Sociology and Social Problems

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So why have Orlando, Los Angeles, Tokyo, Paris—indeed, all human communities—not emulated the Disney model to become social problem-free? Please consider this question as seriously as the founder did:

In 1964, Walt Disney had sought out [urban developer Ray] Watson, on the recommendation of friends, to review his ideas about EPCOT, which was then to be a planned community of 20,000 or more, with churches, schools, and shopping malls, around a central complex whose towers would pierce a great climate-control dome. Watson told Disney the obvious: it looked great, but he'd have to pay people to live there, since Disney intended to control every aspect of the residents' lives, including their clothing, hairstyles, public behavior, and sex lives, at the same time that he would forbid representative government. (Flower, 1991, p. 95)

In effect, EPCOT-as-utopia could function only by stripping away the Bill of Rights, so the company settled for EPCOT-as-theme park.

Now do a direct comparison between Disney World (DW) and your home town (HT). At DW, people stay for a few nights until the money runs out; at HT, people live there day-to-day when they are not on vacation. Speaking of money, no one gets through DW's turnstiles without quite a lot of it. The prototypical DW purchaser, therefore, is a relatively thrifty (at least) middle-class person committed enough to family entertainment to plunk down five figures for Mickey and Minnie; HT has no turnstiles and imposes no such selectivity on its residents. Speaking of entertainment, your HT has arenas and video stores, but it also has hospitals, churches, orphanages—in short, it is supposed to provide all of the stuff of life. DW is supposed to be a show, with critters in costumes and struts supporting the scenic facades. All of the social machinery necessary to provide real human services must have something to do with real social problems. No wonder Walt Disney gave up on his utopia.

Obviously, you already know that Disney World is not a perfect society. Our little exercise stretches the obvious to pose a not-so-obvious riddle: Real societies always have real social problems—Why?

Commentators on social problems abound. Local newscasters, ministers, op-ed page sages, loudmouth roommates—all freely offer opinions on the issues of the day. Immodest though it sounds, what you are about to read here on those issues is more than opinion. Instead of relying on their own fallible insights, your authors will turn on social problems the full power of sociology, the scientific study of the relationship between social structure and human behavior. It is the purpose of this section to introduce you to sociological thinking and begin to show you its power.

**Dystopias**

Thomas More said, "underlying these [utopian] proposals there is always one radical fallacy, namely, that they do not only invent ideal institutions for mankind, but invent an ideal mankind for their institutions." Taking this tip from five centuries ago, we shall now leave would-be utopias to visit the worst mankind has to offer—dystopias. Perhaps an understanding of a problem-free heaven-on-Earth requires real visions of hell-on-Earth.
families whose very lives have fallen apart hitting the “Hillbilly Highway,” to gruesome murder-suicide shootings discovered in out-of-the-way shacks. More is going on here than personal tragedy. No matter how intense the work ethic of an unemployed miner, the mining jobs are gone. The lost teeth and broken nose due to an aggravated assault are not just some unlucky accident, they are immersed in a rising tide of violence. The ominous numbers suggest social forces operating above the heads feeling private pain.

Sociology is attuned to those very forces. The title of this section is taken from the renowned book The Sociological Imagination by sociologist C. Wright Mills (1956). Mills lays the groundwork for the sociological approach to social problems by distinguishing “personal troubles” from “social issues.” The former are purely personal frets and foibles—what Shakespeare called “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”; the latter are—with apologies to Shakespeare—a sky full of deadly missiles so numerous as to have been launched by the social structure itself. To animate this conceptual distinction with real flesh-and-blood people, Personal Troubles versus Social Issues boxes will appear throughout the book. Box 1:1 presents a case of private pain suddenly set in a wider sociological context.

West Sarajevo The “west” designation for each of our dystopias is really just a rhetorical device. Fact is, social problems are directionless because they are everywhere. North, south, east—and west—there are no human utopias. The West Virginia hills are afflicted with social problems, but so are the Beverly Hills.

The cases chosen are so extreme that the very structure we call society appears to have collapsed. Certainly such cases are not limited to the Americas. Sarajevo has suffered a highly publicized fall from grace as the cosmopolitan, civilized site of the 1984 Olympics. At the time of this writing, Sarajevans inhabit a true hell-on-Earth. It is unnecessary to recite social problems statistics. Replay scenes from your own media memory: thousands of violent deaths among the civilian population; innocents slaughtered for the fatal error of wandering into “sniper alley” (see photo); epidemics of waterborne diseases due to exploded sanitation systems; starvation so pervasive that international air-drops of food must be organized and protected by high-tech weaponry; and always the lurking, ancient fear of a siege army at the city gate. Suffice it to say the Biblical “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”—famine, strife, war, and pestilence—are at full gallop.

Each of our dystopias teaches sociological lessons about social problems. Some of these lessons are cumulative, like the one about the separate dimensions of social problems. Consider the fact that we did not produce statistics about the objective dimension of Sarajevo’s suffering. We could rely on your “media memory” because of Sarajevo’s notoriously high subjective dimension. While the media made you aware of Sarajevo’s sorrow, were you also aware of

-25,000 killed and 500,000 refugees in Tajikistan (since 1991)?
-3,000 killed and 850,000 refugees in Azerbaijan (since 1989)?
-78,000 killed in Sri Lanka (since 1983)?
-20,000 killed (including the president) in Liberia (since 1990)?
-25,000 killed in Croatia, once part of the very same country as Sarajevo?

