Thirteenth Edition

Social Problems
and the Quality of Life

Robert H. Lauer | Jeanette C. Lauer

SOCIAL PROBLEMS
and the quality of life

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Robert H. Lauer
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To Jon, Kathy, Julie, Jeffrey, Kate, Jeff, Krista, Benjamin, David, and John Robert

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

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SOCIAL PROBLEMS AND THE QUALITY OF LIFE, THIRTEENTH EDITION

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brief contents

List of Figures xii
List of Tables xiii
Preface xiv

PART 1 **Foundations 1**

1 Understanding Social Problems 2

PART 2 **Problems of Behavioral Deviance 33**

2 Alcohol and Other Drugs 34
3 Crime and Delinquency 72
4 Violence 104
5 Sexual Deviance 136

PART 3 **Problems of Inequality 159**

6 Poverty 160
7 Gender and Sexual Orientation 192
8 Race, Ethnic Groups, and Racism 226

PART 4 **Problems of Social Institutions 259**

9 Government and Politics 260
10 Work and the Economy 292
11 Education 320
12 Family Problems 350
13 Health Care and Illness: Physical and Mental 380

PART 5 **Global Social Problems 413**

14 War and Terrorism 414
15 The Environment 446

Glossary 476
References 481
Credits 539
Name Index 540
Subject Index 551

Lau26865_fm_i_xviii.indd v 12/20/12 3:30 PM

contents

List of Figures xii
List of Tables xiii
Preface xiv

PART 1 **Foundations 1**

1 Understanding Social Problems 2

Objectives 2
"Why Is It My Fault?" 3
Introduction 3
Personal versus Social Problems 4
- The Causes of Problems 5
- The Consequences of Problems 5

A Model for Understanding 7
- A Theory-Based Model 8
- Quality of Life 10
- Multiple Levels of Social Problems 11
- Social Action for Resolution 12
- The Changing Nature of Social Problems 13
- Analyzing Social Problems 14

Critical Thinking: Recognizing Fallacies 15
- Fallacy of Dramatic Instance 15
- Fallacy of Retrospective Determinism 16
- Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness 17
- Fallacy of Personal Attack 18
- Fallacy of Appeal to Prejudice 18
- Fallacy of Circular Reasoning 19
- Fallacy of Authority 19
- Fallacy of Composition 21
- Fallacy of Non Sequitur 21

Involvement: *How, and How Not, to Think 22*
- Fallacies and Mass Media 22

The Sources of Data: Social Research 23
- Survey Research 24
- Statistical Analysis of Official Records 25
- Experiments 28
- Participant Observation 29

Summary 31
Key Terms 31
Study Questions 31
Internet Resources/Exercises 32
For Further Reading 32

PART 2 **Problems of Behavioral Deviance 33**

2 Alcohol and Other Drugs 34

Objectives 34
Despair and Hope 35
Introduction 36
Alcohol 37
- Effects 37
- Patterns of Use 38
- Alcohol and the Quality of Life 39

Global Comparison: *Alcoholism in Eastern Europe 41*
Involvement: *"I'd Kill Before I'd Drink" 42*
- Contributing Factors 43
- Public Policy and Private Action 45

Other Drugs 47
- Types and Effects 47
- Patterns of Use 53
- Drugs and the Quality of Life 55
- Contributing Factors 59
- Public Policy and Private Action 64

Summary 69
Key Terms 69
Study Questions 69

Lau26865_fm_i_xviii.indd vi 12/20/12 3:30 PM

Internet Resources/Exercises 70
For Further Reading 70

3 Crime and Delinquency 72

Objectives 72
A Victim Recovers 73
Introduction 74
The Varieties of Crime 75
- Predatory Crime 75
- Illegal Service Crimes 76
- Public Disorder Crimes 76
- Crimes of Negligence 76
- Cybercrime 76
- White-Collar Crime 77
- Organized Crime 79
- Juvenile Delinquency 80
- Juvenile Violence and Juvenile Gangs 80

