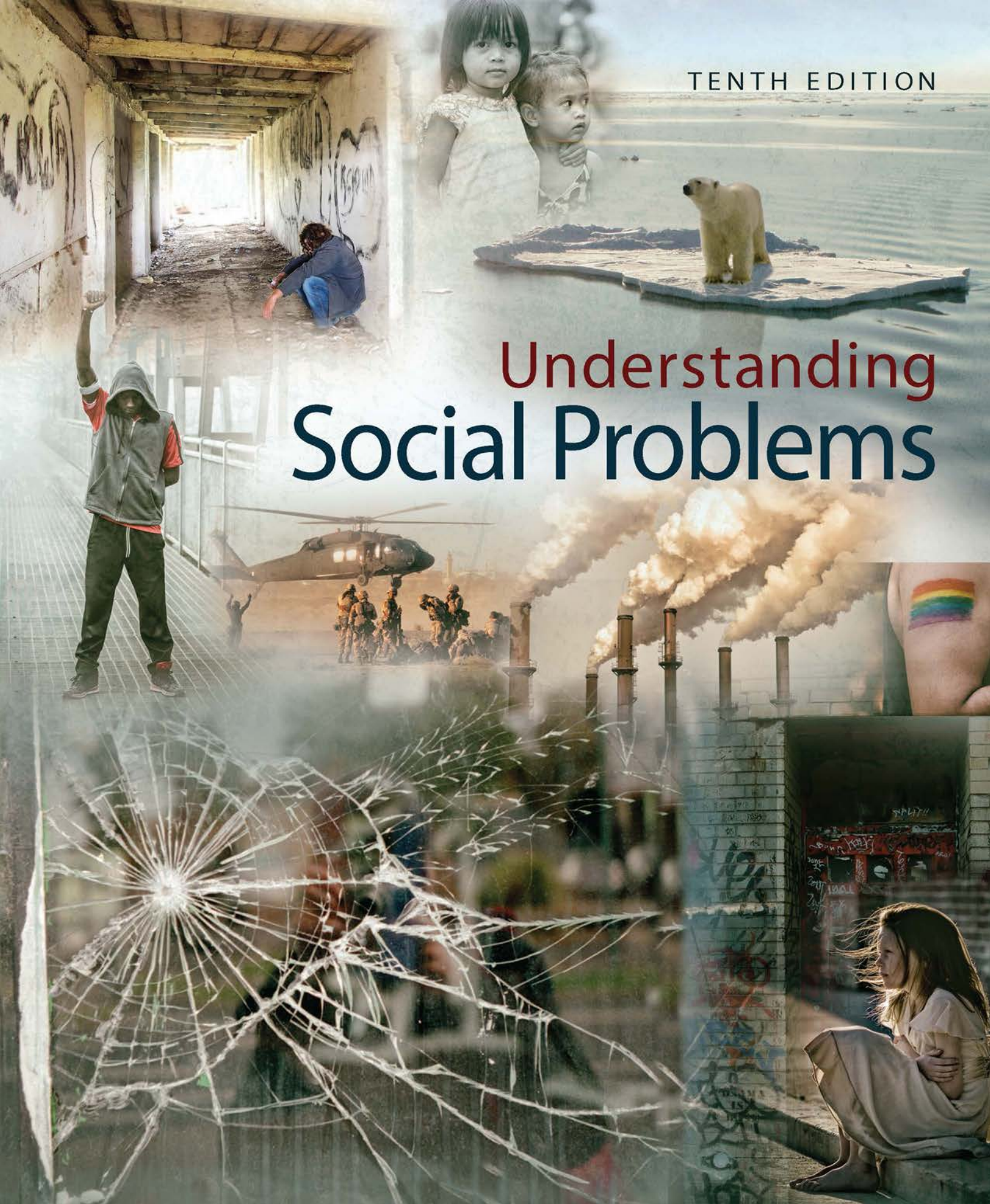


TENTH EDITION

Understanding Social Problems



LINDA A. MOONEY ♦ DAVID KNOX ♦ CAROLINE SCHACHT

UNDERSTANDING Social Problems

10e

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EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY



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Tenth Edition

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For our grandchildren: Lana, Juno, and Sky
They give us hope.

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Preface

U*nderstanding Social Problems* is intended for use in college-level sociology courses. We recognize that many students enrolled in undergraduate sociology classes are not sociology majors. Thus, we have designed our text with the aim of inspiring students—no matter what their academic major or future life path may be—to care about social problems. In addition to providing a sound theoretical and research basis for sociology majors, *Understanding Social Problems* also speaks to students who are headed for careers in business, psychology, health care, social work, criminal justice, and the non-profit sector, as well as to those pursuing degrees in education, fine arts and the humanities, or to those who are “undecided.” Social problems, after all, affect each and every one of us, directly or indirectly. And everyone—whether a leader in business or politics, a stay-at-home parent, or a student—can become more mindful of how his or her actions, or inactions, perpetuate or alleviate social problems. We hope that *Understanding Social Problems* plants seeds of social awareness that will grow no matter what academic, occupational, and life path students choose.

