

Introduction to Social Problems

PART I

CHAPTER 1 The Sociological Study of Social Problems



The Sociological Study of Social Problems

CHAPTER 1

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In the summer of 2000, actor George Clooney starred in the hit Warner Brothers movie *The Perfect Storm*. The movie was based on the true story of a fishing crew from Gloucester, Massachusetts, who lost their lives when their boat, the *Andrea Gail*, sank during a hurricane of unprecedented strength. The National Weather Service had labeled the hurricane “the perfect storm” because the climate conditions that created the storm had been such a perfect recipe for natural disaster. On June 18, 2008, in a *Time* magazine article titled “Pregnancy Boom at Gloucester High,” Kathleen Kingsbury reported on a different kind of perfect storm. Gloucester, like many other towns in the United States, is reeling from a long-lasting economic downturn, job loss, underemployment, and increased instances of homelessness. Christopher Farmer, Gloucester’s superintendent of schools, blames these troublesome social conditions for leaving so many local people “directionless,” “with broken families,” and confronted with an “epidemic” of teen pregnancies.

As many as 17 high school girls in Gloucester participated in a “pregnancy pact.” This was more than four times the number of teen pregnancies at the school the previous year. Many students went to the school clinic several times to get pregnancy tests. According to Kingsbury’s article, “On hearing the results, some girls seemed more upset when they weren’t pregnant than when they were. . . . Some of the girls reacted to news of being pregnant with high fives.” As part of the pact, the unmarried girls not only became pregnant intentionally but also agreed to help support each other as members of a new, extended family. When asked how she felt about girls getting pregnant on purpose, Gloucester High School student Karia Lowe said that at least for now “no one’s offered them a better deal.” Whatever the reasons these girls had for getting pregnant, it was clear that teen pregnancy had risen sharply in Gloucester amid a perfect storm of negative social conditions.

For these girls and their families, the pregnancy presents a challenge and undeniable trouble. But is this simply a personal problem for which the girls are to blame? Are they wild and reckless, incapable of planning for the future and making good, responsible decisions? On the contrary, they are responding to faltering support networks and weakening national and local economies with what they believe to be rational survival strategies. Other likely contributing factors are religious beliefs that discourage the use of contraceptives and the pervasive portrayal in the U.S. culture of sexuality as free and thrilling, ideas that saturate the daily life of young individuals like these. In fact, these cultural influences are so powerful that there are now about 1 million teen pregnancies every year. American adolescents are also far more likely to get pregnant and have babies than their peers in other developed countries. Given this prevalence of premarital pregnancies, the girls in this story no longer can be said to have a personal problem, or to have some difficulty besetting only them and perhaps a few others. What they have, instead, is a part in a serious social problem that afflicts many young people.

What has just been discussed implies that there are two ways to tell whether a problem is personal or social. One way has to do with numbers, whether the problem at hand involves a few people or many. If few, it is a personal problem; if many, a social problem. Another way to tell the difference between the two kinds of problems has to do with causation. If the causes of a problem are psychological in nature, such as recklessness and irresponsibility, it is a personal problem. But if the causes are sociological

in the form of some larger social forces, such as the widespread media depiction of sexuality, we are faced with a social problem. To sociologists, however, many problems that appear personal are actually social, because personal experiences are in one way or another influenced by some social forces. C. Wright Mills (1916–1962) uses the term **sociological imagination** to refer to this ability to see the impact of social forces on individuals, especially on their private lives.

■ The Sociological Imagination

To understand social problems, sociologists stand back and look “from the outside” at individuals as members of society, rather than looking “inside them” to examine their thoughts, personalities, and motivations. Sociologists use this approach because they have long found that no matter how personal our experiences are, they are influenced by **social forces**—forces that arise from the society of which we are a part. Social forces exist outside the individual in the form of social relationships, such as those we have with relatives, friends, and people in familial, educational, economic, religious, and other institutions. Through these social forces, which may be positive or negative, society exercises so much power over individuals that observers can effectively see it through their behaviors, such as treating others merely as sex objects after being constantly exposed to pornography in the media. See **Box 1.1** to learn how this sociological imagination can be used to improve your life.

We have briefly observed how U.S. society influences premarital pregnancies among teenagers with its freewheeling media depiction of sexuality. This is an example of a social force. Let’s take a closer look at how a social force influences another social problem that appears to be personal only: suicide. It is reasonable to assume that those who kill themselves have terrible personal troubles. They are deeply frustrated and unhappy. But suicide cannot be explained that simply. After all, most people who are deeply frustrated and unhappy do not commit suicide. More importantly, individual unhappiness cannot tell us why, for example, people who live in wide-open areas, such as the prairies in Montana and Wyoming, have much higher suicide rates than those who live in crowded areas, such as the cities in New York and New Jersey. There is no evidence that those who live in the wide-open areas are more frustrated and unhappy. How, then, can we account for the difference in suicide rates?