The Extent of Crime and Delinquency 82
- Sources of Data 82
- Problems with Official Records 83
- The Amount of Crime and Delinquency 84

The Distribution of Crime 86
The Criminal Justice Process 86
Crime, Delinquency, and the Quality of Life 88
- Physical and Psychological Costs of Crime 88
- Economic Costs of Crime 89

Contributing Factors 89
- Social Structural Factors 89

Global Comparison: *Alternatives to Imprisonment: Germany and Israel 92*
Involvement: *Coddling Criminals 93*
- Social Psychological Factors 96

Public Policy and Private Action 97
- Punishment or Rehabilitation? 97
- Capital Punishment 98
- Innovative Alternatives 99
- Community Action and Involvement 100
- Aid to Victims 100

Summary 102
Key Terms 102
Study Questions 102
Internet Resources/Exercises 103
For Further Reading 103

4 Violence 104

Objectives 104
"I Felt Guilty" 105
Introduction 106
What Is Violence? 107
- How Much Violence Is There? 107
- Interpersonal Violence 108
- Intergroup Violence 109

Violence and the Quality of Life 110
- Human Injury and Destruction 110
- Psychological Disruption and Dehumanization 111
- Violence as Seductive Self-Destruction 112
- Economic Costs 112

Contributing Factors 113
- Social Structural Factors 113

Involvement: *Violently Opposed to Violence 116*
- Social Psychological Factors 120

Public Policy and Private Action 122
The Violence of Rape 123
Rape and the Quality of Life 124
- Emotional and Physical Trauma 124
- Physical Abuse 126

Contributing Factors 126
- Social Structural Factors 126
- Social Psychological Factors 127

Global Comparison: *Attitudes of Turkish Students Toward Rape 128*
Public Policy and Private Action 131
Summary 133
Key Terms 133
Study Questions 133
Internet Resources/Exercises 134
For Further Reading 134

5 Sexual Deviance 136

Objectives 136
"My Husband Is a Porn Addict" 137
Introduction 138
- Examples of Sexual Deviance 138

Prostitution 140
- Prostitution and the Quality of Life 142

Global Comparison: *Child Prostitutes 145*
- Contributing Factors 146
- Public Policy and Private Action 149

Pornography, Erotica, and Obscenity 150
Nature and Extent of the Problem 150
Pornography, Erotica, Obscenity, and the Quality of Life 152
Involvement: *Sexy or Disgusting? 154*
Contributing Factors 154
Public Policy and Private Action 156
Summary 157
Key Terms 157
Study Questions 157
Internet Resources/Exercises 157
For Further Reading 157

PART 3 Problems of Inequality 159

6 Poverty 160

Objectives 160
"We Feel Like Deadbeats" 161
Introduction 162
What Is Poverty? 162
Extent of Poverty 164
Who Are the Poor? 165
The Changing Nature of Poverty 168
Poverty and the Quality of Life 169
The Right to Life and Happiness 170
Global Comparison: *Poverty in the World System 171*
The Right to Dignity as a Human Being 172
Involvement: *From Riches to Rags 175*
Poverty and Health 175
Dilemmas of Poverty 176
Contributing Factors 177
Social Structural Factors 178
Social Psychological Factors 185
Public Policy and Private Action 186
Summary 189
Key Terms 189
Study Questions 189
Internet Resources/Exercises 190
For Further Reading 190

7 Gender and Sexual Orientation 192

Objectives 192
"I Didn't Need the Extra Hassles" 193
Introduction 194
Gender Inequality 194
Biology or Society? 195
Gender Inequality and the Quality of Life 197
Global Comparison: *Occupational Sex Segregation in Developing Countries 202*
Contributing Factors 203
Involvement: *You Are What You Read 207*
Public Policy and Private Action 210
Homosexuality and Homophobia 212
Homosexuality: Definitions and Numbers 212
Why Are Some People Homosexual? 213
Homosexuality and the Quality of Life 216
Contributing Factors 219
Public Policy and Private Action 221
Summary 223
Key Terms 223
Study Questions 223
Internet Resources/Exercises 223
For Further Reading 224

