Investigating Sociology and Social Problems: My Story

A. Javier Treviño

I took my first sociology course as a high school senior, and I knew I had found my calling. Although no one in my family had ever gone to college, I took both sociology courses offered at the local community college in Laredo, Texas, one of which was about social problems. My appetite whetted, I transferred to a state university to get a B.A. degree in sociology. After graduating and completing a year of substitute teaching at my former high school, I decided to get a master’s degree in applied sociology, with an emphasis in social planning. Thinking this would be the end of my academic journey, I planned to work as a probation officer, a marriage counselor, or even a sociology teacher at a community college. But I soon realized I needed to know more about theory to gain a better understanding of the nature and causes of social problems. I enrolled in the Ph.D. sociology program at Boston College, concentrating on crime, deviance, and social control. I was fortunate to study and work with the preeminent criminologist Richard Quinney, who opened my eyes to a critical approach to the problem of crime. Since then I have looked at various issues—crime, deviance, legal matters—theoretically.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1.1 Describe how working-class young adults are currently experiencing their lives.
1.2 Define what constitutes a social problem.
1.3 Explain the sociological imagination.
1.4 Discuss how sociological research can be used to study social problems.
1.5 Explain the three main sociological perspectives of structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.
1.6 Evaluate how each of the three theoretical perspectives can be applied to improve our understanding of social problems.
1.7 Discuss the role of social policy in managing social problems.
1.8 Explore the role of specialized theories in sociology.
1.9 Identify ways in which service sociology can make a difference.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?
Questions About Sociology and Social Problems From the General Social Survey

1. How scientific is sociology?
   - SCIENTIFIC
   - NOT SCIENTIFIC

2. People need not overly worry about others.
   - AGREE
   - DISAGREE
   - NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE

3. Are people helpful or looking out for themselves?
   - HELPFUL
   - LOOKING OUT FOR THEMSELVES

4. People are treated with respect.
   - AGREE
   - DISAGREE

5. Can people be trusted?
   - YES
   - NO

SOURCE: National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago.

Turn to the end of the chapter to view the results for the total population.

Chapter 1: Sociology and Social Problems

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Jalen is a 24-year-old, single black man who works the baseball season as a night-time security guard at a local stadium. He is living in the basement of his aunt and uncle’s house. After graduating high school, with no clear plans for what to do next, Jalen impulsively joined the Marine Corps. After 5 years of service, which included three tours of duty in Afghanistan, he was honorably discharged. That was a year ago. Since then, his attempts to go to college and find a stable job have been thwarted again and again.

Wanting a career in firefighting, Jalen took the civil service exam. He made the city’s hiring list and enrolled at the fire academy. However, on the second day of training Jalen tested positive for marijuana and was expelled. Although he does not consider himself “book smart,” he knows a college degree will get him a good job, and, because he is a veteran, the G.I. Bill will pay for his schooling. He recently enrolled in a local community college, but 2 weeks into the semester, he still doesn’t have his books because he has not yet received his G.I. Bill benefits check, which he needs to buy them. To make matters worse, he owes $18,000 in credit card debt and has no way to pay it off. He is now tentatively considering going back to the Marine Corps.

Jalen is one of 100 young working-class men and women whom sociologist Jennifer M. Silva interviewed for her book Coming Up Short (2013). Silva found that these young people’s coming-of-age experiences—with education, work, relationships—have not measured up to their expectations. Although they continue to hold tight to the American Dream of realizing upward social mobility through hard work and well-paying jobs, they have achieved less than possible for their own fates. They feel they can’t trust social institutions—any set of persons cooperating together for the purpose of organizing stable patterns of human activity—such as the labor market, education, marriage, and government to help them attain a sense of dignity and well-being.

But let’s look at the larger picture and consider these young adults not on a case-by-case basis but as a generational cohort—a group of individuals of similar age within a population who share a particular experience. Now we see that in 2014, 32% of the nation’s 18- to 34-year-olds—the so-called millennial generation—were living with their parents (Fry, 2016a), compared to 20% of those in the same age group in 1960. They were also delaying marriage or not marrying at all. Consider that in the early 1960s the median age at first marriage was 20 for women and 22 for men. By 2016 it had increased to almost 28 for women and 30 for men (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017).

Now, you may say that being single and living with parents is an unfortunate or undesirable situation for those twentysomethings who would rather be married and on their own, but these circumstances are not social problems. Fair enough. But let’s also look at a situation in which many of the young people Silva interviewed found themselves, and that most of us would agree generally is regarded as a social problem: unemployment (the subject of Chapter 10). And let’s consider unemployment on the basis of demographic factors, or social characteristics of a population—in particular race, age, and gender.

When we look at race (the subject of Chapter 3), we find that in 2016, black men like Jalen had the highest unemployment rate of any racial/ethnic group, 9.1%. Compare this to white men, who had a 4.4% unemployment rate (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017c). As for age, we know there is plenty of discrimination against older persons in the labor market (as we will see in Chapter 6), but we also know that in 2016, 8.4% of people around Jalen’s age, 20–24, were unemployed.

What is the social problem in the scenario above? Let’s see. Due to their difficult situation, these young people experience a whole range of feelings: confusion, bitterness, regret, disappointment, betrayal, hope. In their interviews with Silva about their individual life experiences, they largely blame themselves for their inadequate education, unexpected layoffs, and failed relationships. They believe they are responsible for their own fates. They feel they can’t trust social institutions—any set of persons cooperating together for the purpose of organizing stable patterns of human activity—such as the labor market, education, marriage, and government to help them attain a sense of dignity and well-being.

Social institutions: Any set of persons, such as a family, economy, government, or religion, cooperating for the purpose of organizing stable patterns of human activity.

Cohort: Within a population, a group of individuals of similar age who share a particular experience.

Demographic factors: Social characteristics of a population, in particular those of race, age, and gender.
compared to 4.2% of people 25–54 years of age (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017d). Concerning gender (the subject of Chapter 4), we know that in 2015, women working full-time received 81 cents for every dollar earned by male workers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016b).

But what are we to make of all these statistics? For the moment, simply this: An awful lot of U.S. adults—tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, even millions—are in the same predicament as those young men and women, like Jalen, whom Silva interviewed. And though they may have felt alone and isolated, these young people were not the only ones experiencing such circumstances. In other words, unemployment is not only a matter of these young people’s personal troubles; it is, in fact, a collective problem.

Another important issue to consider briefly now, to which we will be paying greater attention in the rest of this textbook, is that some groups of people experience social conditions—like unemployment and its related issues of discrimination in hiring and wage earning—at higher levels than do other groups. It is for this reason that sociologists look at intersectionality, or the ways in which several demographic factors combine to affect people’s experiences. In Jalen’s case, we would consider how his age (young adult), race (black), gender (male), and social class (working class) combine to shape his life.

So let’s now look at the demographic factor that, in addition to age, characterized all the 100 young people with whom Silva spoke: social class (discussed in more depth in Chapter 2). A social class is a category of people whose experiences in life are determined by the amount of income and wealth they own and control. Remember that the young adults Silva interviewed were from a working-class background. No doubt you have heard and read about the various social classes that exist in U.S. society. There is no agreement, even among social scientists, on how to distinguish among social classes, much less on how many there are. But we typically hear about the upper class (think here about such wealthy people as Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos and Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg), the middle classes (usually referred to in the plural because there are several levels within this middle rank), and the poor (sometimes called the working poor, the homeless, or the indigent).

