FOURTEENTH EDITION

Social Problems and the Quality of Life

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Mc Graw Hill Education

SOCIAL PROBLEMS
and the quality of life

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SOCIAL PROBLEMS
and the quality of life

Fourteenth Edition

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To Jon, Kathy, Julie, Donna, Jeffrey, Kate, Jeff, Nina, Krista, Benjamin, David, John Robert, and Addie

". . . the greatest of these is love."

SOCIAL PROBLEMS AND THE QUALITY OF LIFE, FOURTEENTH EDITION

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brief contents

contents


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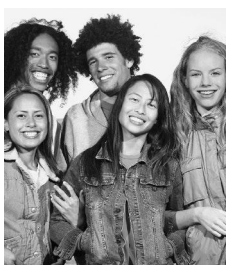

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list of figures

list of tables

People everywhere want to maximize the quality of their lives. There is widespread agreement that a high quality of life requires such things as a good education, freedom from fear of crime, good housing, meaningful work, and good health. A high quality of life, then, can only be attained if people deal with the social problems that detract from that quality. As we point out in the first chapter of this text, a social problem is, by definition, a condition or pattern of behavior that is incompatible with people's desired quality of life.

To deal with a problem, you must understand it—how it affects one's quality of life, what causes it, what tends to maintain it. Sociologists have used three theoretical perspectives to answer these questions in order to analyze and deal with social problems. We discuss the three major perspectives in Chapter 1 and show how we use elements from each to analyze individual problems and talk about how the problem can be attacked.

We do not mean to give the impression here that either understanding a problem or attacking it is a simple matter. Even experts disagree on such things. The factors that combine to cause and perpetuate any particular problem are many and complex. We have seen students feel overwhelmed as they study these factors. As one said: "I don't see how society can ever deal with some of these problems. The more I understand about what causes them, the more hopeless I feel."

It is interesting to note, therefore, that some problems are less serious than they were when this book was in its first edition. Among other things, poverty among the aged has declined, many crime rates have dropped, divorce rates have declined, the cold war and the accompanying arms race between the superpowers have come to an end, and air and water pollution levels have decreased significantly. Other problems, however, are still as serious—or even more so. For instance, addictions continue to ruin lives and traumatize families; domestic and international terrorism are of the highest concern to citizens and the government; war remains a vexing problem; white-collar crime is more widespread and more of a threat to the economy than previously recognized; health problems afflict great numbers of people, many of whom have no health insurance; racial minorities have lost some of the gains made in previous years; poverty has increased among some groups; increasing numbers of single parents mean increasing problems for children; equitable opportunities remain elusive for homosexuals; and the threats posed by such things as global warming and toxic wastes are more serious than previously thought. These advances and setbacks are all discussed in the text.

Changes in the Fourteenth Edition

A social problem is a product of social definition. That is, something becomes a problem, and becomes a more or less serious problem, as it is so defined by the people of a society. People's definitions of problems and the problems themselves continually change.

Each new edition of a social problems text, therefore, strives to capture the current status of an ever-changing phenomenon. To achieve this goal, we have updated all materials in this edition with hundreds of new references as well as the most recent data available from the government and other sources.

There are changing concerns among the public as well as changing emphases among researchers. To reflect current interests and concerns more adequately, we have included new or expanded materials on such topics as e-cigarettes, the misuse of opioids, the difference between decriminalization and legalization of prostitution, the issue of transgender rights, efforts to keep minorities from voting, the Tea Party in politics, bullying in schools, the debt incurred in getting a college education, how technological change affects health, the use of torture and drones by the military, and the Flint, Michigan, drinking water crisis.

Organization

We have divided the book into 5 parts and 15 chapters. Part 1 introduces students to social problems. Chapter 1 discusses the various tools needed, including the difference between social problems and personal problems, sociological theories and methods, and fallacious ways of thinking.

In Part 2, we look at a cluster of problems that involve behavior that deviates from social norms. Chapters 2 through 5 cover the problems of alcohol and other drugs, crime and delinquency, violence (including rape), and sexual deviance (prostitution and pornography).

Part 3 examines problems that involve social inequality. Poverty (Chapter 6) is inequality in income and wealth. Gender and sexual orientation comprise another area of inequality (Chapter 7), as women and homosexuals strive to gain equal rights. Racial and ethnic inequality (Chapter 8) include the multiple ways in which there is disparity in valued things between the various racial and ethnic groups in the nation.

Part 4 focuses on problems of social institutions. Chapters 9 through 13 cover the institutions of government and politics, work and the economy, education, family, and health care. These institutions are factors in other kinds of social problems but are also problematic in themselves.

Finally, Part 5 covers two global social problems: war and terrorism (Chapter 14) and the environment (Chapter 15). These problems pose a threat to civilization itself and cannot be understood apart from their global context.

Learning Aids

We use a variety of learning aids to facilitate understanding of the materials:

- Chapter-opening vignettes personalize the various problems. They make each problem not just a set of facts, but a social reality that disrupts and diminishes the quality of people's lives in concrete, understandable ways.
- Chapter objectives and marginal key terms keep students on track as they work through the chapters.
- Global Comparison boxes add dimension to students' understanding of social problems by seeing how they work out in another nation or nations.

- Dealing with the problems is as important as knowing what causes them. Each chapter, therefore, contains a section, called Public Policy and Private Action, that suggests ways to ameliorate each problem. We have found that most students are like the one quoted near the beginning of this preface—they don't simply want to know about problems; they also want to know what can be done to address those problems. We do not claim that the suggestions will eliminate the problems. But they do demonstrate that problems have solutions, and the solutions are always, to some extent, up to each individual.
- Marginal icons identify places in the text where we show how people use the fallacies of thinking discussed in Chapter 1 to draw erroneous conclusions about social problems.
- End-of-chapter summaries, key terms lists, study questions, and Internet resources and exercises provide students with ample review, study materials, and self-learning projects.

Supplements Package

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- PowerPoint Slides—complete, chapter-by-chapter slide shows featuring text, tables, and visuals.
- Create—a unique database publishing system that allows instructors to create their own custom text from material in *Social Problems* or elsewhere and deliver that text to students electronically as an e-book or in print format via the bookstore.

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Robert H. Lauer

Jeanette C. Lauer

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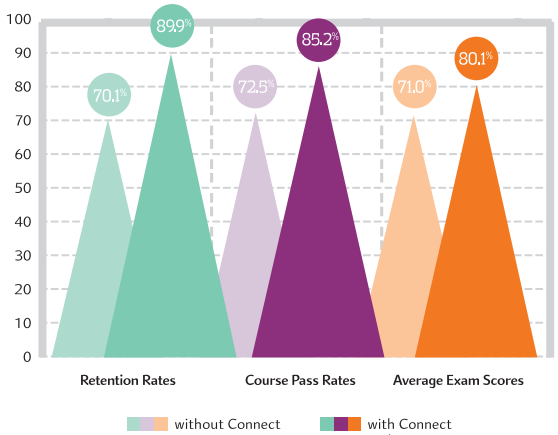

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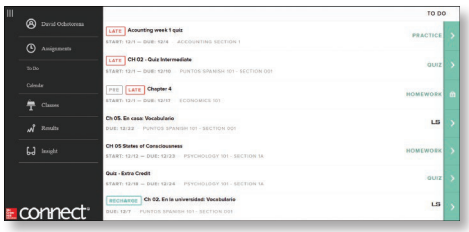

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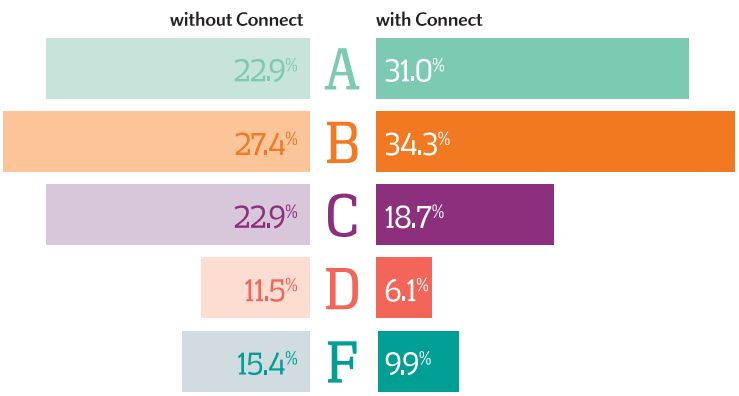

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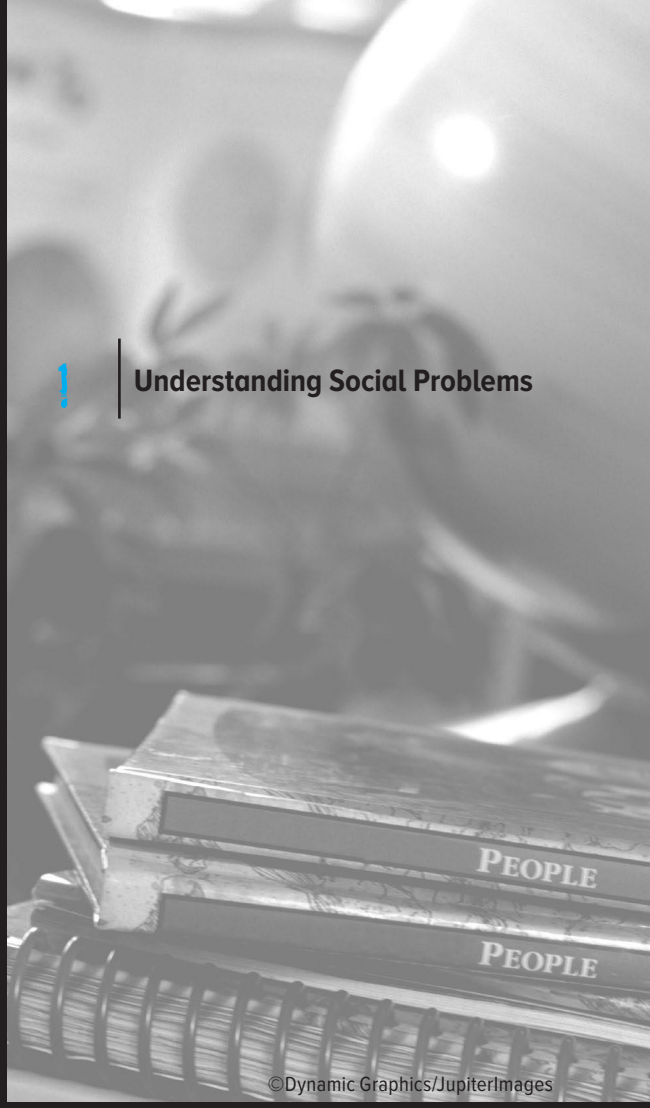
PART 1

Foundations



A Chinese philosopher remarked that one should not attempt to open clams with a crowbar. In other words, any task demands the proper tools. Part 1 of this book is about the proper tools for the study of social problems. What kind of perspective should you bring to the study? What kind of information do you need, and what are the proper ways to gather it? Unless you answer such questions appropriately, you cannot answer the vexing question of how to deal with social problems. This part, then, prepares you to delve into particular problems. It shows you how to use the proper tools to open the "clams."

CHAPTER 1

Understanding Social Problems

OBJECTIVES

1. Explain the difference between personal and social problems.
2. Understand the model used to explain social problems.
3. Discuss the fallacies of thinking, including how they have been used to explain social problems.
4. Explain the meaning of social research.
5. Give examples of different kinds of social research and describe how they have been used to study social problems.

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"Why Is It My Fault?"