8 Race, Ethnic Groups, and Racism 226

Objectives 226
Will It Ever End? 227
Introduction 228
The Meaning of Race, Ethnic Groups, and Racism 228
Extent and Origin of Races and Racism in America 229
Racism in American History 231
Immigration 232
Race, Ethnicity, and the Quality of Life 234
The Rights of Citizenship 234
The Right to Equal Economic Opportunities 237
The Right to Life and Happiness 241
The Right to Dignity as a Human Being 243
Contributing Factors 245

Involvement: *Becoming Color Blind 246*
Social Structural Factors 246
Social Psychological Factors 250
Public Policy and Private Action 253
Global Comparison: *Prejudice in Europe 254*
Summary 257
Key Terms 257
Study Questions 257
Internet Resources/Exercises 257
For Further Reading 258

Problems of Social Institutions 259

9 Government and Politics 260

Objectives 260
"Why Isn't There Help for People Like Me?" 261
Introduction 262
Why Government? 262
Protect the Citizenry 263
Secure Order 264
Distribute Power Equitably 264
Provide a Safety Net 264
Problems of Government and Politics 265
Inequalities in Power 265
The Failure of Trust 266
Involvement: *Why Don't People Trust the Government? 270*
Waste, Corruption, and Scandals 270
Gridlock 273
Government, Politics, and the Quality of Life 273
Unequal Opportunities for a High Quality of Life 273
Inadequate Protection of Individual Rights 274
Lack of Responsiveness to Needs 275
Contributing Factors 277
Social Structural Factors 277
Global Comparison: *Bureaucracy in Indonesia 282*
Social Psychological Factors 285
Public Policy and Private Action 287
Summary 289
Key Terms 289
Study Questions 289
Internet Resources/Exercises 290
For Further Reading 290

10 Work and the Economy 292

Objectives 292
"I'm Not a Worrier. But . . ." 293
Introduction 294
The Economy, Work, and the Workforce in America 294
The Changing Economy 294
The Changing Workforce 297
The Changing Composition of the Labor Force 298
The Changing Meaning of Work 299
Work as a Social Problem 301
Unemployment and Underemployment 301
Dissatisfaction and Alienation 302
Work Hazards and Stress 303
Global Comparison: *Unemployment Rates in Industrial Nations 304*
Work and the Quality of Life 304
Work, Unemployment, and Health 305
Interpersonal Relationships 307
Contributing Factors 308
Social Structural Factors 308
Social Psychological Factors 313
Involvement: *Fun and Games at Work 314*
Public Policy and Private Action 315
Summary 318
Key Terms 318
Study Questions 318
Internet Resources/Exercises 318
For Further Reading 319

11 Education 320

Objectives 320
"I Kept My Mouth Shut" 321
Introduction 322
Why Education? 322

Educational Attainment and Payoff 323
Levels of Attainment 323
Attainment and Payoff 325
Global Comparison: *Educational Attainment, by Country 326*
Education and the Quality of Life 328
Inequality of Opportunity and Attainment 328
The Atmosphere: Learning or Surviving? 330
The Payoff: A Great Training Robbery? 332
American Education: A Tide of Mediocrity? 333
Contributing Factors 335
Social Structural Factors 335
Involvement: *What Is the Purpose of Education? 337*
Social Psychological Factors 340
A Concluding Note on Inequality in Education 341
Public Policy and Private Action 343
Use of Vouchers and Tax Credits 343
Quality Enhancement Measures 344
Reducing Racial and Ethnic Inequality 346
Compensatory and Other Innovative Programs 346
The Deschooling Movement 347
Summary 348
Key Terms 348
Study Questions 348
Internet Resources/Exercises 349
For Further Reading 349

