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SOCIOLOGY AND THE STUDY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1.1 Define the sociological imagination.
- 1.2 Identify the characteristics of a social problem and its stages.
- 1.3 Compare the four sociological perspectives.
- 1.4 Explain how sociology is a science.
- 1.5 Identify the role of social policy, advocacy, and innovation in addressing social problems.

If I asked everyone in your class what they believe is the most important social problem facing the United States, there would be many different responses. This is how we spend much of our public conversation—in the classroom, at work, on the Senate floor—arguing, analyzing, and trying to figure out which problem is most serious and what needs to be done about it. In casual or sometimes heated conversations, we offer opinions about the economy, racism, climate change, or the COVID-19 pandemic. Often, these explanations are not based on firsthand data collection or on an exhaustive review of the literature. For the most part, they are based on our opinions and life experiences.

What this text and your course offer is a sociological perspective on social problems. Unlike any other discipline, sociology provides us with a form of self-consciousness, an awareness that our personal experiences are often caused by structural or social forces. **Sociology** is the systematic study of individuals, groups, and social structures. A sociologist examines the relationship between individuals and society, which includes such social institutions as the family, the economy, and medicine. As a social science, sociology offers an objective and systematic approach to understanding the causes of social problems. From a sociological perspective, problems and their solutions don't just involve individuals; they also have a great deal to do with the social structures in our society. Mills (2000) first promoted this perspective in his 1959 essay "The Promise."

Sociology: The systematic study of individuals and social structures

USING OUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

According to Mills, the sociological imagination can help us distinguish between personal troubles and public issues. The **sociological imagination** is the ability to link our personal lives and experiences with our social world. Mills (2000) described how personal troubles occur within the "character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relationships with others" (p. 8), whereas public issues are a "public matter: some value cherished by publics is felt to be

Sociological imagination: The ability to link our personal lives and experiences with our social world

threatened” (p. 8). As a result, the individual, or those in contact with that individual, can resolve a trouble, but the resolution of an issue requires public debate about what values are being threatened and the source of such a threat.

Let’s consider unemployment. One man unemployed is his own personal trouble. Resolving his unemployment involves reviewing his current situation, reassessing his skills, considering his job opportunities, and submitting his résumés or job applications to employers. Once he has a new job, his personal trouble is over.

However, what happens when there is a nationwide problem of unemployment? A personal trouble is transformed into a public issue. In April 2020, more than 20 million Americans lost their jobs as a result of public health measures meant to reduce the spread of COVID-19, a highly infectious respiratory disease caused by the SARS CoV-2 virus. While physical distancing and sheltering in place were deemed necessary by public health officials, these precautions took a staggering toll on the economy. This is a public issue not just because of how many people it affects; something becomes an issue because of the public values it threatens. Unemployment threatens our sense of economic security. It challenges our belief that everyone can work hard to succeed and that everyone has the right to work. Unemployment raises questions about society’s obligations to help those without a job, no matter the circumstances.



A key distinction between a personal trouble and a public issue is how each one can be remedied. According to C. Wright Mills, an individual may be able to solve a trouble, but a public issue can be resolved only by society and its social structures.

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As Mills explained, “to be aware of the ideal of social structure and to use it with sensibility is to be capable of tracing such linkages among a great variety of milieus. To be able to do that

is to possess the sociological imagination” (Mills, 2000, pp. 10–11). The sociological imagination challenges the claim that the problem is “natural” or based on individual failures, instead reminding us that the problem is rooted in society, in our social structures themselves (Irwin, 2001). For example, can we solve unemployment by telling every unemployed person to work harder? The sociological imagination emphasizes the structural bases of social problems, making us aware of the economic, political, and social structures that govern employment and unemployment trends. Individuals may have agency (the ability to make their own choices), but their actions and even their choices may be constrained by the realities of the social structure, including a global pandemic. Throughout this text, we apply our sociological imagination to the study of social problems. Before we proceed, we need to understand what a social problem is.

WHAT IS A SOCIAL PROBLEM?

A **social problem** is a social condition or pattern of behavior that has negative consequences for individuals, our social world, or our physical world. A social problem such as unemployment, alcoholism, drug abuse, or COVID-19 may negatively affect a person’s life and health, along with the well-being of that person’s family and friends. Problems can threaten our social institutions, for example, the family (spousal abuse), education (the cost of college tuition), or the economy (unemployment). Our physical and social worlds can be threatened by problems related to urbanization (lack of affordable housing) and the environment (climate change). You will note from the examples in this paragraph that social problems are inherently social in their causes, consequences, and solutions.

Social problem: A social condition that has negative consequences for individuals, our social world, or our physical world

Objective and Subjective Realities of Social Problems

A social problem has objective and subjective realities. A social condition does not have to be personally experienced by every individual to be considered a social problem. The **objective reality** of a social problem comes from acknowledging that a particular social condition exists. Objective realities of a social problem can be confirmed by the collection of data. For example, we know from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) that as of August 2021, more than 35 million Americans were infected with the coronavirus. You or I do not have to have been infected with COVID-19 to know that the disease is real, with real human and social consequences. We can confirm the realities of COVID-19 by observing infected individuals and their families in our own community or in hospitals.

Objective reality: Actual existence of a particular condition

The **subjective reality** of a social problem addresses how a problem becomes defined as a problem. This idea is based on the concept of the **social construction of reality**. Coined by Berger and Luckmann (1966), the term refers to how our world is a social creation, originating and evolving through our everyday thoughts and actions. Most of the time, we assume and act as though the world is a given, objectively predetermined outside our existence. However, according to Berger and Luckmann, we also apply subjective meanings to our existence and experience. In other words, our experiences don’t just happen to us. Good, bad, positive, or negative, we attach meanings to our reality.