Your authors certainly were not aware of these numbers until we did our homework on the objective dimension (Binder & Crossette, 1993). That assignment (to be completed below) includes explaining why Sarajevo’s suffering has occupied the world stage while these other hells-on-Earth are known mainly to foreign affairs specialists.

Another instructive aspect of the Sarajevo case is its global status. Russian nationals maintain ties to the Serbian army surrounding Sarajevo; U. S. F-16s have enforced a “no fly zone” over what once was Yugoslavia’s airspace; embattled United Nations forces from
Micro-, Macro-, Megastructure

The animating force of the Sociological Imagination is the idea of social structure, the patterns of relationship linking people. The sociological refinement of this grand idea has advanced from Mills’s day so that we can now break down “social issues” according to three ascending levels of social structure.

Let us take a fresh look at West Philadelphia through these triple lenses of the sociologist’s mind’s eye. First lower the lens called microstructure. In a casual drive through the neighborhood one would observe face-to-face conversations out on the street. This is just the surface of the deeper structure of the egocentric network, the whole pattern of interpersonal relationships centered on a given individual. Such structures are attached to every person seen on the street, and these social bonds linking friends, relatives, coworkers, lovers—they are the essence of what makes up the community. They are also the essence of what makes up the social problems in the community. Stormy relations between spouses leave children stranded; fond friendships become the links in drug distribution networks; frictions between rivals in a love triangle explode into drive-by violence. The trick is to look through the networks and see deeply into the behavior of what seem to be isolated individuals. It is a way of seeing social problems—or oneself—that shows the real power of sociology.

The second lens is termed macrostructure, and it looks through groups. Sociologists define this familiar term as a set of persons with 1) social boundaries, 2) an internal structure, and 3) common expectations. Unlike networks which can branch outward indefinitely (a friend of a friend of a friend . . . ), groups have a clear line separating members from nonmembers. Your classroom, for instance, has a class list as well as an “internal structure” (your teacher bosses student members) and “common expectations” (everybody is supposed to know the course assignments). Even under this exacting definition, groups cover a vast range of sizes and types. Gangs, police, welfare offices, recreation centers, gambling operations, schools—all are groups, all are in West Philadelphia, and all are involved in the social problems of the community.

Many of these groups also have ties beyond the community, which calls for the final lens of social structure. Megastructure is the pattern of relations spanning whole societies; if the USA is viewed as one super-group—the apex of macrostructure—social ties crossing such nation-group boundaries reveal a whole new level of structure. Consider: Numerous factories in West Philadelphia were once subsidiaries of multinational corporations, which are by definition firms transcending a single society. Shifts in the global economy (another manifestation of megastructure) led those firms to restructure themselves by closing down their Philadelphia plants to open operations in third-world countries. A world map in the CEO’s office would show a whole new pattern of factories connected by company lines across the globe. Such megastructural changes send shock waves right down to the neighborhood level. Ex-president of the American Sociological Association (our professional “group”) William Julius Wilson argues in a now-famous book that our inner cities have collapsed for reasons quite like the human cave-in in West Virginia. Boarded-up factories are like headstones marking the loss of thousands of decent-paying, working-class jobs for unskilled workers. The headstone is an apt symbol given the human consequences: unemployment, concentrated poverty, family breakdown (without steady incomes, marriages are undermined), and the associated social problems of drugs and crime (Wilson, 1987).

Why is this a sociology book? As we noted above, every profession—indeed, most every person—claims to possess some special insight into social problems. The crucial difference is in the adjective “social.” Sociology looks directly at human behavior through the lenses of “social” structure. There just are no more penetrating insights into social issues than those viewed through the trifocals of micro, macro, and megastructure. Rather than making tiresome our-discipline-is-better-than-theirs arguments, we shall state a seemingly
is a phrase we can confidently lift from your "media memory" as one of the most highly publicized issues of the past decade. Recall the reports of this hyperaddictive form of cocaine sweeping through inner cities with jobs and children abandoned to seek a life of crime and crack dens. As those reports dramatically conclude with images of crack vials in suburban high schools (like yours?), one can almost hear the crash of society caving in.

Figure 1:1 raises a serious question about the crack epidemic: Where is the crack? The starred line shows annual cocaine use (all forms including crack) among only a relative handful of high school seniors nationwide, and these low rates have actually gotten lower since the mid-1980s. This is not some bad statistic hand-picked to make our point:

For nearly every age category, for nearly every drug, for nearly every time period asked about, the proportion using illicit drugs in the late 1980s was significantly, indeed strikingly, lower than was true for the late 1970s and early 1980s. There is absolutely no doubt whatsoever that this decline is real. (Goode, 1989, p. 336; italics added.)
The Subjective Dimension

This is a dirty trick. In the name of a sociological analysis of social problems, we may have spoiled your summer. Forgive us by running your personal worry meter down the rungs of the ladder. Chances are your needle did not budge all the way to the bottom rung. The point is not to mock your personal ignorance of causes of death lurking at a picnic; the point is to show you that right in your backyard there is a mismatch of subjective fears and objective fatalities.

