



Introduction: What Is a Social Problem?

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What is a social problem? Does everyone see health care and poverty as social problems? Some of you, who may have health insurance, membership in a health maintenance organization, or merely supreme confidence in your own health, may not be concerned at all. You may believe that anyone who works hard and plans well can provide for a secure future.

In the 1960s and 1970s, many people assumed that hardship and inequality were society's fault and called upon society to address and correct them. We are now moving back toward a traditional American value that people are entirely responsible for their own lives, and that the reality of life is such that, in order for there to be winners, there will inevitably be some losers. This conception limits the society's moral and legal obligations, but does not rule out compassion (Yankelovich, 1998, p.5). Some Americans see individual compassion and charity as adequate responses to the problems we identify here and see unemployment, divorce, and other problems as "individual" rather than social concerns. If you share this view, we hope that you will be willing to consider that there may be limits to it (There are also limits to the idea that everything bad is "society's fault").

We hope that your study of social problems will convince you that some kinds of personal problems are in fact embedded in social conditions. Sometimes the institutions of our society (e.g., government, business, schools, health care systems, civil and criminal justice systems) fail to adapt quickly and adequately to wide-scale social changes such as globalization, the march of technology, natural disaster, and international conflict. When this happens, people may be squeezed in ways that they could not have anticipated and cannot control.

Defining Social Problems

The Popular Opinion Approach

What are the social problems of our society? One way to identify the problems of our time is to ask a wide range of people about their beliefs and opinions. Each year (since 1935), the Gallup Poll has asked a representative sample of Americans “What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?” In recent years, the top five categories have been the economy, unemployment and jobs, health care, the deficit, and education. Other problems that have been identified in this way are taxes, the cost of living, welfare, poverty, declining ethical standards, teen pregnancy, foreign relations, racism, war, immigration, AIDS, and abortion. Although there is some consistency in these choices, the trend is away from a consensus (Jones, 2011; The Roper Center, 1998). Many other problems are of “most concern” to some Americans. Examples elicited from a first-year university class include: wife-battering, pornography, violence by and against children, inner-city gangs, sexism, Satanism, suicide, drunk driving, sexual deviance, and surrogate motherhood. The candidates running for the 2016 Democratic and Republican presidential nomination identified the economy, immigration, terrorism, and health care as problems.

What is your opinion? Try talking to others, perhaps trying to convince them that one problem is more important than another. What happens when you do this? Does everyone agree? What kinds of facts do people use to support their opinions? Your personal ranking of these “problems” will be affected by your general knowledge (Do you know how many babies are born addicted? And what this means for them?). Your ranking of these issues will be affected by the values that you have acquired as a member of your society (Do you approve of recreational sex? Do you think hard work is good and necessary?). It will be affected by your personal interests (Does supporting environmental causes conflict with your desire for a high-paying job in a resource-based industry?). It will also be affected by your exposure to mass media (e.g., newspaper and television images of crime). Finally, your feelings may be colored by emotionally significant events in your life (Have you experienced racism or been harassed out of a good job?). When a great many people agree that something is a problem, it is likely to be recognized publicly as a *social problem*. This does not mean that everyone will agree on the nature of the problem, what causes it, what should be done about it, or even that anything can be done about it.

When Americans perceive that a social problem exists, they often join together to take action to “fix” it. This propensity to take action against perceived ills was noted as early as 1835 by de Tocqueville (1835), an aristocratic Frenchman, who wrote a perceptive account of “life among the Americans” based on his experience as a visitor. Americans who see a problem may talk with acquaintances, neighbors, friends, and family in an attempt to define the problem and make others aware of it. Americans often join together in organizations devoted to a particular cause (such as the reduction of child poverty, or the provision of neighborhood watch programs) and they may lobby government to take action. In comparison with other developed countries, the United States relies heavily on volunteerism (grass roots organizations) and shows resistance to the use of government-initiated power in the solution of perceived social problems (Musick & Wilson, 2008; The Roper Center, 1998, pp. 35, 80–81).