The sociological imagination leads us to look not at the individual feelings of those who commit suicide but at social forces. When French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) examined suicide in the late 19th century, he discovered variations in the rates of suicide among different countries and groups. For example, suicide rates are higher in Protestant than in Catholic countries, and higher among men than women. These different rates between religion and sex constitute social, not individual, facts; to explain them, Durkheim turned to social forces. One force that he found to have a great impact on suicide was social isolation. Divorced and widowed individuals, for example, are more likely than married people to be isolated from others and to receive little affection or moral support when they have problems. As a result, they are more likely than married people to commit suicide. Similarly, people who live in sparsely populated states, such as Montana and Wyoming, are more isolated from others than those who live in densely populated states, such as New York and

Sociological imagination

Mills’s term for the ability to see the impact of social forces on individuals, especially on their private lives.

Social forces

Forces that arise from the society of which we are a part.

BOX 1.1 USING SOCIOLOGICAL INSIGHTS



If someone is nasty to you, you are likely to feel upset. But sociological insights can make you feel better.

Why Be Nice to Others Who Are Nasty to You?

How would you react if somebody behaved badly toward you? Suppose you are driving on a highway and someone suddenly comes from behind to cut you off. When you glance at the person, he gives you the finger. Would you get angry, irritated, or react in some negative way? Or would you instead smile at the person and wish him a good day? What if somebody insulted you, calling you all kinds of names in front of your friends? Would you respond negatively or positively? What a silly question to ask, you may say. Of course, a common reaction would be to react

negatively. You would probably feel bad about it later, but you just couldn't help it. You believe that the person was clearly at fault for ruining your day. Unfortunately, your negative reaction to the person's bad treatment of you doesn't do any good. You still feel awful. But the study of social problems can provide sociological insights that you can use to make you feel better—and even improve the quality of your life and the lives of those around you.

As discussed earlier, the sociological imagination suggests that many personal troubles, such as getting laid off, feeling frustrated, and driving recklessly, arise from social forces. These social forces may include the poor conditions of the society, the economy, and other social institutions. Because these social forces significantly cause the individuals to suffer from personal troubles, the individuals are largely the victims. They are thus mostly not to blame for their troubles. The social forces are to blame. According to the sociological imagination, then, if someone behaves badly toward us, that person is already a victim of the social circumstances beyond his or her control. Therefore, it doesn't make much sense to blame the victim by getting upset or angry at that person. To blame the victim for causing us pain makes as much sense as blaming a whip that strikes us. Armed with this knowledge, the next time somebody mistreats you, instead of responding negatively, you should react positively, feeling *grateful* or *lucky* for not having those personal troubles yourself that weigh so heavily on the "nasty" person. You could also feel *sympathetic* and *compassionate* toward the person for having the problem. That's why it makes sense to smile at the offensive driver and wish him a good day.

New Jersey (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Greater isolation tends to make people more individualistic, more dependent on themselves than on others. This individualism may underlie the higher rate of suicide in the wide-open areas. By relying on themselves to solve their personal problems, people tend to be too subjective and too emotional to find viable solutions and are hence more likely to commit suicide. But why is suicide a social problem in the first place?

Social problem

A social condition that is perceived to be harmful to more than just a few people.

■ The Sociological Definition of Social Problems

To sociologists, suicide is a **social problem** because it is a social condition that is perceived to be harmful to more than just a few people. This definition suggests that a social problem is both an objective reality and a subjective perception. As an objective reality, a social problem is absolutely or intrinsically real in that it possesses a harmful

quality that can be verified by the experience of some people. The harmful nature of this experience is universal, existing all over the world. Suicide, poverty, violence, alcoholism, terrorism, human trafficking, and many other social problems are harmful wherever they take place (see **Box 1.2**). However, a social problem is also a matter of personal perception; that is, whether something constitutes a social problem depends on how people see it. If people perceive something as a social problem, it is a social problem; if they view it as something else, it will be something else. In fact, the same thing can be both a social problem and its exact opposite. Take abortion as an example. To people who oppose it, abortion is murder and thereby a problem. But to those who support it, abortion is a solution to being pregnant with an unwanted child for whom the pregnant individual cannot provide care. Premarital pregnancy, too, may or may not be considered a social problem: It is widely considered a social problem if it involves teenagers but not as often if it involves adults. Even suicide can be perceived both ways. Some people may consider it a social problem for bringing

BOX 1.2 GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Human Trafficking

Human trafficking involves the involuntary movement of people across and within borders through the use of coercion, deception, or violence. It is an objective reality in that it is a universal problem that can be found all around the world. The United Nations estimates that there are globally at least 4 million people falling victim to human trafficking every year, which generates annual revenues of \$7 billion to \$10 billion for the traffickers. Deregulation, open borders, entwined economies, and the ease of international banking have all facilitated the trafficking of human beings. Many victims are turned into some form of human slavery, serving as sex, farm, factory, or domestic slaves. One of the largest exporters of sex slaves is Southeast Asia, where an abundant supply of these sex slaves is available to serve wealthy customers in Japan, China, Australia, Europe, and the United States (Aguilar-Millan et al., 2008).

Another large exporter of sex slaves is the former Soviet bloc countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Most of these sex slaves are transported to Western Europe, and roughly a quarter end up in the United States. The rise of the sex slave trade can be traced to the fall of the Soviet Union. The borders that were once heavily guarded by the Red Army became porous when the former Soviet satellites saw their industries and subsidies collapse. Millions of young women tried to escape this economic misery by seeking a better life in the West. But they soon afforded a golden opportunity to the human traffickers, who promised the women good jobs but turned them into enslaved prostitutes. These sex slaves are usually kept under lock and key in the back rooms of bars that double as brothels. When a customer arrives, the slaves are told by their owners to parade in skimpy lingerie before him so that he may pick one to have sex with. Every day the women are forced to have sex with as many as 10 men (Mendenhall, 2009).