Marie, her husband Jim, and their two children had a good life until he lost his job. Stress built up, their marriage fell apart, and he moved to another state. Marie's life has never been the same:

I've never gotten any financial help from Jim since we were divorced. I went to work. It was really hard, raising two kids by myself and working full-time. But we were making it. And I enjoyed working—having people tell me I was doing a good job. Then the company downsized and I was laid off. It's been awful since then.

For the first time in my life, I know what it's like to be poor. I know what it's like to try to get help from the government. And you know one of the worst things? It's feeling ashamed. It's feeling like for some reason it's my fault, like there's something I could have done to avoid it. Why is this my fault? I keep telling myself I shouldn't feel that way, but I can't help it.

Introduction

Who is at fault if you are poor? Are you responsible because you are lazy and unwilling to work or because you are a spendthrift and refuse to properly manage your finances? If so, you have a personal problem. Or are there other factors such as the state of the economy that are responsible for your situation? If so, you are caught up in a social problem. Later in this chapter we define social problems precisely. As a preliminary definition, however, think of social

problems as behaviors or conditions that are caused by factors external to individuals and that detract from the quality of life.

Actually, "we are all part of some social problem" (Lopata 1984:249). In fact, we are all part of the biggest social problem of all—the race to save the planet (Brown 2000). These assertions will become increasingly clear in subsequent chapters. In addition, many individuals are wrestling with several problems at once. For example, the stress of poverty may lead to health problems, both mental and physical. If the impoverished individual is a woman or a minority, the stress may be intensified. The individual also may have to deal with unemployment or underemployment, poor performance at school by a child, and the threat of victimization by criminals. Indeed, social workers deal with families who are coping simultaneously with the majority of problems discussed in this book.

But what exactly is a social problem? How do sociologists decide what is or isn't a social problem? And once you identify something as a social problem, how do you go about analyzing it so that you can understand it? The first part of this chapter answers these questions. We begin by looking at the difference between personal problems and social problems because Americans tend to make all problems personal. That is, they believe that the problem is in some way *the fault of the individual who is struggling with it.* As you shall see, however, to say that a problem is social means that its causes, its consequences, and the way to deal with it all involve the social structure in which individuals live.

Social scientists do not arbitrarily decide which problems are social. Rather, they focus on those conditions that arise from contradictions in the society and that diminish people's quality of life. There is considerable consensus throughout the world on the kinds of things important to the quality of life, so the same kinds of problems tend to be identified in all societies.

Once a problem is identified, because large numbers of people agree that it detracts from their quality of life, we analyze and understand it by looking at the numerous social factors involved in creating and maintaining the problem. Only then can we realistically discuss ways to address the problem. The model we provide later in this chapter shows the kinds of factors that sociologists have found to be important.

Finally, we discuss two important tools of analysis for social problems—critical thinking skills and methods of research. These tools enable us to get valid information about the social factors involved in the problems—information that is crucial to making a realistic and useful analysis from which we can deduce effective ways to address the problem.

personal problem
a problem that can be explained in terms of the qualities of the individual

social problem
a condition or pattern of behavior that contradicts some other condition or pattern of behavior; is defined as incompatible with the desired quality of life; is caused, facilitated, or prolonged by social factors; involves intergroup conflict; and requires social action for resolution

Personal versus Social Problems

We define a **personal problem** as one whose causes and solutions lie within the individual and his or her immediate environment. A **social problem,** on the other hand, is one whose causes and solutions lie outside the individual and the immediate environment. This distinction is not based on the individual's experience of suffering because a certain amount of suffering may occur in either case.

C. Wright Mills (1959:8–9) made a similar distinction, calling personal problems the "personal troubles of milieu" and social problems the "public issues of social structure." He offered many illustrations of the difference between the two. If one individual in a city is unemployed, that individual has a personal trouble. The person may have personality problems, may lack skills, or may have family difficulties that consume all of his or her energy. But if there are 100 million jobs in a society and 150 million people are

available for work, this is a public issue. Even without personal problems, a third of the people will be unemployed. Such a problem cannot be resolved solely by dealing with individual personalities or motivations.

Similarly, a man and woman may have personal troubles in their marriage. They may agonize over their troubles and ultimately separate or divorce. If theirs is one of few marriages that experience such problems, you may conclude that they have personal problems and their marriage broke up because of some flaw in their personalities or in their relationship. But when the divorce rate soars and millions of families are broken up, you must look for causes and solutions beyond the personalities of individuals. The question is no longer "What is wrong with those people?" but "What has happened to the **institution** of marriage and the family in our society?"

institution
a collective pattern of dealing with a basic social function; typical institutions identified by sociologists are the government, economy, education, family and marriage, religion, and the media

Whether you define a problem as social or as personal is crucial. The distinction determines how you perceive the causes of the problem, the consequences of the problem, and *appropriate ways* to cope with the problem.

The Causes of Problems

When asked why there is poverty in affluent America, a 31-year-old female bank teller said the poor themselves are to blame because most of them "are lazy and unreliable . . . and the little money they do make is spent on liquor and nonnecessities rather than for their economic advancement." This is a common approach, namely, that problems are personal. *The victim is blamed as both the source and the solution of the problem.*

Similarly, African Americans are said to have problems because they don't work to advance themselves. If you accept such an individualistic explanation, you are not likely to support government programs designed to raise the status of African Americans. National polls found that 81 percent of whites but only 45 percent of African Americans believe that the latter have as good a chance as whites to get any kind of job for which they are qualified (Polling Report 2016). When people believe that we already have equal opportunity, they will not support new laws or programs. This is well illustrated by the fact that a majority of African Americans (76 percent) but a minority of whites (48 percent) believe that the nation needs voting rights legislation to address the issue of state laws in recent years that tended to suppress the vote of minorities. Thus, the way problems are defined—as social or personal—has important consequences for identifying causes. In turn, the kind of causes identified affects the way problems are handled.

A word of caution is in order here. We are not arguing that *all* problems are social problems, nor that personal problems have no social factors, nor that social problems are free of any personal elements. There are certainly psychological and, in some cases, physiological factors at work. The point is that if you do not look beyond such factors, you will have a distorted view about the causes of problems.

The Consequences of Problems

Viewing a problem as either personal or social leads you to identify very different consequences as well as different causes. Consider, for example, a father who can obtain only occasional work and whose family, therefore, lives in poverty. If the man defines his problem as the result of his own inadequacies, he likely will despise himself and passively accept his poverty. Sennett and Cobb (1972:96) told of a nearly illiterate garbage collector who placed the blame for his lowly position entirely on himself: "Look, I know it's nobody's fault but mine that I got stuck here where I am, I mean . . . if I wasn't such a dumb— . . . no, it ain't that neither . . . if I'd applied myself, I know I got it in me

to be different, can't say anyone did it to me." This man defined his problem as personal and, consequently, viewed himself as inadequate.

The *sense of inadequacy*—blaming or downgrading oneself—is not uncommon among those victimized by social problems. Some children who grow up in impoverished homes view themselves unfavorably, believing that their impoverishment is proof of their inferiority. Some women who are beaten by their husbands feel they have done something to deserve the abuse. Some people who lose their jobs during an economic crunch believe they are failures even though they had no control over what happened.

If a problem is defined as personal, *individual strategies* are employed to cope with the problem. Thus, the individual looks inward for a solution. Sometimes that solution is found in an *escape mechanism,* such as neurosis, physical illness, heavy drinking, or self-destructive behavior. At other times a solution is sought from specialists such as psychotherapists or religious advisors who help the person to change. These specialists may facilitate adjustment to the problem but not ultimately resolve it. If America's troubled families sought the help of counselors, they might learn to cope with or endure their troubles. But troubled families would continue to appear just as frequently.

Identifying something as a social problem presents it from a much different perspective and leads to far different conclusions and actions. Thus, if a man defines his poverty as the result of a declining economy, he may join in collective action such as a social movement, a rent strike group, or an organization set up to relieve the plight of the poor. Rather than blame himself for his poverty, he sees it as a *social* problem and takes action to redress it.

Or consider the problem of rape. Whether rape is defined as a social or personal problem makes a great deal of difference (Figure 1.1). Defining it as a personal problem either *blames the victim* or *castigates the offender.* Defining it as a social problem recognizes the need for *collective action* that attacks factors outside the individual.

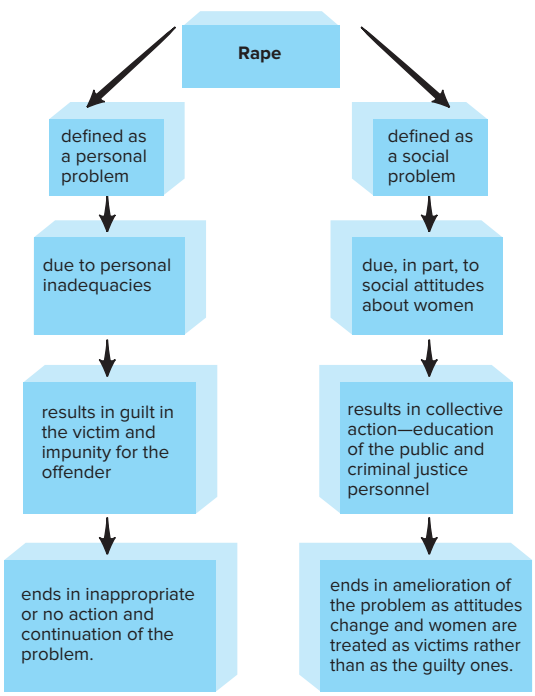


FIGURE 1.1
Some Possible Differences When a Problem—Rape in This Case—Is Defined as Social or Personal.

Several cases of rape (as reported in the news media) illustrate the need to consider it a social rather than a purely personal problem. A physician, 39 years old, married, and the father of two children, confessed to raping 22 women and sexually attacking at least 10 other women, one of whom was a nun. The doctor was a respected member of his community by day but an attacker of women by night. A teenage girl who decided to follow others and cool off in a park fountain on a hot July day was raped by two young men while at least three adults ignored her screams for help. Another young woman met a man at a New Year's Eve party. The man's sister, whom the young woman knew, introduced them. The man drove the two women home, dropped his sister off first, then asked if he could come up to the young woman's apartment for coffee. He was a genial, polite man, and since she had no reason to suspect him, she agreed. Once in her apartment, however, the man forced her to participate in various sex acts. When she prosecuted, she discovered that the man was on parole for a prior rape conviction. Yet people who had been at the party testified on the man's behalf, claiming that they had seen the couple talking and that the woman had been drinking. The man was acquitted. Subsequently he was brought to trial again for the alleged rape of a 13-year-old girl.

How can we account for these rapes? Were the victims at fault in these cases? Did they bring it on themselves by luring their attackers? A female student told us, "My father always said that if a woman was raped, it was her fault, that she somehow provoked the guy to do it." Or can the rapes be attributed to mentally ill or evil males? Are the rapists "sick" individuals who need therapy? Or are they evil men who ought to be castrated? You can blame the victims and say that they have personal problems—their wayward behavior. Or you can accuse the rapists of having personal problems—disturbed or evil natures. Neither will resolve the problem. Women who fight, scream, and risk their physical well-being (and even their lives) to ward off an attacker can hardly be said to be luring the man—and there was no evidence that the attackers were mentally ill.

Nor would castration solve the problem. Contrary to popular belief, castration does not prevent a man from having sexual relations. Castration has been used in a number of European countries to punish sex offenders (Incrocci et al. 2002); but of 39 offenders in West Germany who had voluntarily agreed to castration, 11 could still have sexual relations a number of years afterward, and 4 of the men had sex one to three times a week (Heim 1981).

