

CHAPTER 1

What Are Social Problems?

Chapter Overview

This chapter introduces the concept of “social problems,” and provides an overview of how sociologists understand and address social problems in society. Social problems provide a clear link between individual or private troubles and larger public issues. As such, students are able to utilize their sociological imagination as they move between taking a micro-sociological perspective and a macro-sociological perspective of societal issues.

This chapter focuses on how social problems are constructed through shifting values and norms, and how this is an illustration of the social construction of social problems. Moral entrepreneurs and the process of claims-making play important roles in how social problems are framed and addressed in society, and sociologists must learn how to differentiate between “real” social problems and those that are socially constructed. The chapter also emphasizes how the agenda for the construction of a social problem must also be considered as this has significant implications with respect to social policies.

The chapter also explores how social problems can be understood through various theoretical perspectives, and emphasizes the importance of recognizing that social problems cannot be fully understood through a singular lens. The seven theoretical perspectives that are introduced in this chapter are structural functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, feminist theory, social constructionism, postmodern/post-structuralism, and population health perspective.

The chapter concludes by noting that just as each social problem can be considered through multiple perspectives, the solutions to these problems can also range across perspectives. As such, each social problem and its corresponding solutions will be discussed separately throughout the text.

Learning Objectives

In this chapter, students should learn to do the following:

1. Understand the difference between objective elements and subjective elements of social problems and how these elements fit together in the conceptualization of social problems.
2. Understand how social problems illustrate the connection between “personal troubles” and “public issues,” allowing for the practice of the sociological imagination.
3. Understand that social problems research is a form of moral enterprise, in which certain values inform how social problems are conceptualized.
4. Understand “social constructionism,” and how social problems are constructed through moral entrepreneurs and shifting societal values.
5. Identify the difference between “real” social problems and those that have been socially constructed.

6. Understand the principles underlying seven theoretical perspectives and their conceptualization of social problems. These theoretical perspectives are structural functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, feminist theory, social constructionism, postmodern/post-structuralism, and population health perspective.
7. Understand that there is no one standard solution to social problems, and that solutions must be formed in consideration of the unique complexities of each social problem.

Key Concepts

Claims-making: The promotion of a particular moral vision of social life and, thus, anything people do to propagate a view of who or what is a problem and what should be done about it.

Conflict Theory: A theoretical model, drawn from the writings of Marx and Engels, that highlights conflict and change as the regular features of society.

Latent Functions: Hidden, unstated, and unintended consequences of activities in an organization or institution.

Manifest Functions: The visible and intended goals or effects of social structures and institutions.

Moral Entrepreneurs: Term coined to describe people who ‘discover’ and try to publicize deviant behaviours.

Moral Panic: The process of arousing social concern over false beliefs that a named group of people (often, a minority group) poses a menace to society.

Norms: The rules and expectations of the society pertaining to appropriate behaviours under various social circumstances.

Objective Elements: The measurable features of a negative social condition. Such harmful conditions might include crime, poverty, or alcohol abuse.

Patriarchy: A form of social organization in which fathers—or more generally, the oldest males, or more generally still, men—are the heads and rules of the household, community, and society.

Postmodernism: A school of thought that denies the validity of sweeping statements about groups of people, and analyzes the motives and the consequences of these statements.

Poststructuralism: A concept related to postmodernism that takes analytical deconstruction.

Social Constructionism: A sociological research approach that examines the ways people interact to create a shared social reality.

Social Problem: A social condition or pattern of behaviour that is believed to warrant public concern and collective action.

Sociological Imagination: A term used by sociologist C. Wright Mills, which describes the sociologist’s ability to connect large-scale public issues to people’s personal experiences.

Structural Functionalism: A theoretical model highlighting the way each institution works to fulfill the needs of the society as a whole; also called “functionalism”; a macrosociological approach that focuses on the societal, as opposed to the individual, level.

Subjective Elements: People’s evaluations of sensed realities and the processes that influence their evaluations.

Symbolic Interactionism: A theoretical paradigm that studies the process by which people interpret and respond to the actions of others and that conceives of society as the product of this continuous face-to-face interaction; a microsociological approach that focuses on people and small groups.

Whistle Blowers: Employees in a bureaucratic organization who bring forward valid information about wrongdoing or illegal conduct by their organization.

Discussion or Debate Ideas

1. Social problems are believed to be made up of both objective and subjective elements. To what extent do you believe that these two elements can work together to explain social problems? To what extent could they contradict one another?
2. To what extent do you feel that personal troubles can be tied to larger public issues? What factors may make it difficult to make this connection?
3. Why do you think that sociologists argue that reality is socially constructed? Who might challenge this claim?
4. How do social concerns come to the surface? Who is responsible for raising awareness of these concerns? What might motivate them to raise this awareness?
5. How can you determine if a social problem is “real” or not? What do you think are the implications of some social problems being labelled as “real” while others are not?
6. Compare and contrast structural functionalism with conflict theory.
7. What are the differences between taking a macro-sociological perspective to understanding social problems and taking a micro-sociological perspective to understanding social problems?
8. Feminism is focused on gender inequality. How might this perspective shape how social problems are constructed? What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of taking this theoretical perspective?
9. Why might sociologists endorse taking a population health perspective in understanding social problems?
10. How can social problems be resolved? How can we decide which solution is best for a social problem?

Class Activities

1. Compare two newspaper articles discussing a current event. Do the articles discuss this event through an individual perspective (emphasis on personal troubles), or do they consider it through a sociological perspective (emphasis on public issues)? How does the framing of this event impact the reader? Why do you think the newspaper decided to frame this event as either an illustration of personal trouble or as an example of a public issue?

2. If all social reality is conditional and temporary, why do certain social problems persist over time? Why do we allow problems to persist instead of moving towards a change? Would it be easier or more difficult if we were to conceptualize reality as if it were objective, unchanging, and fixed?
3. Which theoretical perspective do you think is most effective in explaining society as a whole? Why? If you were to take part in a debate where you had to defend your chosen theoretical perspective against the others, how would you prove that it is superior to the others?