Fears and worries vary. Some few readers—perhaps those with a bee venom allergy or a dog bite scar—may have felt a subjective surge on one of the objective rungs. Such variability is the reason the sociological approach to social problems relies on public opinion polls to measure the subjective dimension. Scientifically drawn samples allow for opinion variation, while at the same time tracking concern about an issue in a representative slice of the public mind. In 1987, AIDS first popped into that mind as measured by the 3% of Gallup respondents selecting it as “one of the most important” social problems that year. Note in Figure 1.2 an essentially flat (and very low) subjective trend line marked by public opinion. By this point, you should nod your head knowingly at the very different objective trend line.

Even if this lesson on the duality of social problems is well learned, it remains a mystery. Sociology offers two paths to the solution. First, since its birth as a discipline, sociology has been concerned with the social sources of human suffering. The very founders of the field built theories to explain wars, suicides, homelessness, revolutions, assassinations—all objective signs that 19th-century European civilization was falling apart. The second path has developed more recently. Applying sociological concepts and methods to public opinion data, your authors offer a theory of the subjective dimension. We got tired of reading other textbooks’ treatments of “myths” versus “realities” presented as though nonsociologists were just nonrational about social problems. There are sound, socially based reasons why some issues make headlines while others are buried in the cooking section. Not incidentally, those reasons help to explain your own reactions to death risks, U.S. societal breakdown, and all social problems in between.

The true test of a science is the application of its principles to some useful purpose.

—Lester Ward (1883, p. 263)
until they grasped how such bonds are broken. Similarly, social scientists who would understand society must understand how it disintegrates into social problems.

**Sources of Suffering: The Objective Dimension**

We want to live, but we cannot. We want men to be equal, but they are not. We want suffering to end, but it will not. Honesty permits us to know what is to be accepted and, accepting, to reclaim our humanity and struggle against indignity. It is more than the instrument, it is measurement itself, for it is honesty which allows us to see clearly the ways by which societies must cope. (Calabresi & Bobbitt, 1978.

The present section focuses on human suffering and its origins. In reviewing the tangible evidence on the sources of social problems, honesty is indeed essential. Candor alone, however, will not clarify the complex processes of social (and antisocial) behavior. Honesty must be magnified by science, by a set of theories and techniques designed to be, quite literally, objective. Sociological analysis provides the necessary magnification.

There is still the question of just what to put under the lens. Take a moment to decide which—in your opinion—is the single most serious social problem in the United States today. Take another moment to decide why. Is it the deaths caused by the problem? Is it the physical injury, the mental anguish, or the moral outrage that leads you to your choice of a problem? The point is there are several standards against which suffering may be judged:

In violence a person is violated—there is harm done to his person, his psyche, his body, his dignity. . . . Seen in this way, a person can be violated in many ways; physical force is only one of them. (Liazos, 1972, p. 113)

Just as violence cannot be reduced to wounds from street muggings, social problems cannot be seen only in terms of a singular type of suffering. Proper assessment of cause(s) requires measurement more sophisticated than simple death counts. Social scientists have developed various measures—everything from divorce proneness indices to personal stress scales—to dissect the various types of socially induced harm. Combinations of such measures (sometimes called social indicators) can be used to more fully gauge the objective seriousness of a given problem.

Measurement alone is not enough. A student with a semester test average of 68.5 may have an adequate reading of an inadequate performance, but what is lacking is an explanation. In the following pages, we present a number of theoretical perspectives on the causation of social problems. Why is there no single, all-purpose theory? In the first place, consider the wide spectrum of problems—from inflation to infanticide—to be explained. Each problem is unique in many ways, including both the balance of individual versus social forces and the pattern of suffering revealed by social indicators. Even when the focus is on a single problem, though, finding its objective cause is akin to medical research. The complexity of the (physical or social) disease may lead to a profusion of different theories, each capturing part of the truth.

The theories below will be presented as complementary perspectives providing distinctive insights into the many facets of social problems. While the specific mix of theories to be used in explanation depends on the specific problem under study, there are two stable reference points in our general presentation. First, all of these theories are concerned with causes; they seek the objective sources of suffering. Second, all are to some degree concerned with social structure, with tracing the roots of problems into the multileveled world of social relations.
Anomie is precisely this state of disorganization where the hold of norms over individual conduct has broken down. When this controlling normative structure is upset... the individual loses himself in a void of meaningless activities. (Parsons, 1968, p. 377)

The relevance of the anomie concept here is twofold. First, anomie has been frequently observed in cases of rapid social change; second, the "meaningless activities" in which anomic individuals are likely to engage include many forms of destructive behavior. A well-documented case of the rules of everyday social life disintegrating under the shock of too much change occurred in Barrow, Alaska. Most of Barrow's residents are Inupiat Eskimo, a tribe of traditional whale hunters subjected to instant industrialization by the discovery of oil on the North Slope. The overnight change in lifestyle took its human toll. Between 1965 and 1974, the alcohol death rate of the Inupiat nearly tripled (Kraus & Buffler, 1979); over the same period, there were dramatic increases in suicide, homicide, divorce, child abuse—in virtually every objective index of social problems (Klausner et al., 1979). Sudden social change broke down the norms of Inupiat social life, thus creating anomie; personal breakdown soon followed. Similar interpretations have been applied to the rise of fascism in Germany (Fromm, 1965). These extraordinary cases bear directly on ordinary social problems in the United States. As long as we live in a society that is a pacesetter for social change, the social and personal dysfunctions of anomie must be accepted as a price of progress.