12 Family Problems 350

Objectives 350
"I Survived the Abuse" 351
Introduction 352
Is the Family Doomed? 352
Alternative Forms of the Family 353
The Changing American Family 354
Functions of the Family 355
The Extent of Family Problems 356
Disrupted and Reconstituted Families 356
Family Violence 358
Global Comparison: *Marital Quality and Well-Being of Children 359*
Family Problems and the Quality of Life 361
Physical and Emotional Difficulties 362
Poverty 365
Deviant Behavior 366
Maladjustment 366
Contributing Factors 367
Social Structural Factors 367
Social Psychological Factors 371
Involvement: *One Big Happy Family 374*
Public Policy and Private Action 376
Summary 378
Key Terms 378
Study Questions 378
Internet Resources/Exercises 379
For Further Reading 379

13 Health Care and Illness: Physical and Mental 380

Objectives 380
"If You Want to Live a Long Life" 381
Introduction 382
Nature of the Problem: Health Care and Illness 383
Physical Illness 383
Global Comparison: *The Worldwide Challenge of Infectious Diseases 386*
Mental Illness 387
Involvement: *Except Me and Thee? 389*
Health Care, Illness, and the Quality of Life 390
Stress and Suffering 390
Interpersonal Relationships 391
Inadequate Care 392
Deinstitutionalization 395
Individual Freedom 396
Economic Costs 396
Contributing Factors 397
Social Structural Factors 397
Social Psychological Factors 403
Public Policy and Private Action 406
Health Care Reform 406
Innovations in the Delivery of Health Care 407
Innovations in Treatment 408
Prevention 408

Summary 410
Key Terms 410
Study Questions 410
Internet Resources/Exercises 411
For Further Reading 411

PART 5 Global Social Problems 413

14 War and Terrorism 414

Objectives 414
"I Didn't Want to See It" 415
Introduction 416
War, Civil War, and Terrorism 416
The New Face of War 416
The Extent of the Problem 417
War, Terrorism, and the Quality of Life 418
Human Destruction and Injury 419
Psychological and Interpersonal Disruption and Dehumanization 423
Environmental Destruction 427
The Economic Costs 428
War, Terrorism, and Civil Liberties 430
Global Comparison: *Militarism: "A World Gone Insane" 432*
Contributing Factors 434
Social Structural Factors 434
Social Psychological Factors 437
Involvement: *"What a Great War That Was" 438*
Public Policy and Private Action 440
Summary 443
Key Terms 443
Study Questions 443
Internet Resources/Exercises 443
For Further Reading 444
Endnotes 444

15 The Environment 446

Objectives 446
"We're Not Safe Here Anymore" 447
Introduction 448
The Ecosystem 448
Types of Environmental Problems 449
Environmental Pollution 449
Environmental Depletion 453
How Big Are These Environmental Problems? 454
Environmental Pollution 455
Global Comparison: *World Energy Production and Consumption 458*
Environmental Depletion 458
Environmental Problems and the Quality of Life 460
The Environmental Threat to Life and Health 460
Threat to the Ecological Balance 463
The Economic Costs 464
Threat to World Peace 465
Contributing Factors 465
Social Structural Factors 466
Involvement: *Nature Bats Last 469*
Social Psychological Factors 470
Public Policy and Private Action 471
What Can Individuals Do? 471
What Can Business and Industry Do? 472
What Can the Government Do? 472
Summary 474
Key Terms 474
Study Questions 474
Internet Resources/Exercises 474
For Further Reading 475

