

**FORECLOSURE**

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THE STUDY OF  
SOCIAL PROBLEMS

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WHAT IS A SOCIAL PROBLEM?  
HOW DO SOCIOLOGISTS USE  
THEORETICAL PARADIGMS TO FRAME  
THEIR THINKING?  
WHAT IS THE ROLE OF RESEARCH AND  
SOCIAL POLICY IN UNDERSTANDING  
SOCIAL PROBLEMS?

# Almost

2,000 years ago the Roman poet Juvenal was in despair. Muggings in the street, women engaged in traditionally male sport and men marrying each other had convinced him that the social fabric was tearing. He became a brutal critic of all he saw, explaining his acerbic writing thus—"It is difficult not to write satire, when you look at broken society."

The ancient idea that society is broken finds a spokesman in each generation. David Cameron has decided that in this generation, that spokesman is him. The Leader of the Opposition has claimed repeatedly that we live in a broken society. It is a claim that ought to be resisted.

There are good political reasons for a party leader seeking power to assert that society is broken. This does not make the observation correct. Crime and social breakdown are perpetual concerns. Anyone who believes modern experience to be novel should try reading Henry Mayhew. Or try reading Charles Dickens. Or look at the engravings of William Hogarth. Or read Tacitus for that matter. That social problems have always existed does not diminish their importance, of course. But it does call into question the role played by recent changes in, for example, family structure or a decline in civility.

The biggest problem with the broken society claim is statistical. The singer Lily Allen pleaded last week on her website:

"Please can everyone stop stabbing each other in the UK." Sometimes, when following the news it seems as if everyone is indeed stabbing everyone else. Of course, they are not. The Metropolitan Police recorded 70 knife killings last year: the same as a decade ago.

This is 70 killings too many, but numbers matter. There is a big difference between arguing, as Mr. Cameron does, that society is broken, and believing, as we do, that there are broken individuals, families and communities, having an impact on the law-abiding and decent majority. If social breakdown is general, policies are needed to alter behaviour of the average citizen; if the problem is concentrated, so should be resources and attention. Arguing that mainstream society has gone bad demonises the average teenager, the average family, the average public space, the average entrepreneur. Mr. Cameron's broken society rhetoric is in danger of leading him astray.

It is good to hear a Tory leader speak of social problems with passion and determination. There is too much crime, too much poverty; and 4.3 million people are claiming out-of-work benefits. Mr. Cameron is also innovative and right to argue that social change need not always involve regulation and public spending. There are broken communities that urgently need attention. But Britain is not a broken society.<sup>1</sup>

---David Cameron is a conservative politician in Great Britain who regularly views social problems as a sign that society is falling apart. Family breakdown, murder, and social unrest always seem to be popular topics for politicians to bring up.

In Britain, the conservative party has been out of power for more than 10 years, so discussing social instability sends a clear message, “We didn’t cause it, but we can fix it.” Such ideas are often present in the United States as well. Political leaders are quick to lay blame and shirk responsibility. Claims of corruption and moral breakdown provide fuel to a fire that many feel will consume our society. Issues such as poverty, crime, and drug abuse all make for great debating points, but are these

problems really any worse today than they were 100 years ago?

What makes something a social problem? When I was in college, a social problem meant I didn’t have a date on Friday night. To a sociologist, a **social problem** is an issue that negatively affects a person’s state of being in a society. Often, social problems raise considerable debate and controversy. How can we understand the problems of society? What can we do about these problems? Can we do this objectively without

letting political ideology influence our point of view? These are the core questions that this chapter strives to answer.

Certainly the idea of a broken society is nothing new to anyone who has turned on the television. But can we trust the media or our political leaders to provide a perspective from which we can truly investigate these issues? This book seeks to investigate the area of social problems from the point of view of sociology. Like any other science, sociology is thorough, orderly, and logical. It engages in the task objectively, without bias. The American Sociological Association defines **sociology** as “the study of social life, social change, and the social causes and consequences of human behavior.”<sup>2</sup>

## get the topic: WHAT IS A SOCIAL PROBLEM?

**SOCIAL PROBLEM** is an issue that negatively affects a person’s state of being in a society.

**SOCIOLOGY** refers to a systematic and objective science that investigates human behavior in the social environment.

**SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION** is the ability to look beyond the individual as the cause for success and failure and see how one’s society influences the outcome.

**MACRO** is a large scaled point of view.

**MICRO** is a small-scale reference.

### The Sociological Imagination

We’re tuned into the news and we’ve heard the reports: The recent financial crisis is the worst global recession since the Great Depression. News reports are filled with headlines of the housing collapse, the credit crunch, banks in trouble, and the Big Three automakers’ bankruptcy. It’s likely that you or someone you know has been directly affected by the economic downturn through job loss or bankruptcy. What other social problems do you think will develop as a result of the current recession?

Consider this: you pull up to an intersection and notice a man with a makeshift sign; he’s holding out an empty coffee can to the windows of stopped cars. He looks weary, but certainly strong enough to work. At first glance, do you immediately assume that his situation is entirely a consequence of drug addiction or laziness?

