





Sociology and the Study of Social Problems

If I asked everyone in your class what they believe is the most important social problem facing the United States, there would be many different answers. Terrorism. Poverty. Unemployment. AIDS. Crime. Drug abuse. Are all of these social problems? Most would agree that some or all of these social conditions are problems. But which is the most important, and how would we solve it? The answers to these questions may not be so straightforward. If you think about it, this is how we spend much of our public conversation—on the Senate floor, on afternoon talk shows, at work, or in the classroom—arguing, analyzing, and just trying to figure which problem is most serious and what needs to be done about it. In casual or sometimes heated conversations, we offer opinions on whether the United States should have invaded Iraq, explanations for increasing gas prices, or theories on how to reduce drug use. Often, these explanations are not based on firsthand data collection or on an exhaustive review of the literature. For the most part, they are based on our opinions and life experiences, or they are just good guesses.

What this text and your course offer is a sociological perspective on social problems. Unlike any other discipline, sociology provides us with a form of self-consciousness, an awareness that our personal experiences are often caused by structural or social forces. **Sociology** is the systematic study of individuals and social structures. A sociologist examines the relationship between individuals and society, which includes social institutions like the family, military, economy, and education. As a social science, sociology offers an objective and systematic approach to understanding the causes of social problems. From a sociological perspective, problems and their solutions don't just involve individuals, but also have a great deal to do with the social structures in our society. This perspective was first promoted by sociologist C. Wright Mills in his 1959 essay, "The Promise."

Using Our Sociological Imagination

According to Mills, the sociological imagination can help us distinguish between personal troubles and public issues. The **sociological imagination** links our personal lives and experiences with our social world. Mills (1959/2000) describes how personal troubles occur within the “character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relationships with others” (p. 8), whereas public issues are a “public matter: some value cherished by publics is felt to be threatened” (p. 8). As a result, the resolution of a trouble can be accomplished by the individual and/or those he or she is in contact with, but the resolution of an issue requires public debate about what values are being threatened and the source of such a threat.

In his essay, Mills (1959/2000) makes this connection in the case of unemployment. One man unemployed is his own personal trouble. Resolving his unemployment involves reviewing his current situation, reassessing his skills, considering his job opportunities, and submitting his résumés or job applications to employers. Once he has a new job, his personal trouble is over. However, what happens when your city or state experiences high levels of unemployment? What happens when there is a nationwide problem of unemployment? This does not affect just one person, but thousands or millions. A personal trouble has been transformed into a public issue. This is the case not just because of how many people it affects; something becomes an issue because of the public values it threatens. Unemployment threatens our sense of economic security. It challenges our belief that everyone can work hard to succeed. Unemployment raises questions about society’s obligations to help those without a job.

We can make the personal trouble-public issue connection with regard to another issue, the problem of increasing college tuition. Salvador Henriquez works three jobs, and his wife, Colleen, works two. But even with five jobs between them, they are unable to support their daughter, Ana, a sophomore at New York University. She graduated in the top 5 percent of her class and receives a \$14,300 scholarship, but it does not cover all of her school expenses. Each year, the family takes out an additional \$25,000 in loans for Ana’s school expenses (Fresco 2004). Ana and her family may have found a way to support her education, but what will Salvador and Colleen Henriquez do when Ana’s three younger siblings are ready for college? Is this a personal trouble facing only the Henriquez family? Or is this a public issue?

The cost of tuition is rising at a faster rate than family income or student financial aid. During the 1980s, the cost of attending college rose three times as fast as median family income. Between 1981 and 2003, the cost of a public four-year education increased by 202 percent, while the consumer price index (the change in the cost of living) increased 80 percent (Boehner and McKeon 2003). In the 2003–2004 academic year, the average total fees (tuition, room and board) at a four-year public institution were \$10,636, while at four-year private institutions, the average cost was \$26,854 (College Board 2003).

Although most Americans believe that all students have the opportunity to earn a college degree, a recent study concluded that the promise of a college education is an empty one for low- and moderate-income students. It is estimated that nearly one half of all college-qualified, low- and moderate-income high school graduates are unable

to afford college. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, 4.4 million high school graduates will not attend a four-year college, and about 2 million will attend no college at all (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance 2002). On average, poor families spent about 25 percent of their annual income for their children to attend public four-year colleges in 2000. In comparison, middle-income families spent 7 percent of their income, and the wealthiest families spent 2 percent of their annual income (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education 2002). College cost has become a serious social problem, as the “barriers that make higher education unaffordable serve to erode our economic well being, our civic values, and our democratic ideals” (Callan and Finney 2002:10).

The sociological imagination challenges the claim that the problem is “natural” or based on individual failures, instead reminding us how the problem is rooted in society (Irwin 2001). We understand that we cannot resolve unemployment by changing one individual at a time. In the same way, we know that the Henriquez family is not to blame for the high cost of Ana’s education. In both cases, the sociological imagination identifies the structural bases of social problems, making us aware of the economic, political, and social structures that govern employment and unemployment trends and the cost of higher education.

