

Contemporary Social Problems

Socio 2

Goals for this Class

- Provide an integrated theoretical background to the study of social problems
- Encourage the development of a sociological imagination
- Provide global coverage of social problems
- Provide an opportunity to assess personal beliefs and attitudes
- Emphasize the human side of social problems
- Encourage students to take pro-social action

What is a Social Problem? (1)

▪ Objective and Subjective Elements of Social Problems

▪ Objective element

- The existence of a social condition

▪ Subjective element

- The belief that a particular social condition is harmful to society, or to a segment of society, and that it should and can be changed

- A **social problem** is a social condition that a segment of society views as harmful to members of society and in need of remedy

What is a Social Problem? (2)

▪ Variability in Definitions of Social Problems

- Social problems vary across societies, among individuals and groups within a society, and across historical time periods

▪ Example

- Prior to the 19th century, it was the husband's legal right to and marital obligation to discipline and control his wife through the use of physical force

What is a Social Problem? (3)

- A problem depends on people's *values*
- Values are cherished beliefs of what is good
 - If people believe in goodness, they try to act morally
 - If people value materialism, they try to accumulate material goods, etc...
- Groups as well as societies develop values; individuals are socialized to accept these values

Key Values of U.S. Culture (1)

- Robin Williams Jr. (1970)
 - Ten values central to our way of life
- **1. Equal Opportunity**
 - People in the U.S. believe in not equality of condition but equality of opportunity
- **2. Individual Achievement and Personal Success**
- **3. Material Comfort**

Key Values of U.S. Culture (2)

- **4. Activity and Work**
 - Our heroes are “doers” who get the job done
- **5. Practicality and Efficiency**
 - Value the practical over the theoretical
- **6. Progress**
- **7. Science**
 - Expect scientists to solve problems and improve our lives
 - Believe that we are rational people

Key Values of U.S. Culture (3)

- **8. Democracy and Free Enterprise**
 - Our society recognizes numerous individual rights that governments should not take away
- **9. Freedom**
 - Favor individual initiative over collective conformity
- **10. Racism and Group Superiority**
 - Most people in the U.S. still judge others according to gender, race, ethnicity, and social class

What is a Social Problem? (4)

- *A problem is an existing condition that is inconsistent with or threatening to our most important values*
- People can never totally agree on what constitutes a problem because they have different values
- Example: Which one is a problem?
 - Abortion or abortion rights?
 - Violation of laws or unjust laws?
 - Liberal arts education or career placement education?

What is a Social Problem? (5)

- Values vs. goals
 - Strong commitment to education (value) to understand the world better (goal)
 - We might value success and seek classes that will graduate and give us a good prospect for the future
- Individuals have values and goals; *individual* problems arise in relation to both of those
- A group or society also holds values and pursues goals; *social* problems arise in relation to both of those

What is a Social Problem? (6)

- We disagree about what is and is not a problem in part because our values and goals differ; this is true for groups as well as individuals. Values and goals therefore make a problem subjective
- *Does a problem exist only if we are able to see it, or can it exist even if we do not recognize it?*
 - Can politicians really understand what it means to be poor?
 - Do whites really understand what it means to be discriminated against?
 - Do men fully comprehend women's oppression?

What is a Social Problem? (7)

- Understanding problems begins with our own goals and values (socially influenced); these goals and values only *guide* us in the direction of understanding
- However, a careful analysis allows us to understand the problem and its origins
- Example: The oppression of women
 - If you value equality then your goal is the creation of equal rights for men and women
 - BUT the real problem might be the traditions and institutions that define and divide labor unequally
 - Therefore, only changes in the institutions will create equality

What Makes a Problem a *SOCIAL* Problem? (1)

- There are individual problems and social problems
- For a problem to be a *social* problem it has to meet 3 criteria
 - It must be social in origin
 - Hurricanes and earthquakes are natural in origin but the preparation (or lack thereof) are social
 - It must harm many people
 - It must harm society (and its continuation)

What Makes a Problem a *SOCIAL* Problem? (2)

- *Social* condition
 - Neutral quality identified in society such as globalization, marriage, divorce etc...
- *Social* issue
 - A social condition becomes a social issue when people begin to debate whether the condition is a problem
- *Social* problem
 - The social issue evolves into a social problem when those who consider it a problem are able to persuade others that it is, and something needs to be done