Rape, in sum, is not a personal problem that can be solved by individual efforts. Like other social problems, rape requires collective action to attack such things as the social attitudes that legitimate exploiting women and a legal system that may treat the victim as harshly as the rapist does. Important differences, thus, result from defining a problem as social rather than personal. Unless problems like rape are defined as social, causes may not be identified nor solutions found.

A Model for Understanding

Given that problems are social and not merely personal, how do we go about understanding them? First let's define precisely what we mean by a *social problem:* It is *a condition or pattern of behavior that (1) contradicts some other condition or pattern of behavior and is defined as incompatible with the desired quality of life; (2) is caused, facilitated, or prolonged by factors that operate at multiple levels of social life; (3) involves intergroup conflict; and (4) requires social action to be resolved.* We explain this definition in the following pages. It uses major insights of sociological theories and is the basis for the model we use in discussing each of the problems in this book.

A Theory-Based Model

structural functionalism
a sociological theory that focuses on social systems and how their interdependent parts maintain order

conflict theory
a theory that focuses on contradictory interests, inequalities between social groups, and the resulting conflict and change

symbolic interactionism
a sociological theory that focuses on the interaction between individuals, the individual's perception of situations, and the ways in which social life is constructed through interaction

interaction
reciprocally influenced behavior on the part of two or more people

There are three major theoretical perspectives in sociology: **structural functionalism, conflict theory,** and **symbolic interactionism.** Each theory has distinctive emphases that are useful for understanding social phenomena. Structural functionalism focuses on social systems and the way in which their interdependent parts maintain order. Conflict theory focuses on contradictory interests of groups, inequalities in society, and the resulting conflict and change. Symbolic interactionism focuses on the **interaction** between individuals, the importance of knowing individuals' perspectives to understand their behavior, and the ways in which social life is constructed through interaction.

To illustrate these three approaches, consider the problem of crime. A structural-functional approach would point out the way that rapid change has weakened social solidarity and social institutions like the family, so that insufficient order is maintained. A conflict approach would note that the powerful groups in society define the kind of behavior that is crime (resulting in higher rates among the poor), and that much crime results from the lack of opportunities for the poor and for racial or ethnic minorities. A symbolic interactionist approach would stress the fact that people learn criminal behavior by interacting with, and accepting for themselves the perspective of, others who approve of such behavior. Figure 1.2 briefly summarizes the theories, how they are used to understand social problems, and how they can be applied to another problem—poverty.

Some sociologists use only one of the theoretical approaches to analyze social problems. We believe that all three approaches are necessary. Each of the theoretical approaches to crime is valid. Our model, therefore, incorporates emphases of each perspective (Figure 1.3). In essence, the model posits mutual influence between social structural factors, social psychological/cognitive factors, and social interaction. Social problems arise when people define **contradictions** among these various elements as incompatible with their quality of life.

contradiction
opposing phenomena within the same social system

norm
shared expectations about behavior

role
the behavior associated with a particular position in the social structure

values
things preferred because they are defined as having worth

stratification system
arrangement of society into groups that are unequal with regard to such valued resources as wealth, power, and prestige

Each of the three theories contributes to this model. In structural functionalism, a problem involves a system of interdependent parts, including institutions (collective means of dealing with basic social functions such as government, the family, the mass media, and the economy), **norms** (shared expectations about behavior), **roles** (behavior associated with particular positions in the social structure), and **values** (things preferred because they are defined as having worth). The parts are interrelated and exert pressure to maintain the system.

According to conflict theory, however, contradictions and inequalities exist between the parts of the system that generate conflict between groups. This is manifest in the **stratification system,** the pattern of inequality of wealth, power, and prestige that exists in all societies.

And according to symbolic interactionism, social interaction and the perspectives of individuals, including their **attitudes** (predispositions of individuals toward something) and **ideologies** (sets of ideas that explain or justify some aspect of social life), are important components of the system. Only as you understand how an individual perceives his or her social world can you understand that individual's behavior.

The pairs of arrows in the model indicate *mutual influence.* For example, social structural factors affect the way people interact. Norms and roles may lead a white person and a black person to treat each other as equals at the factory but not in other settings. The influence can go both ways: patterns of social interaction can alter the social structural factors. In recent years, for instance, women have interacted with men in ways that have altered the female role. Similarly, African Americans have persisted in interacting with whites in ways that have changed traditional roles. An ideology of white

	Structural Functionalism	Conflict Theory	Symbolic Interaction
Assumptions of the theory	Society is an integrated system of interdependent parts, bound together by shared values and norms.	Society is a system of diverse groups, with conflicting values and interests, vying with each other for power, wealth, and other valued resources.	Society is an arena of interacting individuals who behave in accord with their definitions of situations and who create shared meanings as they interact.
How the theory might explain social problems generally	Problems arise out of social disorganization, a state in which consensus about norms has broken down.	Problems are the result of dominance over, and exploitation of, some groups by others.	A situation or form of behavior becomes a problem when people define it as such.
How the theory might explain poverty	Political, economic, and educational institutions are not functioning adequately (often because of rapid social change), so that old arrangements are obsolete before new arrangements are in place.	The upper and middle classes oppress and exploit the poor through such things as using political and economic institutions for their own benefit and creating ideologies that blame the poor and justify their poverty.	Poverty became a social problem in the United States when people accepted the influential media's definition of it as such; people remain poor when they define their poverty as the result of their own deficiencies.
Illustration of the explanation	Schools train increasing numbers of students for jobs that are diminishing in number as firms adjust to the changing global economy and "outsource" many of those jobs.	Upper- and middle-class lawmakers regularly support corporate welfare (e.g., subsidies and tax breaks) but reject such welfare ideas for the poor as a guaranteed minimum annual income.	The public did not consider poverty as a social problem until the publication of Michael Harrington's influential book *The Other America* in 1962.

FIGURE 1.2 Theoretical Explanations of Poverty.

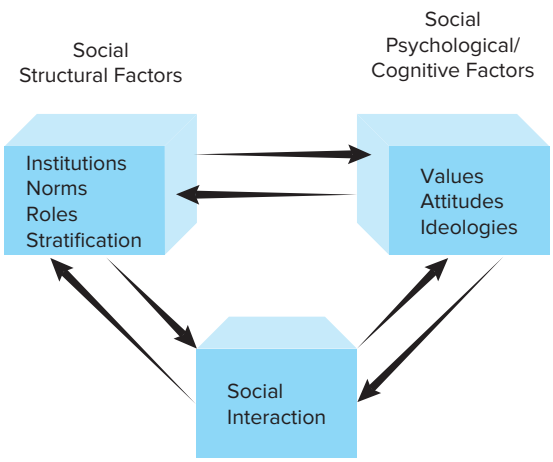


FIGURE 1.3
A Model for the Analysis of Social Problems.

attitude
a predisposition about something in one's environment

ideology
a set of ideas that explain or justify some aspect of social reality

supremacy can help to create and maintain blacks in a subservient role, but as minorities refuse to accept the role and assume instead the same kinds of roles as whites, the ideology will be rejected by increasing numbers of people.

By the very nature of social life, there are numerous *contradictions* among the elements in Figure 1.3. This means that opposing phenomena exist within the same social system. The phenomena are opposed in the sense that both cannot be true or operative. When the contradictions are defined as incompatible with the *desired quality of life,* you have a social problem. For example, the limited opportunities available in the economy are a contradiction to the ideology that all people should support themselves by working. The contradiction, as we shall see in Chapter 6, is incompatible with the desired quality of life of the poor.

By our definition, not all societal contradictions signal social problems, only those defined as detracting from the quality of life. In other words, objective data alone do not compose a problem. In accord with symbolic interactionism, only when people define a situation as problematic and persuade others to view it in the same way is there a social problem (Fine 2000). For instance, religion tends to be a unifying force, proclaiming a duty to love, make peace, and establish brotherhood. Recent terrorist acts by Islamic extremists and religious conflict in various nations contradict this peaceful role. Still, religion generally is not considered a social problem by most observers.

Whether people generally define something as detracting from their quality of life depends upon such things as how the problem is presented in the media (including the increasingly influential Internet blogs), how the problem squares with people's experiences, how readily people can understand the various facets of the problem, and how political leaders shape public opinion on issues (Hawdon 2001; Sacco 2003; Maratea 2008).

Finally, consider gender equality as another example of the usefulness of the model. Among the opposing phenomena involved in the problem are:

1. The *ideology* of equal opportunity versus the *reality* of limited opportunities for female participation in the economy.
2. The *value* of the pursuit of happiness versus the *narrowness* of the traditional female *role.*
3. The *value* of human dignity versus male-female *interaction* in which females are treated as intellectual inferiors.

Each of these oppositions has consequences that are incompatible with the desired quality of life of many women.

Quality of Life

What is this *quality of life* that plays so prominent a role in determining whether a contradiction is defined as a social problem? Thoreau captured its meaning in his desire to avoid discovering, at the point of death, that

> I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life. (Thoreau 1968:113)

The desire to "live deep," to maximize the quality of life, is reflected in a proliferation of studies in recent decades. In quality-of-life studies, cities and states are evaluated in terms of such aspects as equality of opportunity, agriculture, crime rates, technology, education, climate, the economy, cultural opportunities, and health and welfare. They are then ranked according to their overall "quality of life."

After decades of these studies, there is considerable agreement about what Americans define as important to the quality of their lives (Ferriss 2000). In essence, they evaluate their quality of life according to how well they are doing financially, physically, emotionally, socially, and culturally. Americans want well-paying and meaningful work and financial security. They want good health, access to good health care facilities, opportunity for a good education, opportunity to participate in cultural activities, and opportunity to live and work in areas with minimal crime. Americans also want respect from others, self-respect, and a sense of personal worth. Finally, they want to live without fear and with reasonable freedom from stress.

One effort to categorize and quantify quality of life in nations is the Social Progress Index (2016). The Index uses three broad categories: basic human needs (such as nutrition, medical care, and sanitation); foundations of well-being (health, environmental quality, access to basic knowledge and information); and opportunity (personal rights and freedom, tolerance, access to advanced education). When the Index was used to rate and rank 133 nations, comprising 94 percent of the world's population, Finland had the highest quality of life, with a score of 90.1. The worst score, 30.0, was the Central African Republic. The United States ranked 19th with a score of 84.6, lower than Japan, Canada, and most European countries.

When people are asked about their quality of life, they indicate a lowered quality when they lack the kinds of things in the Index. Thus, researchers have found a reduced quality of life reported because of such things as personal health problems (Alonso et al. 2004; La Grow et al. 2011), work demands that interfere with nonworking time (Rice, Frone, and McFarlin 1992), environmental problems (Tickell 1992), and the experience of financial problems and status inequality (Coverdill, Lopez, and Petrie 2011).

Americans are not unique in their view of what constitutes a high quality of life. Studies of other nations show that people everywhere value many of the same things that Americans do (Ventegodt et al. 2005; Liu 2006; Headey, Muffels, and Wooden 2008). Quality of life, then, involves far more than income. You may be able to purchase security devices for your home, but you can't buy total peace of mind when the newspapers regularly remind you of the pervasiveness of crime. You may be able to afford the best seats in the house, but that's meaningless if your community lacks cultural opportunities. You may live in the most expensive area available, but you can't shut out the polluted air that engulfs your property.

Moreover, undesirable conditions that diminish the quality of life affect you both directly and indirectly. For example, some people are the direct victims of criminal activity: assaults, muggings, robberies, rapes, swindles, and so forth. But everyone has some *fear of criminal victimization,* even people who have never been directly victimized. This fear may put limits on where they go or what they do or how secure they feel—limits that reduce the quality of their lives.