Prominent American sociologist C. Wright Mills (1916–1962) argued that people must understand how extraneous factors contribute to individual situations. To do this, we must practice **sociological imagination**—the ability to look beyond the individual as the only cause of success and failure and see how society influences a person’s outcome.<sup>3</sup> Mills noted that this macro (large-scale) point of view helps us understand how history and social structure affect people. Mills noted that we often see social issues from our personal viewpoints only, interpreting actions at face value—a micro (small-scale) view. Using only a micro point of view is detrimental to a clear understanding of the world and can negatively influence our perception of events.

Instead of assuming the worst, we should use our sociological imagination and pause to consider that the man on the corner might be there for a number of reasons. Maybe he really is a drug addict or simply lazy. Then again, he may be a victim of recent layoffs. Perhaps he’s a casualty of globalization, as his former employer downsized staff to hire cheap overseas labor. He may even be mentally ill and unable to hold a job. Can we really assume that we understand a person merely from seeing him on the side of the road? As Mills argued, the goal of sociology is to move beyond our own perceptions and toward a sociological imagination. Without connecting what we know about society to the individual, we run the risk of wrongly placing blame and misconstruing the way we interpret events. In everyday life, we make this mistake regularly, but sociological study is not the same as our everyday “common sense.”



^ We often claim to know the cause of  
 ^ events based on our own assumptions.  
 ^ Is this woman practicing sociological  
 imagination or imposing personal beliefs?

## The Essential Elements of a Social Problem

### THE OBJECTIVE CONDITION

An objective condition is any aspect of society that can be viewed without bias. The recorded number of violent crimes in Britain, the conditions in which people live in a certain region of the United States, or the number of mass layoffs at an auto plant because of the recent economic crisis are examples of objective conditions. All can be quantifiably measured, and generally are not arguable. For example, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 5.7 million jobs have been lost since the recession began in December 2007.<sup>4</sup> Take a look at the table below to see the difference in rate of unemployment between 2007 and 2008.

Overall, men experienced a slightly larger increase in unemployment than women. By April 2009, the total national unemployment rate for men and women combined was 8.9 percent, compared to 8.5 percent the prior month, and 5 percent total in 2008.<sup>5</sup>

What are some of the objective effects of this? According to a study conducted by the Association for Health Services, there is a relationship

U.S. Unemployment Rates between 2007 and 2008			
Men (16 years and older)		Women (16 years and older)	
2007	2008	2007	2008
4.7%	6.1%	4.5%	5.4%

Source: Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, CPS Table 24, "Unemployed persons by marital status, race, Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, age, and sex."

**OBJECTIVE CONDITION** is any aspect of society that can be viewed without bias.

**SUBJECTIVITY** refers to making judgments based on personal feelings and opinions rather than external facts.

between job loss and individual health problems. The results indicate that displaced workers, in relation to their continuously employed counterparts, exhibit poorer physical functioning and higher levels of depression. The study also found that job displacement in the later stages of a worker's career can result in more negative health effects.<sup>6</sup>

### SUBJECTIVE CONCERNS

Most of my students approach the study of sociology with subjective concerns. Is the depletion of Social Security resources really a problem for those in their early 20s? As a student of mine once said, "It's not a social problem if it doesn't affect me." This is a perfect example of subjectivity, a judgment based on personal feelings and opinions rather than external facts. Subjectivity often appears in my classes when students rely on personal experiences. Every semester it seems, a student claims to know a rich welfare mom who sucks the taxpayers dry while riding around in her new Cadillac Escalade. This usually leads the student to make the erroneous conclusion that all welfare recipients are freeloaders. Is that really possible?

We can use the social imagination as a tool to step outside of our subjectivity, or "biography," and look at the big picture, which includes both the objective facts and the historical background of the situation. This does not mean that the subjective is not important, only that it must be balanced against the objective reality of a situation. According to C. Wright Mills, "[It is] by means of the sociological imagination that men now hope to grasp what is going on in the world, and to understand what is happening in themselves as minute points of the intersections of biography and history within society."<sup>7</sup>

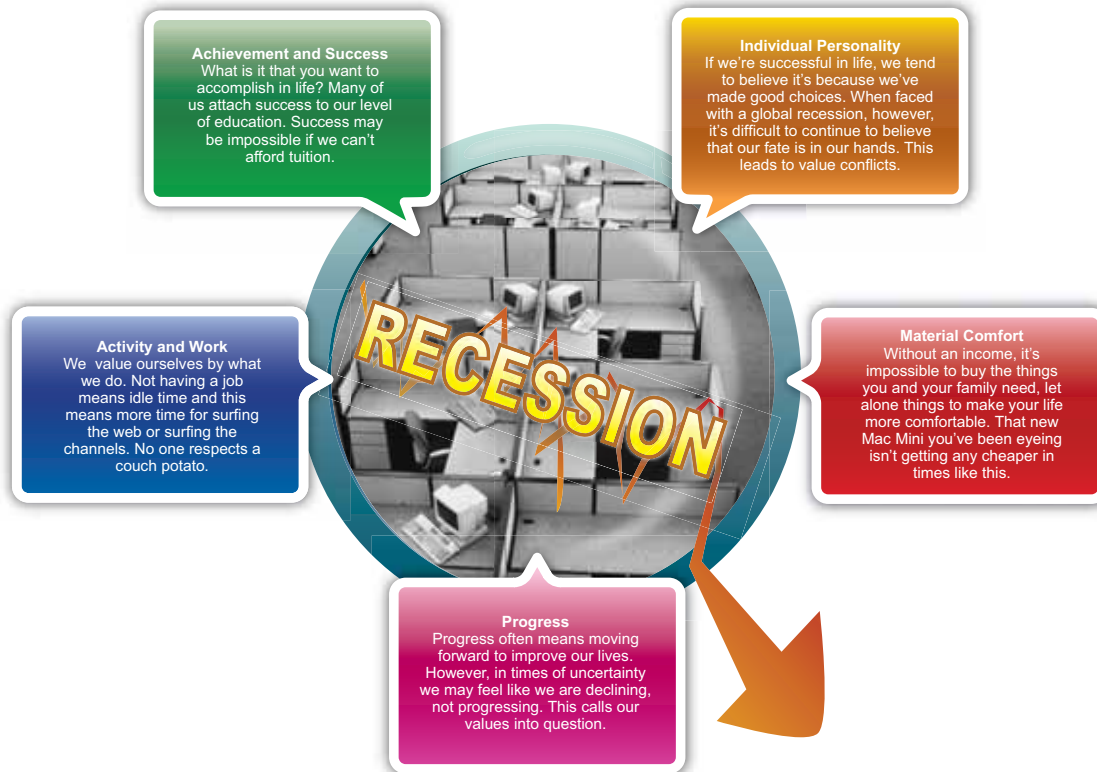
### Factors that Define a Social Problem