The working class, which we can place between the middle classes and the poor, generally consists of people who have a basic education (a high school diploma, vocational skills training, certification in a service occupation), modest income (earned from hourly wages), and jobs in manufacturing or the “service economy” (factory workers, truck drivers, cooks, waiters and waitresses, nurses, police officers). Thirty or so years ago, when the parents of the young men and women Silva spoke with were coming of age, young working-class adults were better able to get steady jobs and maintain relatively stable lives for themselves and their families. What has happened since then to lead thousands of working-class men and women in their 20s and 30s to increasingly remain unmarried, live at home with their parents, have children out of wedlock or not have children at all, divorce, and remain unemployed or stuck in low-paying jobs? We’ll address this important question in due course, but first we turn to the discipline of sociology and its examination of social problems.

**ASK YOURSELF:** Think of a social issue about which you and your peers have expressed concern. How do you think this issue affects other people your age but from a social class different from yours? A different race or ethnicity? Think of the ways in which you do or do not identify with the young working-class adults Jennifer Silva interviewed.

### THE SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

1.2 Define what constitutes a social problem.

Intersectionality: The ways in which several demographic factors—especially social class, race, ethnicity, and gender—combine to affect people’s experiences.

Social class: A category of people whose experiences in life are determined by the amount of income and wealth they own and control.
As the study of social behavior and human society, sociology is the field most likely to examine systematically social problems such as poverty, social discrimination (on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, age), crime, drug abuse, immigration, climate change, terrorism, and more.

This textbook consists of 17 chapters on various social problems. They were written by sociologists who are experts in the social problems they discuss. While social problems may sometimes differ in their extent, and while we may research and analyze them differently, we define a social problem as a social condition, event, or pattern of behavior that negatively affects the well-being of a significant number of people (or a number of significant people) who believe that the condition, event, or pattern needs to be changed or ameliorated. Let's consider the various aspects of our definition, and some of their implications, in turn.

Patterns and Trends

To begin with, in discussing social problems we are talking about conditions, events, or behaviors that occur locally, nationally, or globally and cause or threaten to cause harm to all or some segment of the population. Consider the failure of U.S. schools to teach children basic literacy skills as a social condition that means many students (particularly poor and minority children) will not be well prepared to enter the job market, and that the United States will be less competitive in the world economy. Or consider a series of events like Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria, which, when they made landfall in Texas, Florida, and Puerto Rico during the summer of 2017, flooded hundreds of thousands of homes, caused hundreds of billions of dollars in property damage, and killed over 100 people. Finally, consider as a social problem a pattern of behavior like the increased abuse of prescription opioid pain relievers, ADHD stimulants, and anti-anxiety drugs by young adults, which in 2014 led to more than 1,700 deaths (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2017a).

Because social problems affect large numbers of people, sociologists typically discuss them in terms of patterns and trends, and use measures of rates to describe how frequent and pervasive their occurrence is. For example, we’ve all heard about how politicians, civic leaders, religious leaders, and average citizens are concerned about the crime rates in their cities and communities. In studying rates of crime, sociologists and criminologists rely on certain data sources, or collections of information, like the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports (UCR; to be discussed in Chapter 11). When we look at the UCR’s percentage of violent crime by U.S. region, we see that in 2015, the South had the highest rate of violent crime (murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault) at 41.2%, compared to the Northeast region, with 14.7% (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2015a).

Patterns and trends can be visually presented in a variety of formats, including charts, tables, and graphs. Throughout this textbook you will see data depicted in this way. Back in the 1920s and 1930s the sociologists at the University of Chicago were interested in studying the incidence and prevalence of alcoholism, suicide, mental illness, and crime and delinquency in the city. Knowing that these problems tend to be more concentrated in some areas than in others, they wanted to identify their distribution throughout Chicago. For this they used maps. One of the most common types was the spot map, on which the researchers plotted the locations where a particular social problem was present. For example, Figure 1.1 is a map in which the spots indicate the home addresses of 8,591 alleged male juvenile delinquents during 1927.

### The Objective and Subjective Aspects of Social Problems

We will come back to the way sociologists use and produce information about social problems when they do research, but for now notice that in measuring the rate of crime—or, for that matter, of divorce, population growth, or sex

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**Table 1.1: A Ranking of Social Problems**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Dissatisfaction with government/Poor leadership</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Race relations/Racism</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Health care</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Unifying the country</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Immigration/illegal aliens</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In a Gallup public opinion poll conducted in November 2017, a random national sample of 1,000 adults was asked, “What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today?” Above are the top five results.

**Source:** http://www.gallup.com/poll/1675/most-important-problem.aspx

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**Sociology:** The study of social behavior and human society.

**Social problem:** A social condition, event, or pattern of behavior that negatively affects the well-being of a significant number of people (or a number of significant people) who believe that the condition, event, or pattern needs to be changed or ameliorated.

**Data sources:** Collections of information.
More complicated, however, is the **subjective aspect of social problems**. Here we are talking about what people define as a social problem. There is often a close link between the objective and subjective aspects of a problem. For example, people are made objectively aware (usually through official data) that the murder rate in their community has doubled over the past 5 years, and, as a consequence, they become subjectively concerned about their safety and that of their community.

But even without a direct interaction between the objective and the subjective, people can be troubled about a particular social condition, event, or pattern of behavior. Consider that, on average, over twice as many people in the United States die from injuries sustained in motor vehicle crashes as die from HIV infection: In 2014, fatalities from these two causes were 32,744 and 12,333, respectively (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016c; National Traffic Safety Administration, 2015). Yet there are far more organizations and campaigns for AIDS awareness in the United States and worldwide—such as Acting on AIDS, ACT UP, the Stop AIDS Project, and the Elton John AIDS Foundation—than there are for car crashes. No doubt there are many justifiable reasons for this disproportionate focus, but while **objectively** the problem of auto fatalities causes twice as much harm to people and society, **subjectively** people are much more concerned about the problem of AIDS. In other words, if one troubling condition is more pervasive or more detrimental than another (and even if there’s factual information indicating this), that doesn’t necessarily mean people will perceive the condition as more problematic.

Another subjective aspect of social problems is the **relativity** with which people identify them. First, what is viewed as a social problem in one time and place may not be viewed as a social problem in another time and place. As we will see in Chapter 6, public attitudes toward the aged have fluctuated between positive and negative over the past 200 years. Currently, politicians and policy makers worry that the rapidly growing segment of the U.S. population aged 65 and older will strain government programs like Social Security and Medicare; contrast this attitude with the past, when elderly people were more respected and were valued for their wisdom and insight. Second, relativity ensures that some segments of the population experience the social problem and others do not, or they experience it to a different extent. For

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**Objective aspect of social problems**: Those empirical conditions or facts that point to the concreteness of social problems "out there."

**Subjective aspect of social problems**: The process by which people define social problems.
Part I: The Sociological Study of Social Problems

example, the pervasiveness of assault rifles in U.S. society is a social problem to advocates of stricter gun laws, but not to supporters of gun ownership rights.

The subjective element of social problems is framed by a theoretical approach called social constructionism, which describes the social process by which people define a social problem into existence. Simply put, “social problems are what people think they are” (Spector & Kitsuse, 1987, p. 73). Throughout the chapters in this textbook you will find many of the authors taking a constructionist approach in their analyses of various social phenomena.

Returning to our definition of a social problem, we’ve said that a sufficient or significant number of people must conceptualize the condition as problematic. This means enough people—a critical mass, in fact—must be concerned about the troubling or objectionable situation to call attention to it (in the chapters to follow they are generally called claims-makers). Because social problems are collective in nature, large collections of people are required to define them as such.

