

# Sociology of Contemporary Social Problems

## Lesson 1 - Introduction to Social Problems

A **social problem** is a condition, pattern of behavior, or issue that harms members of a society such that plenty of people warrant a need for change. In this course, we will examine a variety of social problems as well as responses to them. In this lesson, we'll explore what it means to think sociologically and examine the theories and methods that sociologists employ when studying social problems.

### Thinking Sociologically

In this course, we will be using what is called the **sociological imagination**, which is the ability to see how individual lives are influenced by broad social forces and vice versa (Mills, 1959). In other words, we try to see how individual people and a society can influence one another. In order to do this, we start with two basic concepts, agency and structure. **Agency** is focused on individual people and their ability to be in charge of their own actions. Agency is focused on free will. If we are trying to understand why a person did something, it was because that person wanted to do it. On the other hand, **structure** has to do with social patterns that limit and enable opportunities. We see that different people have different opportunities. If we think about agency and structure together, we can see that people do make their own decisions, but they do so within the confines of a social structure (Barker, 2005). For instance, consider recent school shootings. From an agency perspective, we would say the cause of the problem is the shooter. Perhaps the shooter was bullied, had a bad home life, or was mentally ill. The blame resides on the individual. From a structural perspective, we have to think about what patterns exist with school shootings. One major pattern with school shootings is that they are almost always done by young men. We can think about how mass media, including movies and video games, glorify gun violence and portray violence as an acceptable way to solve problems. We can also think about the easy access to guns in the US. In countries with less access to guns, there are fewer school shootings. Agency and structure can both serve as explanations for why people do the things they do. When examining social problems in this class, we need to keep both of these frameworks in mind.

## Sociological Theories

While there are many theories that sociologists draw on when studying social problems, we will begin this lesson by exploring three of the most basic theory. They are functionalism, conflict theory, and social constructionism.

### Functionalism

According to **functionalism** (also called structural-functionalism), society is made up of several interrelated systems that all work together (Parsons, 1951). These social institutions include education, religion, politics, family, media, and so on. There is a **division of labor**, or a separation of work among the workers, such that each social institution fulfills a specific function for society. When you put all of the social institutions and their functions together, you get a working society (Durkheim, 1933).

A key idea within functionalism is that if something exists it must serve some function. There are two primary types of functions, manifest and latent functions. The **manifest function** is the intended function, and the **latent function** is the unintended function (Merton, 1957). For example, the manifest functions of education include providing students with opportunities for learning knowledge and skills, while the latent functions of schools can include making friends and learning how to interact with people.

A **dysfunction** occurs when the something that prevents the system from working. In other words, dysfunctions prevent the manifest function from happening. For example, school shootings prevent the learning of curriculum. Social problems can be thought of as dysfunctions.

### Conflict Theory

According to **conflict theory**, widespread social inequalities between social groups prevent us from having a fair and just society (Marx & Engels, 1967). For instance, there are incredible inequalities in power based on class, race, gender, sexual orientation, and many other systems of difference. According to conflict theory, these inequalities between groups constitute a social problem.

The two major groups under investigation by conflict theorists are the dominant and minority groups. The **dominant** group has more social power, and the **minority** group has less social power. For example, in the United States, dominant groups include the wealthy, men, white people, heterosexuals, and Christians. Minority groups include the poor, and anybody who isn't white, heterosexual, or Christian. A minority group doesn't

necessarily have to be a smaller group. For instance, there are more poor people than rich people, but poor people are considered a minority group since they lack relative social power compared to the wealthy.

These inequalities are kept in place with social institutions as well as ideologies. An **ideology** is a system of beliefs that is used to influence public policy. **Capitalist ideology** values the private ownership of wealth, such that the poor become minority groups. **White supremacy** values whites over other races and ethnic groups, such that non-whites become racial and ethnic minority groups. **Patriarchy** values the experiences of men, such that people who are not men become minority groups. **Heteronormativity** grants legitimacy to heterosexual relationships, such that people who are not heterosexual become a minority groups. **Cisnormativity** grants legitimacy to people who are cisgender. Cisgender people internalize their ascribed gender status. Through cisnormativity, anyone who is not cisgender, including people who identify as transgender, genderqueer, and nonbinary, become minority groups.

## Social Constructionism

According to **social construction theory**, social reality is a product of people's repeated interactions in patterned ways over time (Berger & Luckmann, 1989). In other words, "reality" is simply whatever people have decided is real. Different cultures have different realities. How some people see the world is different compared to how others see the world. We create the social world around us. We can tell if something is socially constructed if it changes across time and from culture to culture. Different cultures and time periods have different ideas about what is and what is not a social problem. Not everyone will agree on what is or is not a social problem. Social problems don't appear on their own, they are created by people. We define them as social problems. For example, drug use could be understood as a religious experience, as medicine, or as criminal behavior. It depends upon the context.