New to This Edition

The tenth edition of *Understanding Social Problems* features expanded coverage of Native Americans, women in the military, LGBT issues, prescription drug abuse, “fracking,” climate deniers, terrorism, and human rights issues. Learning objectives are now presented at the beginning of each chapter to guide student learning. Other pedagogical features that students and professors have found useful have been retained, including a running glossary, list of key terms, chapter reviews, and *Test Yourself* sections. Most of the opening vignettes in the tenth edition are new, as are many of the *What Do You Think?* questions, which are designed to engage students in critical thinking and stimulate classroom discussion. Many of the boxed chapter features (*The Human Side*, *Self and Society*, *Social Problems Research Up Close*, and *Animals and Society*) have been updated or replaced with new content. Finally, the tenth edition has new or updated research, data, tables, figures, and photos in each chapter, as well as new and revised material, detailed as follows.

Chapter 1 (“Thinking about Social Problems”) now includes the results of a global survey on social problems around the world, including a table with rankings of the “greatest problems in the world” by region. This revised chapter also features an updated *Self and Society* and *Social Problems Research Up Close*, as well as new data from Gallup Polls, the Pew Research Center, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Chapter 2 (“Physical and Mental Health and Health Care”) begins with a new opening vignette about the Ebola epidemic. A new *Social Problems Research Up Close* feature asks, “Are Americans the Healthiest Population in the World?” There is a new table on “Successful People with Mental Illness.” New topics include peer-to-peer mental health support groups on campus, food deserts, Indian Health Service, Military Health Service, and the male health disadvantage. Updated topics include the Affordable Health Care Act, medical debt, and complementary and alternative health care. A new *What Do You Think?* question asks readers if they agree with the 2014 Supreme Court ruling that craft store chain Hobby Lobby and other closely held for-profit companies may choose not to pay for coverage of birth control in their workers’ health plans if the company’s owner has religious objections.

Chapter 3 (“Alcohol and Other Drugs”) begins with a new opening vignette, followed by a new *Social Problems Research Up Close* feature on the portrayal of cigarette smoking in popular movies. The chapter has been reorganized for this edition: Misuse of prescription drugs has been added to the section on “Frequently Used Legal Drugs”; and sections on “Tobacco Advertising,” “Alternative Nicotine Delivery Systems,” “Prevention” of alcohol, tobacco and prescription drug abuse, and “Synthetic Marijuana” have also been added. The “Health Costs of Drug Use” section is now divided into legal and illegal drugs, as are the strategies for action.

There are numerous new topics including the dramatic increase in teenagers’ use of heroin and prescription drugs, the modification of the D.A.R.E. curriculum, e-cigarette use, the impact of heavy drinking on others in the home, the impact of alcohol consumption combined with other drugs on driving, drug overdoses, a cost–benefit analysis of drug courts, Internet drug sales and e-pharmacies, the sociological risk factors in drug use, the MPOWER program of the World Health Organization, and pro-tobacco and anti-tobacco social forces on tobacco use.

Chapter 4 (“Crime and Social Control”) contains a new opening vignette, a new section on technology and crime, and two new features. The *Social Problems Research Up Close* examines the role of race in criminal justice policies, and the *Self and Society* assesses students’ fear of criminal victimization. New crime and social control topics include a discussion of Agnew’s General Strain Theory; incarceration as racism; public perceptions of black criminals; General Motors, Honda, and Takata as corporate criminals; gangs and schools; police shootings of unarmed minorities; the safety gender gap; the socioemotional impact of violent crime; aging and crime; the difficulty in assessing crime prevention and recidivism; recent crime legislation; social forces leading to and away from “get tough” crime policies; and federal reforms and the “Smart on Crime Initiative.”

Chapter 5 (“Family Problems”) opens with a new vignette about the domestic violence case of Janay and Ray Rice. We added several new topics, including polyamory and poly families, grandfamilies, gray divorces, relationship literacy education, intentional communities, and the “Period of Purple Crying.” The updated and reorganized section on “Strategies for Action” includes a new section on “Strategies to Strengthen Families” and focuses on expanding definitions of family. There is also a new discussion of Child Protective Services. The revised chapter includes updated global data on child abuse, updated statistics on domestic violence, new Census Bureau data on interethnic and interracial marriages and relationships, and new Pew Research data on U.S. marriage and family patterns and values. A new *Social Problems Research Up Close* feature presents research on “The Polyamorists Next Door.”

Chapter 6 (“Economic Inequality, Wealth, and Poverty”) opens with a new vignette about a dog, Cosmo, who enjoys a higher standard of living than many poor people. This revised chapter includes new data on inequality within the top 1 percent, inequality in the global distribution of household wealth, inequality in the United States, and updated census data on poverty and poverty thresholds. New topics include wage theft, corporate tax inversion, plutocracy, and the marriage opportunity gap. New figures display average U.S. family wealth and distribution of U.S. wealth, and a new table presents the United Nations’ 17 sustainable development goals. A new *What Do You Think?* question asks why wage theft gets so little attention in the media compared with other types of theft.

Chapter 7 (“Work and Unemployment”) opens with a new vignette about unsafe working conditions in Bangladesh’s garment industry. New topics in this revised chapter include communism, full employment, frictional unemployment, and “right-to-work” laws. We have added new research on work-related stressors and health and a new table on common work-related stressors, and new research on life satisfaction among union members compared with nonunion members. This chapter frames employment-related concerns as human rights issues and presents examples of how and why these human rights are being violated in workplaces around the world.