In sum, there are numerous contradictions in society that create conditions incompatible with the desired quality of life. Everyone is affected, though some suffer far more than others. Because of the diminished quality of life, we define these contradictions and the conditions they create as *social problems.*

Multiple Levels of Social Problems

Social problems are manifested at *multiple levels of social life.* The factors that cause, facilitate, and help to perpetuate social problems are found at the individual level (e.g., attitudes), group levels (e.g., ideologies of terrorist groups), societal levels (e.g., the government), and in some cases, global levels (e.g., globalization of the economy).

Explaining social problems requires many factors rather than a single cause.

Think, for example, about the problem of racial and ethnic relations (for brevity's sake, we shall refer to this problem by the commonly used phrase "race problem," though the "problem" is not race per se, but the relation between people of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds). We could analyze the problem in terms of a stratification system in which racial minorities are disadvantaged, kept in inferior roles, and systematically subjected to discrimination. Such arrangements restrict interaction between the races and justify prejudice and claims that the disadvantaged group is naturally inferior.

Or we could analyze the problem in terms of attitudes of prejudice combined with a value of individualism (meaning that the government should not force people to interact with other races). Add to this an ideology that defines the oppressed race as inferior and therefore deserving of an inferior position. These values, attitudes, and ideology explain and perpetuate a structure in which the oppressed race remains in the least desirable roles, institutional positions, and socioeconomic stratum. Furthermore, interaction between the races is restricted, permitting little opportunity for reevaluation and change.

The point is, as our model indicates, *mutual influence* exists among the various factors at differing levels of social life. Prejudice restricts interaction and restricted interaction fosters prejudice. The two feed on each other. Similarly, education can be structured in such a way as to deprive minorities of adequate learning, thereby justifying an ideology of racial inferiority; but the ideology can also justify inaction in securing adequate education for minorities.

The multiple-level factors, in sum, work together to maintain the problem. Meantime, inequalities in the system lead people to act in their own behalf to bring about change; and interaction is never so confined as to prevent the development of new values, attitudes, and ideologies. Eventually, there may be changes in interaction patterns and in the social structure.

The pressure to change may arise as members of the oppressed race react to the contradiction between an ideology of the free pursuit of happiness and the realities of their situation. They may use the ideology and the contradiction to shape new attitudes and values among the oppressed and the oppressors. They may create new ideologies, such as a myth of their own superiority. They may strive to alter patterns of interaction and elements of the social structure. They may try to change the content of education, the power structure of government, and the practices and policies of the economy.

Thus, understanding and dealing with a social problem is never a simple matter. A social problem cannot be reduced to one thing, such as the race problem's being due merely to prejudice or poverty's being due merely to people's failure to work. All the factors in our model enter into each problem.

Social Action for Resolution

Social problems often give rise to *protest groups* and intergroup conflict as expressions of social action. Protest groups arise because not everyone in the society defines a particular situation the same way. For example, the contradiction between the ideals of American life and the reality of life for most African Americans is not defined by all Americans as incompatible with the quality of life. Some deny that African Americans have less access than whites to the desirable aspects of American life. In other words, they deny the existence of a contradiction.

If all Americans denied the contradiction, there would be no racial problem in this country (even though a foreign observer might see the contradiction). On the other hand, if all Americans affirmed the contradiction and demanded change, the problem might be quickly resolved. Because the contradiction is defined differently by different collectivities, intergroup conflict plays a part in resolving social problems.

We use the term *collectivity* here in reference to members of opposing groups in the conflict who agree on particular issues. The race problem, for example, is not simply a matter of white versus minority. The abortion problem is not just a case of Catholics versus Protestants. Gender inequality is not simply men versus women. Poverty is not merely rich versus poor. In each case there are members of both groups on either side of the issue.

All social problems are characterized by opposing groups with differing ideologies and contrary definitions of the contradiction. One side will argue that the contradiction is incompatible with the desired quality of their lives, while the other side will argue that there is no contradiction, that the contradiction is necessary, or that the contradiction exists but is not rooted in the social system (in other words, the victims of the contradictions are blamed for their plight). Such conflict is the context in which efforts to resolve problems take place.

In subsequent chapters we discuss the ways in which problems may be attacked by social action (both public policy and private action). There are many reasons resolution of most social problems through social action are slow and agonizing: problems are manifested at multiple levels of social reality; numerous factors are involved in causing and maintaining problems; intergroup conflict surrounds most problems; and efforts to resolve a problem may ameliorate one problem but create new problems (Fine 2006).

The Changing Nature of Social Problems

One additional factor adds to the difficulty of resolving social problems—both the definition and the objective aspects of a particular problem change over time. Sometimes the change may be so rapid that an issue barely has time to be a problem. Until the exceptionally hot and dry summer of 1988, the public did not respond much to the warnings of scientists about global warming (Ungar 1992). That summer brought the problem to the public's attention. When the summer passed, the problem's importance waned in the public mind as other issues rose to the fore. Although virtually all scientists agree that global warming is occurring, there is still dispute in the nation as to whether it is a social problem.

Thus, problems may *rise and decline in perceived importance,* as illustrated by the problem of poverty. Views of poverty have changed over time. A 1952 edition of a social problems text omitted the two chapters on poverty that had appeared in the original 1942 edition (Reinhardt, Meadows, and Gillette 1952). The omission reflected the belief in the 1950s that poverty was largely a problem of the past. (Even the 1942 edition reflected more the opinion of sociologists than that of the public.) Gallup opinion polls about the

most important problems facing the nation, taken since November 1935, show that the public did not consider poverty an important problem until 1965 (Lauer 1976). Concerns about poverty peaked in the 1960s and 1970s then tended to diminish. In a national poll in late 2016 that asked about the nation's most important problem, poverty was mentioned by only 3 percent of Americans (Polling Report 2016). The economy and jobs, terrorism, immigration, and race relations were all identified by more people than was poverty.

The objective conditions of poverty also have changed over time: the amount of poverty has changed (as measured by some standard such as family income); the composition of the poor has changed (such as the relative proportions of racial, ethnic, and age groups); and the organization of antipoverty efforts has changed (such as the vigor and focus of protest groups and official attitudes and programs).

Recognizing such changes in problems is important for both understanding and action. For example, many people continue to identify poverty as essentially a problem of work—the poor are unemployed. As you will see, the problem of poverty would be little changed even if every able-bodied person in America had a job. It is true that during the depression of the 1930s a considerable number of the impoverished were unemployed. Many people who lived through that period continue to associate poverty with unemployment, failing to recognize the changed nature of the problem. Today, a large number of poor people are working but still live in poverty. Therefore, to continue associating the two concepts is to misunderstand the contemporary problem and thereby fail to take appropriate action.

As you study the various problems, you will see fluctuations in all of them. Some appear to be getting better, and some appear to be getting worse. It is important to remember that improvement does not mean that the problem is resolved (gains can be quickly lost in the ongoing struggle for justice and equality), nor does deterioration mean that the problem is hopeless (lost ground may be regained and new ground may be gained dramatically when appropriate social action is taken).

Analyzing Social Problems

The definition of the term "social problems" that we presented earlier in this chapter shapes our approach to each problem considered in this book. First, we "get the feel" of the problem by seeing how it affects people's lives and examining how the problem involves a contradiction and is defined as incompatible with the desired quality of life. Second, we analyze the multiple-level factors involved in the problem. We do not relate every factor identified in Figure 1.3 to each problem: Research has not yet identified the components of every problem. Yet in each we see the multiple-level components that show how the problem arises and is perpetuated. Third, we consider various ways to attack the problem. Our examination is sketchy (any adequate treatment would require a book in itself), but we do discuss some kinds of both public policy and private action that can ameliorate each problem.

Before we turn to specific problems, we need to address an additional issue. Seemingly reasonable statements are made about every social problem. For example, following the series of highly publicized killings by preteens and teenagers in the 1990s, explanations ranged from the pampering of criminals by the legal system to violence in video games and movies to mental illness. How do you know which of these explanations, if any, are correct? Or to put it another way, how do you distinguish opinion from valid analysis?

critical thinking
the analysis and evaluation of information

First, you need to *develop critical thinking skills.* **Critical thinking** is the process of carefully attending to spoken or written information in order to evaluate its validity.

Make sure you understand the information; then evaluate it by asking such questions as whether it is logical and reasonable. One important way to evaluate information is to look for any *fallacies of thinking.* These fallacies are commonly used when people analyze social problems. You will find illustrations throughout this book on how fallacies lead to misunderstandings.

Second, you need to examine how sociologists research social problems by gathering data to test various explanations. The data may lead you to revise your explanations. Remember, the study of social problems is not an exercise in speculation; it needs explanations that are supported by evidence. Let's look, then, at fallacious ways of thinking and at methods of social research.

Critical Thinking: Recognizing Fallacies

Nine different fallacies have been used to analyze social problems. An important aspect of critical thinking is the ability to recognize these fallacies. This ability enables you not only to assess the validity of information and arguments presented by others but also to make your own analyses with logic and clarity.

Fallacy of Dramatic Instance

fallacy of dramatic instance
overgeneralizing

The **fallacy of dramatic instance** refers to the tendency to *overgeneralize,* to use one, two, or three cases to support an entire argument. This mistake is common among people who discuss social problems. It may be difficult to counter because the limited number of cases often are a part of an *individual's personal experience.* For example, in discussing the racial problem in the United States, a man said to us: "Blacks in this country can make it just as much as whites. I know a black businessman who is making a million. In fact, he has a better house and a better car than I have." We pointed out that this successful businessperson is an exception. The man dismissed the point: "If one guy can make it, they all can." The fallacy of dramatic instance mistakes a few cases for a general situation.

This fallacy is difficult to deal with because the argument is based partly on fact. There are, after all, African Americans who are millionaires. Does this mean there is no discrimination and that any black person can attain success? To use another example, many Americans believe that welfare recipients are "ripping off" the rest of us, that we are subsidizing their unwillingness to work and supporting them at a higher standard of living than we ourselves enjoy. Is this true? Yes, in a few cases. Occasionally, newspapers report instances of individuals making fraudulent use of welfare. But does this mean that most welfare recipients are doing the same? Do people on welfare really live better than people who work for a living?

The point is, in studying social problems, you must recognize that exceptions exist. To use such cases in support of your argument is to fall into the trap of the fallacy of dramatic instance because social problems deal with general situations rather than with individual exceptions.

As this fallacy suggests, the fact that you hear about a lazy poor person or a rich African American or a corrupt politician does not mean that such cases represent the typical situation. Millions of people are involved in the problems of poverty, race, and government. *Systematic studies* are needed to determine whether the one or two cases you know about represent the norm or the exception. For instance, the fact that there

are black and Hispanic millionaires is less important than the government report showing that in 2014 the median annual household income for non-Hispanic whites was $60,256, whereas that for Hispanics was $42,491 and that for African Americans was $35,398 (DeNavas-Walt and Proctor 2015). That same year, 10.1 percent of non-Hispanic whites, 23.6 percent of Hispanics, and 26.2 percent of African Americans lived in poverty. Such figures are more pertinent to the race problem than are cases that represent exceptions to the general pattern.

We are not saying that individual examples or cases are unimportant or unusable. At various points throughout this book (including the chapter opening vignettes) we use examples of people's experiences. These examples are not given as proof or even as evidence. Rather, we use them to *illustrate the impact of social problems on people's quality of life.* These examples may dramatize better than statistics the ways in which people's lives are adversely affected by social problems.