Glossary 476
References 481
Credits 539
Name Index 540
Subject Index 551

list of figures

Figure 1.1 Some Possible Differences When a Problem—Rape in This Case—Is Defined as Social or Personal 6
Figure 1.2 Theoretical Explanations of Poverty 9
Figure 1.3 A Model for the Analysis of Social Problems 9
Figure 2.1 Some Commonly Abused Drugs and Their Effects 48
Figure 3.1 The FBI "Crime Clocks" Dramatize the Extensiveness of Crime in the United States 75
Figure 3.2 Reporting Victimizations to the Police 83
Figure 3.3 Federal Criminal Case Processing, 2004 87
Figure 4.1 Proportion Agreeing Victim Should Report Rape to Police 129
Figure 5.1 What Men Want from Prostitutes 141
Figure 6.1 The Number and Proportion of the Poor, 1970–2010 164
Figure 6.2 Proportion of Poverty for Different Kinds of People 165
Figure 6.3 Gross National Income Per Capita for Selected Countries 171
Figure 7.1 Median Income of Persons in Constant (2006) Dollars, 1990–2009 200
Figure 7.2 Occupational Sex Segregation 203
Figure 7.3 Attitudes about Homosexuality 221
Figure 8.1 Composition of U.S. Population, 2000–2050 230
Figure 8.2 Unemployment Rates, 1980–2011 238
Figure 8.3 Median Household Income, by Race and Hispanic Origin, 1972–2010 241
Figure 8.4 Racial Prejudice in Europe 254
Figure 9.1 Public Confidence Levels in Selected Institutions, 2011 267
Figure 9.2 Government Employees, 1980–2011 277
Figure 9.3 Cost of Congressional Campaigns 281
Figure 10.1 Civilian Employment, 1940–2010 297
Figure 10.2 Distribution of Occupations 298
Figure 10.3 Membership in Labor Unions as a Proportion of the Labor Force, 1970–2011 299
Figure 11.1 Educational Attainment of Adults (25 years and older) 324
Figure 11.2 Enrollment in Community (two-year) Colleges, 1950–2009 325
Figure 11.3 Racial and Ethnic Group Achievement Means of Sixth-Grade Pupils, Adjusted for Social Background Conditions 342
Figure 12.1 Composition of American Households, 1970 and 2010 354
Figure 12.2 Marital Status and Child Well-Being in 39 Nations 359
Figure 13.1 Worldwide Deaths, by Selected Infectious Diseases 387
Figure 13.2 Percent of Persons under 65 without Health Insurance Coverage, 2011 393
Figure 14.1 Military Budgets, by Country 436
Figure 15.1 Typical Sources of Indoor Air Pollutants 451
Figure 15.2 Municipal Solid Waste Generation and Recovery 457

Lau26865_fm_i_xviii.indd xii 12/20/12 3:30 PM

list of tables

Table 1.1 Frequency Distribution of Two Sets of Hypothetical Data 27
Table 1.2 Frequency Distribution, Mean, and Median of Two Sets of Hypothetical Income Data 27
Table 2.1 Use of Selected Drugs 53
Table 2.2 Motivation for Drug Abuse by Age, Race, and Sex of Abuser and Selected Drugs 64
Table 3.1 Reasons for Not Reporting Crimes to the Police 84
Table 3.2 Crime and Crime Rates by Type, 1960–2010 85
Table 3.3 Victimization Rates, Personal and Household Crimes, 2010 85
Table 4.1 Weapon Usage in Selected Crimes 115
Table 4.2 Demographics of Rape Victims 123
Table 6.1 Distribution of Money Income of Households, Ranked According to Income Received, 1929–2009 168
Table 6.2 Property Crime Victimizations, by Income 173
Table 7.1 Unemployment Rates, by Sex, 1948–2010 197
Table 7.2 Employed Persons by Sex and Selected Occupation, 2010 199
Table 8.l U.S. Resident Population, by Race and Hispanic Origin, 1980 and 2010 230
Table 8.2 Employed Persons, by Race and Occupation, 2010 239
Table 8.3 Money Income of Households, 2009: Percent Distribution by Income Level, by Race, and Hispanic Origin 240
Table 9.1 Participation in Elections, 1932–2008 269
Table 9.2 Number and Type of Political Action Committees 284
Table 10.l Unemployment Rates, 1950–2011 302
Table 10.2 Unemployment Rates, by Country, 2000–2010 304
Table 10.3 Impact of a Sustained 1 Percent Rise in Unemployment 307
Table 11.1 Years of School Completed, by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin, 2010 324
Table 11.2 Educational Attainment, by Country 327
Table 11.3 Median Income of Persons 25 Years and Older, by Educational Attainment, 2009 327
Table 12.1 Divorces, 1960–2010 357
Table 12.2 Living Arrangements of Children Under 18 Years, by Race and Hispanic Origin 357
Table 12.3 Proportion of Children Living with Both Parents, by Income 371
Table 13.1 Expectation of Life at Birth, 1900–2010 383
Table 13.2 Leading Causes of Death, by Race/Ethnicity 384
Table 13.3 Common Occupational Carcinogens 400
Table 14.1 War Casualties of American Military Personnel 419
Table 14.2 U.S. Military Sales Deliveries to Other Countries 433
Table 15.1 Energy Production and Consumption, 1950–2010 454
Table 15.2 Energy Consumption of Selected Nations 459