Subjective reality: Attachment of meanings to our reality

Social construction of reality: The world regarded as a social creation

From this perspective, social problems are not objectively predetermined. They become real only when they are subjectively defined or perceived as problematic. This perspective is known as **social constructionism**. Recognizing the subjective aspects of social problems allows us to understand how a social condition may be defined as a problem by one segment of society but be completely ignored by another. Much has been documented how the problem of COVID-19 has

Social constructionism: Subjective definition or perception of conditions

been socially constructed, beginning with President Trump's declaration that the virus was no worse than the flu and would simply go away over time. Competing narratives about the threat of the virus were played out in the news media and throughout the 2020 presidential election campaign. There was acrimonious public debate regarding the need to protect the public from the virus while also preserving the economy and our way of life.

Sociologist Donileen Loseke (2003) explained, "Conditions might exist, people might be hurt by them, but conditions are not social problems until humans categorize them as troublesome and in need of repair" (p. 14). To frame their work, social constructionists ask the following set of questions:

What do people say or do to convince others that a troublesome condition exists that must be changed? What are the consequences of the typical ways that social problems attract concern? How do our subjective understandings of social problems change the objective characteristics of our world? How do these understandings change how we think about our own lives and the lives of those around us? (Loseke & Best, 2003, pp. 3–4)

The social constructionist perspective focuses on how a problem is socially defined, in a dialectic process between individuals interacting with each other and with their social world. In April 2020, the Pew Research Center asked a sample of 1,200 Americans what they perceived as the greatest international threat to the United States. Results, organized by age group, are presented in Table 1.1. From a sociological perspective, the experience of social problems will vary by our social position, determined primarily by our social class, race or ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and age. You'll learn more about these social positions in Chapters 2–6.

In the next section, we'll examine how identifying a social problem is part of a subjective process. Social problems just don't happen.

TABLE 1.1 ■ Percentage of Individuals Who Believe ____ Is a Major Threat to the United States, by Age, April 2020

	18–29	30–49	50+
Large numbers of people moving from one country to another	22	41	50
Cyberattacks from other countries	58	67	81
Russia's power and influence	44	51	66
Terrorism	62	69	80
The spread of nuclear weapons	65	68	81
China's power and influence	52	61	68
Long-standing conflicts between countries or ethnic groups	29	40	43
The spread of infectious diseases	77	74	84
Global poverty	49	44	52
The condition of the global economy	54	56	55
Global climate change	71	62	54

Source: Poushter and Fagan (2020).

The History of Social Problems

Problems don't appear overnight; rather, as Malcolm Spector and John Kituse (1987) argued, the identification of a social problem is part of a subjective process. Spector and Kituse identified four stages to the process. Stage 1 is defined as a transformation process: taking a private trouble and transforming it into a public issue. In this stage, an influential group, activists, or advocates call attention to and define an issue as a social problem. In early January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that it was tracking a cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, China. Most of the world first learned about COVID-19 when WHO declared it as a global public health emergency on January 30. The U.S. secretary of health and human services declared a public health emergency on January 31. By the time President Trump declared a national emergency on March 13, there were more than 2,000 confirmed cases and 48 coronavirus-related deaths. Scientists and public health advocates blamed Trump's inconsistent response to the pandemic for increasing the spread of the disease and the number of deaths in the country. As of August 2021, over 600,000 deaths were attributed to COVID-19.

Stage 2 is the legitimization process: formalizing how the social problem or complaints generated by the problem are handled. For example, an organization or public policy could be created to respond to the condition. An existing organization, such as a federal or state agency, could also be charged with taking care of the situation. In either instance, these organizations begin to legitimize the problem by creating and implementing a formal response. In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) mobilized its laboratories and trained specialists and surveillance systems to identify, track, and contain outbreaks of the disease. Vice President Mike Pence led the White House's COVID Task Force, which included several leading public health and infectious disease specialists. Similar response groups were convened in other countries. Although no single organization or country was in charge, all were intent on combating the disease and finding a cure.

Stage 3 is a conflict stage, when Stage 2 routines are unable to address the problem. During Stage 3, activists, advocates, and victims of the problem experience feelings of distrust and cynicism toward the formal response organizations. Stage 3 activities include readjusting the formal response system: renegotiating procedures, reforming practices, and engaging in administrative or organizational restructuring. Many early public health protocols were revised in response to increased understanding about how COVID-19 is spread and best treated. Patient isolation, social distancing, and the use of personal protection equipment became standard practices. Early in the pandemic and during consequent surges, hospitals had to address shortages of surgical masks, ventilators, and dedicated intensive care unit beds. In an effort to expand the availability of COVID-19 testing, many hospitals and public health departments established drive-through testing sites.

Finally, Stage 4 begins when groups believe that they can no longer work within the established system. Advocates or activists are faced with two options: to radically change the existing system or to work outside the system. Many state and local leaders maintained aggressive public health measures while the Trump administration declared the virus was contained, dismantled the COVID-19 task force, and shifted its focus on economic recovery. As an alternative to the COVID response from the federal government and public health agencies, numerous independent community and advocacy groups began providing services and support to vulnerable populations such as undocumented immigrants, prisoners, unsheltered people, and essential front line workers. Across the country mutual aid groups were established to provide temporary aid and emergency necessities, but as the pandemic continued, these groups expanded their services to include mental health support, internet access, and veterinary services (de Freytas-Tamura, 2021).

UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

According to Ballantine and Roberts (2012), sociologists examine the software and hardware of society. A *society* consists of individuals who live together in a specific geographic area, who interact with each other, and who cooperate for the attainment of common goals.

The software is our *culture*. Each society has a culture that serves as a system of guidelines for living. A culture includes *norms* (rules of behavior shared by members of society and rooted in a value system), *values* (shared judgments about what is desirable or undesirable, right or wrong, good or bad), and *beliefs* (ideas about life, the way society works, and where one fits in).

The hardware comprises the enduring social structures that bring order to our lives. This includes the positions or *statuses* that we occupy in society (student, athlete, employee, roommate) and the social *groups* to which we belong and identify (our family, our local place of worship, our workplace). *Social institutions* are the most complex hardware. Social institutions, such as the family, religion, or education, are relatively permanent social units of roles, rules, relationships, and organized activities devoted to meeting human needs and to directing and controlling human behavior (Ballantine & Roberts, 2012).