Sociologists also acknowledge that, when it comes to deciding which conditions are problematic, some people and groups are more significant or have greater influence than others. This speaks to the issue of political power. For example, as criminologist Richard Quinney (1970) notes, the more the powerful segments of society—such as politicians, bankers, and corporate executives—are concerned about crime, the greater the probability that laws will be created to prohibit such behaviors as muggings, store thefts, and drug use. Conversely, there will be fewer laws to prohibit behaviors like profiting from campaign financing, insider trading, and price-fixing. According to Quinney, definitions of crime align with the interests of those segments of society with the power to shape social policy. We will discuss the relationship between social problems and social policy shortly. But first let’s consider why, once people perceive a social situation as detrimental to their well-being or that of others, they believe some sort of action must be taken to change or improve the situation.

Types of Action

The type of action needed to bring about large-scale social change is usually aimed at transforming the social structure, the pattern of interrelated social institutions. Such action typically includes organizing and mobilizing large numbers of people into social movements, which are collective efforts to realize social change in order to solve social problems. Think about how the Black Lives Matter movement, the 2017 Women’s March on Washington, and the Occupy Wall Street movement, mainly through various forms of demonstration, brought attention to the issues of racial, gender, and income inequality, respectively. In order to bring about greater justice and equality for people of color, women, and the 99%, these social movements sought to change, among other things, immigration policy, women’s rights, financial institutions, the police, and the political system.

Actions meant to ameliorate (from the Latin melior, to improve) a problematic condition are usually aimed at helping those in need. This means providing, in some cases, the material relief necessary for physical survival (money, food, clothes); in most cases, however, it means providing nonmaterial services, such as counseling (employment, parenting), dispute resolution (peace talks, mediation), education (instruction and encouragement), and professional consultation (on specific troublesome
issues). People hoping to take or support these kinds of actions typically engage in community service, civic engagement, and advocacy. Think about organized forms of volunteerism and activism like AmeriCorps, the Red Cross, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Do Something, Save the Children, Oxfam, and the United Way.

**ASK YOURSELF:** What troubling situations do you see in your community (neighborhood, campus)? How do these fit, or not fit, the definition of social problems given above? Do they have both objective and subjective aspects? Explain.

### THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

#### Explain the sociological imagination.

We now return to the question of what social structural changes have occurred during the past three decades to lead millions of working-class young adults like Jalen to join the military because they can’t find jobs, to move back in with their parents, or to struggle to get through college, pay back their loans, and make their monthly car payments. Remember that these millennials—though they try hard to achieve the American Dream of finding stable jobs, getting married, and owning their own homes—largely blame themselves for having stopped “growing up.” They feel insecure, powerless, and isolated. They feel trapped.

More than half a century ago, the American sociologist C. Wright Mills (1916–1962) wrote the following lines, which could easily be describing the lives of young working-class men and women today:

> Nowadays men [and women] often feel that their private lives are a series of traps. They sense that within their everyday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles. . . . Underlying this sense of being trapped are seemingly impersonal changes in the very structure of continent-wide societies. . . . Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both. (Mills, 1959, p. 3; emphases added)

Mills is saying that in order to understand our personal hardships and our own individual feelings, we must be aware of the larger forces of history and of social structure. To gain this awareness, he proposes, we should use a way of thinking that he calls the sociological imagination. The **sociological imagination** is a form of self-consciousness that allows us to go beyond our immediate environments (of family, neighborhood, work) and understand the major structural transformations that have occurred and are occurring. For working-class young men and women, some of these transformations have to do with family patterns, increased inequality of income and wealth, the rise of the service economy, declining social mobility, and depressed wages. These are some of the structural changes that have occurred during the past 30 years that in many ways operate against the working-class millennials’ attempts to create stable and predictable adult lives.

The sociological imagination provides us with insight into the social conditions of our lives. It helps us understand why we feel trapped and insecure, isolated and powerless. The sociological imagination helps us make the connection between *history* and *biography*, between our own society and our private lives, and become aware

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**Sociological imagination:** A form of self-consciousness that allows us to go beyond our immediate environments of family, neighborhood, and work and understand the major structural transformations that have occurred and are occurring.

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C. Wright Mills was a leading critic of U.S. society in the 1950s and made contributions to the sociological perspective known as conflict theory. Mills taught at Columbia University and wrote about the power arrangements in U.S. society in such books as *White Collar* and *The Power Elite*. His most famous book, *The Sociological Imagination*, was published in 1959.
of all individuals in similar circumstances. In short, the sociological imagination allows us to see our personal troubles as social problems. In this way we are not only able to confront social problems, but we are also aware of the social problems’ origins. We come to understand that what we see and feel as personal misfortunes (for example, our inability to achieve the milestones of adulthood) are predicaments shared by many others and difficult for any one individual to solve.

But Mills (1959, p. 150) also asserts that the “problems of [our] societies are almost inevitably problems of the world.” In other words, the sociological imagination requires that we take a global perspective, comparing our own society to other societies in all the world’s regions. When we can understand the social problems of U.S. society in relationship to social problems in other countries, we are using the sociological imagination even more broadly. You will see that, in discussing social problems, the authors of the following chapters take a global perspective. In addition, each chapter contains a “Beyond Our Borders” box featuring discussion of the problem in a global context.

Also be aware that the expert authors writing on various social problems in these chapters have all been trained in sociology. And regardless of the fact that they specialize in one or a few social problems in their research and writing, as sociologists they have several things in common. First, they employ the sociological imagination, frequently from a global perspective. Second, they rely on sociological research. Third, they make use of sociological theory.

ASK YOURSELF: Do people you know feel trapped in their daily lives? How or why? Explain the sociological imagination in your own words. Explain how a social problem in the United States affects other areas of the world.

SOCIOPHOCAL RESEARCH

Discuss how sociological research can be used to study social problems.

In discussing the objective aspect of social problems, we noted that sociologists look at patterns and trends in regard to police brutality, poverty, the opioid epidemic, auto fatalities, and so on. In order to identify these patterns and trends they require numerical facts, like rates, percentages, and ratios. Sometimes these facts are available in data sources such as the General Social Survey (GSS). One of the largest sources for social scientific data in the United States, the GSS includes data on social trends, demographics, behaviors, opinions, and attitudes. GSS data are freely available over the Internet (http://www.gss.norc.org) to policy makers, researchers, government officials, students, and the general public. Other data sources from which sociologists draw numerical facts for conducting social problems research include the ones listed in Table 1.2. Often, however, sociologists need to collect their own original data firsthand. In either case, we refer to these types of data collection as quantitative research because they rely on the empirical investigation of social problems through statistical analysis.

When it comes to the subjective aspects of social problems, sociologists tend to be less interested in facts and figures and more interested in the ways people define, experience, or understand problematic situations. In order to achieve this understanding, they engage in qualitative research, much as Jennifer Silva did when she talked with 100 young men and women of the working class to learn about their lives and feelings. When sociologists conduct studies of social problems, they can employ several research methods or techniques for obtaining information. Let’s look at three of these research methods.

Survey Research

For quantitative research, the method most commonly used is the survey, a technique in which respondents are asked to answer questions on a written questionnaire. A questionnaire is a set of questions a researcher presents to respondents for their answers. Questionnaires typically ask questions that measure variables, such as attitudes (say, political affiliation), behaviors (religious services attendance), and marriage statuses. Researchers may administer questionnaires in person or by telephone, or they can send them through the mail or use the Internet. Because it is often impractical to survey every subject in a population of interest—for example, every homeless person in a large city—the researcher selects a sample of subjects that represents that population. In this way the researcher tries to reach conclusions about all the
participant observation, a method in which the researcher observes and studies people in their everyday settings. The researcher collects data through direct observation and in this way gains a deep understanding of and familiarity with the workings of a particular group, community, or social event. Groups and settings that sociologists observe include impoverished neighborhoods, emergency rooms, homeless shelters, religious groups, secret societies, gangs, welfare mothers, taxi drivers, and pregnant teens.