Conflict Theory

For functionalism, then, the "system" is paramount. Social problems may flow from an imperfect or too quickly overhauled design, but that just leads back to the drawing board. What conflict theorists see on that board is less a blueprint than a battle map. Hence, this basic assumption:

Society is organized around the conflicts among its social structures.

The so-called system is merely the embattled product of conflicting groups trying to impose their self-serving plans on society. After all, society is not a colony of identical individuals. The person in the next desk in class is probably different from you in a number of ways, such as sex, ethnicity, and religion. According to the conflict approach, these diverse social categories mark off not only different kinds of people but also different social demands. Particularly in heterogeneous societies such as the United States, those demands—often called "interests"—are likely to clash. In the terms of the theory, higher salaries for working women mean lower salaries for working men; increasing the age of mandatory retirement expands opportunity for the elderly, but contracts the job market for new college graduates. Society's design is a patchwork of negotiated settlements in which the winning groups get social rewards and the losers get social problems.

The most elegant formulation of the conflict approach focuses on the broad economic divisions of modern societies. In the scramble of contending groups, the main antagonists are the higher and lower classes or, more pointedly, the haves and have-nots. Members of a disprivileged class suffer not due to personal failings or some technical flaw in society's design, but because the privileged class controls social institutions for its own benefit:

Major causes of much actual and potential misery in advanced industrial societies, in principle susceptible to enlightened change, are the vast inequities in wealth and power in these societies. (Rule, 1978, p. 198)

The analysis is not restricted to "advanced industrial societies." In fact, Karl Marx (1818–1883) the intellectual godfather of class-based conflict theory, rewrote all of human
Persons publicly identified as deviant may increase their subsequent rule breaking (Lemert, 1972); this possible result of accepting society's label as one's true identity is a form of secondary deviance. Whatever, the damage done by the primary act of deviant behavior (i.e., violating the norm), attaching a deviant label to an individual causes deterioration of that person's reputation, self-respect, and self-restraint about society's norms. By the lights of labeling theory, it is not so much the breaking as the making of rules (and their enforcement) that causes objective problems.

This side of paradise, why do social problems exist? The search for the sources of objective suffering in social life led us to the three broad theoretical approaches presented above. No one of these theories is definitive. While all are grounded in scientific investigation, none is a universal explanation for the many forms of human misery. Part of the reason is the diversity of social problems and the diverse harms they bring. It would be truly remarkable if the same theory could fully explain illegitimate tax deductions and illegitimate children. Given the present state of knowledge, the multiplicity of theories enriches explanation. Each theory provides a unique angle of vision, a vantage point with fresh insights.

Need convincing? After all, few people appreciate theory for theory's sake. We'll provide you with a demonstration on what is literally an objective ill of our society: AIDS. Begin with Figure 1:3, which shows the pathways of HIV transmission following the contours of a social network. Like all social problems, this one needs to be viewed through the trifocals of social structure. Note who prepared the microstructural diagram in Figure 1:3; it is the Centers for Disease Control, one of the many macrostructures stretching from volunteer groups up to the federal government that are actively engaged in anti-AIDS activities. One of those activities has been the tracing of HIV across national borders to determine megastuctural paths of transmission and control.

Now that the three objective levels of AIDS in social structure are in sight, what can sociological theory offer by way of explanation? Plenty. From a functionalist perspective, the continuing transmission of HIV is indicative of dysfunctions built into U.S. educational institutions that avoid privacy issues like sex. Paradoxically, fear of AIDS may actually serve the positive function of reinforcing traditional family relationships. The frequent association of the terms AIDS and controversy signals the relevance of conflict theory. The tug-of-war of AIDS activists versus other disease advocates for precious research dollars spotlights the contentiousness of social life. Such grass-roots activism often starts when two outraged friends (a microstructure) form an organization to do battle with the National Institutes of Health (a macrostructure). Note that these insights do not cancel the functionalist image of AIDS, they enhance it. The whole point of public education/consciousness-raising about HIV is to change people's minds, or, in symbolic interactionist terms, to change the "meaning" of high-risk acts such as sexual and shared-needle contact. These are the most intimate of human acts, which nevertheless have global manifestations. The international (i.e., megastuctural) distribution of AIDS cases is associated with the travel policies of national governments (megastuctures), which control access to personal interactions (microstructures) across societal boundaries (McCoy & Inciardi, 1995).

**Sources of Concern: The Subjective Dimension**

Wherever the human harms of social problems come from, public concern about them must come from someplace else. The overriding mystery of this chapter is: Why are the objective and subjective dimensions not identical? Here is our three-part answer.