In human trafficking, people such as this woman are moved across and within borders through the use of coercion, deception, and violence.

so much grief to its survivors, but others may regard it as a compassionate act for allowing the terminally ill to die with dignity.

■ **Conflicting Constructionist Views**

We have observed how sociologists see a social problem as a dual phenomenon with its objective and subjective components. This view reflects the influence of two general perspectives in sociology. One is the positivist perspective, and the other the constructionist. According to the positivist, a social problem is absolutely or intrinsically real in that it possesses some negative qualities as opposed to the positive qualities of a social well-being. Thus poverty is a social problem as opposed to prosperity as a social well-being, racial hatred as opposed to racial harmony, mental illness as opposed to mental health, war as opposed to peace, and so on. On the other hand, according to the constructionist perspective, a social problem is an idea that people use to define a certain condition as a problem. The so-called intrinsically negative characteristics of a social problem do not come from the problem itself. They are, instead, socially constructed, originating from some people's minds. Although a socially constructed problem is not intrinsically real, it has the potential to have very real consequences for those involved.

While the objective component stays the same when different people look at it, the subjective component often varies from one person to another. This is particularly true in our multicultural society. **Box 1.3** considers how the same thing—the status of morality in the United States—appears different to two observers through the subjective lens of their own constructionist perspectives.

■ **Sociological Theories of Social Problems**

Sociologists approach the study of human society in different ways. They can look at the “big picture” of society to see how it operates. This is a macroview, focusing on the large social phenomena of society, such as culture, institutions, and inequality. Sociologists can also take a microview, zeroing in on the immediate social situations in which people interact with one another. From these two views, sociologists have developed various perspectives, each with a set of general assumptions about the nature of society. There are three well-known perspectives in sociology: The functionalist perspective assumes that society is stable and orderly, the conflict perspective sees society as always changing and always marked by conflict, and the symbolic interaction perspective views society as being made up of countless social interactions, therefore focusing on the details of any specific situation and the interaction between individuals in that situation. Thus the functionalist and conflict perspectives reflect the macroview of society, while the symbolic interaction perspective represents the microview. In the study of social problems rather than society in general, however, sociologists derive more specific theories from the three perspectives to explain the causes of social problems.

Functionalist Theory

According to functionalist theory, every part of society—the family, the school, the economy, the government, and other social institutions and groups—performs certain functions for the society as a whole. The family raises children, the school teaches knowledge, the economy provides jobs, the government offers security, and so on.

BOX 1.3 DIVERGENT VIEWS

Is the United States in Moral Decline?

The answer is “yes” according to Robert Bork, a conservative, but “no” according to Kay Hymowitz, a liberal. According to Bork, the signs of the U.S. moral decline include high rates of crime, low rates of punishment, high rates of illegitimate births, and high rates of divorce. For example, as Bork points out, the proportion of illegitimate births was only about 5% in 1960 but shot up to 30% in 1991. Bork further sees the moral decline in popular culture. In his view, for example, a popular song of the 1930s titled “The Way You Look Tonight” is sweet and innocent, but today the song “Horny” sung by Snoop Dogg is downright decadent and obscene. The first, older song contains these words:

*Oh, but you're lovely,
With your smile so warm,
And your cheek so soft,
There is nothing for me but to love you,
Just the way you look tonight.*

But the second, more recent song includes the following:

*I called you up for some sexual healing.
I'm callin' again so let me come get it.
Bring the lotion so I can rub you.
Assume the position so I can f— you.*

Bork blames this moral decline on modern self-centered liberalism, excessive liberty, and the pursuit of happiness being pushed too far. He also argues that the constant denigration of such institutions as the family, church, school, neighborhood, and old morality has necessarily weakened the restraints on individuals (Bork, 1996; Fukuyama, 2009).

However, Hymowitz does not see a moral decline but instead observes a moral regeneration. She notes that since 1965 most of the growing trends in juvenile delinquency, adult crime, divorce, illegitimacy, drug use, and the like have turned around today. “What is emerging,” she says, “is a vital, optimistic, family-centered, entrepreneurial, and yes, morally thoughtful, citizenry.” To support her observation, she offers statistical evidence on the decline of those various indicators of “immoral” activities. In regard to juvenile crime, for example, she notes that the juvenile murder rate has sunk 70% since the early 1990s, the arrest rate for all violent crime among teenagers has dropped 44% since its peak in 1994, and juvenile arrest rate for burglary has gone down 56% since the early 1990s (Fukuyama, 2009; Hymowitz, 2004).



According to one view, the United States suffers a moral decline as suggested by the song “Horny” sung by Snoop Dogg. But another view sees a moral regeneration.

Moreover, all parts of society depend on each other to bring about a stable social order. Thus the family depends on the school to educate its children, and the school, in turn, depends on the family to provide emotional support, and both the school and the family depend on the government to offer a safe environment. If some parts of

Dysfunction

The failure of some parts of society to perform their functions and the resulting disruption of the network of interdependence among all parts.

Manifest function

A function that is intended and widely recognized.