Society

- For sociologists, *society* is more than a bunch of people who act together
 - “Society is greater than the sum of its parts”
- *Society* develops certain ways and patterns over time. It has a structure and a culture
- Social problems are therefore equated with *social patterns* that have developed over time in this society

Elements of Social Structure & Culture

- Social problems are rooted in the structure and culture of society
- The structure of a society involves institutions, social groups, statuses and roles
- The culture of a society involves beliefs, values, norms, sanctions and symbols

Elements of Social Structure (1)

- **Institutions**
 - Established and enduring patterns of social relationships (family, religion, politics, economics, and education)
- **Social groups**
 - **Primary groups** are small, intimate, and informal
 - **Secondary groups** are large or small, task-oriented, impersonal, and formal

Elements of Social Structure (2)

- **Statuses**
 - Positions occupied within a social group
- **Ascribed status**
 - It is assigned on the basis of factors over which the individual has no control (e.g. sex, race). Obtained at birth
- **Achieved status**
 - It is assigned on the basis of some characteristic or behavior over which the individual has some control (e.g. parent, college graduate). Obtained through work, achievement etc...
- **Master status**
 - It is the status that is considered the most significant in a person's social identity

Elements of Social Structure (3)

▪ Roles

- The set of rights, obligations, and expectations associated with a status

▪ Example

- A set of obligations emerge when you become a parent
- Roles guide our behavior and allow us to predict the behavior of others

Elements of Culture (1)

▪ Beliefs

- Definitions and explanations about what is assumed to be true
 - Does violence in movies lead to increased aggression in children?
 - The answer will influence the way we define social problems

▪ Values

- Social agreements about what is considered good and bad, right and wrong, desirable and undesirable

Elements of Culture (2)

▪ Norms

- Socially defined rules of behavior
- We learn them during our interactions with our friends, family and other people
 - Example: being polite to cashier at the store etc...

▪ Folkways

- Customs and manners of society (unwritten rules)
- We take them for granted
- We do not always think about them but we understand
- When breached, we face shame or embarrassment

Elements of Culture (3)

▪ **Laws**

- Norms that are formalized and backed by political authority
- Written rules people should abide by
- Sanctions can be severe

▪ **Mores**

- Norms that have a moral basis
- Those norms are deemed necessary for the well-being of society
 - You do not molest children (Law)
 - You do not cheat on your spouse (Folkway)

Elements of Culture (4)

▪ **Sanctions**

- Social consequences for conforming to or violating norms (positive, negative, formal and informal)
 - Embarrassment
 - Imprisonment or fine
 - Graduating from college (positive)

▪ **Symbols**

- Language, gestures, and objects whose meaning is commonly understood by the members of a society

Sociological Imagination

- Term coined by C. Wright Mills (American sociologist)
- It refers to the ability to see the connections between our personal lives and the social world in which we live
 - You should be able to relate your problems to larger structural & cultural problems
 - Your problems cannot always be attributed to individual causes
 - Example: Being poor
 - You can understand your poverty by examining larger structural and cultural issues around you
 - Private troubles vs. public issues
 - What are the links?

What Causes a Social Problem? (1)

- Social forces vs. Individual actions
- Poverty as a social problem
 - Economic factors lead to people competing and create “haves” and “have-nots”
 - vs.
- People *choose* poverty and what comes with it

What Causes a Social Problem? (2)

- Some people attribute social problems to evil people
 - Some argue that we are *all* naturally evil, selfish, and cruel
 - Some others argue that only *a few* are evil, and they are the ones that create social problems
 - Historically, racial minorities have been portrayed as such

What Causes a Social Problem? (3)

- Some people attribute social problems to biology, physical and/or psychological characteristics
- Societal problems are therefore rooted in individual problems who are seriously deranged
- They need to be cured so society can get rid of social problems

What Causes a Social Problem? (4)

- To sociologists, social problems are NOT primarily caused by personal choices made by individuals or evil people
- Social problems arise from the nature of society
- They are caused by the operation of society, the limitations of its workings, and its qualities that act on too many individuals

What Causes a Social Problem? (5)

- To argue that people make free choices and cause their own problems is to ignore the cause completely
 - Are you really “free” to quit your job?
- Our individual choices are important but many factors, social and/or not social, enter into every “free” choice

What Causes a Social Problem? (6)

- It is too simple to look at the individual and refuse to understand the larger social context
- When one looks at the larger context:
 - There is a strong tendency for our understanding of cause to become broader and broader until we come to see society itself as cause
 - By examining the social we begin to examine the complexity of cause and the interdependence of a number of problems in society

