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 too 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