The Sociological Perspective

Sociology studies people as “actors” playing social roles. In the course of your day, you play many roles: student, parent, friend, spouse, neighbor, and so on. (You may do this well or badly, conventionally or with inventive flourishes.) Each of these roles connects you to other “actors” and to society as a whole. As we interact in these roles, society takes shape, and takes on a reality that is structural. Thus we create, through interaction, organizations such as colleges, businesses, and government agencies. Also, by following the norms set for these roles, we maintain and adapt the institutions of society (the family, education, religion, government, and others). At a fundamental level, we interact with others to produce social definitions and social meanings that guide our actions.

The Tools of Sociology: Concepts, Scientific Method, and Theories

The greatest competitor to the social sciences is the untested cultural knowledge that we call “common sense.” Most people in the street would rather rely on “common sense” than study textbooks and do research. But common sense is wrong as often as it is right, and its errors can be costly in human suffering and public expense. It is common sense that tells us “fools seldom differ,” but it is also common sense that “great minds think alike.” When we test the common sense notion that people who have been abused as children will know it is wrong, and not abuse their own children, we find that a significant proportion of abusers were abused themselves (Glasser et al., 2001; Widom & Ames, 1994).

The Growing Link between Technology and Social Problems

Leigh Tomb Messenger

Culture can be understood as our guidebook, or blueprint, for living and is acquired through the process of socialization. A parent who imparts the concepts of right and wrong, manners, and even language to their children is passing along culture to the next generation. Culture includes both material (clothing, housing, books, etc.) and nonmaterial elements. Nonmaterial culture is composed of language, norms, beliefs, symbols, values, and technology. Technology is produced by society and ultimately influences social institutions, organizations, and relationships. One of the most basic elements of life is sustenance. In American society, we no longer roam looking for food because of technological advances that increase crop production and food preservation advances. Technology means that you can go to church services from the comfort of your couch, do all your shopping online, be treated by a physician thousands of miles away, and even take your entire music collection along in your pocket. However, because we live in a society where technology is rapidly advancing, sometimes it is hard to keep up with the changing culture, and this can create confusion and discord.

Consider how our society used technology to communicate. From Alexander Graham Bell's invention of the telephone and the use of the Pony Express to deliver correspondence, technology has propelled society to an age of instant messaging (IM), texting, Skype, social networking sites such as Facebook, and cell phones. How could this lead to social problems? Using your sociological imagination, ask yourself whether you have ever sent a text or email that was misinterpreted or was sent in haste? Did you regret your actions? Instant access to communication may have caused you to have personal problems with the person messaged. Now consider how millions of people probably have this issue every day. Your personal problem just became a larger social issue and illustrates the way that technology can contribute to social problems.

Also consider the generational divide that technology creates. What if you were to get a text saying, "SWDYT? *\$ L8R 2NITE? TTYL"? Would you understand that the writer is asking, "So what do you think? Would you like to meet at Starbucks later tonight? Talk to you later." You first must understand the culture (language) and be able to use the technology to reply. In this case, an age gap can be a hindrance to communication because of technology.

Where appropriate throughout the book, we will use these boxes to demonstrate how changing technology contributes to current social problems. We hope that these boxes illustrate the importance of culture—specifically, technology in defining contemporary social problems.

Similarly, when we test the commonsense idea that when families go on welfare they stay on it forever, we find that this is not the case. On the whole, social mobility is more frequent than persistent poverty. The University of Michigan Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) is a major longitudinal study begun in 1968 (Hofferth, Yeung, & Stafford, 1996). The panel began with 5,000 representative families living in poverty across the nation and has, due to low attrition rates, expanded over time. Among its findings is the realization that only about one-sixth of those who use welfare at any time still need it after eight or more years. These findings are generally supported by other studies of poverty in America, which show that most people who need welfare remain on it for less than two years, using it to get through a crisis. Fewer than two percent of those on welfare rolls are “able-bodied” males, and many of these are looking for work. There are other cases of multiply caused persistent poverty. These require a different kind of analysis.