As Mills (1959/2000) explains, “To be aware of the ideal of social structure and to use it with sensibility is to be capable of tracing such linkages among a great variety of milieux. To be able to do that is to possess the sociological imagination” (pp. 10–11). Throughout this text, we will apply our sociological imagination to the study of social problems. Before we proceed, we need to understand what a social problem is.

What Is a Social Problem?

The Negative Consequences of Social Problems

First, a problem is a social condition that has negative consequences for individuals, our social world, or our physical world. If there were only positive consequences, there would be no problem. A social problem such as unemployment, alcoholism, or drug abuse may negatively impact a person’s life and health, along with the well-being of that person’s family and friends. Problems can threaten our social institutions, for example, the family (spousal abuse), education (the rising cost of college tuition), or the economy (unemployment and underemployment). Our physical and social worlds can be threatened by problems related to urbanization and the environment.

Objective and Subjective Realities of Social Problems

Second, a social problem has objective and subjective realities. A social condition does not have to be personally experienced by every individual in order to be considered a social problem. The **objective reality** of a social problem comes from acknowledging that a particular social condition does exist. For example, you or I do not have to be poor in order to recognize that some men, women, and children experience the consequences of living in poverty. We can confirm the realities of poverty

VISUAL ESSAY: SEEING PROBLEMS SOCIOLOGICALLY ❖

We often speculate about the causes for the moods and behaviors we observe in others. If we saw this unhappy little boy, we might assume that he's spoiled or tired or sick or perhaps even a temperamental, bratty type.



But if we think sociologically and expand our focus beyond this boy to include the social context in which he exists, we begin to notice a few things. The social context gives us additional information to explain the individual and his experiences. One thing we notice is that the boy is part of a family.



Another thing we might notice is that his family appears rather poor, at least judging from their clothing and their home and car, seen in the background. We could speculate on the causes of the family's poverty. We might conclude that their poverty is a result of laziness or a lack of ambition.

What we have done, however, is to identify personal shortcomings or failures as the source of problems and to define the family's poverty as a personal trouble, affecting just one boy and his family. The sociological imagination provides us with an awareness that personal troubles are often caused by institutional or structural forces. Take another look at the family, and this time note what is in the background.



The boy's father used to work in the lumber mill but lost his job when the factory closed. The sociological imagination reminds us that a social problem is not based simply on individual failures but rather is rooted in society. In this case, unemployment is not just experienced by one boy and his family but by all in the community.

Which makes more sense to you: Is it better to try to solve the problem of poverty by helping this boy and his family, and others like them, one family at a time? Or is it better to seek long-term solutions through structural changes?

by observing conditions in our own community, at local clothing drives, food banks, or shelters. Objective realities of a social problem can be confirmed by the collection of data. For example, we know from the 2003 U.S. Census figures that 34.6 million people were poor, and among them, the number of children under the age of 18 was 12.1 million (Proctor and Dalaker 2003).

The **subjective reality** of a social problem addresses how a problem becomes defined as a problem. This idea is based on the concept of the **social construction of reality**. Coined by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), the term refers to how our world is a social creation, originating and evolving through our everyday thoughts and actions. Most of the time, we assume and act as though the world is a given, objectively predetermined outside of our existence. However, according to Berger and Luckmann, we also apply subjective meanings to our existence and experience. In other words, our experiences don't just happen to us. Good, bad, positive, or negative—we also attach meanings to our reality.

From this perspective, social problems are not objectively predetermined. They become real only when they are subjectively defined or perceived as problematic. This perspective is known as **social constructionism**. Recognizing the subjective aspects of social problems allows us to understand how a social condition may be defined as a problem by one segment of society but be completely ignored by another. For example, do you believe poverty is a social problem? Some may argue that it is a problem only if you are the one who is poor. Or poverty is your problem if you are “lazy” or a “welfare mother.” However, others would argue that it qualifies as society's problem.

Sociologist Denise Loseke (2003) explains that “conditions might exist, people might be hurt by them, but conditions are not social problems until humans categorize them as troublesome and in need of repair” (p. 14). To frame their work, social constructionists ask a set of questions:

What do people say or do to convince others that a troublesome condition exists that must be changed? What are the consequences of the typical ways that social problems attract concern? How do our subjective understandings of social problems change the objective characteristics of our world? How do these understandings change how we think about our own lives and the lives of those around us? (Loseke and Best 2003:3–4)

The social constructionist perspective focuses on how a problem becomes defined. In particular, it examines how powerful groups, like politicians, religious leaders, and the media, can influence our opinions and conceptions of what is a social problem. For example, in an effort to preserve their definition of the “traditional family,” conservative political and religious groups encourage laws and practices that discriminate against parents with a gay or lesbian sexual orientation and the families they build. Such groups continue to offer support for the Defense of Marriage Act of 1996, which denies federal recognition of same-sex marriages and gives states the right to refuse to recognize same-sex marriages performed in other states. The act also created a federal definition of marriage: the legal union between one man and one woman as husband and wife. When the act passed, Senator Philip Gramm (R-Texas) explained, “The traditional family has stood for 5,000 years. Are we so wise

today that we are ready to reject 5,000 years of recorded history? I don't think so" (CNN 1996). Although conservatives considered the act a victory, opponents expressed concern that the act created a social problem, specifically legislating discrimination against gay and lesbian couples and their families. According to Senator Carol Moseley-Braun (D-Illinois), the act was really about "the politics of fear and division and about inciting people in an area which is admittedly controversial" (CNN 1996). From the social constructionist perspective, problems are in the "eye of the beholder" (Konradi and Schmidt 2001).