Chapter 8 (“Problems in Education”) has been significantly revised with a new opening vignette, and all new chapter features. The *Self and Society* asks students to assess the importance of various aspects of their high school experiences in securing a job, and

The Human Side recounts the story of a former teacher who describes why she left the profession. The *Social Problems Research Up Close*, using a national sample, examines the process that leads students to drop out of high school. New *What Do You Think?* topics include the worldwide availability of *Sesame Street*, the desirability of same-sex classrooms, the case of a black college student suing his white roommates, and the future of teacher tenure. The section on “Crime, Violence, and School Discipline” is now reorganized into four areas: “Crime and Violence against Students,” “Crime and Violence against Teachers,” “School Discipline,” and “Bullying.”

New topics include comparisons of student outcomes by socioeconomic status in China and the United States, a longitudinal study of students from first grade to young adulthood, the social costs of dropouts, the impact of a disadvantaged school environment on teacher effectiveness, the diversity gap, “degrees of inequality” in higher education, for-profit online colleges and universities, merit-based versus need-based financial aid, “separate but unequal” college admissions, Parents’ Revolution and the Network for Public Education, and the UNC scandal.

Chapter 9 (“Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration”) opens with a new vignette about the anti-Columbus Day movement. This chapter features a new *The Human Side* feature: “A Cherokee Citizen’s View of Andrew Jackson.” There is a new section and table on racial microaggressions, and a new section on implicit prejudice. Other new topics include colorism, “sundown towns,” and state laws banning Sharia law. The revised chapter includes updated U.S. Census data on Hispanic, racial, and foreign-born U.S. populations, new FBI data on hate crimes, and an updated section on white power music. New *What Do You Think?* questions ask (1) about views toward Rachel Dolezal’s choice to identify as black, (2) if black racism toward whites is equivalent to white racism toward blacks, (3) what students think about the phrase “Black lives matter,” and (4) if Barack Obama would have been elected president if he had darker skin color.

Chapter 10 (“Gender Inequality”) features a new *The Human Side*—a suicide note written by a transgender teen—and a new *Self and Society* on whether men, women, or both make strong financial and political leaders. There is also a new subsection on same-sex education under “The School Experience and Cultural Sexisms” heading.

New topics and terms include the “missing girls” of China, vulnerable employment, family well-being and the gender pay gap, attributional gender bias, reinforcement of gender stereotypes in same sex classrooms, gender role content analyses of the 10 most popular programs on Cartoon Network and of 120 children’s films from 11 countries, income differentials, Freeman and Freeman’s *Stressed Sex: Uncovering the Truth about Men, Women, and Mental Health*, human trafficking of women and girls, A Voice for Men, the Paycheck Fairness Act, and the Workplace Advancement Act.

Chapter 11 (“Sexual Orientation and the Struggle for Equality”) has been significantly revised in light of the recent Supreme Court decision legalizing gay marriage in the United States. A new section, “The Consequences of Anti-LGBT Bias,” has also been added that includes topics on the relationship between LGBT status and (1) physical and mental health; (2) substance abuse; (3) economic inequality, poverty, and homelessness; and (4) aging and retirement. There is also a new opening vignette, and two new features. The *Self and Society* assess student attitudes toward gay and lesbian issues and *The Human Side*, “I Needed to Do Something . . .,” an essay by Tim Cook, CEO of Apple, on why he felt he had to come out to the public.

New topics and terms include estimates of the U.S. LGBT population and the number of LGBT married couples; results of public opinion polls; the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision and reactions to it; the backlash against LGBT rights successes; religious freedom laws and the corporate response; societal beliefs about the origin of sexual orientation; banning sexual orientation change efforts; social forces that led to greater social support for LGBT individuals; demographic differences between same- and different-sex couples; gay fathers’ connectivity between emotional and cognitive parts of their brains; the American Sociological Association’s amicus curiae brief; “corrective rape” of lesbians; LGBT higher rates of depression, suicide, poverty, homelessness, and physical illness; dissenting opinions in *Obergefell*; the social costs of continued homonegativity; the “gay stimulus package”; the First Amendment Defense Act; children’s response to learning a

parent is gay; and the self-fulfilling prophecy of stereotypical gay men and women's appearances.

Chapter 12 ("Population Growth and Aging") includes a new *The Human Side* feature describing one woman's decision (with her husband) to remain childfree. This revised chapter includes updated information about Social Security and updated figures, tables, and data from the Population Reference Bureau. A new *What Do You Think?* question asks if professors should retire after a certain age.

Chapter 13 ("Environmental Problems") begins with a new vignette about the 2015 Indian heat wave. A new *Social Problems Research Up Close* feature, "The Climate Deception Dossiers," presents documentation of how the fossil fuel industry has deceived the public on issues related to global warming and climate change. The revised chapter also includes new sections on climate deniers, fracking, environmental migrants, and hunters and anglers as environmentalists. A new *The Human Side* feature, written specifically for this text, is titled, "Fracking Stories Told by Someone Who Isn't Gagged." There is also a new figure on "The Cycle of Fracking Denial." New topics include charismatic megafauna, NIMBY ("Not in My Backyard"), the landmark Dutch court ruling that orders the government to step up efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and the 2015 Senate vote that climate change is real. The section on religion and environmentalism has been updated, including the addition of Pope Francis's call to action on climate change and environmental protection. This revised chapter also mentions the Permanent People's Tribunal consideration of whether fracking violates human rights, and also discusses how state officials and employees in Florida were ordered to not use the terms *global warming* or *climate change*. A new *What Do You Think?* feature asks students what Pope Francis's statement "There can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself" means to them.