In building scientific knowledge, as opposed to commonsense knowledge, sociologists use several kinds of tools, the most important of which are concepts, the scientific method, and theories. Let us briefly look at some examples of these tools. *Concepts* express the common features of things that are observed. They help us to describe and compare things so that others in the same field can understand what we are talking about. Concepts such as “relative deprivation” are the jargon of the sociological trade, just as notions of “distributor” or “carburetor” are the jargon of the automotive trade. The sociological concept of “relative deprivation” applies when people feel that they do not have much compared to equally deserving others. They may see this “unfair” distribution of reward as a serious problem. Because human beings often compare themselves this way (choosing to compare ourselves to those who have more), relative deprivation is probably a more common issue than is absolute deprivation (insufficient resources for survival). In this text, you will encounter many useful concepts that help us to understand the nature of social problems.

The second tool that we use is the *scientific method* which has proven itself superior to most other ways of knowing about empirical reality. Science brings together controlled observations of the real world with logical theories about that world. Science is applied to social problems by way of the following sequence of time-tested procedures: (1) we need to specify the problem to be studied; (2) we need to examine previous research that has been done on this problem, both to learn from its failures and to build on its achievements; (3) we need to formulate testable hypotheses

(We assert that two or more things should be connected, identifying them in objective ways.); (4) we design a study that allows us to test the hypotheses we have developed; (5) We use recognized techniques to gather the data; (6) we use appropriate techniques to analyze the data; (7) we draw conclusions from our data analysis; and (8) we share the results, preferably by publishing them. Through this process, we can learn about which aspects of the current reality are contributing to social problems and which aspects might be manipulated or changed in order to have fewer problems. Generally, this method needs to be adapted when it is applied to human subject matter. Many of the studies in the area of social problems use combined techniques of data gathering that give us evidence about both physical and emotional realities. Some studies are qualitative studies, which focus more on understanding the meanings of events as understood by the participants. Such studies are especially useful when they are combined with the techniques of program evaluation.

An example of applying the scientific method to understanding program evaluation comes from the Boy Scout program originally designed on the basis of common sense and experience. Founded in Great Britain in 1908 by Lieutenant-General Robert Baden-Powell, it provided group membership, moral leadership, and outdoor skills training for boys from 11 to 15 years of age. Over time, these programs have been extended to younger and older youths. The scout motto “Be Prepared” and its admonition to do a “good deed” each day helped to encourage good citizenship; its “secret handshake” and regular meetings encouraged a sense of belonging. Scouting quickly spread to other countries. In every country, the same basic pattern was followed, so Boy Scouts from many countries had similar experiences and might even meet each other at annual Jamborees. Scouting allowed boys who might otherwise have been delinquent street kids to learn both conformity and leadership skills so that they would become good workers, citizens, and persons.

Although Baden-Powell, as a cavalry officer, was probably more influenced by the military model than by the science of his day, we now know that the essential components of his program are based on recognized scientific principles. For example, youths of scouting age tend to have a strong desire to belong to a group (Hartup, 1983). Research by Savin-Williams (1980) indicates that group structures often depend on normative activities such as knowing what to do on a camp-out, and having pride in being able to do these things well. On moral development, Eisenberg (1982) found that in later elementary and early secondary school, a child helping someone resulted from and confirmed his or her empathy and responsibility toward the other person. Testing of initiatives such as scouting is called program evaluation.

Program evaluation is an extension of scientific research that allows us to fine-tune our efforts at problem solving. Each of the steps of scientific research (as outlined earlier) has a role in evaluation. Thus we need to be clear about “what” we are evaluating, find out what is already known or suspected about it, formulate clearly testable hypotheses, use reliable methods to test them, and then draw conclusions from our findings. For an organization such as the Boy Scouts, it is not difficult to find clear statements of the purpose of the group and of its “target population” of “at-risk” youths. The current emphasis in program evaluation, at the testing phase, is “outcome measurement” (Penna, 2011; United Way of America, 1996). *Outcomes* may be defined as the benefits or changes for individuals or populations during or after participating in program activities. According to a study of the Boy Scouts of America conducted by Harris and Associates (1998), the scouting movement has in fact made a difference by reducing the number of youths who “choose to do what is wrong.”