Definitions of what is a social problem may even come from grassroots efforts. The national campaign against drunk driving began in 1980 with a group of California mothers. Their organization, Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), has been credited with changing our definition of drunk driving and strengthening state and federal drunk-driving laws. The term *designated driver*, now part of our language and promoted by bars and restaurants, was originally popularized by MADD in the 1980s (Lord 2000). Currently, MADD boasts more than 600 chapters and 3 million members.

❖ PUTTING IT TOGETHER:

Apply the concepts of "objective" versus "subjective" reality to the social problem of homelessness. What are the objective realities of homelessness in your neighborhood? According to the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (2002), more than 3 million women, men, and children were homeless in 2001. It is estimated that in any given year, more than 1.5 million youth between the ages of 12 and 17 spend at least one night in an emergency shelter or on the streets (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 1999). Use the Internet (or local resources) to determine the number of homeless in your city or state. What are the subjective realities of homelessness?

The History of Social Problems

Problems don't appear overnight; rather, as Malcolm Spector and John Kituse (1987) argue, the identification of a social problem is part of a subjective process. Spector and Kituse identify four stages to the process. Stage 1 is defined as a transformation process: taking a private trouble and transforming it into a public issue. In this stage, an influential group, activists, or advocates call attention to and define an issue as a social problem. Stage 2 is the legitimization process: formalizing the manner in which the social problems or complaints generated by the problem are handled. For example, an organization or public policy could be created to respond to the condition. An existing organization, such as a federal or state agency, could also be charged with taking care of the situation. In either instance, these organizations begin

to legitimize the problem by creating and implementing a formal response. Stage 3 is a conflict stage, when Stage 2 routines are unable to address the problem. During Stage 3, activists, advocates, and victims of the problem experience feelings of distrust and cynicism toward the formal response organizations. Stage 3 activities include readjusting the formal response system: renegotiating procedures, reforming practices, and engaging in administrative or organizational restructuring. Finally, Stage 4 begins when groups believe that they can no longer work within the established system. Advocates or activists are faced with two options, to radically change the existing system or to work outside of the system.

Understanding the Sociological Perspective

The way sociologists conduct sociology and study social problems begins first with their view on how the world works. Based on a **theory**—a set of assumptions and propositions used for explanation, prediction, and understanding—sociologists begin to define the relationship between society and individuals. Theories vary in their level of analysis, focusing on a **macro** (societal) or a **micro** (individual) level. Theories help inform the direction of sociological research and data analysis. In the following section, we will review four theoretical perspectives: functionalism, conflict, feminist, and interactionist. Research methods used by sociologists are summarized below.

❖ FOCUS ON: THE SCIENCE OF SOCIOLOGY

Sociology is not commonsense guessing about how the world works. In his book, *Investigating the Social World* (1999:10), Russell Schutt explains how the social sciences rely “on the use of scientific methods to investigate individuals, societies, and social process [and on] the knowledge produced by these investigations.”

Research is divided into two areas: basic and applied. The knowledge we gain through **basic research** expands our understanding of the causes and consequences of a social problem, for example, homelessness among female-headed households or declining educational attainment among Latina

students. On the other hand, **applied research** involves the pursuit of knowledge for program application or policy evaluation (Katzer, Cook, and Crouch 1998). Often, social programs are evaluated for their effectiveness in reducing a problem or in creating some desired change. The information gained through applied research can be incorporated into social programs serving homeless female-headed households or Latina high school students.

All research begins with a **theory**—identifying the phenomenon we’re trying to explain and then offering an explanation for social patterns or causal relationships

❖ FOCUS ON (Continued)

between variables (Frankfort-Nachmias and Leon-Guerrero 2003). **Variables** are a property of people or objects that can take on two or more values. As we try to explain homelessness, we may have a specific explanation about the relationship between two variables, for example, educational attainment and homelessness among female-headed households. Education could be measured according to different categories: less than a high school degree, a high school degree, some college, or a bachelor's degree or higher. Homelessness could be measured according to whether a woman and her family experienced homelessness in the previous 10 years. The relationship between these variables can be stated in a **hypothesis**, a tentative statement about how the variables are related to each other. We could predict that higher educational attainment will decrease the likelihood that a woman and her family

will experience homelessness. In this hypothesis statement, we've identified a **dependent variable** (the variable to be explained, homelessness among female-headed households) along with an **independent variable** (the variable expected to account for the cause of the dependent variable, educational attainment). Data may confirm or refute this hypothesis.