The way sociologists conduct sociology and study social problems begins first with their view on how the world works. Based on a **theory**—a set of assumptions and propositions used for explanation, prediction, and understanding—sociologists begin to define the relationship between society and individuals and to describe the causes and consequences of social problems.

Theories vary in their level of analysis, focusing on a **macro** (societal) or a **micro (individual) level of analysis**. Theories help inform the direction of sociological research and data analysis. In the following section, we review four theoretical perspectives—functionalist, conflict, feminist, and interactionist (see also Table 1.2)—and how each perspective explains and examines social problems. Research methods used by sociologists are summarized in the next section.

Theory: A set of assumptions and propositions used for explanation, prediction, and understanding

Macro level of analysis:
Societal level of analysis

Micro level of analysis:
Individual level of analysis

TABLE 1.2 ■ Summary of Sociological Perspectives: A General Approach to Examining Social Problems

	Functionalist	Conflict/Feminist	Interactionist
Level of analysis	Macro	Macro	Micro
Assumptions about society	Order. Society is held together by a set of social institutions, each of which has a specific function in society.	Conflict. Society is held together by power and coercion. Conflict and inequality are inherent in the social structure.	Interaction. Society is created through social interaction.
Questions asked about social problems	How does the problem originate from the social structure? How does the problem reflect changes among social institutions and structures? What are the functions and dysfunctions of the problem?	How does the problem originate from the competition between groups and from the social structure itself? What groups are in competition and why?	How is the problem socially constructed and defined? How is problem behavior learned through interaction? How is the problem labeled by those concerned about it?

Functionalist Perspective

Among the theorists most associated with the functionalist perspective is French sociologist Émile Durkheim. Borrowing from biology, Durkheim likened society to a human body. As the body has essential organs, each with a specific function, he theorized that society has its own organs: institutions such as the family, religion, education, economics, and politics. These organs or social structures have essential and specialized functions. For example, the institution of the family maintains the health and socialization of our young and creates a basic economic unit. The institution of education provides knowledge and skills for women and men to work and live in society. No other institution can do what the family or education does.

Durkheim proposed that the function of society is to civilize or control individual actions. He wrote, “It is civilization that has made man what he is; it is what distinguishes him from the animal: man is man only because he is civilized” (Durkheim, 1973, p. 149). The social order can be threatened during periods of rapid social change, such as industrialization or political upheaval, when social norms and values are likely to be in transition. During this state of normlessness or **anomie**, Durkheim believed, society is particularly prone to social problems. As a result, social problems cannot be solved by changing the individual; rather, the problem has to be solved at the societal level. The entire social structure or the affected part of the social structure needs to be repaired.

The **functionalist perspective**, as its name suggests, examines the functions or consequences of the structure of society. Functionalists use a macro perspective, focusing on how society creates and maintains social order. Social problems are not analyzed in terms of how “bad” they are for society. Rather, a functionalist asks, how does the social problem emerge from society? Does the social problem serve a function?

The systematic study of social problems began with the sociologists at the University of Chicago. Part of what has been called the Chicago School of Sociology, scholars such as Ernest W. Burgess, Homer Hoyt, Robert E. Park, Edward Ullman, and Louis Wirth used their city as an urban laboratory, pursuing field studies of poverty, crime, and drug abuse during the 1920s and 1930s. Through their research, they captured the real experiences of individuals experiencing social problems, noting the positive and negative consequences of urbanization and industrialization (Ritzer, 2000). Taking it one step further, sociologists Jane Addams and Charlotte Gilman studied urban life in Chicago, developed programs to assist the poor, and lobbied for legislative and political reform (Adams & Sydie, 2001).

According to Robert Merton (1957), social structures can have positive benefits as well as negative consequences, which he called dysfunctions. A social problem such as homelessness has a clear set of **dysfunctions** but can also have positive consequences or functions. One could argue that homelessness is dysfunctional and unpleasant for the women, men, and children who experience it, and for a city or community, homelessness can serve as a public embarrassment. Yet a functionalist would say that homelessness is beneficial for at least one part of society, or else it would cease to exist. The population of the homeless supports an industry of social service agencies, religious organizations, community groups, and service

Anomie: State of normlessness

Functionalist perspective: A theoretical perspective that examines the functions or consequences of the structure of society; functionalists use a macro perspective, focusing on how society creates and maintains social order



Jane Addams’s (center) sociological perspective informed her connection to her Chicago community and led her to a life of social action. She developed programs to assist the poor and advocated legislative and political reforms.

Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division [LC-USZ62-37768]

Dysfunctions: Negative consequences of social structures

workers. In addition, the homeless also highlight problems in other parts of our social structure, namely, the problems of the lack of a livable wage or affordable housing.

Conflict perspective: A theoretical perspective that considers how society is held together by power and coercion for the benefit of those in power (based on social class, gender, race, or ethnicity)

Proletariat: The working class in a capitalist economy

Bourgeoisie: Capitalist ruling class; owners of businesses

Conflict Perspective

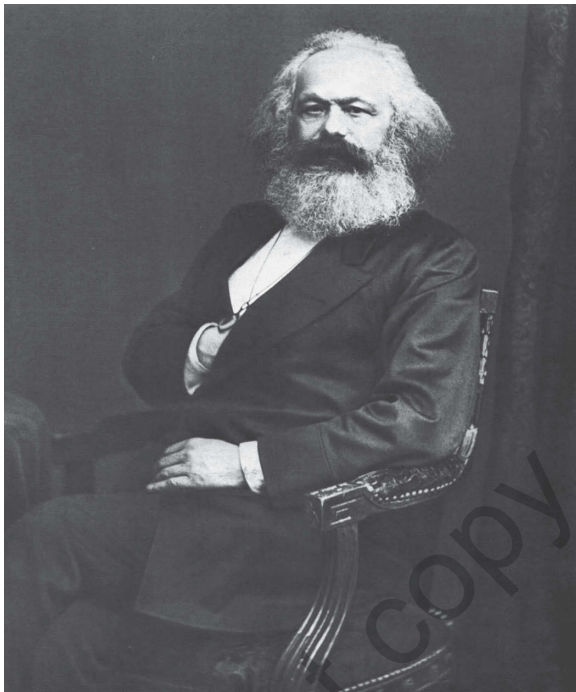
Like functionalism, conflict theories examine the macro level of our society, its structures, and its institutions. Whereas functionalists argue that society is held together by norms, values, and a common morality, those holding a **conflict perspective** consider how society is held together by power and coercion (Ritzer, 2000) for the benefit of those in power. In this view, social problems emerge from the continuing conflict between groups in our society—based on social class, gender, race, or ethnicity—and in the conflict, the dominant groups usually win. There are multiple levels of domination; as Patricia Hill Collins (1990) described, domination “operates not only by structuring power from the top down but by simultaneously annexing the power as energy of those on the bottom for its own ends” (pp. 227–228).

