

Contemporary Social Problems

- What is a social problem?
- Functionalist, Conflict and Interactionist Perspectives on social problems
- The natural history of social problems
- Research and methodologies on social problems
 - Demographic studies
 - Surveys
 - Field observation
 - Social experiments

What is a Social Problem?

- **Social Problem**-Behavior that departs from established norms and social structures because individual and collective goals are not being achieved
 - A condition that a significant number of people believe should be remedied through collective action (ex. Crime)
 - Occurs when enough people in a society agree that a condition exists that threatens the quality of their lives and their most cherished values
 - Becomes a problem for all of society (C. Wright Mills)
 - Social problems are often interrelated
 - lack of education>unemployment>poverty>crime>poor health>etc...

What is a social problem?

- Debate about social problems in society centers on:
 - the causes of social problems
 - who is responsible for the problems
 - solutions to the problem
- Collective recognition of a social problem does not mean that there is a unified collective response
- Power plays a large role in how society defines social problems
 - Social problems are sometimes thought to be the natural order of things
 - Women and the right to vote, environmental issues, etc...

Perspectives on Social Problems

- Contemporary sociology is founded on three basic perspectives that offer theories about why societies hang together and how and why they change
 - Functionalism
 - Conflict Theory
 - Interactionism
- *Functionalism*-Views society as a vast organism whose parts are interrelated
 - Focuses on the role of institutions in maintaining the overall functioning of society
 - Institutions must address problematic aspects

The Functionalist Perspective

- **Status**-a socially defined position in a group or organization
 - We occupy different statuses in the groups and organizations we are a part of (family, work, etc...)
- **Role**-a certain set of behaviors that are expected of and performed by an individual on the basis of his or her status or position in society
- The roles and statuses of the members of a group form an institution
- **Institution**-stable structure of statuses and roles devoted to meeting the basic needs of people in a society
 - Health-care system, educational system, political system, etc...

The Functionalist Perspective

- The functionalist perspective looks at the way major institutions actually operate
 - The role behavior associated with any given status has evolved as a means of allowing a particular social institution to fulfill its function in society
 - Institution
 - Organizations
 - Individuals
 - Roles Statuses
 - (Behaviors) (Socially defined position)
 - If all the members of the group perform their roles correctly, the group is said to be functioning well
 - *Functionalists state that social problems occur because societies are always changing and having to adapt to new conditions

The Functionalist Perspective

- The functionalist perspective of the late 1800s and early 1900s attributed criminal deviance to “social disease”
 - **Social pathology**-a term applied to the “illness” of individuals or social institutions that fail to keep pace with changing conditions and thereby disrupt the healthy functioning of the social “organism”
 - These days, most sociologists reject the notion of society as an organism
- **Social Disorganization Theory**-views society as being organized by a set of expectations or rules; social disorganization occurs when those expectations fail
 - *Normlessness*-when people have no rules
 - *Culture conflict*-people feel trapped by contradictory rules
 - *Breakdown*-obedience to rules is not rewarded

The Conflict Perspective

- **Conflict perspective**-rejects the idea that social problems can be corrected by reforming institutions that are not functioning well
 - Based on the belief that social problems arise out of major contradictions in the way societies are organized, which leads to large-scale conflict between the “haves and the have-nots”
 - Karl Marx-Believed social problems weren’t the result of poorly functioning organizations, but in the way society organizes wealth and power
- Value-Conflict Theory-Asserts that not all social problems are due to class antagonisms, but on differences in values
 - Define social problems as conditions that are incompatible with group values
 - Power comes into play when some groups are able to define and enforce their values against the wishes of other groups

The Interactionist Perspective

- The interactionist perspective gets closer to the individual level of behavior
- Looks at the processes whereby different people become part of a situation that the larger society defines as a social problem and construct a version of life that promotes certain values
- An individual or group's definition of the situation is central to understanding the actions of that individual or group
- Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead:
 - Although we learn our values and ways of behaving early in life (from family), we also learn from peer groups, from which we draw much of our identity and sense of who we are
 - We also learn values and behavior from peer groups

Labeling

- Labeling is an application of the interactionist perspective
- *Labeling theorists feel the label “deviant” reveals more about the society applying it than about the act or person being labeled
 - Deviant acts are not always judged the same way
 - Separates deviant and non-deviant people by the way society reacts
- **Secondary deviance**-a term applied to behavior that elaborates on a deviant act in order to reinforce the role of deviant
 - Those who are labeled may accept the definition, leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy
 - According to labeling theory, the way to solve social problems is to change the definition of what is considered deviant

The Natural History of Social Problems

- In the early 20th century, sociologists recognized that social problems often seemed to develop in a series of phases or stages
- This became what is known as the natural history approach because they were charting the stages of social problem development
- Spector and Kituse's outline of social problem stages:
 - Stage 1-*Problem definition*-groups publicize their claims and try to turn the problem into a political issue
 - Stage 2-*Legitimacy*-groups pressing their claims are considered credible and are accepted by official organizations
 - Stage 3-*Reemergence of demands*-Groups aren't satisfied with actions taken and demand stronger measures or more funding
 - Stage 4-*Rejection and institution building*-When official action is not seen as adequate, groups develop their own organizations to press their claims

Research on Social Problems

- **Ethnography**-The close observation of interactions among people in a social group or organization
- **Demography**-the subfield of sociology that studies how social conditions are distributed in human populations and how those populations are changing
- **Survey Research**-a method for gathering information from a number of people, known as a **sample**-who represent the behavior and attitudes of the larger population from which they are selected
 - Information gathered by phone, in person, or by mail
 - **Longitudinal data**-data derived from comparisons of matched samples over time

Research on Social Problems

- **Field research (participant observation)**-a research technique in which the sociologist participates directly in the social life of the individuals or groups under study
 - Necessary to keep the trust of the people whose behavior is being observed
 - Applies the interactionist perspective
- **Social experiments**-applies experimental methods to the study of social problems
 - **Experimental group**-the subjects who receive the “treatment” in an experiment
 - **Control group**-the subjects who do not receive the “treatment” in an experiment

Zimbardo's Famous "Prison" Study

- Split 24 Stanford University students into two groups, guards and prisoners
 - "Prisoners" confined in a makeshift prison
 - "Guards" were instructed to the job of a prison guard
 - Cancelled after 6 days because the guards and the prisoners were unable to distinguish between the experiment and reality
 - "human values were suspended, self-concepts challenged, and the ugliest most base pathological side of human nature surfaced"
- Experiment raised major questions about the ethical limits of social research

Ethical Limits

- People who conduct research on human subjects must guarantee the following rights:
 - *Privacy*-Only in extreme cases should a subject's acts be revealed to the general public where the interest of society is at stake
 - *Confidentiality*-the assurance that information supplied by a subject will not be passed to anyone else that identifies the respondent
 - *Informed Consent*-Subjects are informed before about how the information will be used and what they are being asked
- **Social Policies**-formal procedures designed to remedy a social problem
 - Research conducted by sociologists provides information to be used in forming social policies