Imagine a perfect society. Forget fairy tale never-neverlands and vague notions of heaven-on-Earth and really try to see the place. This is a lot to ask of an unfamiliar student on page one of an unfamiliar book, so we’ll offer a hint: What would such a society not contain? In prompting you to mentally discard everything that does not belong in a “utopia,” we cleverly suggest the subject matter of the pages to come. Drugs, crime, poverty — in fact, every topic in the Table of Contents would no doubt disappear from your perfect place. This book examines these human nightmares that haunt our visions of a humane society.

There have been many such visions beyond the one in your imagination. The term Utopia was coined nearly 500 years ago by social visionary Thomas More as the title of his treatise about a perfect society on an island. Chances are your college career has exposed you to Plato’s Republic, a meditation on societal perfection written some 24 centuries ago. Some utopian visions have materialized in real places. The most famous settlement in what would become the United States, in fact, aspired to be a perfect society away from decadent, problem-infested Europe. Puritan intellectual Cotton Mather wrote “Theopolis Americana: An Essay on the Golden Street of the Holy City” (1710); the title itself gives away the founding dream of the Massachusetts Bay colony — to make a utopia in “The New World.” Clearly, the contemporary United States is not what these utopians had in mind.

Still, the utopian impulse has been strong throughout American history. Over one hundred experimental communities had been founded by the Civil War, and recent history continues to sprout communes and cults. Sprout, indeed, since nearly all would-be utopias bloom and wither in less than a single generation. Thomas More’s term translates from the Greek as “no” (ou) “place” (topos), and it is a fact that utopias still exist in the world of the ideal rather than the real.

There is a lesson here: Social problems are the “real” violating the “ideal.” Gruesome though it may be, death itself is just another fact of life. But if a fatality is preventable (e.g., poisoning from an overdose of medicine) and if some agent of the society did not prevent it (e.g., a typing error on the container label) it seems tragic. The most cynical cop in the most violent city in the land can still feel rage when the courts release a prisoner who immediately descends upon a victim. The sense of tragedy or rage in these cases arises from the same gut reaction: This should not have happened. The “real” social order has allowed suffering that would not occur in an “ideal” society.

So: Everyday people view real social problems through ideals they have about social life. One need not carry a vivid image of Plato’s Republic around in one’s head to sense societal breakdown. Shortly, we shall explain more about these ideals. For the present, it is instructive to introduce you to social problems by pondering their opposites.

DisneY World as Utopia

There are no true utopias, so let us ponder a reasonable approximation. In case you’re smirking about the choice of Disney World, Walt himself originally planned it to be “a real city of the future, where everything would be perfect” (Flower, 1991, p. 9). Now consider the scale of the place. It is built on 28,000 acres in central Florida, a space about the size of San Francisco. The building process itself was monumental; the Magic Kingdom—just one of the major attractions—was the largest single construction project in the United States. The human dimension is even more impressive than the physical. Some 50,000 people live there every night, and more people visit the Magic Kingdom than the United Kingdom in a typical year. And yet the familiar social problems of a highly mobile urban area are conspicuously absent. There is virtually no crime and certainly no poverty; pollution-free vehicles shuttle multicultural visitors of all ages around the parks; there is less litter than on the best-scrubbed main street of any “real” community; and the park staff are as polite, smiling, and helpful as the denizens of any dreamer’s “ideal” society.
**West Philadelphia**  
According to a recent study focusing on this single city neighborhood over a four-year period, half of all residents suffered an injury severe enough to visit a hospital emergency room (or worse). The severe injury (or death) rate for males in their 20s: 90%! As you probably suspect, many of West Philadelphia’s residents are victims of violence, much of it committed by other residents. But this is not just a place where one must constantly be on guard against predatory crime. Virtually every form of human suffering is apparent. The typical household subsists on an income near the federal poverty line. There is overwhelming racial segregation, with 97% African American residents. Unemployment and family instability persist at several times their national rates, and retail drug sales can be observed in the “open air markets” of known street corners. The study cited above was published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* because of the health crisis in the neighborhood, a crisis that is deepening with more suicide attempts, stabbings, and sexually-transmitted diseases.

Enough? This West Philadelphia neighborhood fits the conventional wisdom about big city slums. The sociological wisdom adds several important complications. First, notice the teeming mass of social problems. Instead of single-issue news reports on shootings or house fires (most often from neighborhoods like this) the reality behind the reports is a snake like tangle of social issues so ensnared it is unclear where one begins and the other ends. The second sociological complication is that there are angels among the serpents. Clergy, coaches, crossing guards—all manner of everyday heroes—are striving mightily to maintain social order in a community too easily dismissed as disorderly.

**West Virginia**  
Throughout the twentieth century, much of the coal produced in the entire United States came from a single state. West Virginia’s many mining jobs were a hard, dangerous living, but they were the heart of a distinctive social order. The richly forested terrain of “The Mountain State” was dotted with communities characterized by “[a] strong, self-reliant local heritage unaffected by circumstances beyond the hills” (Britannica, vol. 29, p. 352). These were no utopias, but they were real places with a real pride in their way of life.