As a result, this perspective offers no easy solutions to social problems. The system could be completely overhauled, but that is unlikely to happen. We could reform parts of the structure, but those in power would retain their control. The biggest social problem from this perspective is the system itself and the inequality it perpetuates.

The first to make this argument was a German philosopher and activist, Karl Marx. Conflict, according to Marx, emerged from the economic substructure of capitalism, which defined all other social structures and social relations. He focused on the conflict based on social class, created by the tension between the **proletariat** (workers) and the **bourgeoisie** (owners). Capitalism did more than separate the haves from the have-nots. Unlike Durkheim, who believed that society created a civilized man, Marx argued that a capitalist society created a man alienated from his **species being**, from his true self. **Alienation** occurred on multiple levels: Man would become increasingly alienated from his work, the product of his work, other workers, and, finally, his own human potential. For example, a salesperson might be so involved in the process of her work that she doesn’t spend quality time with her coworkers, talk with her customers, or stop and appreciate the merchandise. Each sale transaction is the same; all customers and workers are

treated alike. The salesperson cannot achieve her human potential through this type of mindless unfulfilling labor. According to Marx, workers needed to achieve **class consciousness**, an awareness of their social position and oppression, so they could unite and overthrow capitalism, replacing it with a more egalitarian socialist and eventually communist structure.

Widening Marx’s emphasis on the capitalist class structure, contemporary conflict theorists have argued that conflict emerges from other social bases, such as values, resources, and interests. Lewis Coser (1956) focused on the functional aspects of conflict, arguing that conflict creates and maintains group solidarity by clarifying the positions and boundaries between groups. Mills (2000) argued the existence of a “power elite,” a small group of political, business, and military leaders who control our society. Ralf Dahrendorf (1959) explained that conflict of



From a conflict perspective, all social problems can be traced back to the economic substructure of capitalism. According to Karl Marx, the organization of capitalist labor erodes one’s human potential or what Marx referred to as species being.

Species being: A human being’s true self

Alienation: Separation from one’s true self; alienation occurs on multiple levels—from one’s work, the product of one’s work, other workers, and one’s human potential

Class consciousness: Awareness of one’s social position

interest is inherent in any relationship because those in powerful positions will always seek to maintain their dominance.

Cedric Robinson (1983) used the term “racial capitalism” to recognize how the development of capitalism is built upon racialized ideologies. The accumulation of capital is associated with features of white supremacist capitalistic development—slavery, colonialism, genocide, and migrant exploitation (Melamed, 2015). “Racial capitalism helps us to understand how people become divided from each other in the name of economic survival or in the name of economic well-being,” according to Gargi Bhattacharyya (2018, p. x). “One aspect of its techniques encompasses the processes that appear to grant differential privileges to workers and almost workers and non-workers and the social relations that flow from these differentiations.”

Conflict theorists may also take a social constructionist approach, examining how powerful political, economic, and social interest groups subjectively define social problems.

Feminist Perspective

Rosemarie Tong (1989) explained that “feminist theory is not one, but many, theories or perspectives and that each feminist theory or perspective attempts to describe women’s oppression, to explain its causes and consequences, and to prescribe strategies for women’s liberation” (p. 1). By analyzing the situations and lives of women in society, the **feminist perspective** defines gender and other areas of oppression (i.e., race and ethnicity, age, social class, sexual orientation, and disability) as the source of social inequality, group conflict, and social problems. For feminists, the patriarchal society is the basis of social problems. **Patriarchy** refers to a society in which men dominate women and justify their domination through devaluation; however, the definition of patriarchy has been broadened to include societies in which powerful groups dominate and devalue the powerless (Kaplan, 1994).

Patricia Madoo Lengermann and Jill Niebrugge-Brantley (2004) explained that feminist theory was established as a new sociological perspective in the 1970s, largely because of the growing presence of women in the discipline and the strength of the women’s movement. Feminist theory treats the experiences of women as the starting point in all sociological investigations, seeing the world from the vantage point of women in the social world and seeking to promote a better world for women and for humankind.

Although the study of social problems is not the center of feminist theory, throughout its history, feminist theory has been critical of existing social arrangements and has focused on such concepts as social change, power, and social inequality (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 2004). Major research in the field has included Jessie Bernard’s (1982) study of gender inequality in marriage, Collins’s (1990) development of Black feminist thought, Dorothy Smith’s (1987) sociology from the standpoint of women, and Nancy Chodorow’s (1978) psychoanalytic feminism and reproduction of mothering. Although sociologists in this perspective may adopt a conflict, functionalist, or interactionist perspective, their focus remains on how men and women are situated in society, not just differently but also unequally (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 2004).

Interactionist Perspective

An **interactionist perspective** focuses on how we use language, words, and symbols to create and maintain our social reality. This micro-level perspective highlights what we take for granted: the expectations, rules, and norms that we learn and practice without even noticing. In our interaction with others, we become the products and creators of our social reality. Through our interaction, social problems are created and defined. More than any other perspective,

Feminist perspective:

A theoretical perspective that defines gender (and sometimes race or social class) as a source of social inequality, group conflict, and social problems

Patriarchy: Society in which the powerful (often men) dominate the powerless (often women)

Interactionist perspective:

A micro-level perspective that highlights what we take for granted: the expectations, rules, and norms that we learn and practice without even noticing; interactionists maintain that through our interaction, social problems are created and defined



Individuals come together in public rallies to show their support of frontline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. These demonstrations galvanize the efforts of advocacy and activist groups, as well as educate the public about the pandemic.