Latent function

A function that is unintended and unrecognized.

society fail to perform their functions so as to disrupt the network of interdependence among all parts, we have a case of **dysfunction**. As dysfunctions occur, social disorder will take place in the form of social problems, such as high rates of delinquency, crime, unemployment, and poverty.

There are two kinds of functions. **Manifest functions** are those that are intended and widely recognized, while **latent functions** are unintended and unrecognized. The manifest function of attending college, for example, is to acquire knowledge, but attending college also has the latent function of enabling many students to find their future spouses. Often, however, the manifest function is carried too far because some social institutions, groups, and other parts of society are too successful in performing their functions. Sometimes this may cause their latent function to become *negative* in nature, which is popularly known as “unintended consequences.” If this occurs, it is known as a social problem. Thus, by focusing too much on acquiring knowledge, students may neglect to pick up social skills. Also consider the excessive pursuit of the American Dream. It is widely believed to have the manifest function of making us rich by encouraging us to work hard. But it may also have the latent function of causing widespread deviance by encouraging people to adopt an “anything goes” mentality in the relentless pursuit of material success. The relentless pursuit of the American Dream may cause deviance because it induces a strong *self-interest* with little or no *social* interest. Self-interests focus on personal success, while social interests emphasize concern for the welfare of others. People tend to engage in deviance if they have strong self-interests while lacking social interests (Konty, 2005; Messner and Rosenfeld, 2007).

Conflict Theory

According to conflict theory, social problems arise from various kinds of social conflict. The most important and common are class conflict, racial or ethnic conflict, and gender conflict. Each conflict stems from the inequality between the powerful and the weak. As observed by Karl Marx (1818–1883), a German economist who spent much of his life writing in England, **class conflict** involves the struggle between the **bourgeoisie** (capitalists), who own the means of production such as factories and machineries, and the **proletariat** (laborers), who do not. These two classes are inevitably locked in conflict, with the capitalists successfully maximizing profit by paying their workers as little as possible and the laborers failing to get as high a wage as they desire. This exploitative nature of capitalism causes many social problems, such as crime and deviance, by generating poverty among the lower classes. Capitalism further causes social problems by bringing about widespread unemployment. To increase profit, capitalists must find ways to enhance productivity at low labor costs, including introduction of automation and other labor-saving devices; relocation of industries to cheap-labor places, such as nonunionized areas in the southern United States or in labor-rich developing countries; and hiring of workers from poor countries. These measures inevitably throw some of the existing labor force out of work. The workers’ inability to maintain a decent living pressures them toward crime and deviance.

Capitalism produces not only property crimes such as theft and robbery among the unemployed lower-class people; it also causes personal crimes such as assault, rape, and homicide in addition to various other forms of deviance such as alcoholism,

Class conflict

Marx’s term for the struggle between capitalists, who own the means of production such as factories and machineries, and laborers, who do not.

Bourgeoisie

The capitalists who own the means of production such as factories and machineries.

Proletariat

The laborers who do not own the means of production.

suicide, and mental illness. As Sheila Balkan, Ronald Berger, and Janet Schmidt (1980) explain, “Economic marginality leads to a lack of self-esteem and a sense of powerlessness and alienation, which create intense pressures on individuals. Many people turn to violence to vent their frustrations and strike out against symbols of authority, and others turn this frustration inward and experience severe emotional difficulties.” By this reasoning, capitalism pressures people to commit crimes and become deviant by making them poor in the first place.

The capitalistic pressure to commit crime and other forms of deviance is not confined to the lower classes, but reaches upward to affect the higher classes as well. By making possible the constant accumulation of profit, capitalism inevitably creates powerful empires of monopoly and oligopoly in the economy. These economic characteristics bring about corporate misconduct. By dominating a sector of the economy, a few firms “can more easily collude to fix prices, divide up the market, and eliminate competitors” (Greenberg, 1981). Smaller companies, unable to compete with giant corporations and earn enough profits, also are tempted to shore up their sagging profits by illegal means, such as resorting to tax evasion.

Racial or ethnic conflict can further be a source of social problems. Racial conflict typically appears in the form of prejudice and discrimination held and practiced by the dominant group, namely whites, against the minorities, which include African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and other racial or ethnic groups. Deprived of equal treatment, these minorities end up being saddled with higher rates of unemployment and poverty. Generally, the more a minority group suffers from prejudice and discrimination (and consequently unemployment and poverty), the more likely its members are to commit crime than are other minorities. African Americans, for example, suffer more than Asian Americans and are therefore more likely to commit crime.

Gender conflict can also be a source of social problems. Gender conflict appears in the form of prejudice and discrimination by men against women. Thus women’s position in most social situations is unequal to that of men. Compared with men, women have less power, freedom, respect, and money. This gender inequality goes hand in hand with the widely held sexist belief that women are inferior to men. Women are further oppressed—restrained, subordinated, controlled, molded, or abused—by a male-dominated society. This is the essence of **patriarchy**, a system of domination in which men exercise power over women. The oppression may involve overt physical violence against women, such as rape, wife beating, and incest. It may assume more subtle forms such as unpaid household work, underpaid wage work, sexual harassment in the workplace, and standards of fashion and beauty that reduce women to men’s sexual playthings. Not surprisingly, women earn less than men, and unmarried women are poorer than their male counterparts. Nevertheless, women are still less likely to commit crimes, a finding that also seems to have something to do with patriarchy. Females are socialized to be less aggressive and violent than males, and females are subjected to greater parental supervision and social control.