Social problems are often constructed through the news media. According to the **agenda-setting function of the news media**, the news media don't tell us what to think, but they do tell us what to think about (Bryant & Zillmann, 2002). News media have the ability to influence the level of concern regarding a social problem. People become concerned about the social problems that are covered a lot in the news and are less concerned about problems that receive less coverage. People become very concerned about celebrity divorces, which are covered in the news a lot. However, people are less concerned about corporate ownership of news and giant media conglomerations, which are rarely covered on the news. As a result of this agenda-setting, the objective rates of a social problem don't necessarily match the

subjective rates of concern. In other words, news media may start reporting on something like shark attacks. Then, people become very concerned about shark attacks. However, that doesn't mean that shark attacks are on the rise.

Social problems get perpetuated using specific frames. A **frame** allows people to locate, perceive, identify, and label social phenomena thereby giving them meaning (Goffman, 1974). Many frames are used to create social problems. Two very common frames are the individualization of social problems and routinization of caricature. The **individualization of social problems** locates the causes of and solutions to social problems on the individual, agency level. For instance, we often think about ADHD as an individual problem (Conrad, 1975). If kids can't sit still and pay attention in class, there must be something wrong with the child. The cause is the individual, so the solution must be on the individual as well. Then, we medicate the child. Since the conversation is focused on the individual, we pay less attention to social structural factors that may contribute to the problem, such as fast-paced media consumption and instant gratification culture.

Another common frame is **routinization of caricature**, which is the tendency to portray worst-case scenarios as common, typical scenario (Reinarman, 1994). For instance, in the 1936 propaganda film *Reefer Madness*, marihuana was portrayed as causing violent behavior and fast, reckless driving. While surely some people have smoked marihuana and had those consequences, the drug is not usually associated with those outcomes. Routinization of caricature is somewhat similar to the psychological concept of catastrophizing.

Social problems may also be framed through misinformation and disinformation. **Misinformation** is incorrect information that is spread unintentionally. Under President George W. Bush, the United States engaged in military operations in Iraq to remove weapons of mass destruction, none of which were ever found. It turns out, the United States and its allies were relying on information that turned out to be false. Presumably, Bush really believed the weapons of mass destruction existed (Lewandowsky, Stritzke, Freund, Oberauer, & Krueger, 2013). On the other hand, **disinformation** is incorrect information that is deliberately spread. For decades, the Sugar Research Foundation conducted studies that cast doubt about the hazards of sugar consumption. The studies showed that sugar consumption was not associated with coronary heart disease. The Sugar Research Foundation concealed the negative consequences of sugar consumption, while making statements claiming there were no negative consequences of sugar consumption, all the while making money from sugar sales (Kearns, Schmidt, Glantz, 2016).

Finally, the last issue we'll explore within social constructionism is how social problems are perpetuated by individual people. A **moral entrepreneur** is a person, group, or formal organization that seeks to adopt or maintain a norm or cultural expectation (Becker, 1963). Fred Phelps of the Westboro Baptist Church was outspoken about what he believed to be the evils of being gay. Meanwhile, Sister Donna Quinn, who is a Catholic nun in Chicago, was an outspoken supporter of same-sex marriage. Both Phelps and Quinn are moral entrepreneurs because they both advocated for a social problem. Incidentally, Quinn is also pro-choice on the abortion debate.

## Research Methods

Sociologists employ a variety of research methods when studying social problems. **Field research** is the study of social life in its natural setting. When doing field research, sociologists observe and often participate in the social world of their research subjects. For example, Alice Goffman (2014) spent six years living in a Philadelphia neighborhood where she got to know drug dealers and learned about their culture. Researchers also conduct **survey research** in which they ask respondents a variety of questions via questionnaire. Kero, Högberg, and Lalos (2004) asked respondents about their living conditions, decision-making process, and feelings about pregnancy prior to having an abortion. The researchers also performed **interviews**, in which they asked direct questions of the respondents about their experiences and effects of abortion. Sociologists also conduct **secondary analysis of existing data**, by which researchers analyze data that was previously collected by other researchers. David Cotter, Joan Hermsen, Seth Ovadia, and Reeve Vanneman (2001) analyzed data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics to find evidence of a glass ceiling, which prevents women from reaching the upper levels of an organization's hierarchy.

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