**Visibility** There is no such thing as a social problems beeper. None of us is hooked up to a machine that registers precisely the level of human harm being inflicted by a given issue at a given moment. And aside from gaping at the occasional crime scene or motor vehicle accident, we rarely get to bear direct witness to any of society's suffering. So what does bring our attention (or apathy) to a social problem?
bombs seems inconceivable mainly because the former are so much less spectacular than the latter. "Poverty in America"—the very phrase conjures images of inner-city wastelands. Fact is, poverty is more common near pasturelands. As you will read in chapter 8, the percentage of rural residents is actually higher than the percentage of urban residents in poverty in the United States. Surprised? Block after block of squalid housing concentrated in a slum creates a spectacle whatever the objective numbers; the scattering of shacks over a wide area of country diffuses the drama, thus rendering rural poverty all but invisible.

The nearest thing to a social problems beeper is media exposure, which can endow an issue with instant visibility in the eyes of millions. Consider the phenomenon we call "Sixty Minutes Syndrome," in which that (or any other) TV newsmagazine can conjure sudden subjective outrage about an objective condition that had been there all along. As though a societal switch has been thrown, public opinion blips upward while human damage changes not at all. Are the issues thrown into the media spotlight chosen for their objective significance? No:

A media system for a democracy ought to provide . . . some coherent sense of the wider social forces that affect the conditions of their everyday lives. It is difficult to find anyone who would claim that media discourse in the United States even remotely approaches this ideal. (Gamson et al., 1992, p. 373; italics added)

So what hits the headlines and the airwaves? For starters, it is intrinsically dramatic issues that are the most "newsworthy." Try not to smirk while comparing your media memory for Oklahoma City versus falling-down-the-steps stories. A big exposé on unsafe stairwells could not hold a candle to the drama of a bombed-out building full of corpses, so the latter is what you saw, heard, and read about. Not by the way, the connection between intrinsic drama and media exposure is a prime motivation for terrorist acts in the first place. Over the past three years, a nasty, terroristic civil war has raged in Algeria killing somewhere between 15,000 and 50,000 people. The estimate is so indefinite in part because 40 journalists have been murdered, including 10 employees of Algeria's only TV station. Both sides in this vicious conflict have learned the present sociological lesson: No matter how serious, a social problem can penetrate the public consciousness only if it is visible to the public.

Expectations If you thought this book would be boring, you must be pleasantly surprised; if you anticipated a verbal orgy of sex and violence, on the other hand, you must be disappointed. The actual words on these pages—the objective stuff—are the same in both cases. The subjective difference in your reaction stems from what you anticipated before you sat down to read.

The difference between satisfaction and dissatisfaction often depends on what is expected. This truth can be applied to cases that seem to be paradoxes at the societal level. Take, for example, the timing of revolutions, which are more likely to occur when social conditions are improving:

The most perilous moment for a bad government is when it seeks to mend its ways. Patiently endured so long as it seemed beyond redress, a grievance comes to appear intolerable once the possibility of removing it crosses men's minds. For the mere fact that certain abuses have been remedied draws attention to the others and they now appear more galling. (Tocqueville, 1955, p. 177)

As Tocqueville observed well over a century ago, an improvement in one's lifestyle makes it clear that positive change is possible and therefore can be expected of the present regime. With the objective standard of living rising but expectations rising even faster, things can get better but feel worse. The resultant subjective dissatisfaction may build to the point
Figure 1:4
Subjective and Objective Dimensions of Crime in America

Money should be spent to combat it; by this measure, crime has highest subjective dimension of any social problem included in the GSS. Note further that this very high level of concern is still rising. The final note shifts to the objective dimension. According to the National Crime Survey (described in chapter 11), there is no “rising crime rate.” In fact, the percentage of persons victimized by serious crimes is lower in the 1990s than in the 1980s and is substantially lower than it was in the 1970s (not shown).

Few behaviors receive more “negative evaluations” than crime. By definition, a criminal act is an attack on what society cherishes. The direct slap in the face of societal values magnifies the perceived harms of criminality. To compare on the basis of one such harm, homicides take about half the annual number of lives as automobiles and only about a third as many as occupational illness and injury; there is no comparison in the

individualistic but unenlightened act of all—suicide. If something as personal as the voluntary act of self-destruction could be related to what he called “social facts,” the relevance of sociology to social problems would be indisputable.

What Durkheim discovered is still startling. While no one person’s suicide was (or is) perfectly predictable, the relative risk of suicide across different categories of persons was (and is). In his analysis of the rate of suicide (i.e., the number for a constant base of population), Durkheim consistently found Protestants, men, and the unmarried to be more suicidal than Catholics, women, and married persons. Why? The common factor is the level of social integration. Protestant denominations tend to encourage individualism, whereas Catholicism is more group centered in its church hierarchy and communal rituals; women are more enmeshed in networks of family and friendship relations than are men; and married persons of both sexes are forced into more interaction by their very household arrangements. Durkheim further found exceptionally high suicide rates in the elite officer corps of the French military, much higher than among common soldiers. The explanation offered here by Durkheim concerned too much social integration. The elite officers identified so completely with the tight bonds of the military group that their very selves became disposable. Like a traditional Indian wife throwing herself on the funeral pyre of her husband, or a Japanese Kamikaze pilot diving to his death in World War II, these are cases of excessive social integration. To put it in Durkheim’s terms, if the “social self” is too weak, there is risk of egoistic suicide because of too little interpersonal involvement; too much such involvement overdevelops the social integration of the self, and altruistic suicide rates rise. Durkheim also derived an explanation of anomie suicide nearly a century before the Inupiat disaster described on p. 15.