Research methods can include quantitative or qualitative approaches or a combination. Quantitative methods rely on the collection of statistical data. It requires the specification of variables and scales collected through surveys, interviews, or questionnaires. Qualitative methods are designed to capture social life as participants experience it. These methods involve field observation, depth interviews, or focus groups.

A brief description of research methods based on Schutt's text is presented in the following table.

Research Method	Description
Survey research	Collection of data based on responses to a series of questions. Surveys can be offered in several formats: a self-administered mailed survey, group surveys, in-person interviews, or telephone surveys.
Field observation	This category includes data collection conducted in the field, emphasizing the observations about natural behavior as experienced or witnessed by the researcher. Field observation can include participant observation, focus groups, and/or intensive interviewing techniques.
Historical and comparative methods	Research that focuses on one historical period or traces a sequence of events over a number of years. Comparative research involves multiple cases or data from more than one time period.
Secondary data analysis	Research that involves working with data that the researcher did not originally design or collect. Secondary data analysis usually involves the analysis of large public data sets, such as the U.S. Census, the General Social Survey, or the National Election Survey.

The Functionalist Perspective

Among the theorists most associated with the functionalist perspective is French sociologist Emile Durkheim. Borrowing from biology, Durkheim likened society to a human body. As the body has essential organs, each with a specific function in the body, he theorized that society has its own organs: the institutions of the family, economy, politics, education, and religion. These organs, or social structures have essential and unique functions. For example, the institution of the family maintains the health and socialization of our young and creates a basic economic unit. The institution of education provides knowledge and skills for women and men to work and live in society. No other institution can do what the family or education does.

Durkheim proposed that the function of society was to civilize or control individual actions. He wrote, “It is civilization that has made man what he is; it is what distinguishes him from the animal: man is man only because he is civilized” (Durkheim 1914/1973:149). The social order can be threatened during periods of rapid social change, such as industrialization or political upheaval, when social norms and values are likely to be in transition. During this state of normlessness or **anomie**, Durkheim believed society was particularly prone to social problems. As a result, social problems cannot be solved by changing the individual; rather the problem has to be solved at the societal level. The entire social structure or the affected part of the social structure needs to be repaired.

The functionalist perspective, as its name suggests, examines the functions or consequences of the structure of society. Functionalists use a macro perspective, focusing on how society creates and maintains social order. Social problems are not analyzed in terms of how “bad” it is for parts of society. Rather, a functionalist asks: How does the social problem emerge from the society? Does the social problem serve a function?

The systematic study of social problems began with the sociologists at the University of Chicago. Part of what has been called the Chicago School of Sociology, scholars such as Ernest W. Burgess, Homer Hoyt, Robert Park, Edward Ullman, and Louis Wirth used their city as an urban laboratory, pursuing field studies of poverty, crime, and drug abuse during the 1920s and 1930s. Through their research, they captured the real experiences of individuals experiencing social problems, noting the positive and negative consequences of urbanization and industrialization (Ritzer 2000). Taking it one step further, sociologists Jane Addams and Charlotte Gilman not only studied urban life in Chicago but also developed programs to assist the poor and lobbied for legislative and political reform (Adams and Sydie 2001).

According to Robert Merton (1957), social structures can have positive benefits as well as negative consequences, which he called **dysfunctions**. A social problem such as homelessness has a clear set of dysfunctions but can also have positive consequences or functions. One could argue that homelessness is clearly dysfunctional and unpleasant for the women, men, and children who experience it; and for a city or community, homelessness can serve as a public embarrassment. Yet, a functionalist would say that homelessness is beneficial for at least one part of society, or else it would cease to exist. Think of it, the population of the homeless supports an

industry of social service agencies, religious organizations, and community groups and service workers. In addition, the homeless also serve to highlight problems in other parts of our social structure, namely the problems of the lack of a livable wage or affordable housing.

❖ PUTTING IT TOGETHER:

Merton (1957) separated functions into two categories: **manifest** and **latent**. Manifest functions are the consequences that are intended and recognized, whereas latent functions are the consequences that are unintended and often hidden. What are the manifest and latent functions of homelessness?

The Conflict Perspective

Like functionalism, conflict theories examine the macro level of our society, its structures and institutions. Whereas functionalists argue that society is held together by norms, values, and a common morality, conflict theorists consider how society is held together by power and coercion (Ritzer 2000) for the benefit of those in power. In this view, social problems emerge from the continuing conflict between groups in our society—based on social class, gender, ethnicity/race—and in the conflict, the powerful groups usually win. As a result, this perspective offers no easy solutions to social problems. There could be a total overhaul of the system, but that is unlikely to happen. We could reform parts of the structure, but those in power would retain their control. The biggest social problem from this perspective is the system itself and the inequality it creates.