This way of life survived into the 1970s when the worldwide oil shortage prompted a resurgence of coal mining. During the 1980s, however, “circumstances beyond the hills” reached into these communities and tore out their economic heart. Due to automation and a changing global economy, the number of coal-mining jobs dropped nearly 80% in that single decade! The result: a domino effect of social problems. In many West Virginia counties, unemployment reached Great Depression–like levels of 50% and, consequently, poverty rates reached West Philadelphia–like levels. Violent crime rates jumped 11% in 1992 alone, and murders increased an ominous 42% in the first six months of 1993. Some desperate residents are resorting to the wholesale drug trade, planting marijuana farms protected by razor blades on fishing line. For others the desperation mounts to the point of escape. Suicide rates have jumped in the coal counties, and so many residents have left the state in search of a better life (nearly 1 in every 10 West Virginians emigrated in the 1980s) that a popular bumper sticker reads, “Will the last person leaving West Virginia please turn out the lights?” (Fleishman, 1994).

Again we call your attention to sociological lessons deeper than 30-second sound bites. First, some of you will have been surprised by the concentration of human misery in those hazy green hills. Public opinion—defined here as the “subjective dimension” of social problems—has been conditioned to see hells-on-Earth in the setting of concrete jungles rather than mountain hollows. The above documentation of human—damage—defined here as the “objective dimension” of social problems—reveals communities every bit as ravaged as the worst big-city slum. The separate (and often unequal) subjective and objective dimensions of social problems are a keynote of our sociological approach.

Lesson two: personal versus social problems. The staggering statistics on West Virginia are not empty numbers. Each digit is a tragedy etched on someone’s soul, from
CHAPTER 1 • SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

PERSONAL TROUBLES VERSUS PUBLIC ISSUES

The emotional passage to follow resounds with the many themes of this chapter. It is a mother’s account of the very public death of her college-age son. She points out that he was in the business of affecting subjective opinion about distant tragedies to which she now feels intimately connected.

Today’s headlines scream of new atrocities as “extensive tribal slaughter leaves hundreds of thousands dead in Rwanda.” Descriptions of torture and mass genocide focus international attention on appalling violence in yet another country in Africa. French troops struggle as their humanitarian aims are caught up in tribal warfare that almost defies comprehension.

This month we are horrified by Rwanda. Last July, it was Somalia. Somalia? Who remembers or cares about Somalia now?

I do, for last July 12, my 22-year-old son, Dan Eldon, a Reuters photographer, was stoned to death on a dusty street in Mogadishu. He and three colleagues had been taken to the site of a U.N. bombing that killed or maimed several hundred innocent people. As they were beginning to record the carnage for the world to see, an enraged mob picked up stones, pipes and staves and beat them to the ground, murdering all four.

For a moment in time, the eye of the press focused on my suffering, subjecting me and the families of the other journalists to the inevitable questions of a hungry media. Then the eye moved on, relentlessly tracking man’s inhumanity to man, somewhere else.

Journalists are our eyes and ears, awakening us to what goes on in far-off places, and those nearer home, where violence has replaced the law, where anger and chaos rule, and where hatred is learned in the cradle. Their words and pictures prod our consciences, sometimes even stirring us to action when children are dying of starvation in Somalia or Ethiopia and in the ghettos of our tortured cities.

Journalists make it impossible not to know about the specter of brother killing brother in Rwanda, Belfast and Bosnia, of mindless drive-by shootings in Los Angeles, and of massacres in fast-food restaurants in obscure towns all over America. Journalists also write about violence closer to home, usually involving innocent women and children. We read and watch, silently wondering what can ever heal their pain.

Violence affects people—whether it is the violence of wars raging across countries, or raging through households, it affects us. It touches those of us who watch television and read the papers, but it also affects those who seek out the news and relay it to us.

My son Dan was not a seasoned photographer when he arrived in southern Somalia at the age of 21 to cover an unknown famine in June of 1992. He was devastated by what he saw, and nine months later, when he was more accustomed to the sights of war, he wrote, “Somalia will survive, but what kind of life is it for a people who have been so wounded? I don’t know how these experiences have changed me, but I feel different.”

We no longer have to be present in the battlefield to feel different in this age of instant communication. No longer shielded by time and space from killings, car crashes, domestic violence, genocide and bombs, we are daily voyeurs to the suffering of others. Dan had to shut down his wounded heart to do this job. We all do. We cannot read the paper or watch television, nor can journalists write articles, nor can broadcasters report the news with their hearts wide open. The pain would be too great.

My heart was broken last July 12, as were the hearts of the families of Dan’s friends, and I am sure, the families of the Somalis killed in that senseless raid. Maybe the pain we all feel this week is not as searing as it was last year, but it will be with us forever.

As a result of Dan’s death, I can begin to understand how the survivors of the massacre in Rwanda must feel. Indeed, I am now connected by our shared pain to all survivors of any kind of violence in this world....


many nations are encamped to distribute food and to keep the uneasy peace. Clearly, these are not just the “personal troubles” of the Sarajevan natives. This is a “social issue” actively involving much of the world.
outrageous claim about you. Never again will you see an impoverished neighborhood the way you used to. That’s right. We think that the compact little analysis of inner cities in the United States immediately above has already changed your mind. It is not the power of our prose, it is the power of the Sociological Imagination.