Leafing through the pages of Suicide, one sees actual tables comparing social categories of individuals. This type of statistical analysis has become a model for the social sciences for the very reason Durkheim used it; it reveals social patterns invisible at the individual level.

What are the sources of contemporary sociology’s nonobvious wisdom? Sociologists employ three main strategies in their analyses of social problems. In our brief sketch of these strategies one point will be paramount: The strengths and weaknesses of each research design must be judged in relation to the subject under study.

### THE DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

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**TABLE 1:1**
uncertainty? What Stack found was an organization of family life very different from the American middle-class ideal, but admirably suited to the reality of grinding poverty. One of her key findings was an elaborate system of material aid, "a cooperative life style built upon exchange and reciprocity," linking relatives in a network of obligations that most benefitted those "down on their luck" (1974, p. 125). The existence of a kinship-based safety net among the impoverished contradicts the public image of the poor as a disorganized rabble; it is also a social reality that should be taken into account in the design of antipoverty policy (Jones, 1982).

Participant observation is a strategy applicable to a wide range of social problems; it will therefore be instructive to use Stack's study to spotlight the general advantages—and disadvantages—of this research design. An impressive advantage is the natural setting of the observed group. Stack's subjects were viewed in situ, right in the deprived environment that is the daily background of their behavior. On the negative side of the ledger is, first, the sampling issue. You may recall from above that Stack's research chronicled the activities of two families in one community. Does that particular community typify the national poverty problem? Are these families even typical of the thousands of others in The Flats? The deeply personal nature of the research (Stack lived among the families for three years) precludes selection of a representative sample of the poor. Consequently, one must be cautious in generalizing beyond the study subjects.

There is a related issue. Keep in mind that the observer is—even with the proper introductions—a stranger entering the lifestyle of a group. Since it is often difficult to disguise the identity of the investigator (Stack was White, her subjects Black), the group members under study are liable to reactivity, that is, changing their behavior just because they know they are being watched. This disadvantage will be particularly pronounced among deviant populations who may feel they have something to hide. Although reactivity of subjects tends to decrease over time, the personal involvement of the researcher can be expected to increase. The observer's participation, emotional and otherwise, may become very intense. Elijah Anderson, while he was a graduate student doing research among poor street-corner males in Chicago, found himself involved in a near fistfight, the events of which are summarized in Box 1.3. This extreme example raises the general issue of objectivity. An investigator embroiled in face-to-face relations with the people studied will have personal reactions to them, just as they will react to the researcher. It may be no easy matter to untangle one's feelings about the group from one's theoretical observations.

As a research strategy, participant observation offers intimate insights of groups as they actually function in the social world. Such glimpses are bought, however, at the cost of generalizability and possible bias on the part of the researcher and/or research subject. These considerations suggest that, in general, it is a strategy most profitable for exploratory research, for stimulating hypotheses (testable questions drawn from theories), rather than for definitively testing them. Given the present state of development of our theories for many social problems, this is an indispensable service.

**Experimentation**

Calling the sociologist a scientist connotes laboratories and white coats. Experimentation, is, however, only one of the tools of sociological study, and it has distinctive strengths and weaknesses in the dissection of social problems. We will evaluate this strategy by again scrutinizing a classic study.

Why are prisons so oppressive? Is the dehumanization caused by the attitudes of the guards, by the behavior of the prisoners, or by the social situation of confinement? Unfortunately, such questions are complicated in real jails by the overlap of all these factors. The problem is a general one. Rather than possessing neatly separable variables like mass and velocity, people have interrelated traits that may be virtually impossible to untangle in the real world. Philip Zimbardo and his colleagues dealt with the overlapping trait
individual personalities who play them. Once one recovers from the emotional punch of the study, however, some questions linger.

Once again, there is the problem of generalizability. The disturbing findings among college students may or may not characterize the reactions of housewives, senior citizens, religious professionals, or the population at large. Even if the 24 subjects of this study are assumed to be representative of all college students, there is little reason to believe that people such as yourself are mirrors of the whole prison population. This is not a criticism directed specifically at Zimbardo. As a practical matter, most social experimentation has been restricted to samples of college populations (Rubinstein, 1982). Even if the researcher has the money, the often elaborate artificial situation designed to highlight a facet of a social problem cannot easily accommodate all the subjects in a scattered national sample.

"Artificial situation" is a phrase reflecting the ambivalence of the experimental technique. The contrived circumstances allowing one to tune in on a specific element of human behavior may tune out the real world. Zimbardo's subjects, after all, always knew they could go home; there is no way to ascertain whether the guards were playing at cruelty or being their own cruel selves in the situation. If you are heterosexual and the experimenter assigns you the identity of a homosexual in a campus role-playing experiment, how similar will your actions be to those of a person who lives such a sexual identity? Artificial situations may produce artificial behavior. A final problem is reactivity (see above), a real concern for subjects in a predicament obviously arranged so that the investigator can watch.