A good example of participant observation research is a study in which sociologist Nicole Gonzalez Van Cleve (2016) examined how the criminal courts in Cook County–Chicago dispensed racialized punishments to African American and Latino defendants before, during, and after they were found guilty. Van Cleve spent 9 months working as a law clerk in order to incorporate both participant and observer roles. During that time she observed open-court interactions and private plea-bargaining exchanges. She interacted with court officials and defendants—in attorney’s offices, courtrooms, hallways, jails, and judge’s chambers. Van Cleve learned how racial meanings become ingrained within the courthouse culture despite the procedural protections available to the defendants—most of whom were people of color. She found that the race-neutral or “colorblind” ideology espoused by the white attorneys and judges masked the truth.

**Participant Observation**

Because qualitative researchers seek to understand the social world from the subject’s point of view, they frequently employ participant observation, a method in which the researcher observes and studies people in their everyday settings. The researcher collects data through direct observation and in this way gains a deep understanding of and familiarity with the workings of a particular group, community, or social event. Groups and settings that sociologists observe include impoverished neighborhoods, emergency rooms, homeless shelters, religious groups, secret societies, gangs, welfare mothers, taxi drivers, and pregnant teens.

A good example of participant observation research is a study in which sociologist Nicole Gonzalez Van Cleve (2016) examined how the criminal courts in Cook County–Chicago dispensed racialized punishments to African American and Latino defendants before, during, and after they were found guilty. Van Cleve spent 9 months working as a law clerk in order to incorporate both participant and observer roles. During that time she observed open-court interactions and private plea-bargaining exchanges. She interacted with court officials and defendants—in attorney’s offices, courtrooms, hallways, jails, and judge’s chambers. Van Cleve learned how racial meanings become ingrained within the courthouse culture despite the procedural protections available to the defendants—most of whom were people of color. She found that the race-neutral or “colorblind” ideology espoused by the white attorneys and judges masked the truth.

**Participant observation** A research method that includes observing and studying people in their everyday settings.
racial divides and unequal treatment that were endemic in the criminal courts she studied. Van Cleve could not have revealed the culture of racialized justice that exists in the Cook County court system had she not spent long periods of time observing the everyday nature of the courthouse.

**Interviewing**

Quantitative research has the advantages of providing precise numerical data and of generalizing research findings. Qualitative research, on the other hand, has the advantage of providing in-depth information that describes complex phenomena in rich detail. One research method that may include both quantitative and qualitative elements is interviewing, the form of data collection in which the researcher asks respondents a series of questions. Interviews can be conducted face to face or on the phone, on a number of issues (sexual harassment, texting while driving, cutbacks to social welfare programs), and in a variety of settings (at home, on the street, on the Internet). Researchers record the subjects’ responses in writing or by audio recording. Once recorded, the responses can be treated quantitatively when researchers assign numerical values to them, enter the values into a data analysis program, and then run various statistical commands to identify patterns across responses. Researchers can use the patterns to make comparisons between different sample groups. Interviews can also be treated qualitatively, as guided conversations that let respondents talk at length and in detail. In this case the researcher listens carefully and may ask follow-up questions. Once the responses have been recorded, the researcher can identify categories or themes across them. This helps the researcher determine which issues from the interviews are significant.

One study that relied heavily on interviews was done by sociologist Sharmila Rudrappa (2015). Wanting to find out how the phenomenon of surrogacy—when women are paid to carry and deliver babies for people who cannot conceive them biologically—was experienced and transacted, Rudrappa conducted in-depth interviews with women from India, who served as surrogate mothers. These Indian women were hired to have babies mostly by white parents in the United States and Australia. She discovered that many of the surrogate mothers experienced a great deal of ambivalence in the process of sharing children. In the interviews, some women spoke candidly about how grateful they were to become surrogates, while others told about how they had to emotionally distance themselves from the babies they were bearing. As she listened carefully to what these women had to say, Rudrappa realized they were giving new meanings to the value of babies and motherhood.

**Mixed Methods**

Because each method offers its own advantages, sociologists often combine quantitative and qualitative methods of research to achieve a fuller picture of the social problems they are studying. One example is Carla Shedd’s (2015) research exploring how the views that inner-city youth have of themselves and the larger social world are shaped by their experiences as they go from home to school and back. Shedd relied on a University of Chicago data source that documents thousands of Chicago public school students’ perceptions of social injustice, on in-depth interviews that she conducted with students in high schools with different racial compositions, and on her participant observation research of schools and local communities. By employing these various techniques, Shedd was able to show how these young people’s beliefs about their economic and educational opportunities are determined by their race and place of residence.

*Andrea Neal, a sociology student at Pierce College, interviews Nathan Jaffe, a retired engineer. She is attempting to find out what it means to be a senior citizen in the community. What do you think are some of the merits of conducting interviews in doing research?*
Interview With Sociologist Joel Best

You have written many important books that focus on understanding how and why people become concerned with particular social problems. These include The Stupidity Epidemic: Worrying About Students, Schools, and America’s Future; How Claims Spread: Cross-National Diffusion of Social Problems; and Images of Issues: Typifying Contemporary Social Problems. How, in brief, do social problems emerge?

We start thinking that something is a social problem after someone makes a claim and other folks start to pay attention. Imagine a guy standing on the sidewalk warning about invading extraterrestrials—that’s a claim, but if no one responds to it, then the alien invasion doesn’t become a social problem. All sorts of people can make claims: people who have been victimized, activists, experts, journalists, and so on. Typically, there is a social problems process: the original claim attracts attention, which leads to media coverage that brings the topic to a wider audience, which in turn affects public opinion, and that leads to policy makers trying to establish some way of dealing with the troubling condition. In my view, it is not the nature of a social condition that makes something a social problem; rather, social problems emerge through this process of collective definition. If people don’t define something as a social problem, then it isn’t one.

You have also written several books on how questionable statistics influence how we think about social problems. These include Damned Lies and Statistics; More Damned Lies and Statistics; and Stat-Spotting: A Field Guide to Identifying Dubious Data. How can we deal with statistics and other data intended to influence how we think about social problems?

Social problems can be big and messy. We need statistics to understand them. At the same time, we need to realize statistics about social problems may come from people who worry more about the problem than the accuracy of their numbers. “This is a big problem,” they reason, “and here’s a big number, so it must be about right.” This doesn’t mean they’re trying to spread false numbers, just that they may not be thinking carefully about the statistics they use. Therefore, it is important that we think critically about the social problems statistics we hear. In particular, when you encounter a statistic that seems particularly alarming, it’s a good idea to take a deep breath and start asking some questions. Who did the counting? What did they count? How did they count it, and why? Statistics may be accurate, but sometimes we discover that a figure is little more than a guess.

In the conference talk that you gave as president of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, you ended by saying that you believe in the value of the sociological perspective. What value does sociology have for understanding social problems?

Sociology is like a pair of glasses: Put them on and you’ll see the world differently. Our common-sense reasoning tells us that of course the world is the way it is, while everyday explanations for people’s behavior tend to emphasize personality traits. In contrast, sociology teaches us to look for the ways people affect one another, for the patterns in social life. It encourages us to stop taking things for granted, to question why our lives take the forms they do. Psychologists tend to focus on the behavior of individuals, just as economists try to understand life in terms of rational choices. Each of these perspectives can be illuminating when we ask some sorts of questions. Sociology offers another, distinctive perspective. I find the questions it can answer particularly interesting, and that’s why I became a sociologist.

In each of the chapters to follow you will find a “Researching” box feature that discusses a study or two done on a particular social problem, including information on methods and results.

**ASK YOURSELF:** Think of a social problem you would like to research. Which of the three research methods discussed above do you think is best suited for your purposes? Why?

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THREE SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES

Explore the three main sociological perspectives of structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.