Lau26865_fm_i_xviii.indd xiii 12/20/12 3:30 PM

preface

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 Thirteenth 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

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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 pychotherapeutic drugs, cybercrime, effects of imprisonment on prisoners, cybersex, the new supplemental measure of poverty, emotional problems of homosexuals, same-sex marriage, illegal immigration, the subprime mortgage fiasco, "Super PACs" and campaign financing, the use of vouchers and tax credit programs in education, and the role of lifestyle in people's health.

Organization

We have divided the book into five parts and fifteen 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 at 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

As a full-service publisher of quality educational products, McGraw-Hill does much more than sell textbooks. The company creates and publishes an extensive array of print, video, and digital supplements for students and instructors. This edition of *Social Problems* is accompanied by an extensive, comprehensive 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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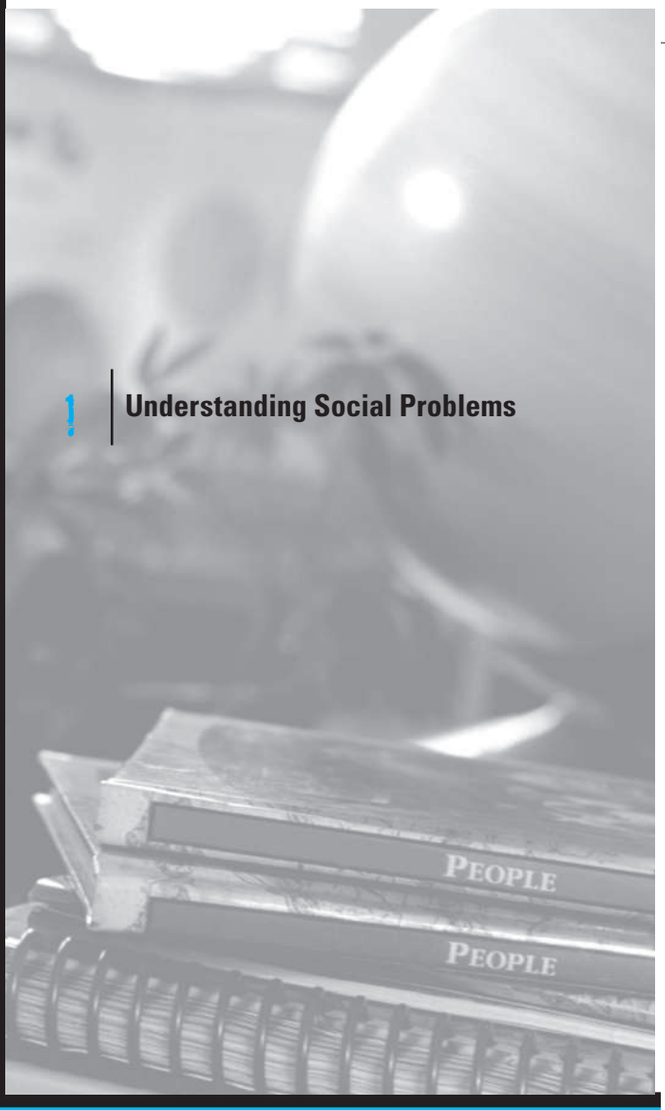
PART 1

Foundations



1 Understanding Social Problems

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."