As with participant observation, our assessment of social experimentation leads to a kind of scientific balance sheet. In the plus column is the degree of control researchers hold over the situation. This gives the freedom to construct conditions that will spotlight a crucial facet of social problems. Exercise of that freedom is a weakness as well as a strength. The more intense the focus on one social trait, the more unnatural the situation is likely to be. The desire to drain off all of the "bathwater" clouding the view of that trait may result in throwing out part of the "baby": the real context in which the social problem is set. On balance, the utility of social experimentation will be maximized for research issues that are already fairly well understood. If there is a general base of empirical and theoretical knowledge, one should gain the most from a narrowly focused study, and also know enough to control the worst sources of bias due to sampling and artificiality.

**Survey Research**

The final strategy to consider is probably the most familiar. Survey research is built upon two techniques that have been widely applied in the real world outside social science. The first of these, random sampling, was deliberately devised to deal with the generalizability issue that haunts observational and experimental research. The problem: to select a sample that accurately represents the various segments of a much larger population. The solution: to give each unit (person or group) in the population an equal chance of being selected. The practical advantages of this seemingly simple concept are enormous. Selection of equally likely units by a random process (bingo balls, computer-generated numbers, etc.) not only tends to yield a true cross section of the population, but also tells us the likelihood of sampling error. The main payoff is generalization. One can say something general about a large population (the United States contains about 255 million people) on the basis of a workably small sample (the GSS polls only about 1,500 people). It is important to note that a random sample is not simply many cases gathered in some scattered way. Careful attention to random procedures in a small sample will produce much more representative results than a large sample drawn nonrandomly.

The persons selected into survey samples are generally asked questions through one or more of the following techniques: face-to-face interviews, self-administered questionnaires, or telephone interviews. Each form of questioning has its respective strengths and weaknesses, but all ultimately depend on verbal (oral or written) information. Rather than observing people in their natural groups (participant observation) or watching their behavior under laboratory conditions (experimentation), the survey researcher seeks knowledge about social problems in what the
observation in any absolute sense. Rather, the advantages and disadvantages of a strategy must be weighed in relation to a specific subject of study.

In the analysis of unconventional populations, just getting close enough to do research is likely to be problematic. The fear of public disclosure or official sanctions is a real-world barrier in the face of the researcher. Laud Humphreys was able to cross that barrier in his participant observation study of homosexual behavior in a public bathroom known as a "tearoom" (1975). By playing the role of voyeur (an accepted type of homosexual who just watches the action) without identifying himself as a social scientist, Humphreys solved the access problem. (He also raised some ethical problems.) While one may legitimately wonder how typical this single site is of anything, study through participant observation at least offered insights into a virtually unstudied social world. In this case, the generalizability problem was less serious than those that would have been encountered by a survey researcher waving questionnaires or by an experimenter inviting tearoom regulars into a laboratory.

Once sociological knowledge of a given subject has passed the exploratory stage, interest centers on the wider dimensions of the problem. If the research issue concerns prevalence (the total number in a population with a given condition), incidence (the number of new cases affected by a condition during a given time period), or the overall relationship between variables (e.g., is wealth related to the risk of divorce?), then survey research becomes the strategy of choice. An early study of marijuana use probed this (then) relatively rare practice through participant observation among jazz musicians (Becker, 1953). Moving to the next level of scientific generality, a series of national surveys have established objective trends about the use of marijuana and many other drugs (see chapter 2). If the scientific priority is to sketch the broad patterns of a problem, the generalizing strength of survey research will outweigh its weaknesses.

The sketch drawn by survey analysis, however, is done in very broad strokes. Data on the distribution of a social condition are typically reported as a correlation—a statistical association between variables; Fernandez and Kulik found, for example, that higher happiness and rural residence are correlated. Knowing that two variables tend to vary together creates a seemingly irresistible temptation. The conclusion to which one will be tempted to leap is causation, a condition that exists only when a change in one variable actually produces the associated change in the other variable. Which way does the causal arrow run in the relationship between happiness and place of residence? The proper answer is this: We can't really tell from Fernandez and Kulik's data. Cities could make people miserable, or unhappy people might move to cities; both causal interpretations fit the general correlation established by the survey analysis. For a more definite answer, we might turn to the experimental strategy, which is "considered to be more powerful than nonexperimental designs in uncovering causal relationships among variables" (Spector, 1981, p. 20). Once correlational analysis has drawn the broad outlines of a social problem, experimental studies are the strategic choice to tease out the causal specifics.

The essence of all this talk about strategies can be distilled into two basic points. First, the sociological study of social problems is based on the application of scientific techniques to theoretical issues. This implies, second, that research findings are not ultimate truths handed down on stone tablets. The quality of the data depends on how skillfully the investigator has wielded the scientific instruments in the dissection of the social problem.