THE DUALITY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

After pages and pages of discussion to set the stage, it is finally time to raise the curtain on a formal definition of a “social problem.” Why all the fuss over what might seem so obvious? Explicit statements are necessary precisely because social problems are not obvious. Suggestive of their intriguing complexity is the fact that they exist in two dimensions. The objective dimension of a social problem is the concrete, measurable human harm associated with a societal phenomenon; the subjective dimension is the general level of concern about that phenomenon registered by the members of a society. What immediately follows is an exploration of this two-dimensional reality of social problems.

IS U.S. SOCIETY FALLING APART?

It is not an idle question. This very thought probably crosses your mind as the evening news recites its grisly account of terrorist bombings, mass murderers, and tortured children. It is hard to shake the notion that the fabric of U.S. society itself is unraveling into threads of human evil. There are two kinds of evidence bearing on the question. Not surprisingly, they break down into the dual dimensions of social problems.

The Subjective Dimension

Since we began by probing your thoughts about societal breakdown, let us consider how many other “enquiring minds” harbor the same thought. The solid line in Figure 1:1 traces the results of a scientific national poll of the U.S. population over a 10-year period. The data are drawn from the Gallup organization, which (at least) annually asks a representative sample of citizens the following question:

*What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?* The percentage of the population picking a problem provides an index of the subjective dimension we shall refer to throughout the book.

One of the notable features of this poll is how few social problems actually get picked (i.e., are listed by at least 1% of the respondents). Despite the fact that only about a dozen issues are typically mentioned in any one poll, a small but significant portion of the populace gives a response consistent with notion that U.S. society is breaking down. Note also that the “moral decline” response is trending upward recently, indicating a surge in public opinion about societal breakdown.

The Objective Dimension

So: Quite a few citizens, and more and more in the last few years, think that U.S. society is its own worst social problem. Are they right?

Framing the question in this way leads to the search for “concrete, measurable human harm”—in short, it leads to the objective dimension. Consider first an indicator of “moral decline” that has penetrated much public discussion about “family values”: illegitimate births. The dotted line in Figure 1:1 clearly shows a steady increase in the percentage of extramarital births in the United States even over the historically narrow timeline of the past decade. Since the family is widely viewed to be the institution that is the repository of personal morality—especially for the next generation who must be trained in traditional values—this is evidence that *should* concern the public. The conclusion to which one is tempted to jump is that the lines are simple reflections of each other, that objectively increasing family breakdown translates directly into increasing subjective concern about societal breakdown. It does not.

Remember the issue—“Is U.S. Society Falling Apart?” Illegitimacy is only one piece of a complex societal puzzle. Let’s add a piece that you may find puzzling. The “crack craze”
If U.S. society is falling down, it seems to be cleaning up the drug problem during the collapse.

Hmm. This objective measure is actually moving in the opposite direction of the subjective line. Without cluttering up the figure, perhaps we should consider alternative objective trends supporting the growing sense of “moral decline.” Speaking of morals, maybe the explanation is religious decline. No help there—church membership and attendance are both up since the mid-1980s. Even “loving one’s neighbor” appears to be up as measured by private charitable contributions (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993, p. 387).

From this muddle of data we derive one fact and one puzzle. Fact: There are multiple indicators of the objective and subjective dimensions of social problems (some additional subjective sources will be introduced below). Puzzle: Why do the objective and subjective dimensions appear to be unrelated?

DEATH RISKS

C. Wright Mills’s distinction between “personal troubles” and “social issues” is not just some clever, ivory tower idea. It is an amazingly deft instrument in the messy, real-world work of dissecting social problems. The previous section explored social problems at one macrosociological extreme: Whether or not U.S. society is falling apart is the quintessential “social issue.” We switch now to the “personal troubles” extreme by spotlighting—you. How will you die? Powerful seer that it is, sociology cannot predict your personal demise. But posing this kind of question has immediate benefits in terms of our definition of the objective dimension: 1) most everyone accepts death as a “human harm,” 2) corpses are eminently “concrete [and] measurable” and, therefore, 3) causes of death can be enumerated to compute your actual death risks. Here’s another hint: Your subjective fear does not match your objective death risk from these causes. Just possibly, what you are about to read may save your life by changing your mind (if so, please recommend this book to a friend).

The Objective Dimension

Chances are you spend little time worrying about death. It is not our purpose to stir up morbid thoughts, but rather to match up personal fears against real fatalities. A quick reading of the obituaries reveals a distressingly diverse array of ways to die. Since this chapter is being written in July, let us limit the focus to what might kill you on summer vacation. Readers who are regulars at ocean resorts know that fear of sharks actually keeps some people out of the water. And shark attacks do happen, but... they only kill an average of 1 person per year, making any given U.S. citizen’s chances of being chomped to death about 1 in 255 million. This kind of objective analysis gives the first rung in a “ladder of risk” of things more likely to kill you:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CAUSE OF DEATH</th>
<th>APPROXIMATE DEATHS PER YEAR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hamburgers</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(E. coli bacteria)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fresh vegetables</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(listeria brain infection)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bee stings</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dog bites</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eggs</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(salmonella virus)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shark attack</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Revolution, a period of vast violence and social chaos. The aristocrats (and their heads) fell in 1789, and order was not fully restored until 1848. Just one small segment of this six-decade hell-on-Earth, known as the Reign of Terror, slaughtered 17,000 people in a France that had been widely considered the most civilized society on Earth. Revolution, war, and counterrevolution simmered throughout the rest of Europe and had already swept through the United States. When the gunfire died down, wholly new social institutions were creeping over the picturesque medieval landscape. An excruciating question hung unanswered in the air of history: What happened? On cue, sociology entered seeking answers. Like everyone else, the first sociologists had seen the gigantic, world-conquering machine of Western civilization break down completely. Their first theories addressed the nature of social order—How is a society put together? But contemporary history pressed them to a deeper level of understanding. To really fathom social order, one must penetrate the mystery of social disorder. Natural scientists could not write the laws of molecular bonding...
Functionalism  Sociological theory is a big, complicated, controversial subject you will study in its own course if you decide to major in sociology. For our present purposes, we shall employ it pragmatically for the considerable light it can shine on everyday social problems.