ROBYN BECK/Contributor/Getty Images

Human agency: The active role of individuals in creating their social environment

interactionists stress **human agency**—the active role of individuals in creating their social environment (Ballantine & Roberts, 2012).

George Herbert Mead provided the foundation of this perspective. Also a member of the Chicago School of Sociology, Mead (1962) argued that society consists of the organized and patterned interactions among individuals. As Mead defined it, the *self* is a mental and social process, the reflective ability to see others in relation to ourselves and to see ourselves in relation to others. Our interactions are based on language, based on words. The words we use to communicate with are symbols, representations of something else. The symbols have no inherent meaning and require human interpretation. The term **symbolic interactionism** was coined by Herbert Blumer in 1937. Building on Mead's work, Blumer emphasized how the existence of mind, self, and society emerge from interaction and the use and understanding of symbols (Turner, 1998).

How does the self emerge from interaction? Consider the roles that you and I play. As a university professor, I am aware of what is expected of me; as university students, you are aware of what it means to be a student. There are no posted guides in the classroom that instruct us where to stand, how to dress, or what to bring to class. Even before we enter the classroom, we know how we are supposed to behave and even our places in the classroom. We act based on our past experiences and based on what we have come to accept as definitions of each role. But we need each other to create this reality; our interaction in the classroom reaffirms each of our roles and the larger educational institution. Imagine what it takes to maintain this reality: consensus not just between a single professor and his or her students but between every professor and every student on campus, on every university campus, ultimately reaffirming the structure of a university classroom and higher education.

So, how do social problems emerge from interaction? First, for social problems such as juvenile delinquency, an interactionist would argue that the problem behavior is learned

Symbolic interactionism: Theoretical perspective that examines how we use language, words, and symbols to create and maintain our social reality

from others. According to this perspective, no one is born a juvenile delinquent. As with any other role we play, people learn how to become juvenile delinquents. Although the perspective does not answer the question of where or from whom the first delinquent child learned this behavior, it attempts to explain how deviant behavior is learned through interaction with others.

Second, social problems emerge from the definitions themselves. Objective social problems do not exist; they become real only in how they are defined or labeled. A sociologist using this perspective would examine who or what group is defining the problem and who or what is being defined as deviant or a social problem. As we have already seen with the COVID-19 pandemic, the problem became real after medical and public health officials called attention to the disease.

Third, the solutions to social problems also emerge from our definitions. Helen Schneider and Anne Ingram (1993) argued that the social construction of target populations influences the distribution of policy benefits or policy burdens. Target populations are groups of individuals experiencing a specific social problem; these groups gain policy attention through their socially constructed identity and political power. The authors identified four categories: Advantaged target populations are positively constructed and politically powerful (likely to receive policy benefits), contenders are politically powerful yet negatively constructed (likely to receive policy benefits when public interest is high), dependent target populations have positive social construction but low political power (few policy resources would be allocated to this group), and deviant target populations are both politically weak and negatively constructed (least likely to receive any benefits).

Jean Schroedel and Daniel Jordan (1998) applied the target population model to U.S. Senate voting patterns between 1982 and 1992, examining the allocation of federal funds to four distinct HIV/AIDS groups. As Schneider and Ingram's (1993) theory would predict, the groups receiving the most funding were those in the advantaged category (war veterans and health care workers), followed by contenders (gay and bisexual men and the general population with AIDS), dependents (spouses and the public), and, finally, deviants (intravenous drug users, criminals, and prisoners).

SOCIOLOGY AT WORK

Doing Sociology

At the end of each chapter, the Sociology at Work feature will examine how your sociological imagination and skills can be used in the workplace.

You may be most familiar with how your sociology professors use their sociological imagination as teachers and researchers. Yet sociology is practiced in a variety of ways and settings beyond academia. Hans Zetterberg, in his 1964 article, "The Practical Use of Sociological Knowledge," identified five roles for sociologists: decision maker, educator, commentator/critic, researcher, and consultant. Notice that none of these roles includes sociologist in the title. People are doing sociology, using sociological methods and skills or applying their sociological imagination in their work, even though sociology or sociologist is not part of their job description.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), many sociology bachelor's degree holders find positions in related fields, such as social services, education, or public policy. Based on their survey of recent bachelor's degree graduates, the American Sociological Association (Spalter-Roth & Van Vooren, 2008) reported that about one-quarter of full-time working graduates were employed in social service and counseling occupations. Almost 70%

of graduates who reported that their jobs were closely related to their sociology major were very satisfied with their jobs.

In Chapters 2 through 5, we will review how your sociology learning experiences and skill development will be important for your postcollege work life. Specific occupations will be examined in Chapters 6 through 15, including social work, criminal justice, public health, education, and medicine. Told through stories of sociology alumni, these features highlight how sociology can be used in the workplace. We'll conclude with a discussion on postgraduate study in Chapter 16.

Science: A logical and systematic process to investigate social phenomena and the knowledge produced by these investigations

Empiricism: Gathering data and evidence using our five senses

Basic research: Exploration of the causes and consequences of a social problem

Applied research: Pursuit of knowledge for program application or policy evaluation

Variables: A property of people or objects that can take on two or more values

Hypothesis: Statement of a relationship between variables

Dependent variable: The variable to be explained

Independent variable: The variable expected to account for the cause of the dependent variable

Quantitative methods: Research methods that rely on the collection of statistical data and require the specification of variables and scales collected through surveys, interviews, or questionnaires

Qualitative methods: Research methods designed to capture social life as participants experience it

THE SCIENCE OF SOCIOLOGY

Sociology is a science of our social world, based on information derived from research (Ritzer, 2013). **Science** relies on logical and systematic methods to investigate social phenomena (Chambliss & Schutt, 2016) and encompasses the knowledge produced by these investigations (Schutt, 2012). All research begins with a theory or theories to help identify the phenomenon we're trying to explain and provide explanations for the social patterns or causal relationships between variables (Frankfort-Nachmias et al., 2017). We practice **empiricism**, using our five senses to gather data (Ballantine et al., 2018; Ritzer, 2013) and allowing the evidence to inform our theories about how the world works.