Theoretical Perspectives

- **Conflict Perspective**
- **Functionalist Perspective**
- **Interactionist Perspective**

Conflict Perspective (1)

- This perspective emphasizes social conditions that cause harm to people
 - Focuses on societal conditions that create poverty, and inequality of class and power
- Society is defined as a conflict of various interests
 - While some can meet their needs and desires, others are harmed and excluded

Conflict Perspective (2)

- The **conflict perspective** views society as comprised of different groups and interests competing for power and resources
- Industrialization led to the emergence of two classes
 - Bourgeoisie
 - Owners of means of production (the “haves”)
 - Proletariat
 - Workers who earn wages (the “have-nots”)

Conflict Perspective (3)

- Marxist theories claim social problems result from class inequality inherent in a capitalistic system
 - Quest for profit leads to corporate violence (negligence)
 - People make and sell anything even if it is dangerous etc...
- Marxist theories focus on problems of **alienation**, or powerlessness and meaningless in people's lives
 - Workers have little control over their jobs (powerlessness)
 - The specialized nature of work requires workers to do the same task over and over
 - Their lives become meaningless

Conflict Perspective (4)

- Non-Marxist theories claim conflicts arise when groups have opposing values
 - Pro-Choice vs. Pro-life (or pro-birth)
 - Environmentalists vs. Industrialists
 - Non-Whites vs. Whites
- Those with the most power will influence the outcome of value conflicts

Functionalist Perspective (1)

- This perspective tends to emphasize those social conditions that threaten the continuation of society as it is
- Its major concerns are too much disorder in society, too little consensus, and too few institutions that work well to uphold society as we know it

Functionalist Perspective (2)

- **Functionalism** views society as comprised of parts that work together to maintain a state of balance and social equilibrium
- Example: the family, education etc... provide important information for the members of society to know how to act, behave and work for society to continue to function
- If one institution fails to do its job, society is in trouble

Functionalist Perspective (3)

- Structural-functionalists talk about “functions” and “dysfunctions” in society
- Manifest functions
 - Consequences are intended and known
 - Going to school to get education and get a degree
- Latent functions
 - Consequences are unintended and often hidden
 - People usually find their mate in school

Functionalist Perspective (4)

- **Social Pathology**
 - Problems in society occurs because of “sickness”
 - Analogy with your body
 - Crime, violence, and poverty can compared to cancer, AIDS and Diabetes
 - Sickness or illness occurs when members of society are not properly socialized
 - They need to be re-socialized, morally educated etc...

Functionalist Perspective (5)

▪ Social Disorganization

- Rapid social change disrupts society
- Society is in a state of *anomie*
 - Members of society do not know how to act, behave etc...
 - Norms and values are changing to rapidly
- Social change should therefore be gradual
- Social norms should be reinforced

Interactionist Perspective (1)

- Also known as Symbolic Interactionist perspective or constructionism or micro-sociology
- This perspective highlights how social conditions become social problems through communication (interaction) and definition
- Social problems exist because certain conditions are identified in society as unacceptable

Interactionist Perspective (2)

- WI Thomas
 - Human respond to their definition of a situation rather than the objective situation itself
 - We tend to rely on images and/or stereotypes rather than on the objective examination of the situation
 - Situations that we define as real have real consequences
- Charles Cooley
 - Our identity is defined by our interactions with others and how they perceive us
 - "I am who I think you think I am"

Interactionist Perspective (4)

- “How do people successfully influence others to accept what they regard as a social problem?”
- Labeling Theory
 - A social condition or a group is seen as problematic if it is labeled as such (can lead to stigmatization)
- Social Constructionism
 - Our reality is socially constructed and we are able to interpret the social world around us
 - Social problems are examined from their origins

How can we solve Social Problems? (1)

- Solving social problems is a *myth*
 - Poverty, violence, racism will never be solved
- First, whenever we find a solution to a serious problem, our definition of the problem will change
 - Racism
- Second, social problems are too complex to be solved
- Third, social problems are inherent to our society
- Fourth, finding solutions would demand a dramatic change in our society
 - People are not ready for this change yet

How can we solve Social Problems? (2)

- If they cannot be solved, why study them?
- Some of us remain utopian about the future and believe it is important to try
- We can also lessen the impact of certain social problems by understanding their origins
- We all part of social problems and we need to critically address to understand who benefit from them