research Study

• Formulating a Hypothesis:
  – A hypothesis is a prediction about how one variable is related to another variable.
  – The dependent variable is the variable that the researcher wants to explain.
  – The independent variable is the variable that is expected to explain change in the dependent variable.
What Do You Think?

• A journalist cannot reveal information given in confidence without permission from the source or a court order.

• Do you think sociologists should be granted the same protections as journalists?

• If a reporter at your school newspaper uncovered a scandal at your university, should he or she be protected by the First Amendment?
Social Problems Research
Methods of Data Collection

• Experiments
• Surveys
• Field research
• Secondary data research
Social Problems Research
Methods of Data Collection

• **Experiments** are a research method that involves manipulating the independent variable to determine how it affects the dependent variable.
Debating Social Problems

• Stanley Milgram found that 65% of a sample of citizens were willing to use harmful shocks on an elderly man with a heart condition because they were instructed to by the experimenter.

• It was revealed that the man had been part of the experiment.

• While this experiment provided valuable information, it also raised serious ethical questions. Should he have been allowed to perform his experiments?
Social Problems Research
Methods of Data Collection

• **Surveys:**
  – *Survey* research involves eliciting information from respondents through questions.
  – An important part of survey research is selecting a sample of those to be questioned.
  – A sample is a portion of the population, selected to be representative so that the information from the sample can be generalized to a larger population.
Social Problems Research
Methods of Data Collection

• **Interviews:**
  – In *interview* survey research, trained interviewers ask respondents questions and make written notes about or tape-record the answers.
  – One advantage of interview research is that researchers are able to clarify questions for the respondent and follow up on answers to particular questions.
What Do You Think?

• Imagine you are doing research on the prevalence of cheating on examinations at your university.

• How would you get a random sample of the population?

• What are some of the independent variables you would examine?

• How would you operationalize these variables?
Social Problems Research
Methods of Data Collection

• **Questionnaires:**
  – Researchers may develop *questionnaires* that they mail or give to a sample of respondents.
  – Questionnaire research is less expensive and less time consuming than surveys and provides privacy to research participants.
  – The disadvantage of mail questionnaires is that it is difficult to obtain an adequate response rate.
“Talking” Computers:
– A new method of conducting survey research is asking respondents to provide answers to a computer that “talks.”
– Research found that respondents rated computer interviews about sexual issues more favorably than face-to-face interviews and that the computer interviews were more reliable.
Social Problems Research
Methods of Data Collection

• **Field Research:**
  – **Field research** involves observing social behavior in settings in which it occurs naturally.
  – In participant observation the researcher participates in the phenomenon being studied to obtain an insider’s perspective.
  – In nonparticipant observation the researcher observes the phenomenon being studied without actively participating.
Social Problems Research
Methods of Data Collection

• **Secondary Data Research:**
  – Secondary data are data that have already been collected by other researchers or government agencies or that exist as historical documents.
  – An advantage of using secondary data in studying social problems is that the data are readily accessible, so researchers avoid the time and expense of collecting their own data.
  – The disadvantage is that the researcher is limited to the data already collected.
What Do You Think?

- Service learning entails students volunteering in the community and receiving academic credit for their efforts.
- Universities are increasingly requiring service learning credits as a criterion for graduation.
- Do you think students should be required to engage in service learning?
- Why or why not?
Understanding Social Problems

• Hopefully, you will learn how to use your “sociological imagination.”
• Sociologists have been studying social problems since the Industrial Revolution. Industrialization brought about massive social changes.
• There is no single agreed-upon definition of what constitutes a social problem.
Chapter 1 Review

• What is a social problem?
• What is meant by the structure of society and what are its components?
• What is meant by the culture of society and what are its components?
• What is the sociological imagination and why is it important?
• What is the difference between the three sociological perspectives?
Chapter 1 Review

- What is a social problem?
- What is meant by the structure of society and what are its components?
- What is meant by the culture of society and what are its components?
- What is the sociological imagination and why is it important?
- What is the difference between the three sociological perspectives?
Quick Quiz

1. According to Marxist conflict theorists, social problems are the result of:

   A. class inequality.
   B. anomie.
   C. the sickness within social institutions.
   D. different interpretations of roles.
Answer: A

- According to Marxist conflict theorists, social problems are the result of class inequality.
Quick Quiz

2. According to symbolic interactionists, what must occur in order for a condition to be a social problem?

A. The condition weakens institutions.
B. The condition disrupts society's harmony and balance.
C. The condition is defined as a social problem.
D. The condition involves competition between groups.
Answer: C

• According to symbolic interactionists, in order for a condition to be a social problem, the condition is defined as a social problem.
Quick Quiz

3. Defining abortion as an immoral act of murder is an example of what?

A. conflict theory
B. looking glass self
C. anomie
D. labeling theory
Answer: D

- Defining abortion as an immoral act of murder is an example of labeling theory.
Quick Quiz

4. Which of the following is not one of the four stages of setting up a research study (before data collection actually begins)?
A. Formulating a hypothesis
B. Reviewing the literature
C. Conducting a survey
D. Defining your variables
Answer: C

- Conducting a survey does not take place during the process of setting up your research study. The four stages are 1, formulating a research question, 2, reviewing the literature, 3, defining the variables, and 4, formulating a hypothesis. (pp. 15)
5. A ___________ is the portion of the population that has been selected for your study that is supposed to be representative of a larger population.
A. Target Population  
B. Sample  
C. Variable  
D. Experimental Group
Answer: B

• The sample is the portion of the population that has been selected to represent the target population. (pp. 17)