What is and is not considered a social problem can vary a great deal over time. As you continue through this course, you will see that social problems are common to all societies, and they often are latent results from efforts to deal with certain social situations. For example, the idea that people should take care of themselves leads to limited government involvement in housing, jobs, and other aspects of people's lives. This can result in members of the population being unemployed, homeless, and/or living in substandard housing. Are such things socially caused? Perhaps, but what is certain is that they have social consequences for us all. For example, whether or not you care about the argument for a more generous social service program, you'll be dealing with the results of that decision, either by encountering more beggars on the street or paying higher federal taxes to fund the program.

Of course, not everyone agrees that such things are social problems. In my years of teaching, I've found that students are more eager to classify the things that directly affect them as social problems, while discounting the importance of things that do not affect them. For something to be considered a legitimate social problem, however, it must be agreed that it is a problem, and that something can be done about it.

Other factors influence how we define social problems as well. Let's take look at those now in more detail.

# Five Cultural Values Affected by a Global Recession



VALUES are a part of a society's nonmaterial culture that represent cultural standards by which we determine what is good, bad, right, or wrong.

CULTURAL UNIVERSALS are aspects of one's social life that are common to all societies.

## HISTORY

History changes the definition of social problems. The issues that society considered major in the past are often not that important in the present. For example, at one point in history a major concern in the United States was horse theft—obviously, this is no longer an issue. Many of the problems we encounter today may also go the way of the horse thief. For instance, high gasoline prices and fear of an oil shortage may seem laughable 50 years from now when electric or magnetic motors are the norm.

Of course, history is often written by the powerful, and this influences how we view the problems of the past. We've been taught "In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue," and he discovered the New World. But according to political scientist Howard Zinn, no textbook accounts for the torture, slave labor, or murder of approximately half of the 250,000 natives that occurred as well.<sup>8</sup> At the time, Columbus and the subsequent European explorers probably felt that what they were doing was "right." And yet nowadays, killing, enslaving, and forcing people into religious conversions would certainly be viewed differently.

## CULTURAL VALUES

Just as history defines social problems, so do values. Values are a part of society's nonmaterial culture that represent standards by which we determine what is good, bad, right, or wrong. As we've mentioned before, one

of the country's largest current social problems is unemployment. But why do you suppose this is? According to noted American sociologist Robin Murphy Williams Jr., there are certain dominant values held by people in the United States.<sup>9</sup> In the diagram above, you can see five of these values, and how they relate to the recent economic crisis.

Societies tend to define social problems according to their cultural values. For example, in countries where women's education is devalued, it's not seen as a social problem for girls to be illiterate. In our nation, this would be shocking. Values matter.

## CULTURAL UNIVERSALS

A cultural universal is any aspect of one's social life that is common to all societies. All societies experience births, deaths, crime, war, and a host of other issues. In response to these issues, they create social customs to deal with them. For example, think back to a wedding you may have attended or viewed on TV. Most likely, it was similar to all the others you've seen: fancy clothes, lots of food, and friends and family gathered in celebration. Although the color of the dress or the wording of the vows may differ, people from all over the world still deal with the same issue: How do two people leave their childhood behind them and step into their new, adult lives? Wedding ceremonies help make this important step official—and fun.

From this perspective, social problems are also cultural universals. In other words, every society has social problems, but how societies deal with these problems can vary a great deal from place to place. For example, when I lived in Mexico, I remember my friends having a big celebration on November 2, The Day of the Dead. As they explained, it's a traditional Mexican day to remember loved ones who have passed away. In the United States, many people use Memorial Day as an occasion to pay their respects to fallen soldiers and departed relatives. Both cultures honor their dead; they simply have different dates and rituals by which to do it.

## AWARENESS

The last factor that defines a social problem is awareness. Awareness is the ability of a person or group to bring a problem into public recognition. This often happens only after years of conflict. The battle for women's suffrage, for example, lasted about 150 years before women finally achieved the right to vote in the United States.<sup>10</sup>

Awareness can lead people to start social movements—activities that support or protest social change. These often start as grassroots movements formed by non-government organizations. For example, the Civil Rights Movement started in churches in the South, as leaders worked to increase the awareness of racial discrimination.