Patriarchy

A system of domination in which men exercise power over women.

Symbolic Interaction Theory

Both functionalist and conflict theories assume that a social problem is a *product* of society. In contrast, symbolic interaction theory views a social problem as a *symbolic interaction* between individuals without the problem and others with the problem,

leading the former to behave like the latter. Generally, symbolic interaction is the interaction between a person and others that is governed by the meanings that they impute to each other's actions and reactions. The interaction would be a pleasant one if the two parties interpret each other's behavior as friendly, but unpleasant if the two parties regard each other's behavior as unfriendly. This is because people react to others not in accordance with the others' behavior but instead with their own interpretation of the others' behavior. Thus even if your boyfriend or girlfriend treats you badly, you would still react to him or her with kindness if you define his or her behavior positively, with understanding or affection. To symbolic interaction theory, then, the meaning (variously referred to by symbolic interactionists as a symbol, significant gesture, interpretation, definition, or label) that people attach to an act in a given interaction is much more important than the act itself, because our reaction to others depends on the meanings we ascribe to their behavior rather than the behavior itself.

In symbolic interaction theory there are at least two ways a social problem can arise from the attachment of positive meanings to some deviant, criminal, or delinquent behavior. One way involves *differential association*, the process of acquiring, through association with others, "an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of law" (Sutherland, 1939). This means that an individual is likely to commit a crime if the individual interacts more frequently with people who define the crime positively ("it's okay") than with those who define it negatively ("it's wrong"). Another way for a social problem to emerge is through *labeling* individuals as deviants, usually by convicting and imprisoning them as criminals or treating them as disreputable characters. Once a person has been labeled a thief or a robber or a drunk, he or she may be stuck with that label for life and rejected and isolated as a result. Finding a job and making friends may become extremely difficult. Consequently, the person may be forced to continue committing such acts or may commit increasingly deviant acts. Being labeled a deviant, then, can push the individual toward further and greater deviance. Being labeled a deviant involves, in effect, the individual being caught up in a symbolic interaction with the authorities or hostile others.

Evaluating the Theories

Functionalist theory has been criticized for portraying society as stable. Consequently, it focuses on the positive functions of social institutions and ignores the negative ones. It has also drawn fire for being inherently conservative, effectively justifying the status quo. Such criticisms seem valid if the functionalist theory is used here to show *society* as an orderly entity. But the theory is employed here to deal with *social problems* as a disorderly phenomenon—for the purpose of seeking out the causes of the problems.

Conflict theory has been faulted for going too far in blaming inequalities for the prevalence of social problems. Advocates of the theory seem to hold the *unconvincing* assumption that in a utopian, classless society, such nasty human acts as killing, robbing, raping, and otherwise hurting one another will disappear. It may be more realistic to assume, as Durkheim did, that social problems are inevitable, even in

a society of saints, although the type of misconduct committed by saints can be expected to be mostly unserious or even trivial.

The symbolic interaction theory offers a close-up view of social problems and consequently tends to ignore how the larger social forces may have influenced it. Suppose we want to study the interaction between whites and blacks through the eye of symbolic interactionism only. We can get a rich, detailed understanding of the racial interaction, but this understanding is likely to be limited or even distorted if we do not know how the interaction is affected by such larger social forces as the popular belief in democracy and equality and the election of Barack Obama to the presidency. These larger forces can be better understood through the lens of the functionalist and conflict theories. For a quick review of these three sociological theories, see [Box 1.4](#).

BOX 1.4 THEORETICAL THUMBNAIL

Explaining Social Problems

Theory	Focus	Insights
Functionalist Theory	Threat to social order	Social problems arise from failure of social institutions, groups, and other parts of society to perform their functions properly. But these functions if carried too far may turn into negative, unintended consequences.
Conflict Theory	Contribution to social conflict	Social problems originate from the exploitative nature of capitalism along with class, racial, ethnic, gender, and other inequalities.
Symbolic Interaction Theory	Negative interaction between individuals	Social problems result from associating to a greater extent with law violators than abiders and from being labeled as unsavory characters.

QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE

1. Which of the theories would be the most useful for understanding human trafficking as a social problem? Why do you feel that this theory is best suited for this particular problem? Are there any limitations to using this theory? If so, what are they?
2. If you were a member of a special task force to study the possible effects of television viewing on divorce, what theoretical perspective would you use to guide your study? Explain your answer.
3. Students and researchers alike have a tendency to pick their “pet theories” to make sense of the social world around them. Of the three theories, which one do you favor? Why?

■ Research Methods: Seeking Facts

From those sociological theories, we can draw many ideas about how certain social forces bring about social problems. Yet these ideas are merely idle guesswork unless they are backed up by scientific facts. The need for facts is one important reason sociologists conduct research. There are four methods for researching social problems: survey, observation, experiment, and secondary analysis.

Survey

Of the four methods, the **survey** is most frequently used by sociologists. It involves asking people questions about their opinions, beliefs, or behaviors. To take a survey, we first select a **population**, the entire group of people to be studied. We can choose a population of any size, but all of its members must have something in common. Thus, a population may consist, for example, of all U.S. citizens aged 30 to 40 years, all U.S. congresswomen, all of the students at a large university, or all the people in the world.