Sociological research is divided into two areas: basic and applied. The knowledge we gain through **basic research** expands our understanding of the causes and consequences of a social problem, for example, identifying the predictors of COVID-19 or examining the rate of infection among African Americans. Conversely, **applied research** involves the pursuit of knowledge for program application or policy evaluation (Katzner et al., 1998); effective program practices documented through applied research can be incorporated into social and medical programs serving COVID-19 patients.

Variables are a property of people or objects that can take on two or more values. For example, as we try to explain COVID-19, we may have a specific explanation about the relationship between two variables: social class and COVID-19 infection. Social class could be measured according to household or individual income, whereas COVID-19 infection could be measured as a positive test for the COVID-19 antibodies. The relationship between these variables can be stated in a **hypothesis**, a tentative statement about how the variables are related to each other. We could predict that COVID-19 infection would be higher among lower-income individuals than upper-income individuals. In this hypothesis statement, we've identified a **dependent variable** (the variable to be explained, COVID-19 infection) along with an **independent variable** (the variable expected to account for the cause of the dependent variable, social class). Data, the information we collect, may confirm or refute this hypothesis.

Research methods (i.e., how sociologists collect data) can include quantitative or qualitative approaches or a combination. **Quantitative methods** rely on the collection of statistical data. They require the specification of variables and scales collected through surveys, interviews, or questionnaires. **Qualitative methods** are designed to capture social life as participants experience it. These methods involve field observation, depth interviews, or focus groups. Following are definitions of each specific method.

Survey research: This is data collection based on responses to a series of questions. Surveys can be offered in several formats: a self-administered mailed survey, group surveys, in-person interviews, or telephone surveys. For example, information from COVID-19 patients may be collected by a survey sent directly in the mail or by a telephone or in-person interview.

Qualitative methods: This category includes data collection conducted in the field, emphasizing the observations about natural behavior as experienced or witnessed by the researcher. Methods include participant observation (a method for gathering data that involves developing a sustained relationship with people while they go about their normal activities), focus groups (unstructured group interviews in which a focus group leader actively encourages discussion among participants on the topics of interest), or intensive (depth) interviewing (open-ended, relatively unstructured questioning in which the interviewer seeks in-depth information on the interviewee's feelings, experiences, and perceptions). Sociologists can utilize various qualitative methods in COVID-19 research—collecting data through participant observation at clinics or support groups and focus groups or depth interviews with patients, health care providers, or key informants.

Historical and comparative methods: This is research that focuses on one historical period (historical events research) or traces a sequence of events over time (historical process research). Comparative research involves multiple cases or data from more than one time period. For example, researchers can examine the effectiveness of COVID-19 treatments over time and compare infection rates between men and women.

Secondary data analysis: Secondary data analysis usually involves the analysis of previously collected data that are used in a new analysis. Large public survey data sets, such as the U.S. Census, the General Social Survey, the National Election Survey, or the International Social Survey Programme, can be used, as can data collected in experimental studies or with qualitative data sets. For COVID-19 research, a secondary data analysis could be based on existing medical records or a routine health survey. The key to secondary data analysis is that the data were not originally collected by the researcher but were collected by another researcher and for a different purpose.

Empirical evidence is part of the scientific process. Some social scientists disagree about the applied use of data, arguing that the role of science is to simply describe the world as it is. Others (like me) acknowledge how research and data not only inform our understanding of a social problem but also identify a solution or a path to some desired change. Lawmakers, public leaders, professionals, and advocates utilize research and data to inform policy, programming, and education. Simply stated, social problems research and data are important not only for expanding what we know about the causes and consequences of problems but also for identifying what can be done to address them.

The U.S. Commission on Evidence-Based Policy Making was established in 2016 by legislation cosponsored by House Speaker Paul Ryan and Senator Patty Murray. Releasing a set of recommendations to improve access and use of government data, the commission (Commission on Evidence-Based Decision Making, 2017) stated, “The American People want a government that functions efficiently and responsibly addresses the problems that face this country. Policy makers must have good information on which to base their decision about improving the viability and effectiveness of government programs and policies.” In October 2017, Ryan and Murray introduced the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act. The act is intended to improve the ability of researchers and statisticians both inside and outside the government to use government data to better inform important policy decisions, implementing many of the commission's

recommendations. President Trump signed the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act into law in January 2019 (Abraham & Haskins, 2018).

VOICES IN THE COMMUNITY

ADIA HARVEY WINGFIELD

Sociologist Adia Harvey Wingfield is the Mary Tileston Hemenway Professor in Arts & Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis. Her scholarship examines how and why racial and gender inequality persists in professional occupations (Washington University in St. Louis, 2020). In 2019 she published *Flatlining: Race, Work, and Health Care in the New Economy* describing the experiences of Black workers in health care based on interviews with 60 Black doctors, nurses, and technicians. Wingfield concluded that among people of color, one's professional status within the organization has a significant effect on how one perceives instances of racial discrimination. Her research documents the racism in health care work but also identifies real solutions.

Wingfield (2020) wrote about how one unanticipated consequence of the coronavirus was “a setback of the modest advances the medical industry has made towards improving racial diversity among practitioners.” Black people constitute only 5% of all doctors and 10% of all nurses despite being approximately 13% of the population. “Both professions have come to realize that more racial and gender diversity is essential for providing care in a multiracial society—especially given data indicating black patients’ health outcomes improved when matched with a same-race provider.”