The first to make this argument was German philosopher and activist Karl Marx. Conflict, according to Marx, emerged from the economic substructure of capitalism, which defined all other social structures and social relations. He focused on the conflict based on social class, created by the tension between the **proletariat** (workers) and the **bourgeoisie** (owners). Capitalism did more than separate the haves and have-nots. Unlike Durkheim, who believed that society created a civilized man, Marx argued that a capitalist society created a man alienated from his **species being**, from his true self. **Alienation** occurred on multiple levels: Man would become increasingly alienated from his work, the product of his work, other workers and finally, his own human potential. For example, a salesperson could be so involved in the process of her work that she doesn't spend quality time with her coworkers, talk with her customers, or stop and appreciate the merchandise. Each sale transaction is the same; all customers and workers are treated alike. According to Marx, workers needed to achieve a **class consciousness**, an awareness of their social position and oppression, in order to unite and overthrow capitalism, replacing it with a more egalitarian socialist/communist structure.

Widening Marx's emphasis on the capitalist class structure, contemporary conflict theorists have argued that conflict emerges from other social bases, such as values, resources, and interests. C. Wright Mills (1959/2000) argued the existence of a "power elite," a small group of political, business, and military leaders who control our society.

Ralf Dahrendorf (1959) explained that conflict of interest is inherent in any relationship because those in powerful positions will always seek to maintain their dominance. Lewis Coser (1956), in *The Functions of Social Conflict*, focused on the functional aspects of conflict, arguing that conflict creates and maintains group solidarity by clarifying the positions and boundaries between groups. Conflict theorists may also take a social constructionist approach, examining how social problems are subjectively defined by powerful political, economic, and social interest groups.

The Feminist Perspective

Rosemarie Tong (1989) explains that “feminist theory is not one, but many, theories or perspectives and that each feminist theory or perspective attempts to describe women’s oppression, to explain its causes and consequences, and to prescribe strategies for women’s liberation” (p. 1). By analyzing the situations and lives of women in society, feminist theory defines gender (and sometimes race or social class) as a source of social inequality, group conflict, and social problems. For feminists, the patriarchal society is the basis of social problems. **Patriarchy** refers to a society in which men dominate women and justify their domination through devaluation; however, the definition of patriarchy has been broadened to include societies in which powerful groups dominate and devalue the powerless (Kaplan 1994).

Patricia Madoo Lengermann and Jill Niebrugge-Brantley (2004) explain that feminist theory was established as a new sociological perspective in the 1970s, due in large part to the growing presence of women in the discipline and the strength of the women’s movement. Feminist theory treats the experiences of women as the starting point in all sociological investigations, seeing the world from the vantage point of women in the social world and seeking to promote a better world for women and for humankind.

Although the study of social problems is not the center of feminist theory, throughout its history, feminist theory has been critical of existing social arrangements and has focused on such concepts as social change, power, and social inequality (Madoo Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 2004). Research in the field has included Jessie Bernard’s (1972/1982) study of gender inequality in marriage, Patricia Hill Collins’s (1990) development of Black feminist thought, Dorothy Smith’s (1987) sociology from the standpoint of women, and Nancy Chodorow’s (1978) psychoanalytic feminism and the reproduction of mothering. Although sociologists in this perspective may adopt a conflict, functionalist, or interactionist perspective, their focus remains on how men and women are situated in society, not just differently but also unequally (Madoo Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 2004).

The Interactionist Perspective

An interactionist focuses on how we use language, words, and symbols to create and maintain our social reality. This perspective highlights what we take for granted: the expectations, rules, and norms that we learn and practice without even noticing. In our interaction with others, we become the products and creators of our social reality. Through our interaction, social problems are created and defined.

The foundation of this microlevel perspective was provided by the work of George Herbert Mead. Also a member of the Chicago School of Sociology, Mead (1934/1962) argued that society was the organized and patterned interactions among individuals. As Mead defined it, the self is a mental and social process. It is the reflective ability to see others in relation to ourselves and to see ourselves in relation to others. The term *symbolic interactionism* was coined by Herbert Blumer in 1937. Building on Mead's work, Blumer emphasized how the existence of mind and self emerges from interaction and the use of symbols (Turner 1998).

How does the self emerge from interaction? Consider the roles that you and I play. As a university professor, I am aware of what is expected of me; as university students, you are aware of what the student role means. There are no posted guides in the classroom that instruct us where to stand, how to dress, or what to bring into class. Even before we enter the classroom, we know how we are supposed to behave. We act based on our past experiences and based on what we have come to accept as definitions of each role. But we need each other to create this reality; our interaction in the classroom reaffirms each of our roles and the larger educational institution. Imagine what it takes to maintain this reality: consensus not just between a single professor and her students but between every professor and every student on campus, on every university campus, ultimately reaffirming the structure of a university classroom and higher education.

So, how do social problems emerge from interaction? First, for social problems such as alcoholism or juvenile delinquency, an interactionist would argue that the problem behavior is learned from others. According to this perspective, no one is born a juvenile delinquent. Like any other role we play, people learn how to become juvenile delinquents. Although the perspective does not answer the question of where or from whom the first delinquent child learned this behavior, it attempts to explain how deviant behavior is learned through interaction with others.