Fallacy of Retrospective Determinism

fallacy of retrospective determinism
the argument that things could not have worked out any other way than they did

The **fallacy of retrospective determinism** is the argument that things could not have worked out any other way than the way they did. It is a *deterministic* position, but the determinism is aimed at the past rather than the future. The fallacy asserts that what happened historically *had* to happen, and it *had* to happen just the way it did. If you accept this fallacy, the present social problems are inevitable. Whether the issue is racial discrimination, poverty, war, or the well-being of the family, the fallacy of retrospective determinism makes it unavoidable.

This fallacy is unfortunate for a number of reasons. History is more than a tale of *inevitable tragedies.* History is important for understanding social problems. You cannot fully understand the tensions between America's minority groups and the white majority unless you know about the decades of exploitation and humiliation preceding

Those who are born poor are likely to remain poor. Their poverty, however, is caused by social conditions, not fate.

the emergence of the modern civil rights movement. Your understanding will remain clouded if you regard those events as nothing more than an inevitable process. Similarly, you cannot fully understand the tension between the People's Republic of China and the West if you view it only as a battle of economic ideologies. It is vital to know that the tension is based in the pillage and humiliation to which China was subjected by the West. Yet your understanding will not be enhanced by the study of history if you regard the Western oppression of China in the 19th century as inevitable.

If you view the past in terms of determinism, you have little reason to study it and are deprived of an important source of understanding. Furthermore, the fallacy of retrospective determinism is but a small step from the stoic *acceptance of the inevitable.* That is, if things are the way they have to be, why worry about them? Assuming that the future also is determined by forces beyond your control, you are left in a position of apathy: There is little point in trying to contest the inevitable.

This fallacy is probably less common in discussions about social problems than the fallacy of dramatic instance, but it does appear in everyday discussions. For example, in responding to the question about the causes of poverty in America, a 64-year-old service station owner told us: "Go back through history, it's traditional; there's no special reason, no cause for it. We can't get away from it. It has just always been this way." A businessman expressed a similar fatalism: "I don't actually know the cause of poverty, but it's here to stay and we must learn to live with it. We have to take the good with the bad."

An individual might view social problems in deterministic terms for reasons other than intellectual conviction. Determinism can relieve you of responsibility and can legitimate a lack of concern with efforts to effect changes you do not want. Whatever the basis for affirming determinism, the outcome is the same: You may as well accept the problem and learn to live with it, because it is inevitably and inextricably with you.

Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness

Some people have a tendency to explain some social problems by resorting to **reification**—making what is abstract into something concrete. "Society," for example, is an abstraction. It is not like a person, an animal, or an object that can be touched. It is an idea, a way of thinking about a particular collectivity of people. Yet we often hear people assert that something is the fault of "society" or that "society" caused a certain problem. This is the **fallacy of misplaced concreteness.** In what sense can society "make" or "cause" or "do" anything? To say that society caused a problem leaves you helpless to correct the situation because you haven't the faintest notion where to begin. If, for example, society is the cause of juvenile delinquency, how do you tackle the problem? Must you change society? If so, how?

reification
defining what is abstract as something concrete

fallacy of misplaced concreteness
making something abstract into something concrete

The point is that "society" is an abstraction, a concept that refers to a group of people who interact in particular ways. To *attribute social problems to an abstraction* like "society" does not help resolve the problems. Sometimes people who attribute the cause of a particular problem to society intend to *deny individual responsibility.* To say that society causes delinquency may be a way of saying that the delinquent child is not responsible for his or her behavior.

You can recognize the social causes of problems without either attributing them to an abstraction like society or relieving the individual of responsibility for his or her behavior. For instance, you could talk about the family's role in delinquency. A family is a concrete phenomenon. Furthermore, you could say that the family itself is a victim of some kind of societal arrangement, such as government regulations that tend to

perpetuate poverty, cause stress, and create disruption in many families. You could say that families can be helped by changing the government regulations that keep some of them in poverty and, thereby, facilitate delinquent behavior.

Society, in short, does not cause anything. Rather, problems are caused by that which the concept of society represents—people acting in accord with certain social arrangements and within a particular cultural system.

Fallacy of Personal Attack

fallacy of personal attack
argument by attacking the opponent personally rather than dealing with the issue

A tactic among debaters is to attack the opponent *personally* when they can't support their position by reason, logic, or facts. This tactic diverts attention from the issue and focuses it on personality. We call this the **fallacy of personal attack** (philosophers call it *ad hominem*). It is remarkably effective in avoiding the use of reason or the consideration of evidence in discussing a social problem. In analyzing social problems, this fallacy can be used either to attack an opponent in a debate about a problem or to *attack the people who are the victims of the problem.* Ryan (1971) called this "blaming the victim" and said it involves nearly every problem in America.

Historically, the poor have suffered from this approach. Instead of offering sympathy or being concerned for the poor, people may label the poor as disreputable and, consequently, deserving of or responsible for their plight. People who are not poor are relieved of any responsibility. In fact, government efforts to alleviate poverty are even thought to contribute to the problem by taking away any incentive of the poor to help themselves, and leading them instead to become sexually promiscuous, irresponsible, and dependent on others (Somers and Block 2005). Attitudes have been changing. Increasing numbers of Americans agree that the poor are victims of circumstances beyond their control. Still, by 2014 a national poll reported that 44 percent of Americans believed that the poor were not doing enough to help themselves (O'Connor 2014).

The meaning and seriousness of any social problem may be sidestepped by attacking the intelligence or character of the victims or of those who call attention to the problem. Name-calling and labeling, thereby, change the social problem into a personal problem.

Fallacy of Appeal to Prejudice

fallacy of appeal to prejudice
argument by appealing to popular prejudices or passions

In addition to attacking the opponent, a debater may try to support an unreasonable position by using another technique: **fallacy of appeal to prejudice.** (Philosophers call it argument *ad populum.*) With this fallacy, debaters use popular prejudices or passions to convince others of the correctness of their position. When the topic is social problems, debaters use *popular slogans* or *popular myths* to sway people emotionally rather than using reasoning from systematic studies.

Some slogans or phrases persist for decades and are employed to oppose efforts to resolve social problems. "Creeping socialism" has been used to describe many government programs designed to aid the underdogs of society. The term is not used when the programs are designed to help business or industry, or when the affluent benefit from the programs. As someone remarked, "What the government does for me is progress; what it does for you is socialism."

In some cases, the slogans use general terms that reflect *traditional values.* Thus, the various advances made in civil rights legislation—voting, public accommodations, open housing—have been resisted in the name of the "rights of the individual." These slogans help to perpetuate the myth that legislation that benefits African Americans

infringes on the constitutional rights of the white majority. More recently, those who oppose same-sex marriage argue that they are simply acting in *defense of marriage and the family*. They claim that making same-sex marriage legal will further damage or even destroy the traditional family life that is the bedrock of a stable society.

Unfortunately, in the absence of other information or evidence, people tend to rely on myths to assess situations. Thus, some Americans continue to assume that rape is often the woman's fault because she has sexually provoked the man. These Americans either have seen no evidence to the contrary or have dismissed the evidence as invalid. Unfortunately, myths tend to become so deeply rooted in people's thinking that when people are confronted by new evidence, they have difficulty accepting it.

Myths are hard to break down, but if you want to understand social problems, you must abandon popular ideas and assumptions and resist popular slogans and prejudices that cloud your thinking. Instead, you must make judgments based on evidence.

Fallacy of Circular Reasoning

The ancient Greek physician Galen praised the healing qualities of a certain clay by pointing out that all who drink the remedy recover quickly—except those whom it does not help. The latter die and are not helped by any medicine. Obviously, according to Galen, the clay fails only in incurable cases. This is an example of the **fallacy of circular reasoning:** using conclusions to support the assumptions that were necessary to draw the conclusions.

fallacy of circular reasoning using conclusions to support the assumptions that were necessary to make the conclusions

Circular reasoning creeps into analyses of social problems. Someone might argue that Hispanics are inherently inferior and assert that their inferiority is evident because they hold only menial jobs and do not do intellectual work. In reply, you might point out that Hispanics are not doing more intellectual work because of discriminatory hiring practices. The person might then counter that Hispanics could not be hired for such jobs anyway because they are inferior.

Similarly, you might argue that homosexuals are sex perverts because they commonly have remained secretive about their sexual preference. But, we counter, the secrecy is due to the general disapproval of homosexuality. No, you reply, homosexuality is kept secret because it is a perversion. Thus, in circular reasoning people bounce *back and forth between assumptions and conclusions.* Circular reasoning leads nowhere in the search for an understanding of social problems.

Fallacy of Authority

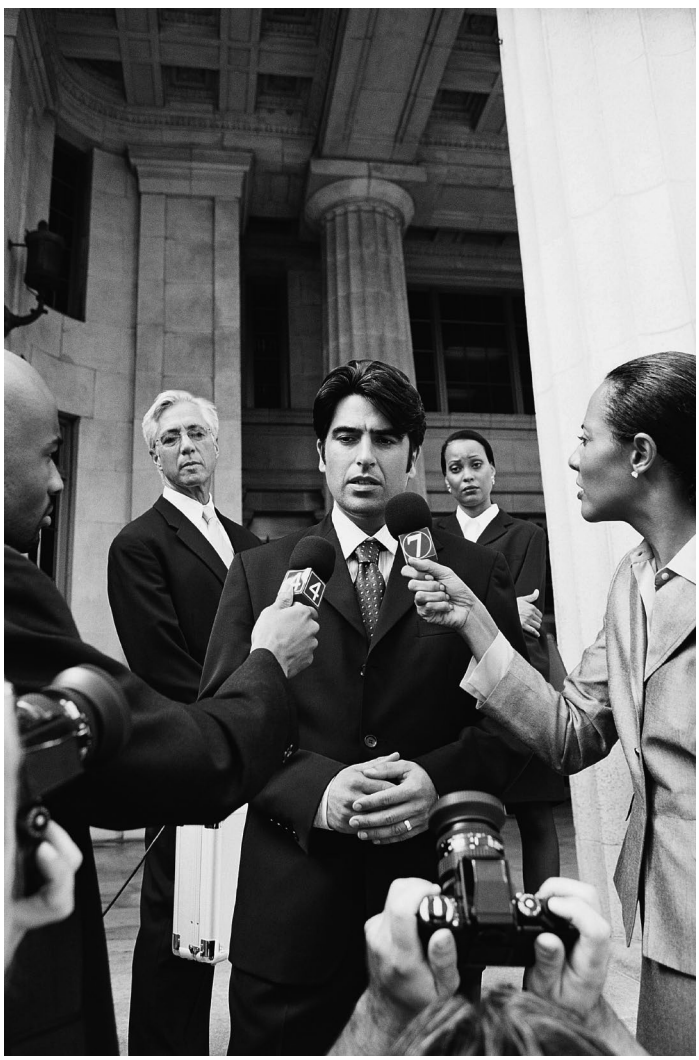
Virtually everything you know is based on some authority. You know comparatively little from personal experience or personal research. The authority you necessarily rely on is someone else's experience, research, or belief. You accept notions of everything from the nature of the universe to the structure of the atom, from the state of international relationships to the doctrines of religion—all on the basis of some authority. Most people accept a war as legitimate on the authority of their political leaders. Many accept the validity of capital punishment on the authority of law enforcement officers. Some accept that use of contraceptives is morally wrong on religious authority. Most rely on the authority of the news media about the extent and severity of various problems.