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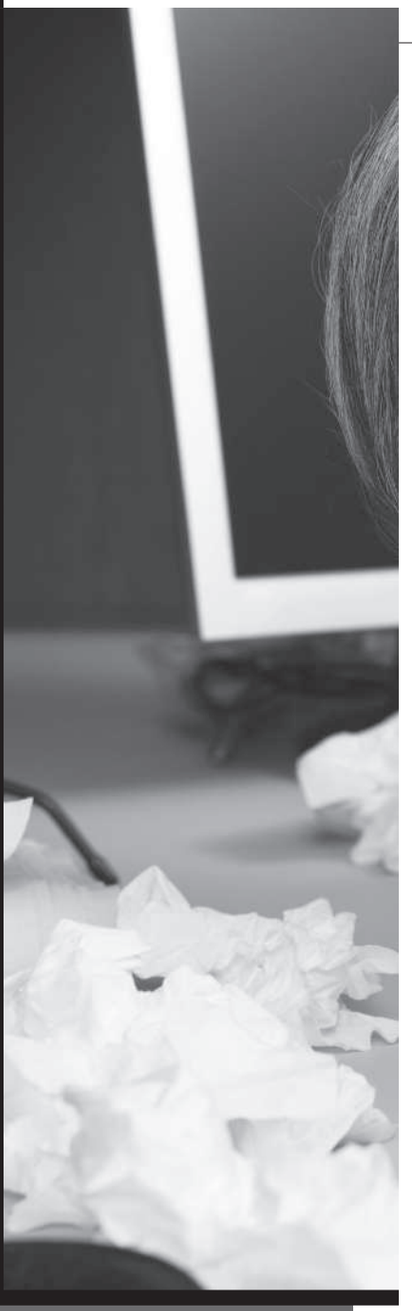
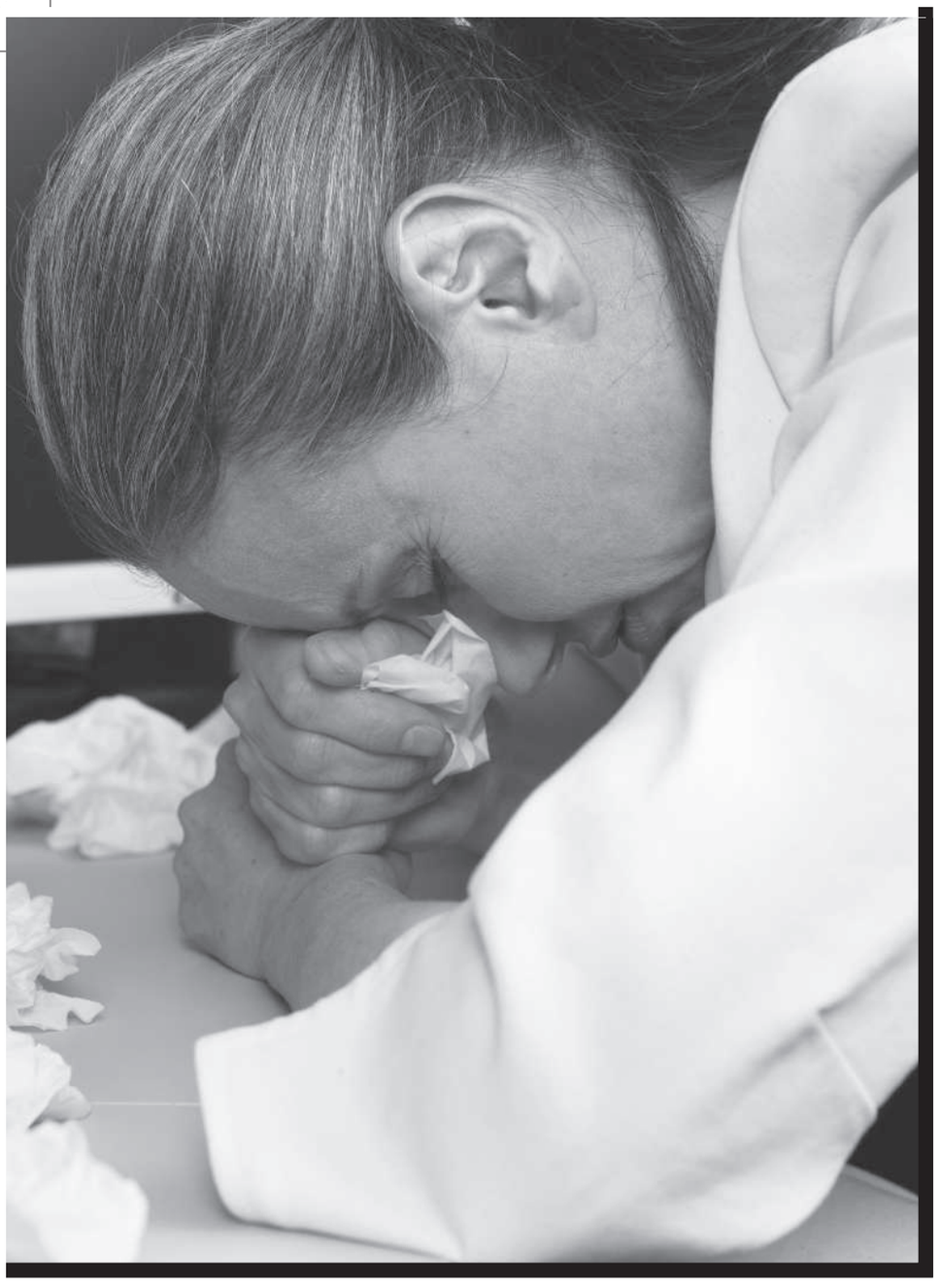
CHAPTER 1