In this utilitarian spirit, we present the basic assumption of the functionalist perspective in sociology:

Society is a system whose parts are to be analyzed in terms of the functions they perform within the system.

Just about any "part" is amenable to functionalist analysis. Take the standard course-work approach to college education. The positive functions—that is, those benefiting the social system—of a professor lecturing students, assigning readings, then testing knowledge are both obvious and nonobvious. Clearly, students sitting in the classroom absorb much information of practical use in the "real world" of the society. A not-so-obvious positive function concerns the labor market for Ph.Ds. If college courses instead were organized as a cable lecture series with standardized tests through the Internet (such "remote learning" models are already being discussed by college administrators), Ph.D unemployment would skyrocket. One positive function of the collegiate status quo, then, is to provide job security for society's most highly educated members. You can probably think of some personal positive functions of having an accessible human being as your teacher.

Functionalism is not a doctrine of simple conservatism stating that society is just perfect as it is. In fact, all of the parts of the system scrutinized for positive functions should be screened for dysfunctions—that is, negative functions—as well. When you return to your classroom, ask yourself what this social arrangement hurts. It clearly hurts those not admitted to such classrooms, who are thereby excluded from certain jobs and possibly from the "good life." Some argue that the college model is archaic, based on some ancient Greek ideal for nobles' kids, and it retards the training demanded by a high-tech, multicultural society. Be clear on the general implications of this theory: 1) individuals are less important than the social system, 2) the parts both help and hurt the system in complex ways, and 3) the dysfunctions built into the system's design contribute to social problems.

A major complication for the functionalist theorist is that society does not stand still. How can the social analyst refine the design to reduce human suffering if the drawings are always changing? A useful concept for analyzing this phenomenon is cultural lag (Ogburn, 1950). The essence of the idea is that social change is not uniform; when one part of the social system moves forward, the other parts lag behind and suffer strain (read: social problems) while catching up. Particularly in an industrial economy like ours which deliberately stimulates technical innovation (through research and development labs, subsidy of science education, etc.), technological change tends to be rapid. Adjusting to the flood of innovations is more than a matter of replacing one piece of hardware with another. Mass production of the automobile provided the U.S. public with a means of transportation far superior to the horse, but there was a "lag" of decades before political institutions dealt with the associated problems of traffic congestion and air pollution. Consider (as chapter 3 does) the enormous adjustments necessitated by cutting-edge technologies such as genetic engineering. From the functionalist perspective, it is easy to see dysfunctions in marvels of science that warp society's design.

Uneven or not, social change is problematic for people. Each of us has felt the disorienting symptoms of "future shock" (Toffler, 1970) in dealing with new situations, new people, new anything. Too much change too fast can disorient individuals about proper social behavior (norms), thus infecting them with the social disease known as anomie:
history as a sustained class conflict. In this sweeping panorama, Marx even addressed the appearance of peace during periods not as chaotic as Marx's own time. He introduced the concept of ideology, meaning ideas justifying the interests of the ruling class. The silent violence of class exploitation can proceed behind smokescreens such as God ordaining the social order (pre-Revolutionary Europe), or the rich being rich because they are more deserving (contemporary United States).

The proposals of conflict theory for the solution of social problems hinge on the contradictory interests of the major classes. The ills of poverty can be cured simply by taking from the rich and giving to the poor. If the little guy is exploited by the price fixing and shoddy products pushed by major corporations, impose stiffer sentences for such white-collar crimes; the loss in the power of privileged executives means a gain in justice for the disprivileged.

**Symbolic Interactionism**

In important respects, symbolic interactionism is less a coherent theory than it is a set of ideas critiquing the alternative sociological theories. The symbolic interactionist approach begins by pulling the rug out from under grand designs of functionalist systems and conflict theory class structures. Have you ever actually seen, touched, or bumped into this thing called "society"? Such provocative questions set up the three linked premises of symbolic interactionism (Becker, 1969):

1. **Individuals act on the basis of the meaning they attribute to a given behavior.**
2. **The meaning of acts emerges out of social interactions with other individuals.**
3. **Individuals develop the meaning of acts in interpretive process.**

So: People are not mere slaves of societal functions or class positions. Individuals in interpreting their personal interactions build the world called society. The real action of social life is one-to-one contact and the meaning people draw from it. Another way of viewing symbolic interactionism, then, is that macrostructures (groups) and even megastructures (global relations) are nothing more than projections on the real screen of society—face-to-face microstructures.