While fellowships, training programs, and pipelines programs can attract underrepresented minority students into the field of medicine, there is more work to be done. She explains:

Programs like these will become all the more crucial if black doctors and nurses are hit as hard by the coronavirus as many of the patients they treat. But hospital administrators should also consider other ways to address the issues that adversely affect black health care practitioners’ work—the routine gender discrimination black women doctors face, for example, and the unevenly implemented and enforced diversity policies.”

What other social problems could a sociologist study?

THE TRANSFORMATION FROM PROBLEM TO SOLUTION

Although Mills identified the relationship between a personal trouble and a public issue, less has been said about the transformation of an issue into a solution. Mills leads us in the right direction by identifying the relationship between public issues and social institutions. By continuing to use our sociological imagination and recognizing the role of larger social, cultural, and structural forces, we can identify appropriate measures to address these social problems. Mills (2000) suggested how “the educational and political role of social science in a democracy is to help cultivate and sustain publics and individuals that are able to develop, to live with, and to act upon adequate definitions of personal and social realities” (p. 192).

Modern history reveals that Americans do not like to stand by and do nothing about social problems. Most Americans support efforts to reduce homelessness, improve the quality of education, or find a cure for COVID-19. In some cases, there are no limits to our efforts. Helping our nation’s poor has been an administrative priority of many U.S. presidents. President Franklin Roosevelt proposed sweeping social reforms during his New Deal in 1935, and President Lyndon



With more than 70 national organizations around the world, Habitat for Humanity is supported primarily by local volunteers. In this photo, volunteers from the Rochester Institute of Technology are building a home during their spring break in Wichita Falls, Texas.

AP Photo/Wichita Falls Times Record News, Torin Halsey

Johnson declared the War on Poverty in 1964. President Bill Clinton offered to “change welfare as we know it” with broad reforms outlined in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. In 2003, President George W. Bush supported the reauthorization of the 1996 welfare reform bill. During his term in office, President Obama addressed poverty through community development programs like the Promise Zones Initiative. No president or Congress has ever promised to eliminate poverty; instead, each promised only to improve the system serving the poor or to reduce the number of poor in our society.

Solutions require social action—in the form of social policy, advocacy, and innovation—to address problems at their structural or individual levels. **Social policy** is the enactment of a course of action through a formal law or program. Policy making usually begins with the identification of a problem that should be addressed; then, specific guidelines are developed regarding what should be done to address the problem. Policy directly changes the social structure, particularly how our government, an organization, or our community responds to a social problem. Think about it this way: Policies reflect and shape the way we view social problems and the people affected by these problems (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). According to Jacob Lew, President Barack Obama’s budget director, “the [federal] budget is not just a collection of numbers, but an expression of our values and aspirations” (quoted in Herbert, 2011, p. 11). In addition, policy governs the behavior and interaction of individuals, controlling who has access to benefits and aid (Ellis, 2003). Social policies are always being enacted.

Social advocates use their resources to support, educate, and empower individuals and their communities. Advocates work to improve social services, change social policies, and mobilize individuals. There are many examples of community members who have taken a stand against a particular social problem and dedicated their lives to addressing it. After surviving the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, student David Hogg became a gun control activist. According to Hogg, “There is no age limit to changing the world. And age is no excuse not to be involved, no matter if you’re too young or too old” (quoted in Leigh, 2019). At the age of 15, Greta Thunberg started a global movement by skipping school and protesting in

Social policy: Enactment of a course of action through a formal law or program

front of the Swedish Parliament. She inspired millions to join the largest climate demonstration on September 20, 2019. Thunberg told a group of world leaders at the 2019 World Economic Forum, “I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act” (quoted in Alter et al., 2019).

Social innovation: Policy, program, or advocacy that features an untested or a unique approach

Social innovation may take the form of a policy, a program, or advocacy that features an untested or unique approach. Innovation usually starts at the community level, but it can grow into national and international programming. Millard and Linda Fuller developed the concept of “partnership housing” in 1965, partnering those in need of adequate shelter with community volunteers to build simple interest-free houses. In 1976, the Fullers’ concept became Habitat for Humanity International, a nonprofit, ecumenical Christian housing program responsible for building more than 1 million houses worldwide. When Millard Fuller was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian honor, President Clinton described Habitat for Humanity as “the most successful continuous community service project in the history of the United States” (Habitat for Humanity, 2004).



Service and volunteer opportunities are available to college and university students in the United States and abroad. This student is doing her service work in Kingston, Jamaica, through Emory University’s nursing program.

Karen Kasmauski/Getty Images

In his book *Social Things: An Introduction to the Sociological Life*, Charles Lemert (1997) wrote that sociology is often presented as a thing to be studied. Instead, he argued that sociology is something to be “lived,” becoming a way of life. Lemert (1997) wrote,

To use one’s sociological imagination, whether to practical or professional end, is to look at the events in one’s life, to see them for what they truly are, then to figure out how the structures of the wider world make social things the way they are. No one is a sociologist until she does this the best she can. (p. 105)

We can use our sociological imagination, as Lemert (1997) recommended, but we can also take it a step further. As Marx (1972) maintained, “the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it” (p. 107).

Throughout this text, we explore three connections. The first connection is the one between personal troubles and public issues. Each sociological perspective—functionalist, conflict, feminist, and interactionist—highlights how social problems emerge from our social structure or social interaction. While maintaining its primary focus on problems within the United States, this text also addresses the experience of social problems in other countries and nations. The comparative perspective will enhance your understanding of the social problems we experience here.

The sociological imagination will also help us make a second connection: the one between social problems and social solutions. Mills believed that the most important value of sociology is in its potential to enrich and encourage the lives of all individuals (Lemert, 1997). In each chapter, we review selected social policies, advocacy programs, and innovative approaches that attempt to address or solve these problems.

Textbooks on this subject present neat individual chapters on a social problem, reviewing the sociological issues and sometimes providing some suggestions about how it can and should be addressed. This book follows the same outline but takes a closer look at community-based approaches, ultimately identifying how *you* can be part of the solution in your community.