Charles Tilly, a twentieth century American sociologist, identified three elements common to all social movements. The first involves **campaigns**, organized and ongoing efforts that make claims targeting a specific authority in society. For example, at the outbreak of the war in Iraq, peaceful protestors marched on Washington, hoping to demonstrate enough negative public response to end the war. Campaigns tend to focus on one specific issue. Recently, a campaign to begin curbside recycling was successful in my hometown. Citizens voted for higher tax rates in order to be able to decrease the amount of waste that goes into landfills, and began to put recycling bins in their driveways.

A repertoire is the second element of a social movement. According to Tilly, this step involves the actions used to promote interest and participation within the movement. Anti-war campaigners might lobby, protest, or march to advertise their opinions. Depending on the situation, different strategies may be more useful. The recyclers in my neighborhood used

**AWARENESS** is the ability of a person or group to bring a problem into public recognition.

**SOCIAL MOVEMENTS** are activities that support or protest social issues organized by nongovernmental organizations.

**CAMPAIGNS** are organized and ongoing efforts that make claims targeting a specific authority in the society.

**REPERTOIRE** is the actions used to promote interest and participation within the movement.

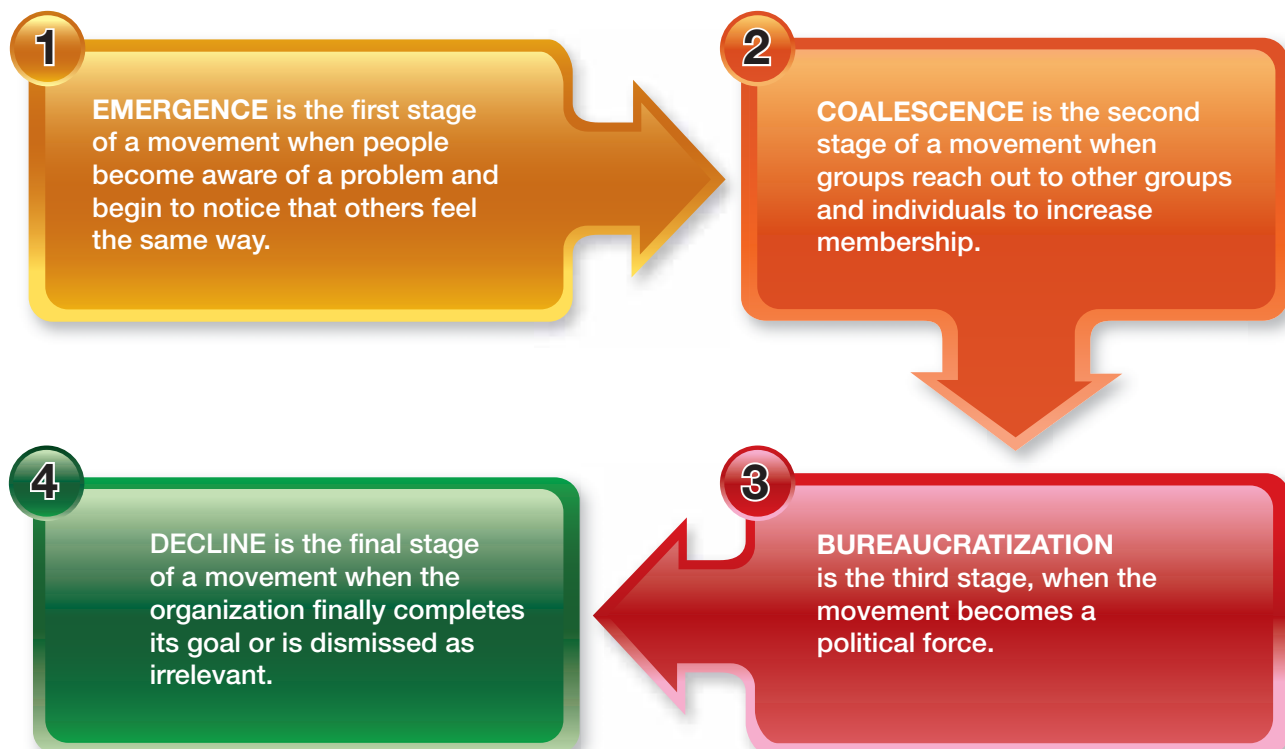
**WUNC** refers to worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitments, which are the characteristics shown by members of a social movement.

direct mail and door-to-door visits to promote their cause. Their campaign was successful because of these efforts.

The third element of a social movement encompasses the worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitments (WUNC) of the individuals involved. Social movements must be seen by the public as “worthy” of action. Recycling seemed worthy of action in my town, but carpooling has not. Unity refers to the idea that all members of the movement must agree on what they are trying to accomplish—the message must be focused. Furthermore, the movement must have enough people involved to avoid looking like a small “splinter group.” Finally, members must be committed to the social change. Having WUNC gives the movement a fighting chance for success. A social movement typically goes through several conventional stages of development: emergence, coalescence, bureaucratization, and decline.<sup>11</sup>

✓ Charles Tilly noted that **all social movements travel through four stages: emergence, coalescence, bureaucratization, and decline**. He also argued that all movements involve campaigns, repertoire, and WUNC.