Chapter 14 ("Science and Technology") begins with a new opening vignette on medical technology. There are also two new features and two updated features. *The Human Side* concerns the consequences, for one young woman, of being denied an abortion, and the *Social Problems Research Up Close* examines gender differences, or lack thereof, in Internet use. Both the *Self and Society* and *Animals and Society* features have been updated. New topics or terms include the increased use of "digital agents" for blue- and white-collar jobs, technology corporate lawsuits, the Internet of Things (IoT), use of social media in political unrest, the growth of genetically modified (GM) organisms, GM foods and their consequences, wearable technology, the use of nanotechnology in "nanofoods," new state restrictions on abortion, genetic cloning, reproductive cloning, and therapeutic cloning, the expansion of cybersecurity breaches and Internet vulnerability, cyberattack threats to global security, automation of language and reasoning skills, the FCC's right to regulate net neutrality (no blocking, no throttling, no paid prioritization), slowness rage, the deep or dark web, Silk Road, Acxiom—the "cookie" collecting company, reform of the NSA's surveillance program, and the Marketplace Fairness Act. New *What Do You Think?* topics include the impact of self-driving cars, restrictions on privately owned drones, "right to forget" Internet laws, social groups on Mars, and sexism, racism, and diversity in the gaming community.

Chapter 15 ("Conflict, War, and Terrorism") begins with a new opening vignette. There is a new *The Human Side* on the refugee crisis, and a new *Self and Society* feature on "National Defense and the U.S. Military." The "Economics of Military Spending" has new subsections on weapons sales and the cost of war. Feminist theories of war and an expanded section on women in the military are now standalone headings. Reorganization of the chapter also includes adding two new sections ("Guantánamo Detention Center" and "Weapons of Mass Destruction") under the "America's Response to Terrorism" heading.

New topics of discussion include the use of unoccupied aerial vehicles (drones), the direct and indirect costs of violence, the devastation of Afghanistan and Syrian society, refugees and asylum seekers, women in the military, "rally around the flag," gender norming, occupationally specific standards validation, conflict minerals, civil war in Yemen, Charlie Hebdo and the terrorist attacks in Paris and Garland, Texas, Boko Haram, the evolution and funding of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), public attitudes toward the use of ground troops in the Middle East, the Charleston, South Carolina,

killings, the grievance models of terrorism, micro-aggression psychological models of terrorists, ecocide, the nuclear weapons agreement with Iran, and the public's national priorities by political party.

Features and Pedagogical Aids

We have integrated a number of features and pedagogical aids into the text to help students learn to think about social problems from a sociological perspective. Our mission is to help students think critically about social problems and their implications, and to increase their awareness of how social problems relate to their personal lives.

Boxed Features

Animals and Society. Several chapters contain a feature called *Animals and Society*, which examines issues, problems, policies, and/or programs concerning animals within the context of the social problem discussed in that chapter. For example, Chapter 5 (“Family Problems”) includes an *Animals and Society* feature that examines “Pets and Domestic Violence,” and in Chapter 14 (“Science and Technology”), the *Animals and Society* feature discusses “The Use of Animals in Scientific Research.”

Self and Society. Each chapter includes a *Self and Society* feature designed to help students assess their own attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, or behaviors regarding some aspect of the social problem under discussion. In Chapter 5 (“Family Problems”), for example, the “Abusive Behavior Inventory” invites students to assess the frequency of various abusive behaviors in their own relationships. The *Self and Society* feature in Chapter 3 (“Alcohol and Other Drugs”) allows students to measure the consequences of their own drinking behavior and compare it to respondents in a national sample, and students can assess their fear of criminal victimization in Chapter 4 (“Crime and Social Control”).

The Human Side. Each chapter includes a boxed feature that describes personal experiences and views of individuals who have been directly affected by social problems. *The Human Side* feature in Chapter 4 (“Crime and Social Control”), for example, describes the horrific consequences of being a victim of rape, and *The Human Side* feature in Chapter 9 (“Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration”) presents a Cherokee citizen's view of Andrew Jackson. In Chapter 10 (“Gender Inequality”), *The Human Side* features a suicide note from a transgender teenager.

Social Problems Research Up Close. This feature, found in every chapter, presents examples of social science research, summarizing the sampling and methods involved in data collection, and presenting findings and conclusions of the research study. Examples of *Social Problems Research Up Close* topics include job loss in midlife, polyamorists and poly families, gender and Internet use, tactics used by the fossil fuel industry to deceive the public about global warming and climate change, two-faced racism, and mental illness and suicide among U.S. veterans.

In-Text Learning Aids

Learning Objectives. We have developed a set of learning objectives that are presented at the beginning of each chapter. The learning objectives are designed to help students focus on key concepts, theories, and terms as they read each chapter.

Vignettes. Each chapter begins with a vignette designed to engage students and draw them into the chapter by illustrating the current relevance of the topic under discussion. For example, Chapter 5 (“Family Problems”) begins with the domestic violence incident involving football player Ray Rice and his wife Janay Rice. Chapter 9 (“Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration”) opens with details concerning the anti-Columbus Day movement and Chapter 15 (“Conflict, War, and Terrorism”) describes an ISIS training camp for young boys.

Key Terms and Glossary. Important terms and concepts are highlighted in the text where they first appear. To reemphasize the importance of these words, they are listed at the end of every chapter and are included in the glossary at the end of the text.

Running Glossary. This tenth edition continues the running glossary that highlights the key terms in every chapter by putting the key terms and their definitions in the text margins.