Social networks that build social worlds also tear them down. Why do some people break society's norms, thereby engaging in deviant behavior that can be objectively destructive? One answer is the classic concept of differential association (Sutherland, 1939). The term concerns one's "different associates" and their attitudes toward deviance. Take yourself as an example. If the majority of members of your egocentric network think it is OK to cheat on exams, you are more likely to cheat than is a classmate whose friends all swear by the honor code. Sutherland originally formulated the idea to explain criminal behavior, but differential association is a flexible schema applicable to many problematic behaviors. One recent study showed that adolescents' likelihood of smoking is importantly influenced by the number of their friends who smoke (Flay et al., 1994).

As a social process, deviant behavior logically separates into two stages: 1) the act of violating the norm and 2) societal reaction to the act. **Labeling theory** focuses on the latter stage. A society creates its own rule breaking by forbidding certain acts; without laws, no one behaves like a criminal. After the norms are in place, the social definition—or label—is not applied to every deviant. Similar violations of the law may be dismissed as "boys will be boys" among middle-class youths, while lower-class males are convicted of juvenile delinquency (Chambliss, 1973). Socially inappropriate behavior may be seen as eccentricity if the deviant is rich, but mental disorder if the individual is not (Scheff, 1975). Behavior comes first; society then reacts by deciding what deviance is and upon whom to bestow the label of deviant.

Even though it focuses on subjective definition, labeling theory does identify objective causes of suffering. Regardless of where the rule comes from (or whether you actually broke it), there is personal pain when society pronounces you a burglar, bum, or alcoholic. The suffering of the individual who receives such a label can have further consequences.
Researchers at the Pennsylvania Health Department followed leads from a Berks County Prisoner who was HIV positive to find drug and sex partners who were linked to him. Each person in the study was linked to others by either shared needle or sexual contact. The researchers could not determine who had infected whom. In the network, 44 people were found to be infected with HIV.

SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control

Part of the answer is the intrinsic drama connected to the issue. Terrorist bombings such as the Oklahoma City disaster are, well, disastrous. To say that an explosion slaughtering 167 people instantaneously is a dramatic event is an understatement. Meanwhile, the social problem of stairs (i.e., people falling down them) causes 80 times as many fatalities as bombings in a typical year. That you would be as concerned with steps as with
where large numbers of people see society itself as the social problem and revolution as the solution (Brinton, 1960).

It is a truth that also applies to nonrevolutionary social problems: However good or bad, the more objective conditions violate popular expectations, the more subjectively serious they will seem to be. Remember the floods that inundated the U.S. Midwest in the summer of 1993? For weeks national TV news and newspaper headlines were equally flooded with the story, featuring helicopter roof-rescues and presidential fly-ins. The national obsession was fanned by our utter amazement that such a natural disaster could strike at the heart of so technologically advanced a society. At the same time these storms were ravaging the Mississippi valley on our video screens, a cyclone flattened hundreds of villages in Bangladesh, creating tens of thousands of hungry, homeless people. (Another “media memory” note: In 1991, another storm killed 130,000 Bangladeshis; did you hear about it?) Although we cannot compare storm-tracking polls across the two societies, it is pretty obvious that public outrage was higher in the United States even though the objective damage was obviously lower. So: High expectations fan the flames of subjective concern, and low expectations dampen them. The relatively low trend of public concern about AIDS registered in Figure 1:2 despite an escalating death toll is expectations dampened. Scientists have been publicly pessimistic about the prospects for a vaccine. If a vaccine is discovered and U.S. citizens continue to die of AIDS, we fearlessly predict skyrocketing subjective attention to the disease.

Values “Everyday people view real social problems through ideals they have about social life.” We promised to tell you more about such “ideals,” which sociologists define as values: standards of desirability widely shared in a given society. Even allowing for personal and group differences, there are emotionally charged responses to social conditions such as individualism, equality, and achievement that also charge our responses to social problems.

Positive evaluations reduce subjective concern. Automobile accidents never register significant numbers in social problems polls. Right now you’re probably wondering how cars even qualify as a social problem. They certainly have the objective qualifications: about 45,000 fatalities a year and millions of maimings and injuries (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993). Yet your mind resists the idea. Why? Cars carry a “positive evaluation” in American culture; they are not only economically valuable objects, but are also strongly connected to distinctive values such as personal freedom and material success. Consequently, the damage done by the automobile seems somehow less serious. Work is dangerous to your health. The numbers show about 60,000 deaths a year in the United States from occupational injury or illness (Reiman, 1990), a fact that barely generates a subjective ripple. For many people, their job and the sense of achievement it brings is the highly valued centerpiece of personal identity. The result: A mountain of objective harm seems like a subjective molehill.

The reverse of this principle is also true: Negative evaluations increase subjective concern. Consider crime. Figure 1:4 reports the results of our second major subjective source, the General Social Survey. The GSS is an annual poll of a scientifically drawn cross-section of U.S. adults who are asked about a broad range of sociological subjects, including social problems:

We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I’m going to name some these problems, and for each one I’d like you to tell me whether you think we’re spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount. (italics added)

Respondents are then presented with a list of 15 separate social problems, including crime. The percentage responding that “too little money” is being spent “halting the rising crime rate” is charted in Figure 1:4. Note that roughly 70% think crime is so serious that more
respective subjective dimensions. A full explanation incorporates all three of our subjective factors. According to the Center for Media and Public Affairs, network evening newscasts doubled their coverage of crime and violence between 1992 and 1993. This massive media exposure spotlights the most intrinsically dramatic incidents—that is, those most outrageously violating public expectations and values. Crime in America is no statistical molehill, but it seems subjectively more mountainous even when objectively eroding. Now you know why.