I should warn you that this text will not identify a perfect set of solutions to our social problems. Individual action may be powerless against the social structure. Some individuals or groups will have more power or advantage over others. Solutions, like the problems they address, are embedded within complex interconnected social systems (Fine, 2006). Sometimes solutions create other problems. For example, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) chief of health Mickey Chopra reports that as countries, such as the United States, have focused their attention and funding on the AIDS epidemic worldwide, deaths due to preventable or treatable diseases (e.g., diarrhea and pneumonia) have increased. Diarrhea kills 1.5 million children a year in developing countries, more than AIDS, malaria, and measles combined (Dugger, 2009). A program may have worked, but it might no longer exist because of a lack of funding or political and public support. Programs and policies are never permanent; they can be modified. Consistent with standards established in many European countries, in 2014 the U.S. Food and Drug Administration lifted the prohibition on blood donation from gay and bisexual men but kept the prohibition in place for men who have had sex with a man in the last year.

In communities such as yours and mine, individuals and community groups are taking action against social problems. They are adults and children, common citizens and professionals, from different backgrounds and experiences. Whether they are working within the system or working to change the system, these individuals are part of their community’s solution to a problem. The goal might be to solve one social problem or several or to create what Joel Feagin (2002) described as a “new global system that reduces injustice, is democratically accountable to all people, offers a decent standard of living for all, and operates in a sustainable relation to earth’s other living systems” (p. 17). What Feagin (2002) described has also been referred to as *social justice*. Although the term is widely used, there is no single definition. Social justice has different meanings and will vary depending on one’s ideology, discipline, and experience. One way to think of social justice is to consider what constitutes a “perfect” society and what it takes to make that happen

In the end, I hope you agree that it is important that we continue to do something about the social problems we experience. Gary Fine (2006) observed, “those who care about social problems are obligated to use their best knowledge to increase the store of freedom, justice and equality” (p. 14).

In addition, I ask you to make the final connection to social problems and solutions in your community. For this quarter or semester, instead of focusing only on problems reported in your

local newspaper or the morning news program, start paying attention to the solutions offered by professionals, leaders, and advocates. Through the Internet or through local programs and agencies, take this opportunity to investigate what social action is taking place in your community. Regardless of whether you define your “community” as your campus, your residential neighborhood, or the city where your college is located, consider what avenues of change can be taken and whether you can be part of that effort. As civil rights icon John R. Lewis said, “When you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have to speak up. You have to say something; you have to do something” (quoted in Christian, 2020).

I often tell my students that the problem with being a sociologist is that my sociological imagination has no “off” switch. In almost everything I read, see, or do, there is some sociological application, a link between my personal experiences and the broader social experience that I share with everyone else, including you. As you progress through this text and your course, I hope that you will begin to use your own sociological imagination and see connections between problems and their solutions that you never saw before.

CHAPTER REVIEW

1.1 Define the sociological imagination.

The sociological imagination is the ability to recognize the links between our personal lives and experiences and our social world.

1.2 Identify the characteristics of a social problem and its stages.

A social problem is a social condition that has negative consequences for individuals, our social world, or the physical world. A social problem has objective and subjective realities. The identification of a social problem is part of a subjective process that includes four stages: transformation, legitimization, conflict, and creation.

1.3 Compare the four sociological perspectives.

A functionalist considers how the social problem emerges from society itself. From a conflict perspective, social problems arise from conflict based upon social class or competing interest groups. By analyzing the situations and lives of women in society, feminist theory defines gender (and sometimes race or social class) as a source of social inequality, group conflict, and social problems. An interactionist focuses on how we use language, words, and symbols to construct and define social problems.

1.4 Explain how sociology is a science.

Sociology is a science of our social world. Sociology relies on logical and systematic methods to investigate social phenomena. The knowledge we gain through basic research expands our understanding of the causes and consequences of a social problem, whereas applied research involves the pursuit of knowledge for program application or policy evaluation.

1.5 Explain the roles of social policy, advocacy, and innovation in addressing social problems.

Solutions require social action—in the form of social policy, advocacy, and innovation—to address problems at their structural or individual levels. Social policy is the enactment of a course of action through a formal law or program. Social advocates use their resources to support, educate, and empower individuals and their communities. Social innovation may take the form of a policy, a program, or advocacy that features an untested or unique approach. Innovation usually starts at the community level but can be applied to national and international programming.

KEY TERMS

alienation (p. 10)	objective reality (p. 5)
anomie (p. 9)	patriarchy (p. 11)
applied research (p. 14)	proletariat (p. 10)
basic research (p. 14)	qualitative methods (p. 14)
bourgeoisie (p. 10)	quantitative methods (p. 14)
class consciousness (p. 10)	science (p. 14)
conflict perspective (p. 10)	social construction of reality (p. 5)
dependent variable (p. 14)	social constructionism (p. 5)
dysfunctions (p. 9)	social innovation (p. 18)
empiricism (p. 14)	social policy (p. 17)
feminist perspective (p. 11)	social problem (p. 5)
functionalist perspective (p. 9)	sociological imagination (p. 3)
human agency (p. 12)	sociology (p. 3)
hypothesis (p. 14)	species being (p. 10)
independent variable (p. 14)	subjective reality (p. 5)
interactionist perspective (p. 11)	symbolic interactionism (p. 12)
macro level of analysis (p. 7)	theory (p. 8)
micro level of analysis (p. 7)	variables (p. 14)

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How does the sociological imagination help us understand social problems?
2. Select two of the sociological perspectives introduced in this chapter. Compare and contrast how each defines a social problem. What solutions does each perspective offer?
3. Apply your sociological imagination to the problem of the increasing cost of college. Is the increasing cost of tuition a public issue? Why or why not?
4. Using the social constructionist perspective, analyze how the primary messages in the 2020 presidential campaign were defined by the candidates, political leaders, the media, and public interest groups. In your opinion, what was defined as a social problem?
5. Explain how science and the scientific method help us understand social problems. How is this different from a commonsense understanding of social problems?
6. Select two research methods and explain how each could be used to examine the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on higher education.
7. What is the relationship among social advocacy, innovation, and policy?