What Do You Think? Sections. Each chapter contains multiple sections called *What Do You Think?* These sections invite students to use critical thinking skills to answer questions about issues related to the chapter content. For example, one *What Do You Think?* question in Chapter 4 (“Crime and Social Control”) asks students, “What perpetuates the myth of the male-only serial killer?” and a *What Do You Think?* question in Chapter 11 (“Sexual Orientation and the Struggle for Equality”) asks, “Should gay men and women who are subjected to violence in their home country be eligible for political asylum in the United States?”

Understanding [Specific Social Problem] Sections. All too often, students, faced with contradictory theories and research results walk away from social problems courses without any real understanding of their causes and consequences. To address this problem, chapter sections titled “Understanding [specific social problem]” cap the body of each chapter just before the chapter summaries. Unlike the chapter summaries, these sections sum up the present state of knowledge and theory on the chapter topic and convey the urgency for rectifying the problems discussed in the chapter.

Supplements

The tenth edition of *Understanding Social Problems* comes with a full complement of supplements designed for both faculty and students.

Supplements for Instructors

Online Instructor’s Resource Manual. This supplement offers instructors learning objectives, key terms, lecture outlines, student projects, classroom activities, Internet exercises, and video suggestions.

Online Test Bank. Test items include multiple-choice and true-false questions with answers and text references, as well as short-answer and essay questions for each chapter.

Cengage Learning Testing Powered by Cognero. The Test Bank is also available through Cognero, a flexible, online system that allows instructors to author, edit, and manage test bank content as well as create multiple test versions in an instant. Instructors can deliver tests from their school’s learning management system, classroom, office, or home.

Online PowerPoints. These vibrant, Microsoft® PowerPoint® lecture slides for each chapter assist instructors with lectures by providing concept coverage using images, figures, and tables directly from the textbook.

Supplements for Students

MindTap Sociology for *Understanding Social Problems*. With MindTap™ Sociology for *Understanding Social Problems* students have the tools to better manage their time, allowing them flexibility in when and where they complete assignments. Course material that is specially customized by the instructor in an easy-to-use interface keeps students engaged and active in the course. MindTap helps students achieve better grades by cultivating a true understanding of course concepts, and includes a mobile app to help keep students on track. With a wide array of course specific tools and

apps—from note taking to flashcards—MindTap is a worthwhile and valuable investment in students' education.

Students will stay engaged with MindTap's interactive activities and remain motivated by information that shows where they stand at all times—both individually and compared to the highest performers in class. MindTap eliminates the guesswork, focusing on what's most important with a learning path designed specifically by the instructor. Students can master the most important information with built-in study tools such as visual chapter summaries that help students stay organized and use time efficiently.

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Finally, we are interested in ways to improve the text and invite your feedback and suggestions for new ideas and material to be included in subsequent editions. You can contact us at mooneyl@ecu.edu, knoxd@ecu.edu, or cschacht@suddenlink.net.



Andrew Rich/Getty Images

“

Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot,
nothing is going to get better. It's not.”

DR. SEUSS
The Lorax

Thinking about Social Problems

Chapter Outline

What Is a Social Problem?

Elements of Social Structure and Culture

● **Self and Society: Social Opinion Survey**

The Sociological Imagination

Theoretical Perspectives

● **Social Problems Research Up Close:
The Sociological Enterprise**

Social Problems Research

● **The Human Side: A Sociologist's "Human Side"**

Ten Good Reasons to Read This Book

Understanding Social Problems

Chapter Review

Learning Objectives

After studying this chapter, you will be able to . . .

- 1 Define a social problem.
- 2 Discuss the elements of the social structure and culture of society.
- 3 Understand the connections between private troubles and public issues, and how they relate to the sociological imagination.
- 4 Summarize structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism and their respective theories of social problems.
- 5 Describe the stages in conducting a research study.



Rubberball/Fotosearch

After the economic downturn of 2008, the U.S. Congress passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. The stimulus package was designed to help failing industries, create jobs, promote consumer spending, rescue the failed housing market, and encourage energy-related investments. To date, the distribution of stimulus funds amounts to over \$840 billion (Recovery.gov 2015).

IN A JUNE 2015 Gallup Poll, a random sample of Americans was asked, “What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?” Leading problems included economic issues (i.e., wages,

corporate corruption, the gap between the rich and poor, etc.), which were the clear majority of responses, and noneconomic issues such as immigration, distrust of government, health care, the family, education, and poverty (Gallup 2015a). Moreover, a recent survey indicates that just 28 percent of Americans are satisfied “with the way things are going in the United States”—a number significantly lower than a decade ago when 42 percent of Americans were satisfied with the direction of the country (Gallup 2015b).

We should not, however, confine our concerns to social problems in the United States. Globalization requires an understanding of the interrelationship between countries and regions around the world. Although some social problems are clearly global in nature, others appear to only impact the nation in which they occur. The economy, for example, is often discussed in terms of the U.S. job growth, the U.S. inflation rate, or American’s consumer confidence. And yet, in 2015, when China’s stock market plunged, the NYSE recorded its steepest losses since the recession of 2008. Nonetheless, whether measured by travel patterns, languages spoken, or student study abroad, Americans have shown little interest in other countries. Calling this “unfamiliarity with the world” a crisis, Ungar (2015) comments that the “continued ignorance of, or indifference toward, how other people see the world is a concrete threat to our own security and safety (p. 1).