Second, social problems emerge from the definitions themselves. Objective social problems do not exist; they become real only in how they are defined or labeled. A sociologist using this perspective would examine who or what group is defining the problem and who or what is being defined as deviant or a social problem. We'll examine this more closely in Chapter 10, Crime, when we review labeling theory, an interactionist approach to the study of deviance.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER:

A summary of these sociological perspectives is presented in Table 1.1. These sociological perspectives will be reintroduced in each chapter as we examine a new social problem or set of problems. As you review each perspective, do not attempt to classify one as the definitive explanation. Consider how each perspective focuses on different aspects of society and its social problems. Which perspective(s) best fits with your understanding of society? your understanding of social problems?

❖ **Table 1.1** Summary of Sociological Perspectives: A General Approach to Examining Social Problems

Level of analysis	Functional Macro	Conflict/Feminist Macro	Interactionist Micro
Assumptions about society	Order. Society is held together by a set of social institutions, each of which has a specific function in society.	Conflict. Society is held together by power and coercion. Conflict and inequality are inherent in the social structure.	Interaction. Society is created through social interaction.
Questions asked about social problems	How does the problem originate from the social structure? How does the problem reflect changes among social institutions and structures? What are the functions and dysfunctions of the problem?	How does the problem originate from the competition between groups and from the social structure itself? What groups are in competition and why?	How is the problem socially constructed and defined? How is problem behavior learned through interaction? How is the problem labeled by those concerned about it?

The Transformation from Problem to Solution

Although C. Wright Mills identified the relationship between a personal trouble and a public issue more than 50 years ago, less has been said about the transformation of issue to solution. Mills leads us in the right direction by identifying the relationship between public issues and social institutions. By continuing to use our sociological imagination and recognizing the role of larger social, cultural, and structural forces, we can identify appropriate measures to address these social problems.

Let's consider homelessness. It does not arise out of mysterious or special circumstances; it emerges out of familiar life experiences. The loss of a job, the illness of a family member, domestic violence, or divorce could make a family more susceptible to

❖ TAKING A WORLD VIEW



SOCIAL PROBLEMS AND HOMELESSNESS IN JAPAN

The study of social problems in Japan is different than it is in the United States (Ayukawa 2000). In Japan, there are few courses called “Social Problems”; instead, courses are simply titled “Sociology” or “The Introduction to Sociology.” However, within each course, social problems are discussed. Japan has two main academic societies in the field of the sociological study of social problems: the Japan Society of Social Pathology (or the Japan Society of Social Problems) and the Japan Society of Sociological Criminology (Ayukawa 2000).

One social problem that Japanese sociologists have attempted to address is homelessness. The number of homeless has risen sharply since Japan’s economic recession in the mid-1990s. It is estimated that there are more than 20,000 homeless men and women in Japan. The homeless are primarily single men in their late fifties who are former or active laborers. These men are too young to receive social security and too old to work in construction. Recently, a new population of homeless has emerged, youths and unemployed white-collar laborers and women (Aoki 2000).

The experience of homelessness is linked closely to the availability of work for day laborers. Large groups of day laborers live in Japan’s cities; more than 20,000 day workers live in a one quarter-square mile radius in Japan’s second-largest city, Osaka, and the second-largest group of day workers, approximately 8,000, lives in Tokyo. The male workers rely on skilled or unskilled construction jobs to survive. When employed and earning money, the day workers live in cheap hotels

called *yosebas*. It costs more than \$20 U.S. a night to sleep in an approximately 60-square foot room with a tatami mat, a shared bath, boiler, and kitchen (Ayukawa 2000).

However, as Japan’s economy worsens and construction work has steadily declined, more day laborers who are unable to find jobs are becoming homeless (Aoki 2000). The number of homeless people who sleep in building entrances, next to windows, or in small self-made cardboard houses in parks in the middle of the largest cities has increased. In Tokyo’s parks, several tent communities have been erected. Homes are often marked with real addresses, with painted wooden markers that read “3-29,” row 3, tent 29 (Prusher 2001). Clashes between Japan’s homeless and the police have been covered by the print and television media. The largest incident occurred in 1996, between 400 homeless men and 1,000 police officers in the Shinjuku Station in Tokyo. Media coverage has been credited with increasing public awareness of homelessness as a problem in Japan (Aoki 2000).

Japan’s poor do not ask for money on the street; most consider this a degrading act. Still, most do not receive regular public assistance. In 2001, the city of Tokyo had two homeless shelters, with a third one being planned. Smaller towns and cities set their own policies on how to deal with the homeless. Many, but not all, offer a small daily or weekly handout of goods or foods. A voucher to bathe at a public bathhouse may also be offered (Prusher 2001). Many of Japan’s homeless refuse to apply for public aid.

homelessness. Without informal social support, a savings account, or suitable and adequate employment—and with the increasing cost of health care and the lack of affordable housing—a family’s economic and emotional resources can quickly be tapped out. What would it take to prevent homelessness in these situations? The answers are not based in each individual or each family; rather, the long-term solutions are structural solutions such as affordable health care, livable wages, and affordable low-income housing.