The knowledge that you acquire through authority can be inaccurate and can exacerbate rather than resolve or ameliorate social problems. The **fallacy of authority** means an *illegitimate appeal to authority.* Such an appeal obtrudes into thinking about social problems in at least four ways.

fallacy of authority argument by an illegitimate appeal to authority

First, the *authority may be ambiguous.* Thus, appeal is made to the Bible by both those who support and those who oppose capital punishment. Supporters of capital punishment point out that the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, decreed death for certain offenses. Opponents counter that the death penalty contradicts New Testament notions of Christian love. An appeal to this kind of authority, then, is really an appeal to a particular interpretation of the authority. Because the interpretations are contradictory, people must find other bases for making judgments.

Second, the *authority may be irrelevant to the problem.* The fact that a man is a first-rate physicist does not mean he can speak with legitimate authority about race relations. Most of us are impressed by people who have significant accomplishments in some area, but their accomplishments should not overwhelm us if those people speak about a problem outside their area of expertise.



We rely on authorities for information, but authorities are not always right.

Third, the *authority may be pursuing a bias* rather than studying a problem. To say that someone is pursuing a bias is not necessarily to disparage that person because pursuing it may be part of a job. For example, military officers are likely to analyze the problem of war from a military rather than a moral, political, or economic perspective. This is their job—and this is why decisions about armaments, defense, and war should not be left solely to the military. From a military point of view, one way to prevent war is to be prepared to counter an enemy attack. The nation must be militarily strong, according to this argument, so that other nations will hesitate to attack—and military strength requires the most sophisticated technology, a stockpile of weaponry, and a large, standing military force.

The shortcomings of this line of reasoning were dramatically illustrated by the incidents of September 11, 2001, when terrorists seized jetliners and crashed them into the World Trade Center towers in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. At the time, the United States was clearly the strongest military power in the world. Nevertheless, the terrorists struck and they struck effectively. As we discuss in Chapter 14, the notion of defending against enemies must now be reexamined in light of a new face of war in the world.

Although some people pursue a bias as a normal part of their work, others pursue it because of *vested interests.* That is, the authority may deliberately or unconsciously allow biases to affect what he or she says because it is personally advantageous. The head of a corporation that builds private prisons and argues that the private sector can deal with prisoners more effectively than can the government will obviously benefit from public policy that privatizes state and federal prisons. The corporate

executive who talks about federal overregulation would clearly benefit if the government withdrew from consumer protection programs. Political leaders credit their own policies when crime rates fall and point to uncontrollable circumstances when crime rates rise. Their policies may have no effect on crime rates, but they benefit if they can persuade people that their actions have lowered the rate or will do so in the future.

Finally, *the authority may simply be wrong.* This problem often occurs when one authority cites another. For example, in 2003, the Census Bureau issued a report on the foreign-born population of the United States (Schmidley 2003). The report showed the years of entry of the 32.5 million foreign-born people now living in the nation: 4.1 million came before 1970, 4.6 million came during the 1970s, 7.96 million came during the 1980s, and 15.8 million came after 1990. Suppose we wanted information about immigration patterns, and we consulted newspapers instead of the Census Bureau. We examined three respectable sources and found the following interpretations of the report. A national financial paper said that the number of immigrants continued to grow at "a blistering pace." An urban newspaper reported that immigration continued at a steady pace during "the past two years." And a national newspaper claimed that the Census Bureau report stated that the number of foreign-born coming to live in the United States has "slowed considerably"! Clearly, when one authority cites another, it is best to check out the initial authority before drawing any conclusions.

Fallacy of Composition

That the whole is equal to the sum of its parts appears obvious. That what is true of the part is also true of the whole likewise seems to be a reasonable statement, but the former is debatable, and the latter is the **fallacy of composition.** As economists have illustrated, the notion that *what is valid for the part is also valid for the whole* is not necessarily true. Consider, for example, the relationship between work and income. If a farmer works hard and the weather is not adverse, the farmer's income may rise; but if every farmer works hard and the weather is favorable, and a bumper crop results, the total farm income may fall. The latter case is based on supply and demand, whereas the former assumes that a particular farmer outperforms other farmers.

fallacy of composition
the assertion that what is true of the part is necessarily true of the whole

In thinking about social problems, *you cannot assume that what is true for the individual is also true for the group.* An individual may be able to resolve a problem insofar as it affects him or her, but that resolution is not available to all members of the group. For example, a man who is unemployed and living in poverty may find work that enables him to escape poverty. The work may require him to move or to work for less money than someone else, but still he is able to rise above poverty. As you will see in our discussion of poverty, however, that solution is not possible for most of the nation's poor. Thus, something may be true for a particular individual or even a few individuals and yet be inapplicable or counterproductive for the entire group of which the individuals are members.

Fallacy of Non Sequitur

A number of the fallacies already discussed involve non sequitur, but we look at this way of thinking separately because of its importance. Literally, non sequitur means *"it does not follow."* This **fallacy of non sequitur** is commonly found when people interpret statistical data.

fallacy of non sequitur
something that does not follow logically from what has preceded it

For example, data may show that the amount of welfare payments by state governments has increased dramatically over the past few decades. What is the meaning of such data? You might conclude that the number of people unwilling to work has

involvement

HOW, AND HOW NOT, TO THINK

"Use it or lose it" is a common saying. We might paraphrase that and say "Use it and learn it." That is, one of the best ways to learn something is to use it and not simply to memorize it. For this involvement, therefore, we are asking you to learn the fallacies by using them.

Select any social problem in which you are interested. Show how people could use each of the fallacies to "explain" that problem. Construct nine different explanations that are one or two sentences long. Try to make your explanations sound reasonable. Test them by sharing them with someone and seeing how many you can get the other person to accept. If the entire class participates in this project, gather in small groups and have each member share his or her explanations. Group members should then try to identify the fallacy in each of the explanations. Be sure not to present the fallacies in the order in which they appear in the book.

As an alternative, use simple observation to test the accuracy of common (or your own) notions about people involved in particular social problems. For instance, visit a gay bar. Or attend a meeting of gay activists, a feminist group, Alcoholics Anonymous, or an environmental group. Ask a number of people to describe the typical member of the group you visit, and compare their responses (and your own preconceptions) with your observations.

increased and that more and more "freeloaders" are living off the public treasury, but there are other explanations. The increase may reflect adjustments due to inflation, better efforts to get welfare money to eligible recipients, or a rise in unemployment due to government action to control inflation.

Daniel Bell (1960) showed how statistics on crime can be misleading. In New York one year, reported assaults were up 200 percent, robberies were up 400 percent, and burglaries were up 1,300 percent! Those were the "facts," but what did they mean? A crime wave? Actually, the larger figures reflected a new method of crime reporting that was more effective in determining the total amount of crime. An increase in reported crime rates can mean different things, but it does not necessarily signify an actual increase in the amount of crime.

One other example involves studies of women who work. Some employers believe that women are not desirable workers because they are less committed to the job than men, as indicated by their higher turnover rate. Women do indeed have a higher rate of turnover than men. But what does this mean? Are women truly less committed to their jobs?

When you look at the situation more closely, you find that the real problem is that women tend to be concentrated in lower-level jobs. Also, women who quit a job tend to find another one quickly. Thus, women may be uncommitted to a particular low-level job but strongly committed to work. Furthermore, if you look at jobs with the same status, the turnover rate is no higher for women than men.

These illustrations are not meant to discourage you from drawing conclusions. Instead, they are reminders of the need for thorough study and the need to avoid quick conclusions, even when those conclusions seem logical on the surface. Contrary to popular opinion, *"facts" do not necessarily speak for themselves.* They must be interpreted in light of the complexities of social life and with the awareness that a number of different conclusions can usually be drawn from any set of data.

Fallacies and Mass Media

In subsequent chapters, we discuss how mass media contribute to particular social problems. Here we want to point out how the media contribute to misunderstandings by committing or facilitating the various fallacies.

In some cases, the media may inadvertently create fallacious thinking by the way something is reported. For instance, a newspaper story about someone who is guilty of welfare fraud, which omits the fact that such fraud represents only a tiny minority of recipients, can lead readers to commit the fallacy of the dramatic instance: The story proves that those on welfare are cheats who want handouts rather than responsibility. Or a story in a religious magazine about a formerly gay man who is now married to a woman, which omits any mention of the numerous gays who have tried and failed to change their sexual orientation, can lead readers to commit the fallacy of non sequitur: If one man can do it, they all can.

Because the media represent authority in the matter of information, they are particularly prone to the fallacy of authority. That is, they might provide information that is misleading or wrong. It may be a case of bias on the part of those gathering and/or presenting the information. It may be a case of misunderstanding the original source of the information. Or it may be a case of the original source itself being wrong. For example, in 2006 a survey commissioned by the American Medical Association found a startlingly high rate of binge drinking and unprotected sex on the part of female college students while on spring break (Rosenthal 2006). The study, reported widely on TV and in newspapers, was based on a "random sample." It turned out, however, that the sample was not random. Those who participated were volunteers, and only one-fourth of them had actually been on a spring break trip. In essence, then, no conclusions about college women in general could be drawn from the survey.

We do not intend to commit the fallacy of dramatic instance ourselves by suggesting that such incidents are typical or even very common. Rather, they illustrate the need to be alert, thoughtful, and cautious about the things you read and hear about social problems.

The Sources of Data: Social Research

The various "intellectual blind alleys" we have described create and help to perpetuate myths about social problems. *Social research* is designed to gain information about social problems so that you can have a valid understanding of them and employ realistic efforts in resolving them.

Not everything called research is scientifically valid. Therefore, you need to use critical thinking skills as well as information and arguments to evaluate research. Some so-called social research aims to shape rather than gain information. For example, we once received a letter from a U.S. congressman inquiring about our attitudes toward labor unions. Actually, the letter attempted to shape information, and the questionnaire that accompanied it was designed to enlist support for the congressman's antiunion stance. The letter began by saying, "What will happen to your state and local taxes—your family's safety—and our American way of life, if the czars of organized labor have their way in the new Congress?" It used such phrases as "henchmen," "power hungry union professionals," "rip-offs which enrich the union fat cats at your expense," and "freedom from union tyranny." The questionnaire itself requested yes-or-no responses to questions such as "Do you feel that anyone should be forced to pay a union boss for permission to earn a living?" Clearly, this inquiry resorted to *the fallacies of personal attack and appeal to prejudice.* A critical-thinking approach would treat the results as little else than an illustration of people with biases against labor unions.

If you want to gain information and discover the nature of social reality, you must use scientific social research. Scientific research is both rational and *empirical.* That

is, it is logical and comes to conclusions based on evidence rather than speculation or feelings. The stages of such research typically include a clear statement of the problem or issue to be researched; formulation of *hypotheses* so that the problem or issue is in researchable form; selection of the appropriate method, including the sample; collection of the data; analysis of the data; and interpretation and report of the conclusions. A guiding principle throughout the foregoing stages is the desire to discover evidence, not to confirm preconceptions.

Many different methods are used in social research. We look at four methods that have yielded important information about social problems: survey research, statistical analysis of official records (particularly of government data), experiments, and participant observation.

Survey Research

survey
a method of research in which a sample of people are interviewed or given questionnaires in order to get data on some phenomenon

socioeconomic status
position in the social system based on economic resources, power, education, prestige, and lifestyle

variable
any trait or characteristic that varies in value or magnitude

The **survey** uses interviews and/or questionnaires to gain data about some phenomenon. The people from whom the information is gathered are normally a *sample* (a small number of people selected by various methods from a larger population) of a *population* (a group that is the focus of the study). The data include everything from attitudes about various matters to information such as gender, age, and **socioeconomic status.** You can learn two important aspects of social reality from surveys. First, you can discover the *distribution of people along some dimension.* For example, you can learn the proportion of people who say they will vote Republican or Democratic in an election; the proportion of people who favor, oppose, or are neutral about capital punishment; or the proportion of people who believe that homosexuals should be allowed to marry. Second, you can discover *relationships among* **variables.** (A *variable* is any trait or characteristic that varies in value or magnitude.) For instance, you can investigate the relationship between people's positions in the stratification system (socioeconomic status) and their attitudes toward the race problem, gender inequality, or the plight of the poor.