### The Four Stages of Social Movements



# think social problems: HOW DO SOCIOLOGISTS USE THEORETICAL PARADIGMS TO FRAME THEIR THINKING?

PARADIGMS are theoretical frameworks through which scientists study the world.

FUNCTIONALISM is a theoretical framework that defines society as a system of interrelated parts.

CONFLICT THEORY is a theoretical framework that views society as being in a constant struggle over scarce resources.

## The Three Major Paradigms of Sociology

The issues that we define as social problems are complex in nature, and because of the increase in globalization and media outlets, they do not remain confined to one institution or geographic area. For this reason, sociologists must look carefully at a problem to see all its parts. So, how do we begin to approach thinking about social problems? Historically, sociologists use either macro or micro paradigms, the theoretical frameworks through which scientists study the world. These include three major paradigms that we'll be focusing on in this text: functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. Sociologists from each school of thought analyze similar issues, but the manner in which they reach conclusions differs. Let's explore each of these paradigms a little further.

### FUNCTIONALISM

Functionalism is a theoretical framework that defines society as a system of interrelated parts. Because functionalism focuses on the entire social system and not just the individual, it's considered a macro approach to sociological study. If something happens to one component of a social structure, the other components will automatically step in to help restore balance. Think about an automatic HVAC (heating, ventilating, and air-conditioning) system. Some warehouses manufacture products that must be stored at a certain temperature and humidity. If the temperature and humidity outside goes up or down, so do the conditions inside the warehouse. But if an HVAC system has been installed, it can be switched on to maintain a stable temperature and humidity level. Social structures operate in the same manner. If problems occur, society automatically acts in ways to offset these issues. Functionalism treats society as relatively secure—everything that occurs has a purpose in the preservation of stability.

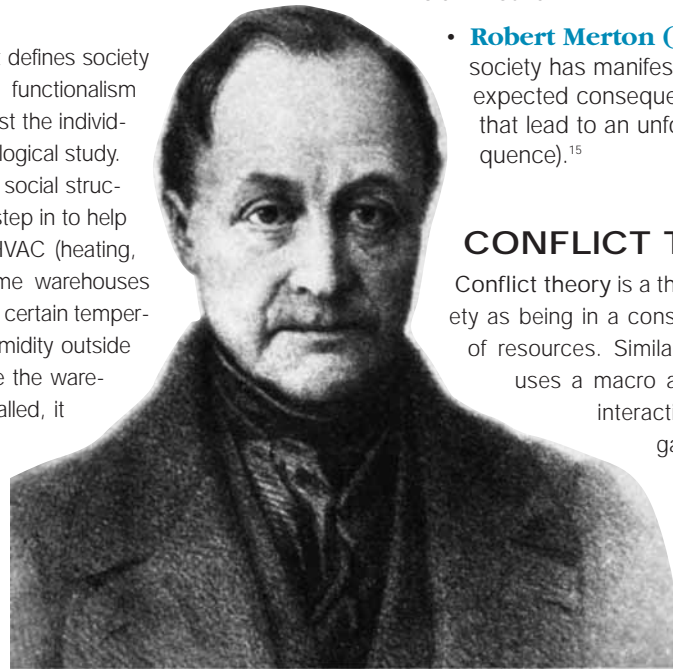
Functionalists believe that the best way to understand society as a whole is to understand how social institutions (such as family, education, and the economy) are interrelated. Each institution has an impact, no matter how small it may seem; because everything is connected, a butterfly effect

occurs. Here's an example: When the economy does poorly, it doesn't just affect your wallet. Companies fold, jobs are lost, families go hungry, and children do poorly in school. Because society's balance is reliant on each of its components, functionalism suggests that all social structures must agree on values and norms. These values and norms create society's rules and laws, thus regulating the relationships between institutions.

Let's take a quick look at a few prominent functionalists from history and their beliefs.

### Functionalists:

- **Herbert Spencer (1820–1903)** Society can be considered a living organism in which some are more apt to deal with social dynamics and, therefore, adapt better to changes in the environment.<sup>12</sup>
- **Emile Durkheim (1858–1917)** Social integration and social control hold society together. People view themselves as unified wholes, which helps them stay within the boundaries of their social structure's rules and laws.<sup>13</sup>
- **Talcott Parsons (1902–1979)** Society is a grand interrelated system in which each individual is instrumental in keeping the system functional. If one individual falters, society as a whole will suffer.<sup>14</sup>
- **Robert Merton (1910–2003)** Every action in society has manifest functions (factors that lead to an expected consequence) and latent functions (factors that lead to an unforeseen or unexpected consequence).<sup>15</sup>



From "The Prophets of Paris."

### CONFLICT THEORY

Conflict theory is a theoretical framework that views society as being in a constant struggle over a limited amount of resources. Similar to functionalism, this theory also uses a macro approach because it deals with the interaction of multiple groups fighting to gain power. For example, conflict theorists would examine how and why the rift between the rich and the poor affects the quality of education, health care, and living conditions of those groups. The wealthy can afford better housing and tend to live near people of the same status. Because of this, the values of these homes increase, and the poor who originally lived there are forced into separate areas. It's no surprise that individuals who can afford to live in more expensive

^ Auguste Comte (1798–1857) coined  
^ the term *sociology* and proposed the  
^ basic principles of functionalism.

neighborhoods can also afford better schools for their children, thereby increasing the chances that their offspring will also be more successful. Conflict theorists suggest that once inequality begins to take root, those at the top are unlikely to push for social change. This is because the elite set standards and rules that benefit themselves, not the individuals or groups below them. These standards also help keep the wealthy and powerful in prominent positions.