The interplay of the objective and subjective dimensions is a major theme of the chapters to follow. These dimensions blend differently for each social problem, but our theoretical approach will remain constant: The sources of concrete harm and the sources of public opinion must be analyzed separately (see Table 1:1).

To be frank, this is a topic that students (and authors) generally consider deadly dull. Quickly, before you dismiss the subject as boring, consider the presence of sociological techniques in your own life. As it attains maturity, social science is enjoying wider and wider public acceptance; if you doubt it, check the studies summarized in your Sunday newspaper supplement or the “Behavior” section of Time magazine. The maturity referred to does not rule out a reality of every science: bad research. A given investigation may “prove” that women are inferior to men, that athletes really are stupid, or that Italians do, in fact, make better lovers. How much (or little) confidence should be associated with these findings, or those in the chapters to follow? The answer will depend on a knowledgeable evaluation of the methods used in the research.

In the present mood of honesty, there is another cliché which must be confronted: The findings of sociological research are nothing more than common sense. The reasoning behind this assertion usually takes two related forms. The first argument is that 1) we are human beings, 2) we live in the societies constructed by us, and therefore 3) we already know all about those societies. While everyday social experience may yield some insights into people and their problems, this argument underestimates the complexity of social facts. Do you know everything about biology because you are an organism? Is an A in physics easily acquired because one's body is composed of atoms? Being part of a complex phenomenon need not bestow a full understanding of it.

Drawing a parallel to the natural sciences raises the second aspect of the commonsense issue. Sociology is often accused of not being a science in the same sense as, say, chemistry because social scientific laws are not rigid enough. While it may be true that theories about people are not (now) as reliable as Boyle's law of expanding gases, there is a certain amount of uncertainty built into every scientific theory. It is an accepted axiom of quantum physics that “if you do not know the precise position of an electron, you cannot determine its momentum, and vice-versa” (Heisenberg's uncertainty principle; Mazur, 1968, p. 196). Since they can consciously direct their own actions, human beings are even harder to lock into laws than atomic particles.

Should we abandon scientific aspirations because the subject is a difficult one? A more reasonable claim to scientific status can be made “when the people who know the theories know more about the real world than the people who don’t know the theories” (Mazur, 1968, p. 195). In other words, the science should be nonobvious, yielding research findings that contradict the conventional wisdom. Sociology has passed that test from the start.

Right there at the start was Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), who helped establish the discipline of sociology with his path-breaking work Suicide (1897). Durkheim was trying to establish the proper subject matter of sociology at a time when intellectuals were obsessed with the powers of the enlightened individual. Durkheim went right to the most
CHAPTER 1:2

SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION IN FICTION

What follows are selections from a science fiction classic that is about the application of scientific study to human behavior. Its basic premise is that the acts of any one person may be unpredictable, but that sifting the actions of large numbers of people can reveal underlying social patterns. This is also one of the premises of modern sociology as applied to social problems. These passages had a powerful effect on an enraptured twelve-year-old who grew up to be a sociologist.

The First Galactic Empire had endured for tens of thousands of years. It had included all the planets of the Galaxy in a centralized rule, sometimes tyrannical, sometimes benevolent, always orderly. Human beings had forgotten that any other form of existence could be.

All except Hari Seldon.

Hari Seldon was the last great scientist of the First Empire. It was he who brought the science of psychohistory to its full development. Psychohistory was the quintessence of sociology; it was the science of human behavior reduced to mathematical equations.

The individual human being is unpredictable, but the reactions of human mobs, Seldon found, could be treated statistically. The larger the mob, the greater the accuracy that could be achieved. And the size of the human masses that Seldon worked with was no less than the population of the Galaxy which in his time was numbered in the quintillions.

It was Seldon, then, who foresaw, against all common sense and popular belief, that the brilliant Empire which seemed so strong was in a state of irremediable decay and decline. He foresaw (or he solved his equations and interpreted its symbols, which amounts to the same thing) that left to itself, the Galaxy would pass through a thirty thousand year period of misery and anarchy before a unified government would rise once more. . . .

Down—down—the results can be followed; and all the suffering that humanity ever knew can be traced to the one fact that no man in the history of the Galaxy, until Hari Seldon, and very few men thereafter could really understand one another. Every human being lived behind an impenetrable wall of choking mist within which no other but he existed. Occasionally there were the dim signals from deep within the cavern in which another man was located—so that each might grope toward the other. Yet because they did not know one another, and could not understand one another, and dared not trust one another, and felt from infancy the terrors and insecurity of that ultimate isolation—there was the hunted fear of man for man, the savage rapacity of man toward man.

Feet, for tens of thousands of years, had clogged and shuffled in the mud—and held down the minds which, for an equal time, had been fit for the companionship of the stars. . . . Psychohistory had been the development of mental science, the final mathematicization thereof, rather, which had finally succeeded. . . . And through the generalization of psychological knowledge from the individual to the group, sociology was also mathematicized.


PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

If one wishes to understand people's problems, a breathtakingly simple idea is to live among them and observe their behavior. This is the basis of participant observation, a technique involving much more than just keeping one's eyes open. What distinguishes such a research strategy from journalism is its use of a "generic frame," a set of concepts that provides a wider framework for the social facts that are observed (Lofland, 1974). Rather than merely reporting the exotic events of an unfamiliar lifestyle, the participant-observer interprets daily details in the terms of a more general social theory.