Once researchers have collected the information they need—whether through data sources, surveys, participant
observation, interviewing, or other research methods—they must then make sociological sense of that information. In other words, they need to manage the data in a way that tells them something new or different about the social issue under consideration. In order to do this, they use theory, a collection of related concepts.

Concepts are ideas sociologists have about some aspect of the social world. They tend to be articulated as terms—words or phrases that make up the vocabulary of sociology. So far in this chapter, we have used and defined several sociological concepts, including “social institution,” “social class,” “social problem,” “social constructionism,” and “social structure.” Throughout this textbook you will meet many concepts, introduced in boldface green type. These terms are defined at the bottom of the page, and the Glossary at the end of the book provides a comprehensive listing of these concepts and their definitions.

Concepts are also the building blocks of theory, and in this sense a theory is an attempt to articulate the relationship between concepts. Sociologists, for example, may want to examine the connection between certain types of social structure and certain types of social problems. Thus, they may pose such questions as the following: Does the kind of economic institution we have contribute to high levels of poverty? How does our political system prevent us from providing adequate health care to everyone? Why do some communities have higher rates of violent crime than others? Or sociologists may want to analyze the relationship between social problems and certain behaviors and attitudes. In that case they might ask questions like these: How might sexist attitudes prevent the country from maximizing the numbers of scientists and engineers it produces? Why do students in some countries have uniformly high scores on math, science, and literacy exams, while in the United States there are large gaps in performance between the highest-scoring and the lowest-scoring students?

While sociology encompasses many theories, there are three main theories with which all sociologists, regardless of their specialty areas, are familiar: structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. Because they are very broad theories they are sometimes called paradigms, or theoretical perspectives. Let’s get familiar with each of these in turn before we look at how policy makers can apply them to addressing social problems.

Structural Functionalism

Structural functionalism (or functionalism) is the sociological theory that considers how various social phenomena function, or work in a positive way, to maintain unity and order in society. The theory of structural functionalism dates back to the beginnings of sociology, and some of its ideas can be traced to several 19th-century sociologists, including Herbert Spencer.

Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) viewed society as an organism, which is to say as an integrated system made up of different social institutions, all working together to keep it going. Just as the human body (a biological organism) has many organs (the heart, brain, liver, kidneys, and so on), all of which are necessary for its survival, so too does society need the various institutions of the economy, the government, the family, religion, and so on to keep it orderly and cohesive. Each institution works in different ways to benefit society. For example, some of the functions—that is, positive consequences—of the family are that it provides an expedient way for humans to

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**Theory:** A collection of related concepts.

**Concepts:** Ideas that sociologists have about some aspect of the social world.

**Paradigms:** Theoretical perspectives.

**Structural functionalism (or functionalism):** The sociological theory that considers how various social phenomena function, or work in a positive way, to maintain unity and order in society.

**Functions:** Positive consequences of social structures or social institutions.
reproduce themselves biologically; it provides emotional support to family members; and it teaches, or socializes, children in the rules of society. Some of the functions of religion are that it gives answers to the larger questions of existence (What existed before the Big Bang? What happens after death?); it presents us with ideas about what is right and wrong; and it brings members of a particular religious group closer together in their shared beliefs. In short, social institutions have functions for society.

Talcott Parsons (1902–1979) was the most famous theorist of structural functionalism. His theory of the functions of social systems is very complex, but here we are concerned only with what he called “the problem of order.” Simply put, Parsons believed that for society as a social system to keep functioning smoothly, it needs to maintain social order. And because the social institutions already provide functions for society, social order is common. However, sometimes strains and tensions threaten to disrupt social integration and stability. Think of wars, revolutions, political polarization, racial tensions, and terrorist attacks. Parsons believed that one way societies can prevent such disruptions is by encouraging people to conform to society’s expectations. This is best achieved by having them abide by the same shared norms, or rules, and values, or beliefs. Thus, for Parsons, consensus produces social order.

Sociologist Robert K. Merton (1910–2003) agreed that social institutions and social structures can have functions. But he saw that they can also have dysfunctions, or negative consequences. Consider how the family can be a refuge from the larger world, where family members can get nurturance, love, and acceptance in ways that are not available to them in other institutional settings. But also consider how the family can be the setting where domestic violence, contentious divorce, and the sexual and emotional abuse of children may occur.

Merton would have us examine both the functions and the dysfunctions of social phenomena, and he would also have us ask about our social structures, “Functional for whom?” In other words, we must be aware that while a social phenomenon like income inequality in the social structure of U.S. society is dysfunctional for one group (the poor), it may be quite functional for another (the wealthy). This may be one reason why the rich, as stakeholders in the economic institution, may not define income inequality as a social problem or may not want to change the social structure that creates it.

**Conflict Theory**

**Conflict theory** is the sociological theory that focuses on dissent, coercion, and antagonism in society. In this sense we may see conflict theory as the opposite of structural functionalism. It too has its roots in the 19th century, particularly in the ideas of Karl Marx.

Karl Marx (1818–1883) was first and foremost engaged in critiquing capitalism, the economic system that includes the ownership of private property, the making of financial profit, and the hiring of workers. Marx saw two main antagonistic social classes in capitalist society. The first, the capitalists (or bourgeoisie), make up the economically dominant class that privately owns and controls human labor, raw materials, land, tools, machinery, technologies, and factories.
labor, raw materials, land, tools, machinery, technologies, and factories. The second social class consists of the **workers** (or proletariat), who own no property and must work for the capitalists in order to support themselves and their families financially. In their effort to maximize their profits, capitalists exploit workers by not paying them the full value of their work. Because their labor is bought and sold by the capitalists who hire and fire them, workers are treated as machines, not as human beings. Many sociologists have been influenced by Marx’s conflict theory and examine the frictions that exist between the powerful social classes (the rich, the 1%, the wealthy) and the powerless social classes (the working class, the 99%, the poor), and that give rise to a variety of social problems related to the unequal distribution of wealth.

Ralf Dahrendorf departed from Marx’s focus on the conflict between social classes and looked instead to the conflict between **interest groups**, organized associations of people mobilized into action because of their membership in those associations. For Dahrendorf (1959), social inequalities have their basis not only in economic differences but also in **political power**. Simply put, those with power give orders and those without power take orders. Power relationships lead to the tensions between interest groups (also called advocacy groups, or lobbying groups). Thus, for Dahrendorf, social conflict in relationship to social problems occurs among interest groups—such as Americans for Prosperity, Heritage Action for America, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and People for the American Way—some of which are politically progressive while others are politically conservative.

Those groups with sufficient political power use it, usually by influencing legislation, to protect their interests. Consider the politically powerful interest groups on opposite sides of the issue of gun control, such as those that support required background checks for all gun purchases (Everytown for Gun Safety) and those that oppose such checks (National Rifle Association). Or consider interest groups that favor abortion rights (Planned Parenthood and the National Organization for Women) and those that do not (Americans United for Life and the National Right to Life Committee).

In short, conflict theory looks at how one group or social class tries to dominate another in situations it perceives as threatening to its interests and well-being. In this sense, what one group considers to be a social problem (say, the sale of assault rifles), another group may not.

### Symbolic Interactionism

As mentioned above, in the discussion of the subjective element of social problems, the **social constructionist** approach says that certain social conditions, events, or patterns of behavior are social problems because people **define** them as such. The third major sociological theory, symbolic interactionism, also takes a definitional approach to understanding social problems, but rather than looking at the social structure it tends to focus on **social interaction**, or the communication that occurs between two or more people. **Symbolic interactionism** is the sociological perspective that sees society as the product of symbols (words, gestures, objects) that are given meaning by people in their interactions with each other. Symbolic interactionism has its origins in the ideas of George Herbert Mead.