Conflict theory can be applied to many institutions, not just social class. Conflict theorists apply their principles to age, gender, race, religion . . . any social construct in which inequality can be viewed as a social problem. Take a look at the list below to see the different ways in which conflict theorists approach this paradigm:

## Conflict Theorists:

- **Harriet Martineau (1802–1876)** A society's actions are often quite different from the values expressed by that society. For example, despite boasts of freedom and democracy in the United States, only men had the right to vote until 1920.<sup>16</sup>
- **Karl Marx (1818–1883)** Capitalism breeds conflict between the rich and the poor. The pursuit of wealth corrupts society and will ultimately destroy it. Economic power should not lie in the hands of the elite few, but in the hands of all people.
- **W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963)** Social equality is impossible to achieve in corrupt social systems. The past strongly influences the present, such as the connection between past and present discrimination against African Americans and all disadvantaged groups.<sup>17</sup>
- **John Bellamy Foster (1953–Present)** Social unrest is a result of unequal distribution of power and wealth. Capitalism cannot continue as is; the process of seeking short-term rewards and avoiding long-term consequences must be stopped if society is to continue.<sup>18</sup>



^ Symbolic interactionists are interested  
 ^ in people's reactions to cultural sym-  
 ^ bols. How do you think someone from  
 Nigeria would respond to these images?

**SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM** is a theoretical framework that focuses on how individual interactions between people influence their behavior and how these interactions can impact society.

## SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical framework that focuses on how individual interactions between people influence their behavior and how these interactions can impact society. Unlike functionalism and conflict theory, this paradigm is a micro approach because it deals with individuals, not groups or institutions. Symbolic interactionists analyze how social interactions influence, create, and sustain human relationships. They believe that symbols such as body language, words, gestures, and images affect communication. Humans interact with one another according to the meanings of these symbols.

How did you first learn your name? Early on in your life your parents called you something, and you learned to respond to it. Now if someone calls you by another name, you're unlikely to even move your head. Why? Because somewhere in your mind, you use this symbol to help form your sense of self. It is this identity that you carry with you your entire life and use in interactions with others to create a social world.

We also learn the meaning behind symbols within social contexts. For example, a photo of Chinese revolutionary Mao Zedong probably has little or no meaning to you, whereas a picture of George Washington might bring forth thoughts of freedom and rebellion. Despite both men being revolutionary leaders, your cultural context influences how you view each photo.

## Symbolic Interactionists:

- **George Herbert Mead (1863–1931)** Society is made up of symbols that teach us to understand the world. We use these symbols to develop a sense of self, or identity. We then take this identity into the world to interact with other identities to create society.
- **Herbert Blumer (1900–1987)** An individual's behavior depends on the meanings we've already created through experience and interaction. We use an interpretive process to handle and alter these meanings.
- **Erving Goffman (1922–1982)** Social interactions are the building blocks of society. Individuals alter their behavior constantly, requiring a complex series of actions and reactions.
- **Howard Becker (1928–Present)** Social interactions can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies that limit a person's outcomes. We place labels on people in society; individuals then feel as though they must embody those labels.<sup>19</sup>

## What Types of Questions Do Sociologists Ask?

Understanding the three paradigms can be confusing, especially when applying them to complicated social problems. Use the table on the following page as a reference to help you remember the basic ideas behind each theory. Often, the types of questions sociologists ask give clues to their school of thought.



**GENDER-INEQUALITY THEORIES** focus on sexist patterns that limit women's opportunities for work, education, and other social needs.

**THEORIES OF GENDER OPPRESSION** refer to a situation in which men purposefully maintain control over women through discrimination and the use of power, leading to oppression.

**STRUCTURAL OPPRESSION THEORIES** refer to the fact that women's oppression is rooted in capitalism; patriarchies keep women on the margins of the social world.

## The Three Paradigms—How Are They Interrelated?

Often, the lines between micro and macro analysis blur. Most sociologists I know follow in the footsteps of Max Weber (VAY-bur), a famous social scientist who in many ways defied being put into any one of these categories. Like conflict theorists, Weber asserted that social class is one of the most important influences in the outcome of our lives. Power disparities between the classes often dictate who succeeds in a society and who does not. However, he also took a more functionalist approach, arguing that society at its most efficient will naturally run like a bureaucracy: One leader presides over a group of smaller organizations that all share a common goal. At the same time, Weber incorporated symbolic interaction into his theories, noting that values influence people's goals and behaviors. Weber understood that sociologists aren't naturally immune to personal biases, and he urged his colleagues to separate their private values from their professional work.

Like Weber, modern sociologists often find themselves taking on the roles of functionalist, conflict theorist, and symbolic interactionist interchangeably to best analyze today's social problems. Few of us are purists; can you think of ways these theories overlap?

## Emerging Paradigms

Other paradigms exist, apart from the major three. Let's take a look at some of the more modern approaches to sociological theory.