A classic application of this strategy to the poverty problem was performed by Carol B. Stack. After introductions through an ex-community resident who had entered her university, Stack participated in the lives of two Black families in The Flats, a fictitious name for a Midwestern slum neighborhood. Her three years of observations illuminated a general theoretical issue: How does the kinship system adapt to everyday economic
problem by creating a mock prison. Volunteers were screened by the experimenters to produce a final set of subjects who were mature, emotionally stable, normal, intelligent college students. . . . They appeared to represent the cream of the crop of this generation. Half were arbitrarily designated as prisoners by the flip of a coin, the others as guards. These were the roles they were to play in our simulated prison. (Zimbardo, 1972, p. 4).

The strategy was experimental in that it created an artificial situation in order to untangle one factor from the others. Since the college students entered the situation with neither the hardened attitudes of prison guards nor the prior criminal records of typical prisoners, the experiment spotlighted the influence of the social situation. What the spotlight revealed was horrifying:

About a third of the guards became tyrannical in their arbitrary use of power, in enjoying their control over other people. They were corrupted by the power of their roles. . . . We had to release three prisoners in the first four days because they had such acute situational traumatic reactions, hysterical crying, confusion in thinking and severe depression. (1972, p. 8)

The experiment dramatically demonstrates that the social roles (behaviors expected of people in specific group positions) of guard/prisoner are dehumanizing regardless of the
respondents say. The strategy thus combines random selection with personal interrogation, but survey research is more than just the use of these two techniques. The choices of both the population to be sampled and the questions to be asked should have their foundation in sociological theory. The guiding concern, after all, is not just getting a cross section of answers to nosy questions; the real goal is settling a general issue bearing on social problems.

A classic application of survey techniques to a theoretical issue is Fernandez and Kulik's study of "life satisfaction" (1981). In everyday terms, they explored the determinants of personal happiness—and unhappiness. While this is a matter of individual interest to all of us, the study involves more general issues concerning social problems. Fernandez and Kulik used an advanced form of the statistical reasoning introduced by Durkheim; specifically, they examined the levels of life satisfaction within the social categories of a nationally representative telephone-interviewed sample of U.S. adults. These categories were sifted to prospect for social facts underlying individual differences in life satisfaction. Probing the sources of dissatisfaction can yield glittering insights into the connections between "personal troubles" and "social issues."

To exemplify the pluses and minuses of survey analysis, we spotlight several of Fernandez and Kulik's findings. First, they determined that urban dwellers are significantly less happy than those residing in rural areas. You can immediately see a problem with such a statement. Since place of residence is also linked with a host of other factors (income, family size, etc.), how can urban location be isolated as a separate source of unhappiness? To deal with this difficulty, the analysts used the technique known as statistical control to hold other factors constant and untangle the specific relationship of interest. After the other variables are controlled, location and—somewhat surprisingly—education are still related to happiness. In the latter case, the link is a negative one that is, the higher the number of years of schooling the individuals have completed, the less happy (on the average) they are. While you might not find that difficult to believe when cramming for a midterm, it contradicts commonsense beliefs about the value of education.

Aside from the surprises involved, the results of this application of the survey strategy are impressive for two reasons. First, there is their generality. Conclusions drawn about life (dis)satisfaction can actually be said to characterize the adult population of the United States, rather than one observed group or a few dozen college students. Also, the use of statistical controls permits the spotlighting of particular variables without the artificial conditions of an experiment. Be impressed by survey analysis, but allow yourself some doubts. One reason generalization may be imperfect is that the population (total set of individuals or groups about which the researcher wants to generalize) must be defined by some sort of list from which the sample is drawn. Since telephone books and census records—both often used to define populations—are known to undercount certain types of people, a random sample of those lists cannot be perfectly representative.

Another consideration: Do you believe everything you are told? If not, that is further reason to question the infallibility of survey findings. Even if people don't deliberately lie to the interviewer or on the questionnaires, what we say is not necessarily the same as what we really do (consider your most sincere resolutions to study). Researchers have evolved procedures for dealing with both these sources of doubt, but they remain only partially solved problems of the survey strategy.

**Which Research Strategy Is Best?**

Given the inherent weaknesses of each research strategy, is the sociological study of social problems to be abandoned as a pointless exercise? No. There are sources of error in the research tools of every science. One must, however, be schooled in the use of such instruments to derive the most knowledge with the least distortion. In the field of social problems, the choice of tools is dictated by the answers to two questions: Who is to be studied? What is it about them you wish to know? Survey research is not better than participant
administrative posts in the government service (Chugerman, 1965). Your authors have not yet been deputized to run U.S. society, but all three of us have worked in some capacity applying sociology to social policy.

The inherent difficulties of building a real-world Utopia using the tools of a social science are illuminated by the work of Max Weber (1864–1920). The illumination is brilliant indeed, as Weber’s work still lights the way for sociologists working into the dawn of the 21st century. One difficulty flows from an inescapable fact: Sociologists are people. Even “sociocrats” would live in the very society they study and be touched by its values even as they attempt to dispassionately analyze it. Weber (1949) posed this as the dilemma of a value-free sociology. The ideal is the development of “ethically neutral” research methods that would allow sociologists to see society objectively, untainted by the rose-colored glasses of their own values. Weber thought perfect attainment of this ideal to be beyond flesh-and-blood scientists, whose values inevitably intrude right from the decision of what to study. But a vehemently antidrug sociologist should be able to control personal prejudices while evaluating a school drug prevention program by adhering to strict scientific procedures. Sociological research methods can keep the rose-colored glasses of values from deteriorating into value-induced blindness.