If a population is relatively small, all of its members can be approached and interviewed. If a population is very large, it would cost too much time and money to contact all of its members. In such a case, we need a **sample**, a relatively small number of people selected from a large population. The sample, however, must accurately represent the entire population from which it is drawn. Otherwise, the information obtained from the sample cannot be generalized to the population. If a sample is to be representative, all members of the population must have the same chance of being selected for the sample. Selection, in effect, must be random, which is why a representative sample is often called a **random sample**.

Given a representative or random sample, we can ask its members about their opinions, attitudes, or behaviors. This is usually done by using self-administered questionnaires, personal interviews, and telephone interviews. In using *self-administered questionnaires*, the researcher simply gives or sends the people in the sample a list of questions and asks them to fill in the answers themselves. Usually the list consists of true/false or multiple-choice questions. The respondents are asked to answer “yes,” “no,” or “don’t know” or to check one of the answers, such as “single,” “married,” “divorced,” or “widowed.” Today the questionnaires can be answered on the Web by people who have a very high rate of Internet use, such as professionals and college students (Schutt, 2009).

Personal interviews may be either structured or unstructured. In a **structured interview**, the researcher asks standardized questions that require respondents to choose from several standardized options on a list, comparable to those in self-administered questionnaires. In contrast, in an **unstructured interview**, open-ended questions are asked and respondents are allowed to answer freely, in their own words, and typically with no restrictions. The interviewer, however, must be friendly and respectful to the respondents (Schutt, 2009; Weiss, 2004).

Telephone interviews have nowadays become popular in survey research and are routinely used in many public opinion polls. A recent *Time* poll, for example, was conducted by telephone and asked a representative national sample of Americans how the 2009 severe economic problem of recession has affected their belief in the American Dream. Although most (57%) said they believed the American Dream would be harder to achieve in 10 years, a surprising majority (56%) also said they believed

Survey

A research method that involves asking people questions about their opinions, beliefs, or behaviors.

Population

The entire group of people to be studied.

Sample

A relatively small number of people selected from a large population.

Random sample

A sample drawn in such a way that all members of a population must have the same chance of being selected.

Structured interview

An interview in which the researcher asks standardized questions that require respondents to choose from several standardized options.

Unstructured interview

An interview in which open-ended questions are asked and respondents are allowed to answer freely, in their own words.

America's best days were still ahead, a testament to the enduring American optimism (Gibbs, 2009). A similar survey method is used to find out whether Americans trust others less today (see [Box 1.5](#)).

Observation

In surveys, we depend on others to tell us what has happened. By contrast, in observation, we rely on ourselves to go where the action is—and to watch what is happening. One way of observing an ongoing activity is through **detached observation**, whereby we

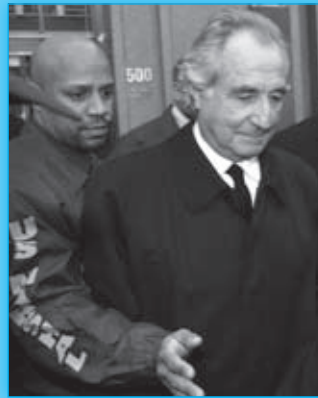
Detached observation

A method of observation in which the researcher observes as an outsider, from a distance, without getting involved.

BOX 1.5 WHAT RESEARCH REVEALS

Declining Trust in Others Today

Every year since 1964 the General Social Survey has asked a random sample of Americans about their trust in others with questions such as “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people.” The survey indicates that over the last 40 years the proportion of Americans who trust other individuals has declined significantly. In the early 1970s, more than 65% of Americans said that most people were trustworthy, but by the 2000s only about half said the same. This decline in trust is largely a result of what sociologists call “generational replacement,” the highly trusting older generation being replaced by the less trusting younger generation.



Why this generational difference? The generation of the past was more trusting because their shared experience of World War II brought them a sense of solidarity and an increased desire to join organizations. But today's generation is more socially isolated—less likely to join clubs, attend civic meetings, play card games, go to dinner parties, or have close friends to discuss important matters with. The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks did initially bring them together so as to ramp up their trust in others, but the unpopular war in Iraq has subsequently diminished their solidarity and trust (Paxton, 2005; Putnam, 2006).

Research shows that Americans trust others much less today than in the past. An important reason is the prevalence of corporate scandals.

Of the same generation, however, some people are more trusting than others. Poor people and racial minorities are less likely to trust others, more likely to believe that others will take advantage of them in some ways. In contrast, people with more education have more trust in others. People with more contacts with others are also more trusting. Such people can thus be easily found in voluntary organizations like a church choir or bird-watching group (Paxton, 2005).