### FEMINIST THEORY

Feminist theory is a female-centered, interdisciplinary approach that seeks to demonstrate how women fit into the social world. Feminists often ask questions such as, "Why is the social world the way that it is?" and "Can we change the social world to make it a fair place for all people?" Feminists are also interested in how race, ethnicity, social class, and age interact with

gender to determine the outcomes for individuals. There are three prominent feminist theories:

- **Gender-inequality theories:** Women's experiences of the social world are not equal to those of men. Such theories focus on sexist patterns that limit women's opportunities for work, education, and other social needs.
- **Theories of gender oppression:** Men purposefully maintain control over women through discrimination and the use of power; this leads to oppression.
- **Structural oppression theories:** Women's oppression is rooted in capitalism; patriarchies keep women on the margins of the social world.

### EXCHANGE THEORY

Exchange theorists suggest that our social experiences consist of a series of costs and rewards. People inherently seek to maximize their rewards and minimize their costs, resulting in social action. Exchange theory often appeals to thinkers on a micro level—for example, why do we choose one mate over another? If you're dating someone and the effort you're exerting makes the relationship feel like the cost is higher than the reward, you're likely to end the relationship. But exchange theory also has a macro point of view. For example, do you suppose it's in the best interest of a country to export all manufacturing jobs to other nations that can provide cheaper labor? In calculating the value of the exchange, we must consider not only the short-term reward (the immediate profit, in this case), but also the potential long-term costs (economic collapse when transportation of goods is interrupted, for example).

### ENVIRONMENTAL THEORY

Environmental theory is the most recent paradigm to emerge in sociology. This theory combines social thought and ecological principles to discover how environmental policies influence society, and how attitudes toward the environment have changed over time. Environmental theorists often attempt to understand how societies adjust to ecological changes. For example, how many people can live in a specific area? This amount is known as carrying capacity. Often we believe that humans are an exception to the ecological limits of carrying capacity. However, for environmental sociologists, humans are merely one type of organism sharing the same ecological space with other organisms. How do societies adapt to these limits? If they fail to adapt, will they continue to survive? These types of questions are at the center of environmental theory.

### Core Questions of the Three Paradigms

	Functionalists	Conflict Theorists	Symbolic Interactionists
Approach to Analysis	Macro	Macro	Micro
Core Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What are the components of society?</li> <li>2. How do these components relate to each other?</li> <li>3. What keeps society in balance?</li> <li>4. What are the expected and unexpected consequences of an event?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How are wealth, power, opportunities, and resources divided within society?</li> <li>2. How do individuals or groups maintain their wealth and power?</li> <li>3. Which groups thrive in society and why?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What influence do individuals have on the creation of a social structure?</li> <li>2. In what manner does social interaction impact human relationships?</li> <li>3. Do individuals alter their behavior depending on setting? If so, why?</li> </ol>

# WRAP YOUR MIND AROUND THE THEORY

Sometimes, it takes a financial collapse to remind consumers to spend responsibly, but functionalists trust that society will rectify its own misdoings. What are some other ways in which society seeks to restore balance?



## FUNCTIONALISM

From a functionalist point of view, society can't be "broken." Systems evolve due to needs that must be met, and social structures exist to balance society. The housing collapse triggered financial instability in many areas, but people and institutions create reforms to counterbalance volatility. For example, after years of heavy borrowing, consumers will now begin to adopt practices of net saving. Social problems that exist are the result of dysfunctions of the system; however, these dysfunctions do not indicate that society is "broken," as David Cameron insists. To a functionalist, fixing society merely involves tinkering with it.

## CONFLICT THEORY

Modern conflict theorists look at social problems, often focusing on how different structures contribute to the existence of those problems. If one were to argue, like David Cameron, that society seems broken, a conflict theorist would likely suggest that those with the most money and power are the ones who broke it.

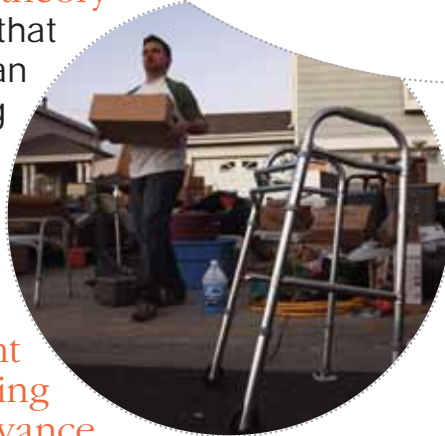
IS SOCIETY  
BROKEN?

## SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

A symbolic interactionist might ask, "What does 'broken' mean?" The definition will change depending on your social status. If you're poor, it's likely that one of your concerns is having enough food to feed your family. If you're rich and powerful, odds are you won't think twice about obtaining your next meal. Before we define and/or deal with social problems, we must first acknowledge their existence. The next step is to find new ways to view the situation so that these same problems will be avoided in the future.



Conflict theory suggests that there is an ongoing struggle for wealth and power creating inequality. How might the housing collapse advance



classism in the United States?

In order for everyone to agree on whether or not society is broken, we would all have to have a common understanding of what society is supposed to be. Do we all share the same ideas?

# discover solutions to social problems: WHAT IS THE ROLE OF RESEARCH AND SOCIAL POLICY IN UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL PROBLEMS?