Sometimes well-planned and well-intended programs do not have the effects that are intended. Evaluations normally show us some of the ways in which programs work and other ways in which they can be made more effective (Parker and Hudley, 2006). Examples of programs that have been evaluated and then adjusted are programs to reduce spousal violence and programs to reduce bullying in schools.

Why are so few programs either evaluated or changed as a result of evaluation? Among the answers to this are a number of constraints. Often, getting people to help fund and staff a program is difficult enough without asking for resources to evaluate the program. Sometimes authorities (e.g., in schools) are not keen on allowing observers to enter their setting and ask touchy questions. Increasingly, though, major donors demand evaluation before putting more money into programs.

The third tool that sociologists use is *theory*, which is a systematic explanation (an answer to the question “why?”). A good theory is logical and phrased in a way that allows for testing with empirical evidence. When a theory is tested, and it does not correspond to events, it must be modified and then tested again. A theoretical perspective emerges in this process of repeated adjustment. Theoretical perspectives become lenses that help us to make sense of what we see when we look at the world through them.

Symbolic Interaction theory (SI) helps us to understand society as it develops in interaction and as interaction creates our meaningful social world. This theory is very useful for understanding such issues as the loss of meaning when people become isolated by divorce or unemployment and the problems faced by people who are marginalized because their lifestyle is different from the mainstream American culture.

SI has given us many useful concepts. The concept of “definition of the situation” is one of these. Thomas maintained that if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences (1967, 315–321). To a large extent, we face the world as we believe it is, we believe this way because the people around us shape it for us, and this has a profound effect on the shape of what we recognize as social problems.

Structural functionalist theory also helps us to see more clearly the ways in which the structural levels of society—its institutional systems and organizations—have an impact on us. The various parts of society, like the various parts of an organism, are interdependent. If one part of the society is put out of balance (e.g., by globalization), there may be painful adjustments in many areas. With the possible exception of the job market (with the export of American jobs to other countries), many Americans are almost unaware of the structural level as they go about their lives. We are much more attuned to the individual, psychological level and tend to find our explanations there, even when such explanations do not work very well.

How Classical Functionalist Theory Applies to Today’s Problems: Durkheim’s Functionalism and Anomie

Durkheim (1933), one of the founders of sociology, attributed many of the problems of his time to the effects of rapid social change that disrupted the social order. In Durkheim’s France, the old feudal order, based on agriculture, had broken down, and the new industrial order was undermining all the old regularities. Durkheim was mainly interested in the way in which social conditions resulted in “rates” of problem events, such as suicides, labor disorder, or trouble in the schools. An individual suicide might seem to be a very personal thing. But Durkheim showed that suicide rates varied according to structural factors and seemed to be very much influenced by how much regulation and integration surrounded people in their lives.

Durkheim noted that in the early societies, people’s lives were very similar, and their beliefs and values (based on common experience) were very similar, too. This similarity produced a strong “common conscience” or “common consciousness” among the people that integrated them and helped produce regulation in their lives. There was little tolerance for divergence from the common path, and individuals had clear guidelines and the confidence that goes with moral certainty. With urbanization and industrialization, this changed. The factory worker not only had little in common with the agricultural worker but would also have very different experiences from those of

a hospital worker or a deliveryman. The common conscience became weaker, which meant more freedom, but also more problems related to a loss of social control. Durkheim felt that society was in a state of disorganization or “anomie” (normlessness). Society needed new ways of regulation and integration.