Modern history reveals that Americans do not like to stand by and do nothing about social problems. In fact, most Americans support current efforts to reduce homelessness, curb violence, or improve the quality of education. In some cases, there are no limits to our efforts. Helping our nation’s poor has been a major social project of many U.S. presidents. President Franklin Roosevelt proposed sweeping social reforms during his New Deal in 1935, and President Johnson declared the War on Poverty in 1964. President Clinton offered to “change welfare as we know it” with sweeping reforms outlined in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. And in 2003, President George W. Bush supported the reauthorization of the 1996 welfare reform bill. No president or Congress has ever promised to eliminate poverty; instead, each promised only to improve the system serving the poor or to reduce the number of poor in our society.

Solutions require social action—in the form of social policy, advocacy, and innovation—to address problems at their structural or individual levels. **Social policy** is the enactment of a course of action through a formal law or program. Policy-making usually begins with identification of a problem that should be addressed; then, specific guidelines are developed on what should be done to address the problem. Policy directly changes the social structure, particularly how our government, an organization, or community responds to a social problem. In addition, policy governs the behavior and interaction of individuals, controlling who has access to benefits and aid (Ellis 2003). An example of homeless social policy occurred in July 2002, when the Senate Appropriation Committee approved the use of a portion of \$8 million from the Social Security Administration research budget to support innovative local programs to assist homeless people in gaining eligibility for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits. At a community level, there are eligibility guidelines to determine which individuals and families can be served at a homeless shelter. Rules govern how long individuals may receive aid and the type of aid they may receive (Ellis 2003).

Social advocates use their resources to support, educate, and empower individuals and their communities. Advocates work to improve social services, change social policies, and mobilize individuals. National organizations such as the National Coalition for the Homeless or local organizations such as Project H.O.M.E. in Philadelphia provide service, outreach, education, and legal support for the homeless. **Social innovation** may take the form of a policy, a program, or advocacy that features an untested or unique approach. Innovation usually starts at the community level, but it can grow into national and international programming. The concept of “partnership housing” was developed by Millard and Linda Fuller in 1965, partnering those in need

of adequate shelter with community volunteers to build simple interest-free houses. In 1976, the Fullers' concept became Habitat for Humanity International, a nonprofit, ecumenical Christian housing program responsible for building more than 125,000 houses worldwide. When Millard Fuller was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, President Bill Clinton described Habitat as "the most successful continuous community service project in the history of the United States" (Habitat for Humanity 2004). We will consider the impact of social action in the last chapter of this text.

❖ PUTTING IT TOGETHER: On your campus.

Are there any campus groups or organizations that address the problem of homelessness? What activities does the campus group sponsor? How does it provide assistance to the homeless population in your area? How does the group educate students and faculty about the problem of homelessness?

Making Sociological Connections

In his book, *Social Things: An Introduction to the Sociological Life*, Charles Lemert (1997) tells us that sociology is often presented as a thing to be studied instead of lived. However, Lemert argues that sociology is also a thing "lived." He says:

To use one's sociological imagination, whether to practical or professional end, is to look at the events in one's life, to see them for what they truly are, then to figure out how the structures of the wider world make social things the way they are. No one is a sociologist until she does this the best she can. (P. 105)

Throughout this text, we will explore three connections. The first connection is the one between personal troubles and public issues. Each sociological perspective—functionalism, conflict, feminist, and interactionist—highlights how social problems emerge out of our social structure or social interaction.

The sociological imagination will also help us make a second connection: the one between social problems and social solutions. C. Wright Mills believed that the most important value of sociology was in its potential to enrich and encourage the lives of all individuals (Lemert 1997). In each chapter, we will review selected social policies, advocacy programs, and innovative approaches that attempt to address or solve these problems.

Textbooks on this subject present neat compact chapters on a social problem, reviewing the sociological issues and sometimes providing some suggestions on how it can and should be addressed. This book follows the same outline but instead takes a closer look at community-based approaches. This text will not identify perfect solutions. We do not live in a perfect world. There may even be some solutions that work but are no longer operating because of lack of funds or public support. Social policies

VISUAL ESSAY: WORKING TOGETHER TO LIGHTEN THE LOAD ❖

Although many of the social problems we see in our communities seem insurmountable, it is hard to stand by and do nothing about them. Individuals and groups have made an effort to improve the quality of life for their neighbors and ultimately have made a difference in their communities.



Here, Habitat for Humanity volunteers pitch in to build a house for a family in their community.

Every community, even your own, has opportunities for those who want to help. Volunteering allows you to contribute to an important cause and provides opportunities to work with others who share your interests or concerns.

These volunteers are cleaning up an empty lot in Philadelphia. Work goes faster, and might even be fun, when others help.



You can volunteer anywhere. These volunteers are helping out at an oil cleanup in Orange County, California.

Age is not a barrier to volunteering. These Atlanta teens are packing food for distribution to the homeless.