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**Workers**: Those who own no property and must work for the capitalists in order to support themselves and their families financially.

**Interest groups**: Organized associations of people mobilized into action because of their membership in those associations.

**Social interaction**: The communication that occurs between two or more people.

**Symbolic interactionism**: The sociological perspective that sees society as the product of symbols (words, gestures, objects) given meaning by people in their interactions with each other.
George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) was interested in understanding the relationship between mind, self, and society (Mead, 1934). For Mead, mind refers to the internal conversations we have within ourselves. In other words, we continuously think about ourselves and about what is going on around us, and all this requires the use of language. Language is nothing more than a system of symbols (objects that represent something else) that we interpret. For example, you are reading the words on this page because you have learned to interpret the symbols (the written words) of the English language. But unless you can read Russian, the following words are not meaningful to you: Эти слова для вас не имеют никакого значения. In the same way you learned to read words, you learned to read or “define” a clock (symbolic of time), a map (symbolic of a particular physical place), a smile (symbolic of an emotion), and so on. Just as important as our ability to define symbols is our ability to define our self. The social self is a process by which we are able to see ourselves in relationship to others. We are not born with a social self, which is why newborns do not have a sense of who they are. They have no self-consciousness. We can acquire the social self only after we have learned to consider who we are in relationship to the attitudes and expectations of others, of society.

Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929) went further and proposed the concept of the looking-glass self, or the idea that we see ourselves as we think others see us (Cooley, 1902a). For example, if our friends, family, and teachers continually tell us we are clever, then we are likely to see ourselves as clever. If, on the other hand, teachers, police, and judges define, or “label,” us as delinquent, we are likely to take on the identity of delinquent.

In addition to defining symbols (words, gestures, objects) and our social self (who we are), we define social situations. Long ago, sociologist W. I. Thomas noted that if people define a social situation as real, it will be real in its consequences (Thomas & Thomas, 1928). This means, for example, that if you and other students define what is going on in the classroom as a lecture, you will listen closely to the speaker and take lecture notes. But if you define it as a funeral or a religious revival (admittedly harder to do), then it is that situation instead, and you will act appropriately. And if you define it as a party, then the consequences are that you stop taking notes and stop raising your hand to ask questions and instead mingle, talk to your friends, and have a good time.

As an extension of these ideas we may also propose a concept originated by Merton: the self-fulfilling prophecy, or the social process whereby a false definition of a situation brings about behavior that makes the false definition “come true.” Let’s combine and apply the self-fulfilling prophecy and the looking-glass self. Imagine a 5-year-old child, Marisol, who is a recent immigrant from Mexico and speaks only Spanish. Her parents enroll her in an English-only school, and her teacher notices that Marisol does not say much in class, does not raise her hand to ask questions like the other students, and does not interact with playmates on the playground. After a while the teacher—and other teachers and students—may label Marisol as shy, introverted, a slow learner, asocial, and so on. Now, Marisol is actually none of these things, but she eventually starts to see herself that way and then becomes timid and unsure of herself. A couple of years later, Marisol is placed in a classroom for slow learners with interpersonal issues.

**Ask Yourself:** Think of a social problem you would like to research. Which of the three theoretical perspectives discussed above do you think is best suited for your purposes? Why?

### Applying the Three Theories To Social Problems

Let us now consider how we can apply each of the three main theoretical perspectives in sociology to gain a better understanding of social problems.

**Structural Functionalism and Suicide**

To illustrate how functionalism has been applied to the real world, we turn to the French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) and his classic study on the social problem of suicide. Durkheim understood that all societies, in order to continue as they are, need two things. The first, social integration, describes a certain degree of unity. In order words, people need to come together and stay together. The opposite of social integration is social disintegration, which leads to the collapse of society. The

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**Mind:** The internal conversations we have within ourselves.

**Symbols:** Words, gestures, and objects to which people give meaning.

**Social self:** A process by which people are able to see themselves in relationship to others.

**Looking-glass self:** The idea that we see ourselves as we think others see us.

**Self-fulfilling prophecy:** The social process whereby a false definition of a situation brings about behavior that makes the false definition “come true.”

**Social integration:** The unity or cohesiveness of society.
second necessary condition, **social regulation**, means that to maintain social order, societies need to have a certain degree of control over the behavior of their members. This is typically achieved by having people follow social norms. The opposite of social regulation is **social disorder**, which may lead to what Durkheim called **anomie**, or a state of normlessness. Both social integration and social regulation are functional for society, but they can become dysfunctional and lead to social problems when there is too much or too little of them.

Turning to the differences in suicide rates among various groups, Durkheim (1979/1897) found, for example, that suicide rates are higher among men than among women, higher for those who are single than for those who are married, and higher among Protestants than among Catholics or Jews. He explained these and other group differences by looking at the degree of social integration and social regulation and identified four types of social suicide.

When a group has too much social integration, when it is overly cohesive, conditions lead to **altruistic suicide**. Here, group members sacrifice their lives for the group. For example, although many complex reasons motivate suicide bombers, suicide bombing is a type of altruistic suicide because it requires that the bombers place less value on their own lives than on the group’s honor, religion, or some other collective interest (Hassan, 2011). By contrast, when a society has too little social integration, when its social bonds are weak, **egoistic suicide** may result. In this case, persons in certain populations kill themselves due to extreme isolation. For example, several studies indicate that while a number of risk factors cause older adults to commit suicide, one of the leading ones is social disconnectedness, which stems from living alone, losing a spouse, experiencing loneliness, or having low social support (Van Orden & Conwell, 2011).

Too much social regulation, or excessive social control over people’s behavior, can cause **fatalistic suicide**. Members of certain groups end their lives because they see no escape from their oppressive situation. For example, among women in Iranian society, fatalistic is the dominant type of suicide due to a traditional male-dominated social structure that, among other things, forces women into marriage at an early age and prohibits divorce, even in the case of domestic violence (Aliverdinia & Pridemore, 2009). On the other hand, too little social regulation, which leads to the absence of norms, causes an increase in **anomic suicide**. This means that people kill themselves because they lack rules to give them social direction for meeting their needs. For example, a long-term causal relationship exists between the unemployment rate and men’s suicide rate. One study explains that when men lose their jobs, society’s regulating influence on their need to work is disrupted, causing an increase in their suicides (Riley, 2010).

In sum, Durkheim demonstrates how an unbalanced degree of social integration and social regulation can be dysfunctional for society, thus resulting in high rates of suicide.

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**Social regulation**: The control society has over the behavior of its members.

**Anomie**: A state of normlessness in society.

**Altruistic suicide**: Suicide that occurs as a result of too much social integration.

**Egoistic suicide**: Suicide that occurs as a result of too little social integration.

**Fatalistic suicide**: Suicide that occurs as a result of too much social regulation.

**Anomic suicide**: Suicide that occurs as a result of too little social regulation.
Conflict Theory and Alcohol Consumption

The use of conflict theory is demonstrated by Joseph R. Gusfield’s (1986) examination of how a particular group—rural, middle-class evangelical Protestants—tried to preserve its own culture, or style of life, in U.S. society during the 19th and early 20th centuries. This cultural group, which Gusfield calls “the Dry forces,” were reformers who wanted to correct what they saw as a major social problem: the drinking habits of ethnic immigrants. The ethnic immigrants who threatened the moral way of life of the Dry forces, and who therefore needed to be reformed and controlled, were mainly urban, lower-class Irish and Italian Catholics and German Lutherans whose cultures did not prohibit the consumption of alcohol. These ethnic groups were also generally ranked at the bottom of the U.S. social and economic ladder and thus had limited political power.