Durkheim’s chief proposal for this was the formation of work-based groups. In these groups, persons would talk, share opinions, and, as a result, form expectations within the group of what was right, wrong, good, or bad. Though various work groups would form different views on morality, the individual in each group would be integrated and regulated in such a way that problems such as suicide and unemployment would be reduced.

The needs that Durkheim identified continue. Anomie (lack of integration) is particularly strong among the poor and marginalized in society. People who live in a place only because they can’t afford to live elsewhere or have only stigmatized characteristics in common may fail to identify with each other or with the community as a whole. An organization such as a community health center might provide at least one focal point in the lives of these citizens—a focal point that can serve some of the functions that Durkheim thought work groups would meet. It could become a place where individuals would talk, share opinions, and form group expectations about right, wrong, good, or bad. The health center could provide its patients, workers, and board members with a sense of belonging that would make them, and the community, less anomic.

The third kind of theory frequently used in this text is conflict theory. This type of theory also focuses on structure. Social structure divides us into groups (such as employers and employees). These groups have different interests in the way that things are organized. Classic Marxists hold that the most important divide is between the owners of the means of production and those who must sell their labor. Owners will be pleased when there are many unemployed competing for positions. People who need jobs will be pleased when the market for their talents is tight. Classic Marxism predicts that the progress of capitalism will eventually mean fewer and fewer owners facing more and more unemployed until this culminates in revolutionary overthrow of the system. Plural conflict theorists (including critical theorists) see many other group interests (race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age) in endless competition. No one is permanently on top. Each group uses its resources of numbers, wealth, education, and connections to enhance its position relative to others. Some groups may have differential access to such things as law making and law enforcement that further increase their advantages and decrease the advantages of others. Legislation outlawing marijuana, for example, was originally brought in to control “deviant” populations along the Mexican border and

expanded in the light of later concerns about sailors, jazz musicians, and 1960s radicals. In addition, some groups also have significant influence on the predominant belief systems of a society and may use their cultural power to label other groups as deviant or unworthy. For instance, beliefs about work ethics in the United States may be utilized by members of the upper classes to label poor and lower class workers as irresponsible, lazy, and unworthy of help. A useful concept from conflict theory is the idea of praxis. *Praxis* is the idea of combining theory with consciousness raising. The praxiological student studies the world not just to understand it, but to assist the oppressed to take action against their troubles.

How Classical Marxist and Theory Applies to Today's Problems: Marx and Alienated Labor

Marx (1969), like Durkheim, emphasized social structure and social process in formulating a theory to explain the terrible plight of factory workers in the early stages of industrialization. He did not believe that individual owners of factories caused the suffering of workers out of personal greed or lack of caring for others. Factory owners (members of the bourgeoisie) were competing with each other for a place in the economic order. An owner who did not "exploit" his workers would soon lose his factory to more successful owners and become a worker himself. All workers and owners were trapped within a system that seemed to be going in the direction of more and more exploitation until it exploded into revolution.

Marx maintained that many problems of his time were due to the alienation of workers: a feeling that they controlled neither the pace of work nor the tasks they performed. The alienated worker worked only for survival, finding little satisfaction in the production process and often not earning enough to buy the products that he has made. The alienated worker would have little satisfaction and little commitment to his work. He might easily become politically radical in ways that would undermine the factory (sabotage) or the system (revolution). Marx felt that the only solution to the underlying problem was the overthrow of capitalism. He predicted that this overthrow would occur in the most industrialized countries, where there were enough resources to support a system of distribution in which all people would have enough, without having to sell themselves for it. Revolutions, however, broke out in places such as Russia and China, where conditions were still largely feudal, and the resulting state was a dictatorship of the party, not a "people's democracy."

What can Marxian theory tell us, when applied to real-life experiences? Consider the high unemployment characteristic of many low-income urban areas. Marx would probably maintain that these unemployed persons were being exploited—denied access to the technology and resources to be productive—because the pool of “surplus labor” helps to keep wages down. This is as true today as it was in Marx’s time.