Some sociologists call individualism the central value in contemporary U.S. society (Bellah et al., 1985). The rights of the individual are enshrined in the Constitution, and the theme of personal independence touches cultural clichés (“Stand on your own two feet,” “Just do it!”)—in fact, individualism is so pervasive as to be invisible. The job of the sociologist is to make the relations of individuals visible, to show the social structures supporting individual behavior. This job is especially important in the arena of social policy. As in the medical sciences where faulty diagnosis means faulty prescription, a misunderstanding of society’s ills means a misguided social program. If suicide is viewed as a purely personal problem, policy will ignore—or, worse, intensify—the social factors that underlie it. A second major theme of Weber’s vast body of work identifies the social context of personal action. Writing around the turn of the 20th century, he predicted a future dominated by the rise of the large-scale organization now called “bureaucracy.” Weber himself (1922/1968) defined and clarified the nature of this new social form of the heart of modern and modernizing societies. No search for solutions to social problems in the United States can ignore the involvement of bureaucracies in the causation of social problems or in the social organizations built to stop them.

So why are social problems unsolved? The case made here for scientific sociology might have you wondering why social problems textbooks are still necessary. One of the services sociology can render is identification of the real-world roadblocks on the path to Utopia.

**Value Trade-Offs**

With or without sociological knowledge, you can readily think of a solution for any social problem. Crime? Simply give the police unlimited powers of search and seizure while instituting mandatory life sentences for all felons. Airplane bombings? Send luggage by train and have people fly naked. These solutions seem absurd because of the enormous sacrifices they demand. The value to be gained by solving the crime and airplane bombing problems must be weighed against the value to be lost in civil rights and personal privacy. Technical ability to reduce one form of objective damage is not the bottom line. Social policies must be assessed by a kind of value accounting, in which benefits are balanced against costs.

Some of these costs can be represented in monetary terms. Consider the fact that there is only so much public concern about social problems, and therefore a limit to the resources to be allocated for social policies. Consequently, a dollar more in one program budget may mean a dollar less to deal with some other form of human suffering. The million dollars spent to save a single balloonist from drowning in the ocean could protect the
even with opposition to the policy. Thus far our discussion of linked values or problems has
assumed the policy does work according to plan. That assumption needs to be examined.
Even though theoretical diagnosis of a problem may suggest a policy cure, policy imple-
mentation is a more complex process than giving aspirin for a headache.

Unfortunately, there are many instances of counterproductive policies that prove this point. Driver education courses for teenagers have been instituted to promote traffic safety within this high-risk group; research suggests, however, that the courses may increase traffic fatalities because more youths get their driver's licenses (Robertson & Zador, 1978). Or consider the attempt to control crack addiction by the prohibition of the drug. According to some experts, the profitability of the entire narcotics black market depends on strenuous efforts of law enforcement agencies to hold the available supply down (see chapter 2). The policy thus causes crack-pushing to be more lucrative. These programs appear to be malfunctioning and, in some respects, actually intensifying the very problems they were designed to solve.

Unproductive or counterproductive policies are not tragic mysteries; they occur for reasons that can be revealed by a sociological analysis of program implementation in the real world. A simplified version of a policy system is shown in Figure 1:5, which represents the complex interplay of forces in and around any social program. One point of breakdown can occur between the policy makers (politicians who write the laws and authorize the funds) and the policy experts (social scientists who evaluate current policies and invent new ones). A major factor hampering the War on Poverty was, quite simply, that the experts lacked sufficient knowledge to decide what should be done (Moynihan, 1970). Because of pressure from the policy makers who could not wait for the necessary studies to be completed, the social science experts had to make recommendations on the basis of partially researched theories. Uncertainty about the basic strategy for fighting poverty contributed to legislation that was vague and ambiguous. Policy agents (the social workers, administrators, and all those hired to put the programs into practice) thus lacked a clear, workable plan of attack (Friedman, 1977) in this War.

The public in the background of Figure 1:1 is not a passive audience to this play of policy specialists. Just as public concern about the problems of the poor hastened the declaration of the War on Poverty, the subjective dimension can intrude at many points in the implementation process. The high tide of current public concern (see Figure 1:4) has floated

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### Table 1:2

**ESTIMATED EFFECTS OF A SUSTAINED 1% INCREASE IN UNEMPLOYMENT ON RELATED SOCIAL PROBLEMS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOCIAL INDICATOR OF RELATED PROBLEM</th>
<th>% INCREASE IN SOCIAL INDICATOR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suicide mortality</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State mental hospital admissions</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State prison admissions</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cirrhosis of the liver mortality</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardiovascular-renal disease mortality</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even in this overview chapter, it is easy to get lost in the complexities of concepts and policies. While such intricacies are necessary for the full illumination of social problems, one simple insight should guide you through the maze: Society, with all of its problems, is created by us. That sociological reality is the key both to your understanding of social problems and to our aspirations to solve them.