In order to retain the dominance of their way of life, the middle-class Protestants attempted to reform the ethnic drinkers. They did this, first, by trying to persuade them to stop their “immoral” drinking voluntarily and by inviting them to membership in the middle class. However, by the last quarter of the 19th century, as the United States was becoming more urban, secular, and Catholic, the Dry forces changed their tactics, substituting for persuasion a method that was more hostile and antagonistic: They tried to coerce reform through legislation. This coercive strategy culminated in a national policy of prohibition in 1919, when Congress ratified the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which prohibited the manufacture, sale, and transportation of intoxicating liquors. This application of conflict theory clearly shows that the interest group with the most political power can prohibit behaviors it considers problematic.

Symbolic Interactionism and Precarious Living

Waverly Duck (2015) takes a symbolic interactionist perspective to explain how the residents of a poor African American neighborhood where drug dealing was prevalent were able to survive their precarious existence. He found that they lacked decent jobs and schools, were likely to get in trouble with the criminal justice system, had little public assistance, and so on. Duck also found that the young black male residents who sold cocaine to white suburbanites were well integrated into the community. Duck’s most important finding, however, was that the community possessed an interaction order. This was a lifestyle that shaped residents’ everyday interactions with each other in order to help them cope with their poverty and racial isolation.

Because this interaction order involved personal interactions that differed sharply with those of the American mainstream, outsiders saw the neighborhood as disordered, and community routine activities appeared to them as senseless and chaotic. For the residents, however, it was the opposite. The interaction order allowed them to accurately interpret and appropriately respond to the social situations in which they daily found themselves. It helped them to define what was meant by a particular gaze, a way of walking, or a way of dressing. It made it possible for residents to move safely through their community’s organized drug trade, to educate themselves and their children, and to make money. Indeed, it gave everyone—law-abiding citizens and drug dealers—a sense of order, predictability, and solidarity.

The interaction order provided residents with a shared understanding of reciprocity and respect. For example, it ensured that no one broke into the homes of elderly

Culture: A style of life.

Interaction order: A culture that shapes everyday social interactions.
people or mugged them on the street. In taking a symbolic interactionist approach, Waverly Duck shows how neighborhood residents navigated challenges by defining their everyday interactions as involving relationships of trust, mutual understanding, and cohesiveness.

**ASK YOURSELF:** Think of three different social problems. What are the strengths of each of the theoretical perspectives in helping you to understand each of the social problems? What are the weaknesses?

### SOCIAL POLICY

**1.7 Discuss the role of social policy in managing social problems.**

We’ve noted above that one possible way to deal with pervasive social problems like poverty is to change the social structure radically. However, short of a social revolution—a total and complete transformation in the social structure of society (such as the French Revolution of 1789, the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Chinese Revolution of 1948)—most social change is achieved piecemeal, and frequently reforms are begun through social policy, a more or less clearly articulated and usually written set of strategies for addressing a social problem.

Governmental implementation of social policy takes the form of legislation that makes some condition or pattern of behavior legal or illegal. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, a piece of legislation passed by Congress and signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson, made racial segregation in public accommodations illegal in the United States. Another type of social policy consists of an organization’s guidelines about what ought to happen or not happen between members in regard to a particular issue, such as sexual harassment, bullying, smoking, infection control, and conflicts of interest. These guidelines are usually disseminated through handbooks, manuals, and official websites.

Although social policy has many goals, our concern here is with its role in managing social problems. Each chapter includes a section proposing policy recommendations for social change that arise from the three main theoretical perspectives.

**ASK YOURSELF:** Think of some policies (rules and regulations) of a workplace where you have been employed. Do you think these policies may have prevented unacceptable or harmful behaviors in that workplace? How?

### SPECIALIZED THEORIES

**1.8 Explore the role of specialized theories in sociology.**

Structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism are the three most general theoretical frameworks in sociology. But given that the study of society and social behavior is a complicated business, and that there is a wide variety of social problems to consider, sociologists have constructed specialized theories to deal with this complexity and variety. Specialized concepts and theories examine narrower features of society (say, the institution of the economy) or specific social problems (the rising rates of unemployment). There are many such specialized concepts and theories within sociology—hundreds, in fact. We will not examine them all in this book, however.

All the chapter authors have expertise in particular areas of social problems research, and they employ specialized concepts and theories intended to address their concerns. You will see that some of these concepts and theories are interrelated across chapters, whereas others are more narrowly focused. In either event, the idea is to go beyond—deeper and further—what the three theoretical perspectives can offer.

**ASK YOURSELF:** Think of a social problem you would like to research. In what ways are the three sociological theories discussed above too broad to provide a specific understanding of that social problem? Imagine some characteristics of a specialized theory that might give you less breadth but more depth on the issue. What types of questions about your research area would it help you answer?

### SERVICE SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

**1.9 Identify ways in which service sociology can make a difference.**

- **Social revolution:** A total and complete transformation in the social structure of society.
- **Social policy:** A more or less clearly articulated and usually written set of strategies for addressing a social problem.
- **Legislation:** Enacted laws that make some condition or pattern of behavior legal or illegal.
This is a textbook about social problems, which means we will be dealing with many issues that are troubling, harmful, or just plain distressing. It is understandable that you may feel “it’s all bad news,” that something needs to be done, that things need to change. But how? If sociology is the discipline that studies social problems, you may want to know what solutions it has to offer. Indeed, you may be interested in finding out what you can do to make a difference.

Concerns about the problems of urban life and ways to alleviate them go back to the early days of U.S. sociology, at the beginning of the 20th century. As sociology became a more popular subject of study in colleges and universities around the country, it took two basic forms: the study of sociological theory and the practice of ameliorative reform and service. At that time, most people thought of sociology as a form of philanthropy (Ward, 1902), and courses with titles such as Methods of Social Amelioration, Charities and Corrections, and Preventive Philanthropy were common (Breslau, 2007). Undergraduate sociology programs were even more focused on training in charity and social service work.

After its founding in 1892, the University of Chicago established the first full-fledged department of sociology in the country. At least initially, sociologists there were diligently engaged with applied social reform and philanthropy (Callhoun, 2007). Indeed, the founder of the department, Albion W. Small (1903, p. 477), pointed out that sociology “is good for nothing unless it can enrich average life; our primary task is to work out correct statements of social problems and valid methods of solving them.”

Along with the development of sociology at Chicago, between 1885 and 1930 a unique, active, and engaged sociology was being implemented in many of the settlement houses—neighborhood centers providing services to poor immigrants—that had been founded in major cities throughout the United States. Settlement sociologists considered the settlement an experimental effort in the solution of the social problems of the modern city. Jane Addams (1860–1935), who in 1889 cofounded the most famous of the settlement houses, Hull House, in one Chicago’s poorest neighborhoods, was among them. Addams, and others like her, sought to compile empirical data on various social problems by gathering detailed descriptions of the conditions of groups living in poverty. In addition, Hull House provided a wide variety of community services, including securing support for deserted women, conducting a kindergarten and day nursery, implementing various enterprises for neighborhood improvement, and establishing a relief station.

A new type of sociology, devoted to the practical amelioration of social problems and with the early U.S. sociology of relief and reform as its heritage, has emerged. Service sociology is a socially responsible and mission-oriented sociology of action and alleviation (Treviño, 2011, 2012, 2013; Treviño & McCormack, 2014; Treviño, 2018). Motivated by care and compassion, service sociology is concerned with helping people meet their pressing social needs. Its practitioners believe the personal needs of one individual are not so different from the collective needs of others in similar life circumstances. This belief is the reason why service sociology treats individuals as people in community with each other. Its main goal is to help people by meeting their essential needs and concerns through service, including community counseling, coaching, mentoring, tutoring, conflict resolution, community gardening, friendly visiting, community cleanup, block activities, giving circles, crime prevention, community organizing, advocacy, voter registration, participatory action research, service learning, and mediation.