Survey research is probably the most common method used in sociology. Let's examine one piece of such research that deals with the problem of wife rape. The example illustrates both the technique of survey research and the kind of information that survey research can yield about a social problem.

Can a man rape his wife? In our experience, students have diverse opinions. Some believe that wife rape is as serious an offense against a woman as rape by a stranger. Others believe that rape makes no sense in the context of marriage, that sex in marriage is "his right" and "her duty" (Durán, Moya, and Megias 2011), a view that is supported by a long legal tradition. The so-called marital rape exemption goes back to 17th-century England, when Chief Justice Matthew Hale declared that a husband cannot be guilty of raping his wife "for by their mutual matrimonial consent and contract the wife hath given up herself in this kind unto the husband which she cannot retract" (quoted in Russell 1982:17). This decision was based on the idea that wives are property and that sex is a wife's duty. It was the prevailing legal guideline in the United States until the 1970s. In 1977, Oregon deleted the spouse-immunity clause from the rape statute, and a man was tried (though not convicted) for wife rape the next year. Marital rape is now a crime in all 50 states, and it is estimated that 10 to 14 percent of all married women and 40 to 50 percent of battered women will experience it (Martin, Taft, and Resick 2007).

Apart from public and legal opinions, is it reasonable to speak of wife rape? Does the wife suffer the same kinds of trauma as other rape victims? Diana Russell (1982) investigated the question of wife rape by surveying a random sample of 930 women in the San Francisco Bay area. ("Random" does not mean they were chosen at random,

but that they were carefully selected using a method that gave every woman in the area an equal chance of being chosen.) She interviewed the 644 women who were or had been married. About 14 percent, or one in seven, told about "sexual assaults" by their husbands that could be classified as rape. The wives were raped by force, by the threat of force, and by their inability to consent to sexual intercourse because of being drugged, asleep, or somehow helpless. The forced sex included oral and anal sex as well as sexual intercourse.

Some of the women said their husbands threatened to beat them if they did not submit. Others said they were held down forcibly. In a few cases, weapons were used to intimidate them or they were beaten with fists or objects. Overall, 84 percent of the wives indicated that some kind of force was used. Pushing and pinning down were the most common kinds of force employed by the husbands, but 16 percent of the women said that their husbands hit, kicked, or slapped them, and 19 percent said they were beaten or slugged. About 1 out of 10 of the women pointed out, without being asked, that they had been injured during the attack, ranging from bruises to broken bones and concussions.

The husbands also made verbal threats and even used weapons: 13 percent of the husbands had guns and 1 percent had knives. Twenty-one percent threatened to kill their wives. These wives were obviously and understandably intimidated.

What about the argument that forced sex with one's husband cannot possibly be as traumatic as forced sex with a stranger? Russell compared the responses of her sample with those of women who had been raped by strangers; acquaintances; authority figures; and friends, dates, or lovers. In terms of the proportion of women who reported being "extremely upset" by the incident, the proportions were 65 percent of those raped by a relative other than the husband (usually a childhood rape), 61 percent of those raped by a stranger, 59 percent of those raped by a husband, 42 percent of those raped by an acquaintance, 41 percent of those raped by an authority figure, and 33 percent of those raped by a friend, date, or lover (Russell 1982). Further, the same percentage—52 percent—of women who were raped by their husbands and women who were raped by a relative other than the husband indicated "great long-term effects" on their lives, compared to 39 percent of those raped by a stranger, and smaller percentages of those involved in the other kinds of rape.

Clearly, wife rape is no less traumatic than other kinds of rape and is more traumatic than many kinds. Women who had been raped by their husbands suffered, among other effects, increased negative feelings toward their husbands and men generally; deterioration of the marriage (including divorce); changed behavior patterns (drinking more, or never remarrying if a divorce resulted); increased fear, anxiety, anger, or depression; and increased negative feelings about sex. Two of the raped women tried to commit suicide.

Russell's research has clear implications for dealing with the problem. Many states still have various forms of the marital rape exemption on their statute books. In some cases, a distinction is made between rape by a husband and rape by someone else, with the former being a less serious offense; but Russell's research shows that rape by a husband is a serious offense from the victim's point of view. Such research not only provides insight but also suggests realistic ways of resolving a problem.

Statistical Analysis of Official Records

Suppose you want to see how *self-esteem* enters into various social problems. For instance, you might want to see whether prejudice and discrimination affect the self-esteem of minorities, whether negative attitudes about growing old affect the self-esteem

of the aged, or whether rapists or other offenders have low self-esteem. You could use a questionnaire to measure self-esteem, then compute the **mean** (average) scores of your respondents.

mean
the average

Let's say that the mean score of a random sample of offenders was 8.9 and the mean score of a random sample of average citizens of the same age, gender, and socioeconomic status was 10.2. The offenders have lower self-esteem. But is the difference between 8.9 and 10.2 a significant one? If not, how much difference would be required before you could say that it was significant—that is, before you could say with some confidence that the two groups differ in level of self-esteem?

test of significance
a statistical method for determining the probability that research findings occurred by chance

The question can be answered by using a **test of significance,** which is a technical way of determining the probability that your findings occurred by chance. That is, if the difference is not significant statistically, then you cannot say that offenders have a lower self-esteem than nonoffenders. A different set of samples might yield scores of 9.4 for both groups, or a slightly higher mean for offenders than for nonoffenders. If the difference is statistically significant, however, you can say with some confidence that offenders generally have lower self-esteem than nonoffenders.

We will not examine details of tests of significance; they require greater knowledge of statistics. Note, however, that many of the findings about social problems discussed in this book—whether gathered through survey research, experiment, or official records—have been subjected to statistical tests. This gives you confidence that the results reflect significant differences between the groups and, if the samples were adequate, that the results apply to more groups than the ones tested. Thus, you can make general statements about, say, women in America without having surveyed the majority of American women.

Some other questions can be asked about data gathered in research. For example, you might want to know how many of the offenders scored high, medium, and low in self-esteem. To get this information, you need a **frequency distribution,** which we use in subsequent chapters. The frequency distribution provides information not available in the mean.

frequency distribution
the organization of data to show the number of times each item occurs

As Table 1.1 shows, you can have different frequency distributions with the same number of cases and the same mean. If the scores in the table represented thousands of income dollars of women in an organization, you would draw different conclusions about the women's economic well-being in the two cases even though the means were the same.

median
the score below which are half of the scores and above which are the other half

Another question that can be asked is, "What is the **median** score?" The median is the score below which half the scores fall and above which the other half fall. This

TABLE 1.1
Frequency Distribution of Two Sets of Hypothetical Data

	Number In:	
Score	Set A	Set B
1	10	3
2	2	10
3	2	7
4	6	0
Mean score	2.2	2.2

TABLE 1.2
Frequency Distribution, Mean, and Median of Two Sets of Hypothetical Income Data

	Number of Families	
Income Level	Set A	Set B
$ 1,000	2	1
2,000	1	2
3,000	1	1
4,000	1	0
5,000	2	1
10,000	0	2
Mean	$3,000	$4,714
Median	3,000	3,000

furnishes important information for dealing with things such as income distribution. For instance, if A and B represent two communities in Table 1.2, the mean incomes of the two are quite different. You might conclude that the people in community B are better off than those in community A. Actually, the median income is the same for both A and B, and the higher mean for B is due to the two families with very high incomes. Thus, *extreme figures* will affect the mean but not the median. When you find a big difference between the mean and the median, you know extremes are involved.

Statistical analysis is useful for several types of research. Suppose you want to see whether women are discriminated against with respect to income. You will need a frequency distribution of male and female incomes as well as mean and median income for the two groups. This information can be obtained from government census data: The analysis has already been made, and you need only interpret it. You do not need to make a test of significance because census data involve the entire population; tests of significance are used only when you want to know the probability that your findings about a sample are true for the population.

Not all official records are analyzed statistically, and not all are as complete as census data. Yet many data are available that you can use to improve your understanding of social problems. An example of the utility of the statistical analysis of official records is provided by Jacobs and Carmichael's (2002) study of the death penalty. The researchers raised the question of why the death penalty exists in some states but not others. Is it simply a matter that some people believe the penalty is an effective crime deterrent while others do not? Or are other factors at work as well?

Using various theoretical considerations, the researchers set up hypotheses about the impact of economic, political, and racial factors on the death penalty. They tested the hypotheses by using official records, including whether a state had the death penalty, the extent of economic inequality in the state, the unemployment rate, the proportion of African Americans and Hispanics, the proportion of families headed by a woman, the extent of public conservatism (measured by the ideologies of the state's elected congresspeople), and the strength of the Republican Party (measured by whether the governor was Republican and the proportion of Republicans in the state legislature).

In accord with their hypotheses, the researchers found that states with the largest black populations, the greatest economic inequality, Republican dominance in the state

legislature, and stronger conservative values were more likely to have the death penalty. In accord with our model, the researchers identified multiple social factors associated with the death penalty—institutions, stratification, values, and ideologies—and they showed that whether a state has the death penalty is not simply a matter of believing in its value as a deterrent to crime. Economic threats, racial divisions, and ideologies all enter into the matter.

Experiments

independent variable
the variable in an experiment that is manipulated to see how it affects changes in the dependent variable

dependent variable
the variable in an experiment that is influenced by an independent variable

In essence, the *experimental method* involves manipulation of one or more variables, control of other variables, and measurement of the consequences in still other variables. The manipulated variables are called the **independent variables,** while those that are measured to see the ways they have been affected are called the **dependent variables.** To see whether the independent variables cause change in the dependent variables, the experimenter uses *both an experimental group and a control group.* Measurements are taken in both groups, but the control group is not exposed to the treatment (the independent variable).

Suppose you want to set up an experiment to test the hypothesis that prejudice is increased by negative interpersonal encounters with people of other races. You get a group of white volunteers, test them on their level of prejudice, and select 20 who score about the same (that is, you control for level of prejudice). You then divide them into two groups and give each group the same brief lecture by an African American. One group is treated kindly by the lecturer, while the other group is treated in an abusive manner. Following the lecture, you again test the 20 subjects for their level of prejudice.

If the 10 who hear the abusive lecturer increase their level of prejudice while the 10 who listen to the kindly lecturer show no increase, the hypothesis is clearly supported. In practice, experiments never come out this neatly. Some people who listen to the abusive speaker will not increase their level of prejudice, and some who listen to the kindly speaker will show more prejudice afterward. In other words, factors other than just the interpersonal contact are at work. The experimenter tries to control the setting and the subjects in order to minimize the effect of these other factors.

The utility of experiments is illustrated in a study of how using a cell phone while driving affects other drivers (McGarva, Ramsey, and Shear 2006). One-third or more of all drivers use cell phones while driving, and cell phone users are more likely than others to be involved in collisions. Is it possible that using cell phones increases the amount of hostility and road rage in others when users are seen driving in ways that are frustrating or hazardous? If so, then cell phone usage while driving may be a factor in the total amount of violence in our society.