The decline in trust does not only involve others as individuals. Over the last 40 years, the trust in various institutions such as business and religion has also gone down. These declines are mostly triggered by scandals. In the 2000s, for example, the Enron and other corporate scandals caused a big drop in the percentage of Americans saying that they had a great deal of confidence in major companies. Similarly, the sex scandals involving Catholic priests caused Americans' confidence in religious institutions to plummet. Once the scandals fade, however, the public's trust in the institutions returns (Paxton, 2005). Still, the general pattern of decline in trust remains, with the trust in institutions as well as individuals being lower today than in the past.

observe as outsiders, from a distance, without getting involved. As detached observers, we may, for example, watch children playing in a schoolyard or bring them into a room and watch from behind a one-way mirror. Detached observation has the advantage of making it less likely that the subjects will be affected by the observer. But it has at least one disadvantage: The detached observer has difficulty perceiving and understanding subtle communication among the subjects. The detached observer behind a one-way mirror might not see some important facial expressions or understand the emotions attached to some unconventional symbols.

Participant observation

A method of observation in which the researcher takes part in the activities of the group being studied.

This problem can be avoided with **participant observation**, in which researchers take part in the activities of the group they are studying. Sometimes they conceal their identity as researchers when they join the group, thus enhancing the chances that the unknowing subjects will act naturally. If the subjects know they are being observed, they might change their behavior. As members of the group, researchers have the opportunity to observe practically everything, including whatever secret activities are hidden from outsiders. As a result, researchers can discover some surprising acts about their subjects. Consider, for example, the following classic case of participant observation involving a researcher with a concealed identity.

If you assume that men must be gay if they engage in same-sex practices, the results of Laud Humphreys's (1970) research may surprise you. Humphreys concealed his identity as a researcher by offering to serve as a lookout for men engaging in same-sex activities in public restrooms, which was against the law. Without being suspected of being an outsider, Humphreys also succeeded in secretly jotting down his subjects' automobile license plate numbers, which he used to trace their addresses. A year later, he disguised himself, visited those men at their homes, and found that they were mostly conservative working-class married men who were seeking the same-sex experience as a means of releasing tension. They considered themselves straight and masculine. Humphreys has been severely criticized for being unethical in deceiving his subjects. He has argued, though, that had he not concealed his identity, it would have been impossible to get scientifically accurate information because his subjects would have behaved differently or would have refused to be studied.

Ethnography

An analysis of people's lives from their own perspectives.

Many sociologists do identity themselves as researchers to the people they study. In fact, they live with them as friends, engaging in **ethnography**, an analysis of people's lives from their own perspectives. In ethnography, the researcher focuses more on *meanings* (what subjects think, believe, or ponder) than on *activities* (what subjects do or how they behave). The use of ethnography has produced interesting insights. In their ethnographic study of people who were homeless in Austin, Texas, for example, David Snow and Leon Anderson (2003) made a startling discovery. Conventional people often associate disabilities—such as a drinking problem, drug abuse, or mental disorder—with homeless individuals. But Snow and Anderson found that the disabilities usually do not inhere in homeless persons but instead stem from the disabling situation called *homelessness*. Thus, if the presumably disabled people are removed from homelessness, their disabilities often disappear.

Experiment

A theory can be tested only indirectly, not directly. It must be translated into a hypothesis or a series of hypotheses that can be tested directly, because hypotheses are more

specific statements that can be demonstrated to be either true or false. Testing a theory, then, effectively means testing a hypothesis. To do so, researchers first specify what they assume to be the *independent variable* (cause) and the *dependent variable* (effect). Then they create a situation in which they can determine whether the independent variable indeed causes the dependent variable. They are, in effect, conducting an **experiment**, a research operation in which the researcher manipulates variables so that their influence can be determined.

Consider an experiment conducted by Matthew McGlone (1998). He wanted to test the hypothesis that nice-sounding statements make even dubious notions more believable. He gave students a list of rhyming sentences, such as “Woes unite foes,” and asked them how accurately the sentences described human behavior. Then he asked the same students to judge the accuracy of nonrhyming statements, such as “Misfortunes unite foes.” The result was that the students considered the rhyming statements more accurate. Later, when asked whether they agreed that financial success makes people healthier, nearly all of the students said no. But they regarded “Wealth makes health” as somehow more plausible. All this confirmed the hypothesis that nice-sounding sentences are more convincing. Not surprisingly, the researcher concludes, at the football star O. J. Simpson’s 1995 murder trial, his defense lawyer’s repeated intonation of “If the glove doesn’t fit, you must acquit” may have had the desired impact on the jurors.

In another, more current experiment, Devah Pager (2003, 2007) tested the effects of a prior criminal record on employment. She gave fictitious criminal records to some black and white subjects and noncriminal records to others. She then sent out all these subjects to apply for jobs. The experiment showed that not only were people with a criminal record less likely to be called back for a second job interview, black subjects with noncriminal backgrounds were also less likely to be called back for interviews than whites with a criminal record.

Secondary Analysis

The methods we have discussed so far involve collecting data from scratch, but this is not always necessary because of the availability of information collected previously by someone else. Besides, it is simply impossible to conduct an interview, observation, or experiment when the people we want to study are long dead. Thus, sociologists often turn to **secondary analysis**, searching for new knowledge in the data collected earlier by another researcher. Usually, the original investigator had gathered the data for a specific purpose but the secondary analyst uses them for something else.

Suppose we want to study religious behavior by means of secondary analysis. We might get our data from an existing study of voting behavior conducted by a political scientist. This kind of research typically provides information on each voter’s religion, along with his or her education, income, gender, and other social characteristics. The political scientist may try to find out from research whether, among other things, men are more likely than women to vote in a presidential election and whether the more religious are more politically active than the less religious. As secondary analysts, however, we can find out from the same data whether women attend church more often than men.