Today, more than ever, we need service sociology, and student involvement in it. Consider that, during the Barack Obama presidency, there had been a renewed interest in volunteering and social service—a so-called compassion

Settlement houses: Neighborhood centers that provide services to poor immigrants.

Service sociology: A socially responsible and mission-oriented sociology of action and alleviation.
boom—particularly among the millennial generation. Today, about one-quarter of all U.S. adults take part in some form of community service, with more than 62 million volunteers serving. In 2015, these volunteers dedicated nearly 8 billion hours to volunteer service, and the economic value of this service was about $184 billion (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2017a). Across the country, millions of volunteers are engaged in a range of critical areas, including tutoring and teaching; participating in fund-raising activities or selling items to raise money for charitable or religious organizations; collecting, preparing, distributing, or serving food; and contributing general labor (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2017a).

What is more, no less than 25.7% of college students volunteered in 2015, and about 3 million of them dedicated more than 286 million hours of service to communities across the country, primarily in activities like youth mentoring, fund-raising, and teaching and tutoring (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2017b). In addition to community service, many citizens across the country are engaged civically. Indeed, in 2013, 36% of U.S. adults participated in groups or organizations, and nearly 63% engaged in “informal volunteering” such as doing favors for neighbors (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2017a).

There are also high-profile national service initiatives, such as the annual Martin Luther King Jr. National Day of Service and the 9/11 National Day of Service and Remembrance. In addition, Americans participate in civil society programs such as AmeriCorps, which engages about 80,000 people in intensive public service work, and Senior Corps, with about 400,000 volunteers over the age of 55 who provide aid to senior citizens. This service work is being done by many ordinary people who are picking up the slack for a city, a state, a nation unwilling or unable to attend to many critical matters that directly affect thousands, even millions, of people (Coles, 1993).

On his travels through the United States during the early 19th century, the French sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville famously remarked on the American spirit of voluntary cooperation. In Democracy in America, Tocqueville (1899) observed that Americans, “if they do not proffer services eagerly, yet they do not refuse to render them,” (p. 185). Proffering helpful services to others in the context of civil society has been a core American value since the beginning of the republic. That value is practiced today as a culture of service—including various forms of civic engagement, community service, and volunteerism—that allows citizens to work together to ease or mitigate the predicaments and uncertainties created by poverty, hunger, racism, sexism, epidemics, calamities, and so on. It is in this culture of service, with its numerous pressing needs and concerns, that we can consider the emergence of a sociology of social problems based on service. At the ends of the chapters to follow, the authors suggest ways in which you can get personally engaged in helping to alleviate social problems.

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**Culture of service:** A style of life that includes various forms of civic engagement, community service, and volunteerism intended to help alleviate social problems.

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### WHAT DOES AMERICA THINK?

**Questions About Sociology and Social Problems From the General Social Survey***

1. How scientific is sociology?
   - **Scientific:** 55.4%
   - **Not scientific:** 44.6%

2. People need not overly worry about others.
   - **Agree:** 31.6%
   - **Disagree:** 44.6%
   - **Neither agree nor disagree:** 24%

3. Are people helpful or looking out for themselves?
   - **Helpful:** 50.6%
   - **Looking out for themselves:** 49.4%

4. People are treated with respect.
   - **Agree:** 90.8%
   - **Disagree:** 9.2%

5. Can people be trusted?
   - **Yes:** 33.4%
   - **No:** 66.6%

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*Since 1972, the General Social Survey (GSS) has been monitoring the characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes of Americans on an annual basis. Along with data collected in the U.S. Census, GSS data play a vital role in helping researchers, journalists, policy makers, and educators understand our complex society.
CHAPTER SUMMARY

1.1 Describe how working-class young adults are currently experiencing their lives.

When we look at young adults as a generational cohort and consider demographic factors, we get a larger picture of their life situation. Many people's personal troubles are, in fact, also collective problems. Because some groups of people experience social conditions differently than other groups, sociologists examine the intersectionality of several demographic factors.

1.2 Define what constitutes a social problem.

The objective aspect of social problems relies on statistical data and other empirical facts to identify patterns, trends, and rates of occurrence. The subjective aspect of social problems considers how people define a certain condition, event, or pattern of behavior as a social problem. Social constructionism states that social problems are social problems for no other reason than that people say they are. The type of action needed to bring about large-scale social change is usually aimed at transforming the social structure. The type of action needed to ameliorate a problematic condition is usually aimed at helping people in need.

1.3 Explain the sociological imagination.

The sociological imagination allows us to see personal troubles as social problems. When we take a global perspective, we compare our own society to other societies in all the world’s regions. In this way we understand the social problems of U.S. society in relationship to social problems in other countries.

1.4 Discuss how sociological research can be used to study social problems.

Quantitative research investigates social problems through statistical analysis. Qualitative research explains how people define, experience, or understand problematic situations. Three common research methods are survey, participant observation, and interviewing. Using multiple methods gives sociologists a fuller picture of the social problems they are studying.

1.5 Explain the three main sociological perspectives of structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.

Functionalism is the sociological theory that considers how various social phenomena function, or work in a positive way, to maintain unity and order in society. Conflict theory is the sociological theory that focuses on dissent, coercion, and antagonism among groups in society. Symbolic interactionism sees society as the product of symbols (words, gestures, objects) that are given meaning by people in their interactions with each other.

1.6 Evaluate how each of the three theoretical perspectives can be applied to improve our understanding of social problems.

Durkheim’s functionalism demonstrates how the degree of social integration and social regulation can result in high rates of suicide. Conflict theory shows how the interest group that has the most political power can prohibit behaviors it considers to be problematic. The symbolic interactionist perspective can help us explain how people with clinical depression make sense of their identity and illness.

1.7 Discuss the role of social policy in managing social problems.

Most social change happens piecemeal, and frequently the transformations are begun through social policy. Governmental implementation of social policy takes the form of legislation. Other forms are the delivery of services, the regulation of certain practices (such as drug use), and the establishment of welfare programs.

1.8 Explore the role of specialized theories in sociology.

Specialized concepts and theories examine particular aspects of society or specific social problems. They go beyond what the three theoretical perspectives can offer.
Identify ways in which service sociology can make a difference.

Service sociology is a socially responsible and mission-oriented sociology of action and alleviation. A culture of service—including various forms of civic engagement, community service, and volunteerism—allows citizens, including students, to work together to alleviate social problems.

**KEY TERMS**

altruistic suicide 16  
anomic suicide 16  
anomie 16  
capitalism 13  
capitalists 13  
cohort 2  
concepts 12  
conflict theory 13  
culture 17  
culture of service 20  
data sources 4  
demographic factors 2  
dysfunctions 13  
egoistic suicide 16  
fatalistic suicide 16  
functions 12  
global perspective 8  
interaction order 17  
interest groups 14  
intersectionality 3  
tnterviewing 10  
legislation 18  
looking-glass self 15  
mind 15  
norms 13  
objective aspect of social problems 5  
paradigms 12  
participant observation 9  
qualitative research 8  
quantitative research 8  
research methods 8  
self-fulfilling prophecy 15  
service sociology 19  
settlement houses 19  
social class 3  
social constructionism 6  
social institutions 2  
social integration 15  
social interaction 14  
social movements 6  
social policy 18  
social problem 4  
social regulation 16  
social revolution 18  
social self 15  
social structure 6  
sociological imagination 7  
sociology 4  
structural functionalism (or functionalism) 12  
subjective aspect of social problems 5  
survey 8  
symbolic interactionism 14  
symbols 15  
theory 12  
values 13  
workers 14

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