Problems related to poverty, inadequate education, crime and violence, oppression of minorities, environmental destruction, and war and terrorism as well as many other social issues are both national and international concerns. Such problems present both a threat and a challenge to our national and global society. The primary goal of this textbook is to facilitate increased awareness and understanding of problematic social conditions in U.S. society and throughout the world.

Although the topics covered in this book vary widely, all chapters share common objectives: to explain how social problems are created and maintained; to indicate how they affect individuals, social groups, and societies as a whole; and to examine programs and policies for change. We begin by looking at the nature of social problems.

What Is a Social Problem?

There is no universal, constant, or absolute definition of what constitutes a social problem. Rather, social problems are defined by a combination of objective and subjective criteria that vary across societies, among individuals and groups within a society, and across historical time periods.

Objective and Subjective Elements of Social Problems

Although social problems take many forms, they all share two important elements: an objective social condition and a subjective interpretation of that social condition. The **objective element of a social problem** refers to the existence of a social condition. We become aware of social conditions through our own life experience, through the media, and through education. We see the homeless, hear gunfire in the streets, and see battered women in hospital emergency rooms. We read about employees losing their jobs as businesses downsize and factories close. In television news reports, we see the anguished faces of parents whose children have been killed by violent youths.

For a condition to be defined as a social problem, there must be public awareness of the condition. How do you think the widespread use of communication technology—such as smartphones, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube—has affected public awareness of problematic social conditions? Can you think of social problems that you became aware of through communication technology that you probably would not have been aware of if such technology were not accessible?

The **subjective element of a social problem** refers to the belief that a particular social condition is harmful to society or to a segment of society and that it should and can be changed. We know that crime, drug addiction, poverty, racism, violence, and pollution exist. These social conditions are not considered social problems, however, unless at least a segment of society believes that these conditions diminish the quality of human life.

By combining these objective and subjective elements, we arrive at the following definition: A **social problem** is a social condition that a segment of society views as harmful to members of society, and is in need of remedy.

Variability in Definitions of Social Problems

Individuals and groups frequently disagree about what constitutes a social problem. For example, some Americans view gun control as a necessary means of reducing gun violence whereas others believe that gun control is a threat to civil rights and individual liberties. Similarly, some Americans view the availability of abortion as a social problem, whereas others view restrictions on abortion as a social problem.

Definitions of social problems vary not only within societies but also across societies and geographic regions. Table 1.1 graphically portrays responses to a global survey (44 countries, $N = 48,643$) concerning the most pressing social problems in the world. Note that in the more advanced regions (Europe and the United States), social inequality is considered the most dangerous world problem, while in Africa, AIDS and other infectious diseases are viewed as the most important issues facing the world. Not surprisingly, religious and ethnic hatred was the top response for Middle Easterners (Pew 2014).

TABLE 1.1 The Greatest Problems in the World, 2014 (44 Countries, $N = 48,643$)

| | Religious & Ethnic Hatred | Inequality | Pollution & Environment | Nuclear Weapons | AIDS & Other Diseases |
|---------------|---------------------------|------------|-------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| Middle East | 34% | 18% | 9% | 20% | 10% |
| Europe | 15 | 32 | 14 | 19 | 5 |
| Asia | 13 | 18 | 22 | 21 | 12 |
| Latin America | 9 | 18 | 25 | 26 | 19 |
| Africa | 24 | 18 | 7 | 22 | 29 |
| U.S. | 24 | 27 | 15 | 23 | 7 |

■ Top Choice

NOTE: Regional medians, Russia and Ukraine not included in Europe median.

SOURCE: Pew 2014.

WHAT
do you
THINK?

Some Americans view gun control as a necessary means of reducing gun violence whereas others believe that gun control is a threat to civil rights and individual liberties.

objective element of a social problem Awareness of social conditions through one's own life experiences and through reports in the media.

subjective element of a social problem The belief that a particular social condition is harmful to society, or to a segment of society, and that it should and can be changed.

social problem A social condition that a segment of society views as harmful to members of society and in need of remedy.

What constitutes a social problem also varies by historical time periods. For example, before the 19th century, a husband's legal right and marital obligation was to discipline and control his wife through the use of physical force. Today, the use of physical force is regarded as a social problem rather than a marital right.

Lastly, social problems change over time not only because *definitions* of conditions change, as in the example of the use of force in marriage, but also because the *conditions* themselves change. The use of cell phones while driving was not considered a social problem in the 1990s, as cell phone technology was just beginning to become popular. Now, with most U.S. adults having a cell phone, the issue of "distracted driving" has become a national problem. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA 2014), in 2012, over 650,000 daytime drivers used their cell phones or operated some other kind of electronic device while driving. In the same year, an estimated 421,000 were injured in distracted driving automobile crashes.

WHAT do you THINK?

Many drivers see using mobile phones while driving as risky when other drivers do it, but view their own mobile phone use while driving as safe (NHTSA 2013). Why do you think this is so? Do you think using mobile phones or other electronic devices while driving is safe?

Because social problems can be highly complex, it is helpful to have a framework within which to view them. Sociology provides such a framework. Using a sociological perspective to examine social problems requires knowledge of the basic concepts and tools of sociology. In the remainder of this chapter, we discuss some of these concepts and tools: social structure, culture, the "sociological imagination," major theoretical perspectives, and types of research methods.