Experiment

A research operation in which the researcher manipulates variables so their influence can be determined.

Secondary analysis

Searching for new knowledge in the data collected earlier by another researcher.

These data for secondary analysis are usually quantitative, presented in the form of numbers, percentages, and other statistics, such as the percentage of women compared to the percentage of men attending church once a week. What if the existing information is qualitative, in the form of words or ideas? Such information can be found in virtually all kinds of human communication—books, magazines, newspapers, movies, TV programs, speeches, letters, songs, laws, and so on. To study human behavior from these materials, sociologists often do a **content analysis**, searching for specific words or ideas and then turning them into numbers by counting the frequency of these words or ideas.

Content analysis

Searching for specific words or ideas and then turning them into numbers.

Suppose we want to know whether public attitudes toward sex have changed significantly in the last 20 years. We may find the answer by comparing popular novels of today with those of the past to see if one set is more erotic than the other. We would first decide what words will reflect the nature of eroticism. After we settle on a list of words, such as *love*, *kiss*, and *embrace*, to serve as indicators of eroticism, we will look for them in a novel. We will then count the number of times those words appear on an average page and use the number as the measure of how erotic the novel is. In repeating the same process with other novels, we will see which ones are more erotic. Similarly, we can analyze media advertisements for products such as music, movies, and new technology in order to find out the frequency of various forms of gender relations such as sexual violence, sexual tolerance, and workplace equality (Carter and Steiner, 2003).

Review

SUMMARY

1. As used by C. Wright Mills, the term *sociological imagination* refers to the impact of social forces on individuals, especially on their private lives. This means that people with personal troubles are victims of larger social forces. They are therefore not to blame for their troubles. So, when they behave badly toward you, it doesn't make sense for you to get upset. It makes more sense to feel grateful or lucky for not having their troubles—as well as sympathetic and compassionate toward them for their suffering.
2. Sociologists define a *social problem* as a social condition that is perceived to be harmful to more than just a few people. It is both an objective reality because it harms large numbers of people and a subjective reality because it is perceived by some people as harmful but as something else by others. Human trafficking exemplifies an objective reality for being universal, because it exists all over the world.
3. The sociological definition of a *social problem* reflects the influence of two major perspectives in sociology: positivism and constructionism. From the positivist perspective, social problems remain the same to different people, but from the constructionist perspective, social problems differ, as illustrated by the divergent views on the moral status of the United States.
4. Three major sociological theories point out different causes of social problems. According to functionalist theory, social problems will arise if some parts of society—the family, the school, the economy, the government, and other social institutions and groups—fail to perform their functions properly or if they carry their performance of the functions too far. According to conflict theory, the causes of social problems stem from the exploitative nature of capitalism along with racial, ethnic, and sexual inequalities. According to symbolic interaction theory, social problems occur if individuals interact more frequently with criminals than with law-abiding citizens and therefore become criminals themselves. Social problems also occur if people are labeled (through conviction, imprisonment, or mistreatment) as criminals or unsavory characters so much that they end up repeatedly engaging in deviant activities.
5. There are four research methods for the sociological study of social problems. The first is the *survey*, which asks people, usually a random sample of them, about their opinions, beliefs, or behaviors. This can be done with self-administered questionnaires or interviews. An example of using a survey indicates that Americans are trusting others less today than before. The second is *observation*, which may be detached, observing subjects from a distance, or participant, joining the subjects in their activities. Observation may also include *ethnography*, analyzing the subjects' lives from their own perspective. The third method is *experiment*, in which

the researcher manipulates variables in order to determine their influence on the subjects. The fourth is *secondary analysis*, searching for new knowledge in the data that have been collected by somebody else.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Identify a social problem that you consider to be a relevant concern in your own community and address the following:
 - a. Describe the problem and explain how you know this is a true “social” and not a “personal” problem.
 - b. What are the primary “social forces” that you see at work behind this problem?
 - c. Do you see any potential solutions for coping with this social problem?
2. Do you favor the positivist or constructionist view of social problems? Discuss what you consider to be the strengths and weaknesses of each approach to studying social problems.

INTERNET RESOURCES

The SSSP (Society for the Study of Social Problems): <http://www.sssp1.org/>. This official site for the SSSP includes current scholarship on global social problems as well as event schedules. You may find it beneficial to peruse this site and familiarize yourself with the breadth of current research projects on social problems and emerging concerns in the United States and abroad.

The *Social Problems* journal, which is published by the University of California Press, can be reviewed at <http://caliber.ucpress.net>. This journal is one of the primary collections of scholarly research on social problems. You can look at article abstracts and titles dating all the way back to June of 1953. This will allow you to get an idea of different social problems that have come into focus in the past 50 years and imagine ways in which some key social problems have worsened or lessened in terms of impact and severity.

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics: <http://www.bls.gov/>. With unemployment at the forefront of today’s global economic news coverage and growing public concern, this site is a valuable source of current, up-to-date statistics on national and international comparative employment trends and other economic trends.

The Willie Nelson Peace Research Institute (<http://willienelsonpri.com/>) offers an attempt to take on social problems in an innovative manner: through the free and open use of music with the sole intention of addressing social problems pertaining to armed conflicts and other forms of violence.