The first professor ever to be called a sociologist, August Comte, professed the relevance of the new discipline to the world of human affairs. Drawing the logical conclusion from his linkage of "pure" to "applied" sociology, Comte called for a "sociocracy," a sort of sociological aristocracy that would run society according to scientific principles. Lester Ward—called the American Aristotle because of his intellectual achievements establishing the discipline in the United States—foresaw a national academy of sociology that would fill all
lives of thousands if it were appropriated for shore patrols; an additional million spent for
fire prevention could convert many drug addicts who will go untreated (Calabresi &
Bobbitt, 1978). Although they are generally not viewed in such cold-blooded terms, budget-
ary decisions reflect values being traded-off among competing social policies.

It is important to note that values do vary among segments of U.S. society. There will
rarely be consensus, therefore, about the relative worth of social policies. All U.S. citizens
do not assign the same value priority to law and order, so the above “solution” for crime
would be applauded by some but booed by others. Nor are all interest groups equally influ-
ential in getting governmental action. Much sociological research has shown that the final
mix of actual policies tends to overrepresent the values of the rich and powerful (Domhoff,
1967; Laumann & Pappi, 1976). The differing values in our complex society, moreover, are
subject to change. Controversial Affirmative Action programs giving preference to minori-
ty applicants to professional schools (thus accused of practicing reverse discrimination
against nonminority college students) have been based on mounting public concern about
equality, which now may be on the wane. These refinements do not change a basic truth
about attempted solutions to social problems: When it comes to the values pursued by vari-
ous policies, there is no such thing as a free lunch.

PROBLEM LINKAGES

West Philadelphia, West Virginia, West Sarajevo—everywhere East of Eden has social
problems, and everywhere they are connected. Problems can be looked at separately (as in
the chapters to come), but social policy must confront the implications of their real-world
linkages.

One implication: Solving problem A can actually worsen problem B. Finding the cure
for cancer would remove an enormous source of objective suffering, but would exacerbate
the problem of caring for the elderly; finding a practical way to harness fusion power might
solve our energy problem, but would increase industrial production thereby using up more
natural resources. The discussion of value trade-offs showed that the creation of a given
policy implies social sacrifices. Here we face the further paradox that a successful policy
may intensify problems linked to the one that is being solved. The latter point can be
refined by the realization that the advantages (and disadvantages) of an effective policy are
not uniform across all segments of society. An end to poverty might fulfill the material
dreams of the lower class, but cause a nightmare of job layoffs among middle-class employ-
ees of the welfare bureaucracy. One group’s solution can be another group’s problem.

The intricacy of the web of problems is suggested in Table 1:2, which displays the esti-
mated effects of a 1% increase in unemployment on suicide, mental disorder, crime, alco-
hol-related disease, and cardiovascular renal disease (Brenner, 1978). One major implica-
tion for policy is the importance of a broad-based societal strategy. A coordinated assault
on a number of related problems should yield more objective benefits than a problem-by-
problem approach. If problem linkages are well understood, such interconnections can be
a strength rather than a weakness. The right policy intervening at the right point in a tan-
gle of problems (for example, reducing unemployment in Table 1:2) may set off a positive
chain reaction in which progress against problem A reduces problem B and C, thus lead-
ing to further progress against A.

IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

A general conclusion of the two preceding sections is that social problems should not be
viewed in isolation from one another. Similarly, it is unwise to separate a specific policy from
the social context in which it is to function. Implementation is the act of putting policies
into practice, of transforming ideal solutions into everyday operations. This transformation
is attempted inside a society filled with other institutions, with individual personalities, and
several major crime bills onto the desks of policy makers. Or take the case of manpower training. The provision of job skills to underprivileged persons through schooling and experience is an idea that has received much public acclaim—and money—over the past two decades. Wide public support has an effect on policy makers who want to be reelected and policy agents who want to be rehired. Careful evaluations by policy experts suggest that manpower training programs have, in the main, failed (Rossi & Freeman, 1985). Not only have special interest groups exploited the policy (Larson & Nikkel, 1979), but the basic individualistic strategy is flawed. Unless changes in the social structure of occupations are also implemented, individuals are left with skills but no job in which to use them.

These case studies show that policy implementation is not magic. Theoretical solutions do not leap off the drawing board into reality. Any program is a complex combination of public attitudes, group interests, and people pursuing bureaucratic careers in the everyday world. Just like the problem it is designed to solve, a policy is a social process that can benefit from sociological scrutiny.

These three dilemmas of social policy stress the need for enlightened action, not the futility of trying. Such barriers have been overcome in a number of successful collaborations of sociologists with policy makers. Even more exciting, though, is the potential for success. In its development as a science, sociology is becoming better and better equipped to answer the applied questions posed by social problems. Policy makers, moreover, are increasingly disposed to listen to and implement these answers. The convergence of both groups in the solution of social problems is an issue we will examine in more detail.

In each of the chapters to follow, the discussion of a given problem will be concluded by a special section on social policy. After a sketch of the two major Strategies for Solution of the problem, each alternative policy will be analyzed in terms of its ability to reduce human suffering in the real—that is, social—world. The latter discussion (entitled Policies into Practice) will recall the lessons just learned about the barriers to social problem solving. A final policy segment will engage in Evaluating the Evidence about the past, present, and future effectiveness of the alternative social programs.
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