Why do you suppose community efforts to address social problems are so popular? Do these efforts make a real difference? Why or why not?

and programs have been effective in helping individuals, families, or groups improve their lives and in reducing the prevalence of particular problems. In the end, I hope you agree that it is important that we continue to do something about the social problems we face.

Each chapter will include a Voices in the Community feature, focusing on individuals or groups who are experiencing, but mostly doing, something about some of these problems. They are women, men, and children, common citizens or professionals, from different backgrounds and experiences. Whether they are working within the system or working to change the system, these individuals are part of their community's solution to a problem. They have decided to be part of the solution and not part of the problem. The point is: People are making a difference.

In addition, I will ask you to make the final connection to social problems and solutions in your community. For this quarter or semester, instead of focusing only on problems reported in your local newspaper or the morning news program, start paying attention to the solutions offered by professionals, leaders, and advocates. Through the Internet or through local programs and agencies, take this opportunity to investigate what social action is taking place in your community. Your community may include your campus, your residential neighborhood, or the city where your university is located. Consider what other avenues of change can also be taken and whether you can be part of that effort.

I often tell my students that the problem with being a sociologist is that my sociological imagination has no "off" switch. In almost everything I read, see, or do, there is some sociological application, a link between my personal experiences and the broader social experience that I share with everyone else, including you. As you progress through this text and your course, I hope that you will begin to use your own sociological imagination and see connections that you never saw before.

MAIN POINTS

- **Sociology** is the systematic study of individuals and social structures. A sociologist examines the relationship between individuals and our society, which includes institutions (the family), organizations (the military), and systems (our economy). As a social science, sociology offers an objective and systematic approach to understanding the causes of social problems.
- The **sociological imagination** is a way of recognizing the links between our personal lives and experiences and our social world.
- A social problem is a social condition that has negative consequences for individuals, our social world, or physical world.
- A social problem has objective and subjective realities. The **objective reality** of a social problem comes from acknowledging that a particular social condition does negatively impact human lives. The **subjective reality** of a social problem addresses how a problem becomes defined as a problem. Social problems are not objectively predetermined. They become real only when they are subjectively defined or

perceived as problematic. This perspective is known as **social constructionism**.

- Problems don't just appear overnight; rather, as Malcolm Spector and John Kituse (1987) argue, the identification of a social problem is a process.

- Four theoretical perspectives are used by sociologists: functionalist perspective, conflict perspective, feminist perspective, and interactionist perspective. The functionalist perspective examines the functions or consequences of the structure of society. Functionalists use a macro perspective, focusing on how society creates and maintains social order. A social problem is not analyzed in terms of how "bad" it is for parts of society. Rather, a functionalist asks how the social problem emerges from the society. What function does the social problem serve?

- Conflict, according to Marx, emerged from the economic substructure of capitalism, which defined all other social structures and social relations. He focused on the conflict based on social class, created by the tension between the **proletariat** (workers) and the **bourgeoisie** (owners). Marx argued that a capitalist society created a man alienated from his **species being**, from his true self. **Alienation** occurred on multiple levels: Man would become increasingly alienated from his work, from the product of his work, from other

workers, and finally, from his own human potential.

- By analyzing the situations and lives of women in society, feminist theory defines gender (and sometimes race or social class) as a source of social inequality, group conflict, and social problems. For feminists, the patriarchal society is the basis of social problems.

- An interactionist focuses on how we use language, words, and symbols to create and maintain our social reality. This perspective highlights what we take for granted: the expectations, rules, and norms that we learn and practice without even noticing. In our interaction with others, we become the products and creators of our social reality. Through our interaction, social problems are created and defined.

- Solutions require social action—in the form of social policy, advocacy, and innovation—to address problems at their structural or individual levels. **Social policy** is the enactment of a course of action through a formal law or program. **Social advocates** use their resources to support, educate, and empower individuals and their communities. **Social innovation** may take the form of a policy, a program, or advocacy that features an untested or unique approach. Innovation usually starts at the community level, but it can grow into national and international programming.

INTERNET AND COMMUNITY EXERCISES

1. Review issues of your local newspaper from the past 90 days. Based on the front page or local section, what issues are important for your community? Crime? Job layoffs? Transportation? Pollution? Examine how the issue is defined and by whom. Is input from community leaders and neighborhood groups being included? Why or why not? Do the issues you have identified include the three elements of a social problem?

2. Social actions or responses are also linked to how we define the problem. If we believe the problem is structural, we'll find ways to change the structure. If the problem is defined at the individual level, a solution will attempt to change the person. Investigate the programs and resources that are available for the homeless in your community or state. Select three local programs and assess how each defines and responds to the homeless problem in your community.

3. What do you think is the most important social problem? Investigate what federal and state policies govern or regulate this problem and those it affects. What is the position of the main political parties—Democrats and Republicans—on this problem?

On your own. Log on to *Study Site—Community and Policy Guide* for more information about the social problems, social policies, and community responses discussed in this chapter.

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