Elements of Social Structure and Culture

Although society surrounds us and permeates our lives, it is difficult to "see" society. By thinking of society in terms of a picture or image, however, we can visualize society and therefore better understand it. Imagine that society is a coin with two sides: On one side is the structure of society, and on the other is the culture of society. Although each side is distinct, both are inseparable from the whole. By looking at the various elements of social structure and culture, we can better understand the root causes of social problems.

Elements of Social Structure

structure The way society is organized including institutions, social groups, statuses, and roles.

institution An established and enduring pattern of social relationships.

The **structure** of a society refers to the way society is organized. Society is organized into different parts: institutions, social groups, statuses, and roles.

Institutions. An **institution** is an established and enduring pattern of social relationships. The five traditional institutions are family, religion, politics, economics, and education, but some sociologists argue that other social institutions—such as science and technology, mass media, medicine, sports, and the military—also play important roles in

modern society. Many social problems are generated by inadequacies in various institutions. For example, unemployment may be influenced by the educational institution's failure to prepare individuals for the job market and by alterations in the structure of the economic institution.

Social Groups. Institutions are made up of social groups. A **social group** is defined as two or more people who have a common identity, interact, and form a social relationship. For example, the family in which you were reared is a social group that is part of the family institution. The religious association to which you may belong is a social group that is part of the religious institution.

Social groups can be categorized as primary or secondary. **Primary groups**, which tend to involve small numbers of individuals, are characterized by intimate and informal interaction. Families and friends are examples of primary groups. **Secondary groups**, which may involve small or large numbers of individuals, are task oriented and characterized by impersonal and formal interaction. Examples of secondary groups include employers and their employees and clerks and their customers.

Statuses. Just as institutions consist of social groups, social groups consist of statuses. A **status** is a position that a person occupies within a social group. The statuses we occupy largely define our social identity. The statuses in a family may consist of mother, father, stepmother, stepfather, wife, husband, partner, child, and so on. Statuses can be either ascribed or achieved. An **ascribed status** is one that society assigns to an individual on the basis of factors over which the individual has no control. For example, we have no control over the sex, race, ethnic background, and socioeconomic status into which we are born. Similarly, we are assigned the status of child, teenager, adult, or senior citizen on the basis of our age—something we do not choose or control.

An **achieved status** is assigned on the basis of some characteristic or behavior over which the individual has some control. Whether you achieve the status of college graduate, spouse, parent, bank president, or prison inmate depends largely on your own efforts, behavior, and choices. One's ascribed statuses may affect the likelihood of achieving other statuses, however. For example, if you are born into a poor socioeconomic status, you may find it more difficult to achieve the status of college graduate because of the high cost of a college education.

Every individual has numerous statuses simultaneously. You may be a student, parent, tutor, volunteer fund-raiser, female, and Hispanic. A person's *master status* is the status that is considered the most significant in a person's social identity. In the United States, a person's occupational status is typically regarded as a master status. If you are a full-time student, your master status is likely to be student.

Roles. Every status is associated with many **roles**, or the set of rights, obligations, and expectations associated with a status. Roles guide our behavior and allow us to predict the behavior of others. As students, you are expected to attend class, listen and take notes, study for tests, and complete assignments. Because you know what the role of teacher involves, you can predict that your teachers will lecture, give exams, and assign grades based on your performance on tests.

A single status involves more than one role. The status of prison inmate includes one role for interacting with prison guards and another role for interacting with other prison inmates. Similarly, the status of nurse involves different roles for interacting with physicians and with patients.

Elements of Culture

Whereas the social structure refers to the organization of society, the **culture** refers to the meanings and ways of life that characterize a society. The elements of culture include beliefs, values, norms, sanctions, and symbols.

Whereas the social structure refers to the organization of society, the culture refers to the meanings and ways of life that characterize a society.

social group Two or more people who have a common identity, interact, and form a social relationship.

primary groups Usually small numbers of individuals characterized by intimate and informal interaction.

secondary groups Involving small or large numbers of individuals, groups that are task oriented and are characterized by impersonal and formal interaction.

status A position that a person occupies within a social group.

ascribed status A status that society assigns to an individual on the basis of factors over which the individual has no control.

achieved status A status that society assigns to an individual on the basis of factors over which the individual has some control.

roles The set of rights, obligations, and expectations associated with a status.

culture The meanings and ways of life that characterize a society, including beliefs, values, norms, sanctions, and symbols.

Beliefs. Beliefs refer to definitions and explanations about what is assumed to be true. The beliefs of an individual or group influence whether that individual or group views a particular social condition as a social problem. Does secondhand smoke harm nonsmokers? Are nuclear power plants safe? Does violence in movies and on television lead to increased aggression in children? Our beliefs regarding these issues influence whether we view the issues as social problems. Beliefs influence not only how a social condition is interpreted but also the existence of the condition itself.

Values. Values are social agreements about what is considered good and bad, right and wrong, desirable and undesirable. Frequently, social conditions are viewed as social problems when the conditions are incompatible with or contradict closely held values. For example, poverty and homelessness violate the value of human welfare; crime contradicts the values of honesty, private property, and nonviolence; racism, sexism, and heterosexism violate the values of equality and fairness. Often responses to opinion surveys (see this chapter’s *Self and Society* feature) reveal an individual’s values. For example, agreeing with the statement “a chief benefit of a college education is that it increases one’s earning power” reflects the American value of economic well-being.

Values play an important role not only in the interpretation of a condition as a social problem but also in the development of the social condition itself. For example, most Americans view capitalism, characterized by free enterprise and the private accumulation of wealth, positively (Newport 2012). Nonetheless, a capitalist system, in part, is responsible for the inequality in American society as people compete for limited resources.