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.



"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

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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" (Lauer 1971:8). 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 76 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 2012). In accord with such beliefs, 59 percent of African Americans but only 19 percent of whites believe that government should have a major role in improving the social and economic lives of minorities, and 52 percent of African Americans but only 15 percent of whites believe that new civil rights laws are needed. 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.

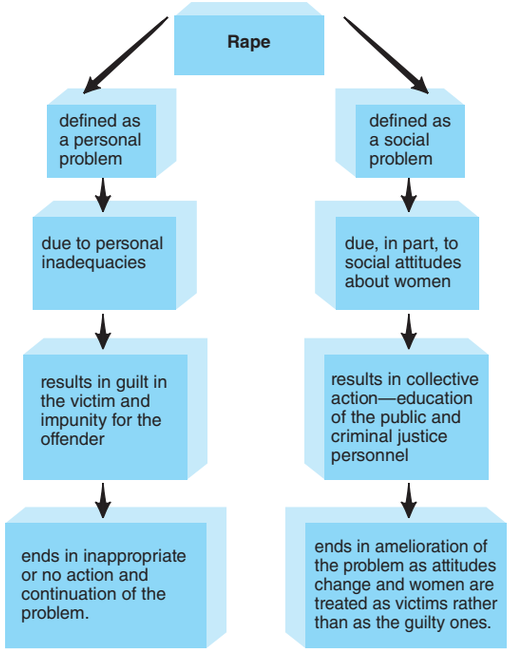

FIGURE 1.1
Some Possible Differences When a Problem—Rape in This Case—Is Defined as Social or Personal.

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.

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

A Theory-Based Model

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.

	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.

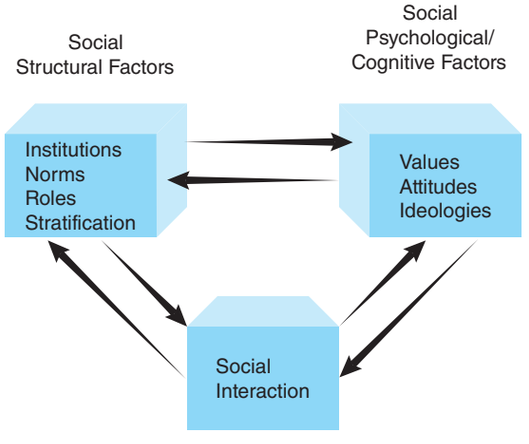

FIGURE 1.3
A Model for the Analysis of Social Problems.

attitude
a predisposition about something in one's environment

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

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 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.

To the extent that these things are missing, Americans perceive the quality of life to be diminished. Thus, the quality of life is reduced by such issues 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).

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