Marx predicted that because work is central to human beings, alienated workers would experience troubles in their lives. The lack of control over the productive aspects of life, for example, could result in severe health problems. An article by Schnall and Kerm (1981) using a Marxian orientation to the study of disease indicates that persons in routine jobs who have little decision-making power regarding the type of work and pace of their work are at a greater risk for heart disease. It is possible that much of the sickness experienced by low-income agencies is the result of the way in which the capitalist system creates a “reserve army of labor” with little possibility for self-fulfilling productive lives.

It is possible to use SI (which is a micro theory) in combination with either of the structural theories (which are macro theories) or to use any of the sociological perspectives alone. Using no theory really means that we are falling back on common sense and are very likely to be wrong or only half-right. It may seem to save time, but it is costly in the end.

Other theories are mostly subcategories of the three that we have highlighted here. They have important things to say about social problems and will be referred to as we attempt to identify, describe, and explain the problems that are highlighted by each of our case studies. One common element in all of these approaches is “the Sociological Imagination,” which understands personal troubles as occurring within a context of social issues.

The Sociological Imagination

The term “sociological imagination” was first used by Mills (1959), a conflict theorist, in his book *The Sociological Imagination*. Theorists from other perspectives have expressed very similar ideas, and some would argue that “the sociological imagination” is the central idea in all sociology. In simplified terms, Mills argues that an individual’s poverty, divorce, or experience of racism is felt as a “personal trouble,” but that the poverty rate, the rate of family dissolution, or the existence of racial discrimination is a “public issue” or social problem.

Mills defines the *sociological imagination* as the ability to grasp the connection between our personal lives and the larger social forces that shape the conditions that we live in. In living our lives, we shape our world, but the forces that make our place

in history also mold our lives, mainly by giving us some choices and some resources, rather than others. Losing one's job feels like a private issue (we may be personally humbled, embarrassed, or angry), but this lost opportunity may also be an aspect of demographic (population) and technological change as well as worldwide political-economic conditions. The sociological imagination enables us to see and understand the relationship between our personal biographies (the micro level) and larger historical forces (the macro level). Mills's perspective is quite compatible with the ideas of functionalists such as Durkheim (1987), for whom a very private issue such as suicide was to be understood as conditioned by wider forces of disorder and change in society, structural changes that encouraged excessive individualism and a loss of moral bearings at the individual level. It is compatible with Marxian views whereby economic conditions result in alienation, whereby people become object-like within capitalism. Are you really yourself, or do you need the latest clothing and "things" to feel complete? Does this keep you unfree?

What Can Be Done?

In this discussion, we have identified several different ways in which social problems can be identified and understood. We now turn to the question "What can be done?" and its pessimistic relative "Can anything be done?" Skepticism (show me!) is a natural, and generally healthy, human reaction to new programs and new ideas. Some of the social problems, such as poverty, that are addressed by this book have existed for centuries; others, such as the dramatically increasing number of dependent older persons, are phenomena of the last few decades. Are these problems inevitable, immutable, and impervious to our wishes? For long periods in history, the existence of suffering was understood only in religious terms, as a test from God that would ultimately help to save our souls. This changed in the eighteenth century, challenged by a group of "classical thinkers" called the *philosophes* (Wallbank, Taylor, & Bailey, 1965). They argued that rationality was the highest mode of thought (superior to faith and obedience to authority). Although they were not scientists themselves, they admired the new way of knowing—the "scientific method" that was making great strides in explaining natural phenomena. Many of them (the "utilitarians") argued that the goal of society should be "the greatest happiness for the greatest number." Suffering was no longer seen as a test of one's spirit, but rather as the product of social systems that were not rational and efficient. This active attitude toward identifiable social wrongs has continued to be an influence to the present time, but now involving social scientists committed to making knowledge a tool for social change.