Norms and Sanctions. Norms are socially defined rules of behavior. Norms serve as guidelines for our behavior and for our expectations of the behavior of others.

There are three types of norms: folkways, laws, and mores. *Folkways* refer to the customs, habits, and manners of society—the ways of life that characterize a group or society. In many segments of our society, it is customary to shake hands when being introduced to a new acquaintance, to say “excuse me” after sneezing, and to give presents to family and friends on their birthdays. Although no laws require us to do these things, we are expected to do them

because they are part of the cultural tradition, or folkways, of the society in which we live.

Laws are norms that are formalized and backed by political authority. It is normative for a Sikh to wear a turban, and to have long hair and a beard. However, when a Hofstra University student who was also a Sikh sought to enlist in his school’s ROTC program, he was denied a religious exemption from the army’s “grooming policies.” The army later argued that Mr. Singh could not request

a religious exemption unless he was an ROTC cadet. A newly filed lawsuit against the United States Army notes the catch-22: Mr. Singh cannot become an ROTC cadet unless he is granted a religious exemption and cannot request a religious exemption unless he is an ROTC cadet (Shortell 2014).

Mores are norms with a moral basis. Both littering and child sexual abuse are violations of law, but child sexual abuse is also a violation of our mores because we view such behavior as immoral.

All norms are associated with **sanctions**, or social consequences for conforming to or violating norms. When we conform to a social norm, we may be rewarded by a positive sanction. These may range from an approving smile to a public ceremony in our honor. When we violate a social norm, we may be punished by a negative sanction, which may range from a disapproving look to the death penalty or life in prison. Most sanctions are spontaneous expressions of approval or disapproval by groups or individuals—these are referred to as informal sanctions. Sanctions that are carried out according to some recognized or formal procedure are referred to as formal sanctions. Types of sanctions, then, include positive informal sanctions, positive formal sanctions, negative informal sanctions, and negative formal sanctions (see Table 1.2).

TABLE 1.2 Types and Examples of Sanctions

| | Positive | Negative |
|----------|--|---|
| Informal | Being praised by one’s neighbors for organizing a neighborhood recycling program | Being criticized by one’s neighbors for refusing to participate in the neighborhood recycling program |
| Formal | Being granted a citizen’s award for organizing a neighborhood recycling program | Being fined by the city for failing to dispose of trash properly |

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beliefs Definitions and explanations about what is assumed to be true.

values Social agreements about what is considered good and bad, right and wrong, desirable and undesirable.

norms Socially defined rules of behavior, including folkways, laws, and mores.

sanctions Social consequences for conforming to or violating norms.

Indicate with a check mark the items you “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree” with.

| | Strongly Agree or Somewhat Agree |
|---|---|
| 1. Wealthy people should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now. | _____ |
| 2. Affirmative action in college admissions should be abolished. | _____ |
| 3. The federal government should do more to control the sale of handguns. | _____ |
| 4. A national health care plan is needed to cover everybody’s medical costs. | _____ |
| 5. The federal government should raise taxes to reduce the deficit. | _____ |
| 6. Addressing global warming should be a federal priority. | _____ |
| 7. The chief benefit of a college education is that it increases one’s earning power. | _____ |
| 8. Gays and lesbians should have the legal right to adopt a child. | _____ |
| 9. Undocumented immigrants should be denied access to public education. | _____ |
| 10. How would you characterize your political views? | |
| Far left | _____ |
| Liberal | _____ |
| Middle of the road | _____ |
| Conservative | _____ |
| Far right | _____ |

**Percentage of first-year college students at bachelor’s institutions who
“strongly agree” or “somewhat agree” with the following statements***

| | Strongly Agree or Somewhat Agree |
|---|---|
| 1. Wealthy people should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now. | 68.1 |
| 2. Affirmative action in college admissions should be abolished. | 52.0 |
| 3. The federal government should do more to control the sale of handguns. | 63.8 |
| 4. A national health care plan is needed to cover everybody’s medical costs. | 61.3 |
| 5. The federal government should raise taxes to reduce the deficit. | 36.9 |
| 6. Addressing global warming should be a federal priority. | 60.8 |
| 7. The chief benefit of a college education is that it increases one’s earning power. | 72.0 |
| 8. Gays and lesbians should have the legal right to adopt a child. | 83.3 |
| 9. Undocumented immigrants should be denied access to public education. | 40.7 |
| 10. How would you characterize your political views? | |
| Far left | 2.8 |
| Liberal | 27.7 |
| Middle of the road | 46.3 |
| Conservative | 21.2 |
| Far right | 1.9 |

*Percentages are rounded.
SOURCE: Eagan et al. 2014.

Symbols. A **symbol** is something that represents something else. Without symbols, we could not communicate with one another or live as social beings.

The symbols of a culture include language, gestures, and objects whose meanings the members of a society commonly understand. In our society, a red ribbon tied around a car antenna symbolizes Mothers against Drunk Driving, a peace sign symbolizes the value of nonviolence, and a white-hooded robe symbolizes the Ku Klux Klan. Sometimes people attach different meanings to the same symbol. The Confederate flag is a symbol of southern pride to some and a symbol of racial bigotry to others.

The elements of the social structure and culture just discussed play a central role in the creation, maintenance, and social responses to various social problems. One of the

symbol Something that represents something else.