How could we find out? McGarva, Ramsey, and Shear (2006) set up two experiments to observe reactions to drivers on cell phones. In the first experiment, one of the researchers drove an older car on some two-lane roads within the city limits of a Midwestern town. The car was equipped with a hidden camera that recorded drivers behind the researcher's car. When a car approached from the rear, the researcher slowed down to 10 miles per hour less than the posted speed limit. In some cases, the researcher appeared to talk on a cell phone while driving slowly (the experimental group); in other cases, the researcher drove with both hands on the wheel (the control group).

In the second experiment, when the researcher's car was at a red light and another car was waiting behind it, the researcher's car paused approximately 15 seconds after the light had turned green. Again, in some cases the researcher appeared to be talking

Drivers on cell phones increase the amount of roadway aggression.

on a cell phone (the experimental group) while in other cases the researcher simply sat in the car with both hands on the wheel.

In both experiments the researchers found that when the driver appeared to be talking on a cell phone, men in other cars honked their horns more quickly and frequently than when the driver was not on a cell phone. Women in other cars tended to use their horns less, but judgments of their facial expressions concluded that they were more angry when the researcher was on a cell phone than when the researcher had both hands on the wheel.

The researchers concluded that the use of cell phones by drivers adds to the growing problem of roadway aggression. It would be useful to know whether those frustrated drivers with elevated levels of hostility act more aggressively or violently afterward. Such a question illustrates why researchers invariably point out that additional research is necessary.

Participant Observation

Participant observation, the last method we consider, involves a number of elements, including interaction with subjects, participation in and observation of pertinent activities of the subjects, interviews, and use of documents and artifacts. In participant observation, the researcher directly participates in and observes the social reality being studied. The researcher is both a part of and detached from the social reality being studied.

participant observation
a method of research in which one directly participates and observes the social reality being studied

However, there are differences in the extent to which the researcher is involved in the social reality being studied. The relative emphasis on participation versus observation, and whether the researcher reveals his or her identity to participants, are decisions that must be made (and are matters of ethical debate). For instance, if a researcher uses observation to study poverty, he or she might live in an impoverished community

and pretend to be a poor person. Or the researcher might acknowledge that research is being conducted while he or she participates in community activities. The researcher might decide to participate only in selective community activities that he or she specifically wants to observe. Or the researcher could choose to be primarily an observer, watching poor children in a schoolroom behind a one-way mirror. Which will yield the best information? Which, if any, would be considered unethical? Researchers must answer such questions.

As an example of participant observation research, we looked at Gwendolyn Dordick's (2002) research into a transitional housing program for the homeless. Numerous programs exist to deal with the problem of homeless people. How effective are these programs? This question needs to be addressed in order to frame public policy and provide guidelines for private efforts to attack the problems.

Dordick pointed out that the initial emphasis on setting up emergency shelters and giving monetary assistance for housing has given way to programs that combine temporary shelter with a variety of social services. The services are designed to address the basic causes of homelessness, such as substance abuse, mental illness, and chronic unemployment. Homeless individuals or families are given temporary shelter while they take advantage of the services to deal with the cause of their homelessness. The goal is to make the homeless "housing-ready."

Dordick spent 18 months as a participant observer in On the Way, a transitional program for homeless, single, substance-abusing men. Her goals were to determine the meaning of "becoming housing-ready" and to see how effective the program was in making people housing-ready.

Dordick did not live in the home where the program was run, but she visited it nearly 100 times, spending two to six hours there each time. She joined in staff and community meetings, observed group therapeutic activities, and hung out with people in the home and in the residents' rooms. She also conducted interviews with current and past staff members and residents.

The services provided by On the Way included mental health counseling, education, job training, and training in independent living skills. Basic questions Dordick tried to answer were: How does one know when a resident is housing-ready, prepared to live on his or her own? How do the staff know when to tell a resident that he or she is ready to move on? The ability to pay rent or the eligibility for government subsidy were not among the criteria used. Rather, the staff used very subjective means such as the "quality of sobriety." A staff member found it very difficult to define precisely what he meant by quality of sobriety. He just had a sense of it from his own experience.

So how well did the program work? While Dordick was there, and during the year following her research, seven residents and two resident managers left On the Way. One secured his own apartment and another moved to a permanent subsidized housing facility. The others moved in with relatives or girlfriends. As Dordick summed it up, there was no transition to independent living for most of them. It was just a matter of substituting "one set of dependencies for another" (Dordick 2002:27).

By the use of participant observation, then, Dordick was able to evaluate the effectiveness of one program designed to help the homeless. The minimal success of this program does not mean that the homeless are hopeless. It means that we must keep searching for effective ways to help.

Summary

You need to distinguish between personal and social problems. For the former, the causes and solutions lie within the individual and his or her immediate environment. For the latter, the causes and solutions lie outside the individual and his or her immediate environment. Defining a particular problem as personal or social is important because the definition determines the causes you identify, the consequences of the problem, and how you cope with the problem.

The model we use to analyze social problems treats them as contradictions. It emphasizes that multiple-level factors cause and help perpetuate problems. You must understand social problems in terms of the mutual influence between social structural factors, social psychological or cognitive factors, and social interaction.

In addition to attending to the multiple factors involved, two additional tools are necessary for an adequate understanding of social problems. One is to use critical thinking skills to identify fallacious ways of thinking that have been used to analyze social problems and that create and perpetuate myths about those problems. The other is to understand the methods of social research. An adequate understanding of social problems is based on research and not merely on what seems to be reasonable.

Nine different fallacies have been used to analyze social problems. The fallacy of dramatic instance refers to the tendency to overgeneralize, to use a single case or a few cases to support an entire argument. The fallacy of retrospective determinism is the argument that things could not have worked out differently. The fallacy of misplaced concreteness is the tendency to resort to reification, to make something abstract into something concrete. The fallacy of personal attack is a form of debate or argument in which an attack is made on the opponent rather than on the issues. Appeal to prejudice is the exploitation of popular prejudices or passions. Circular reasoning involves the use of conclusions supporting assumptions necessary to make those conclusions. The fallacy of authority is an illegitimate appeal to authority. The fallacy of composition is the idea that what is true of the part is also true of the whole. Finally, non sequitur is drawing the wrong conclusions from premises even though the premises themselves are valid.

Four methods of social research that are useful for understanding social problems are survey research, statistical analysis of official records, experiment, and participant observation. Survey research employs interviews and questionnaires on a sample of people in order to get data. Statistical analysis of official records may be simple (computing means, medians, and frequency distributions) or relatively complex (computing tests of significance). Experiment involves manipulation of one or more variables, control of other variables, and measurement of consequences in still other variables. Experiments frequently take place in a laboratory setting, where the researcher has a high degree of control over what happens. Finally, participant observation involves both participation and observation on the part of the researcher; the researcher is both a part of and detached from the social reality being studied.

Key Terms

Attitude
Conflict Theory
Contradiction
Critical Thinking
Dependent Variable
Fallacy of Appeal to Prejudice
Fallacy of Authority
Fallacy of Circular Reasoning
Fallacy of Composition
Fallacy of Dramatic Instance
Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness
Fallacy of Non Sequitur
Fallacy of Personal Attack
Fallacy of Retrospective Determinism
Frequency Distribution
Ideology
Independent Variable
Institution
Interaction
Mean
Median
Norm
Participant Observation
Personal Problem
Reification
Role
Social Problem
Socioeconomic Status
Stratification System
Structural Functionalism
Survey
Symbolic Interactionism
Test of Significance
Values
Variables

Study Questions

1. Using rape or some other problem as an example, how would you distinguish between a personal and a social problem?

2. What difference does the distinction between personal and social problems make in understanding the causes and consequences of problems?
3. Define each of the concepts in the authors' model and illustrate how each can enhance understanding of social problems.
4. What is meant by "quality of life," and in what way is it a part of social problems?
5. Illustrate each of the nine fallacies of thinking by showing how each can be used to "explain" a social problem.
6. How is survey research used to study social problems?
7. In what ways are official records useful for the study of social problems?
8. How do you set up a scientific experiment to research a social problem?
9. What did participant observation teach you about a program designed to help the homeless, and how did the researcher go about being a participant observer?

Internet Resources/ Exercises

1. Explore some of the ideas in this chapter on the following sites:

http://www.asanet.org The official site of the American Sociological Association. Includes press releases and other information of value to students of social problems.

http://www.sssp1.org Official site of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, with access to the *SSSP Newsletter.* Links to other sites relevant to social problems.

www.davidcoon.com/soc.htm A list of sociology sites on the Internet, including links to many sites useful in dealing with social problems.

2. The journal *Social Problems* is published by Oxford. Go to its site: **http://www.socprooxfordjournals.org**. Find the journal and examine the table of contents over the past year. Compare the kinds of problems dealt with in the articles with those explored in this text, with those you think are of concern to most Americans, and with those of most concern to you personally. Is the journal dealing with the issues of most concern?

3. Input the term "fallacies" into your search engine. Select a number of sites and compare their materials with those in the text. Are there other fallacies that should be included in the text? Are there fallacies that seem more appropriate than some of those described in the text for understanding social problems? In addition to those dealt with in the text, what other fallacies do you find helpful for understanding patterns of thinking?

For Further Reading

Best, Joel. *Damned Lies and Statistics: Uncovering Numbers from the Media, Politicians, and Activists.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. Discusses the various ways people use and misuse statistics as they think about and report on social problems.

Black, Beth, ed. *An A to Z of Critical Thinking.* New York: Continuum, 2012. Gives definitions and examples of more than 130 terms and concepts employed in critical thinking. Helps you to better understand the differences between such things as facts, fallacies, arguments, logic, and opinions.

Diestler, Sherry. *Becoming a Critical Thinker: A User Friendly Manual.* 4th ed. New York: Prentice-Hall, 2004. A comprehensive but accessible survey of critical thinking on controversial issues, including exercises to hone your skills.

Gilbert, Nigel, ed. *Researching Social Life.* 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008. Shows how qualitative and quantitative methods can be used to research social phenomena.

Huff, Darrell. *How to Lie with Statistics.* New York: W. W. Norton, 1993. A readable, fascinating exposition of proper and improper use of statistical data. Shows how statistics as well as myths can impart incorrect information.

Rapley, Mark. *Quality of Life Research: A Critical Introduction.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003. A critical introduction to the concept of quality of life and the ways in which people research it. Uses an interdisciplinary approach in its analysis.

Sribnick, Ethan G., ed. *A Legacy of Innovation: Governors and Public Policy.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. Explores the role of state governors vis-à-vis the federal government in addressing a number of social problems.

PART 2

Problems of Behavioral Deviance

What do such actions as prostitution, drug addiction, and arson have in common? They all involve behavior that deviates from social norms. As such, most Americans view the behavior as within the individual's control and responsibility. That is, if a person engages in prostitution, uses drugs, or robs a store, it is a matter of his or her free choice. Further, because it is a choice that violates social norms, the person who engages in any kind of behavioral variance is likely to be (1) condemned and punished, (2) defined as "sick" and given therapy, or (3) both.

As you will see, the matter is not as simple as this view suggests. If, for example, you define crime as any infraction of the law—including such activities as speeding or failing to report income on tax returns—few if any Americans are innocent of crime. Like all problems discussed in this book, problems of behavioral deviance are complex issues that involve social contradictions, are defined as having adverse effects on the quality of life, and have multilevel causes.

CHAPTER 2

Alcohol and Other Drugs

OBJECTIVES

1. Learn the types and effects of alcohol and various other drugs.
2. Identify the patterns of use in the United States.
3. Explain the personal, interpersonal, and societal consequences of the use and abuse of alcohol and other drugs.
4. Understand the varied social structural factors that facilitate and help perpetuate the problem.
5. Describe the kinds of attitudes and ideologies that underlie America's problem of alcohol and other drugs.