Sociologists working from a variety of theoretical perspectives have been active as citizens in addressing the problems of their time. Max Weber saw bureaucratization (the dead hand of bureaucracy) as a major source of trouble in the future of his world and identified “charisma” such as that of Hitler, as an irrational response to such problems. Karl Marx identified many of the problems of capitalist systems, such as worker alienation and its impact on the family and society as a whole. Sociologist/social workers such as Jane Addams of Hull House in the 1900s sought to apply sociological knowledge in ways that would assist immigrants and the poor to “get on board” in American society. Though some sociologists have been activists who work with the people they wanted to help, others have contributed to the solution of social problems by serving as disengaged social critics; demystifiers who attack the propaganda of racism, sexism, and other “isms”; and reporters of the problems that might otherwise be passively accepted as simply individual problems or “necessary costs of doing business.” In an overview of this, we can say that sociologists have always challenged the social order to “get smart” about getting tough on social problems. It is not enough to decide that we need a war on poverty or on drugs. We need to decide whether “war” will work or something else might be better. We can use knowledge of society as we do knowledge about health. We can focus on prevention, solution, and harm reduction.

Using This Book

Each succeeding chapter in the book begins with a case. Many of these are autobiographical or biographical cases of a person experiencing some aspect of the social problem that is addressed in the chapter. One reason for starting the chapters in this way is to grab your attention as a reader and encourage you to see the human dimensions of the problem being discussed. This process is part of the wider sociological practice that Charles Ragin (Ragin & Becker, 1992, p. 217) identifies as “casing.” Casing links ideas (concepts and theories) with evidence. Social problems affect the lives of real people who experience hardship, frustration, pain, and hopelessness because they are personally affected by forces that seem to be beyond their control. A second reason for using cases is that they provide a common reference point for your discussions about theoretical ideas and concepts. A third reason for using cases is to show that the application of sociological tools (concepts, methods, and theories) is useful in taking us beyond unguided “compassion” and into practical modes of problem solving.

This book is designed with the student in mind and is intended to be readable and interesting. We are not naive enough to think that you will be constantly on the edge of your seat, but we hope that most of our material will hold your interest and perhaps inspire you to do more research on your own.

We encourage you to read the case study carefully and to try to keep it in mind as you read the remainder of the chapter. Is this case an example or illustration of the general points? Is it an exception? In the chapter, key terms and concepts are found in italic type. Each chapter also includes a box linking technology to social problems. These are important for understanding and talking about the social problem being examined. Each chapter ends with a summary of its main points, listed in the order of their appearance in the chapter. This should help you to identify the important ideas and to find them in the chapter if you wish to review them. Our hope is that these features will make your reading and learning more enjoyable, especially the cases and we wish to say some more about them.

Summary

1. Some kinds of personal problems are embedded in social conditions.
2. One way to identify problems is to ask people about their beliefs and opinions.
3. Americans often take action to “fix” social problems by forming community groups.
4. A distinctive sociological perspective on social problems is that we interact with others to produce social definitions and social meanings that guide our actions.
5. Concepts are ideas about the common features of things that are observed, and they help us to describe and compare events around us.
6. Over time, we have learned that some methods produce reliable and valid information.
7. A theory is an explanation that follows rules and should be testable.
8. SI holds that humans do not react to the world directly, but rather to the meanings that they attribute to that world.
9. Structural functionalism does not totally ignore social interaction, but tends to look at the social system as a structure that is above individual interaction.

10. Structural conflict theorists focus on the interests of various groups in society and the way in which groups create social structures as they compete for advantage in society.
11. The sociological imagination is the ability to grasp the connection between our personal lives and the larger social forces that shape the conditions in which we live.
12. The use of the scientific method can prove or disprove common sense interpretation of the world.
13. Programs designed on common sense or scientific principles can be tested to see whether they are doing what they say they are doing.
14. Case studies in the text are used as part of Ragin and Becker's (1992) "casing" activity to link ideas and evidence.
15. Sociologists have historically challenged the social order to "get smart" about getting tough on social problems.
16. We can use our knowledge of society to respond to social problems and focus on prevention, solution, and harm reduction.

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