CHAPTER 1

SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

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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—and 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.
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.
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.

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
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 lesson 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
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 to 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.
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
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”
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.)
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:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>CAUSE OF DEATH</th>
<th>APPROXIMATE DEATHS PER YEAR</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hamburgers</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(E. coli bacteria)</td>
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<tr>
<td>fresh vegetables</td>
<td>400</td>
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<tr>
<td>(listeria brain infection)</td>
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<td>bee stings</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>dog bites</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>eggs</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(salmonella virus)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>shark attack</td>
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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 irrational 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)

Sociology has something fundamental in common with the medical sciences—both have been conceived in the pursuit of human betterment. As in any academic discipline, the immediate business is seeking knowledge of the subject, but as a well-known sociologist provocatively put it, Knowledge for What? (Lynd, 1939). Immunologists scrupulously study the body’s defenses not only for the exhilaration of discovery, but also to bolster our defenses against AIDS, ebola virus, and other ravagers of humanity. Right from the start, sociology’s insights into the human condition have offered tantalizing glimpses of Utopia. August Comte (1798–1857) is identified by many as the founder of our field; suggesting the progressive purposes of sociology, he entitled his first treatise System of Positive Philosophy (1830/1974). Comte distinguished “pure” from “applied” sociology only to argue that these aspects of the disciplines are inseparable. The humane applications of its scientific findings are a continuing theme of sociology on this side of the Atlantic. The opening quote above was uttered by the first author of a U.S. sociology textbook; currently, tens of thousands of sociologists are at work in the United States helping to solve social problems. This book is in sociology’s rich tradition of trying to fix the society it analyzes.

It is no accident that sociology invented itself in the mid-19th century. Europe was reeling from the unsteady birth of industrial states arising from the bloody death of agrarian aristocracies (Knapp, 1994). The most traumatic event of all was the French
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.
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.
Functionalist. 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 coursework 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:
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 anomie 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 vase 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
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.
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., megastructural) distribution of AIDS cases is associated with the travel policies of national governments (megastructures), 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?
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
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 expose 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. Patently 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
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
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
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 uncertainly 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
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 anomic 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.

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<td>(A) Functionalism</td>
<td>(1) Intrinsic drama</td>
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<td>(B) Conflict theory</td>
<td>(2) Media exposure</td>
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<td>(C) Symbolic interactionism</td>
<td>(B) Expectations</td>
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<td>(III) Explanation applied to micro-, macro-, and mesostructures.</td>
<td>(C) Values</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(1) Positive evaluations decrease subjective concern.</td>
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<td>(2) Negative evaluations increase subjective concern.</td>
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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
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
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
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
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
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 problematical. 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
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!", "Just say no")—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
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, budgetary 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 influential 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 minority 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 various 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 employees 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 estimated effects of a 1% increase in unemployment on suicide, mental disorder, crime, alcohol-related disease, and cardiovascular renal disease (Brenner, 1978). One major implication 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 tangle 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 leading 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
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 implementation 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
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.
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.
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