RESEARCH METHODS are scientific procedures that sociologists use to conduct research and develop knowledge about a particular topic.

OBJECTIVITY refers to the ability to conduct research without allowing the influence of personal biases or prejudices.

you go about measuring a society's "broken-ness?" What would society look like if it were "fixed?" What would "fixing" it mean? Anyone can comment on society, but it takes a lot more effort to solve its problems. The first step is to understand the specific terms and research methods that sociologists use.

## Research Methods

Sociology is more than a school of thought or a philosophy of life. It is a science that attempts to discover facts and connections between people and the social world in which they live. The only way in which sociologists can truly understand and solve social problems is by studying and conducting scientific research. Like all science, however, sociology has its limits. It provides tools to help us study the social world, but many of these must be fully understood in order to avoid false conclusions.

This section will familiarize you with the various aspects of sociological research. Research methods are the scientific procedures that sociologists use to conduct studies and develop knowledge about a particular topic. Was David Cameron thinking like a sociologist when he hypothesized that society was broken? What does "broken" mean? How would

## OBJECTIVITY

For sociologists, objectivity is the ability to conduct research without allowing the influence of personal biases or prejudices. As Max Weber first advised, sociologists must set aside all private values and preconceived notions to study a subject objectively. Personal experiences and political affiliations are two major biases that most of us find hardest to keep in check. Do you think you could objectively analyze the war in Iraq if your son was stationed in Baghdad? Could you study pedophiles impartially if your child was victimized by one? Objectivity is difficult, but essential to sociological research.

So, how do we think objectively? According to Weber, the only way to draw accurate conclusions is to completely detach yourself from the subject. When you do this successfully, you're able to accomplish *verstehen*, an understanding of the action from the actor's point of view.<sup>20</sup>

## The Six Steps of Social Research

### 1 Choose a Topic

Determine what you want to study by deciding what questions you want answered. You might select a social problem that you believe needs immediate attention, or you might base your decision on past studies.

### 2 Conduct a Literature Review

A **literature review** is a study of relevant academic articles and information. You don't want to plagiarize others' writings of course, but you can analyze existing articles to obtain other viewpoints and get ideas for your own research.

### 3 Form a Hypothesis

A **hypothesis** suggests how variables relate (you can think of it as an educated guess.) From the hypothesis, you'll develop your **theory**; a comprehensive and systematic explanation of events that lead to testable predictions. When you specify terms quantifiably, you're **operationalizing** the variable.

### 4 Collect Data

The method used to find information is known as a research design. To make a design **reliable**, you must measure your variables the same way every time. If your research is valid, you're actually measuring what you set out to measure, and not being misled by unrelated variables. There are three main types of studies in sociology. **Comparative studies** use data from different sources and evaluate these data against each other.

## VARIABLES

Once you train yourself to view social problems objectively, the next step is to determine the variables in the situation. Variables are simply things we want to know about. For example, we may want to know if having a college degree affects the likelihood of having a job. But we may also want to know if the findings vary depending on a person's degree choice, race, or gender. Each of these is a variable.

There are two main types of variables in sociological research: independent and dependent. Independent variables are factors that are deliberately manipulated in an experiment, and dependent variables are the response. So, the dependent variable *depends* on the independent variable. In our previous example, having a college degree is the independent variable,



INDEPENDENT VARIABLES are variables that are deliberately manipulated to test the response in an experiment.

DEPENDENT VARIABLES are the responses to the manipulated variable.

<<< Shows such as Campbell Brown's *No Bias, No Bull*—a self-proclaimed non-partisan newscast of CNN—is increasingly more popular amid the flurry of highly opinionated news commentaries, such as *The Daily Show* and *The O'Reilly Factor*. Ironically, the show begins with a detailed news summary, which is immediately followed by Brown's opinion, followed by other analysts' opinions. *Is it possible to get a completely objective news report?*

### 4 Collect Data

**Cross-sectional studies** focus on a single event in time. **Longitudinal studies** include data from observations over time, and consistently use the same groups of people (known to sociologists as **cohorts**).

Sociologists also collect data by conducting **surveys**, investigations of the opinions or experiences of people, usually obtained through questioning. **Field research** is also useful, since it allows researchers to carry out their experiments in natural, social settings.

### 5 Analyze the Results

This step involves interpreting data, so understanding the basics of statistical data is important. In statistics, the numbers inside a group of numbers are called the **central tendency**. There are three measures of central tendency. The **mean** is the sum of a series of numbers divided by the amount of numbers. The **median** is the midpoint in a distribution of numbers arranged in order of size. The **mode** is the number in the group that occurs most frequently.

### 6 Share and Publish the Results

Sociologists rely on the data and trends of other researchers when attempting to understand and solve social problems.

In the sociological world, everyone must abide by specific guidelines when publishing their work. A good resource to look into is the American Sociological Association style guide.

**CONTROL VARIABLES** are variables that are kept constant to accurately test the impact of an independent variable.

**CAUSAL RELATIONSHIPS** are relationships in which a condition or variable leads to a certain consequence.

**CAUSATION** is the relationship between cause and effect.

**CORRELATION** is an indication that one factor *might* be the cause for another factor.

**POSITIVE CORRELATION** involves two variables moving in a parallel.

whereas employment status is the dependent one. This is because we believe that employment depends on education. Of course, such a study would be rather simple. Do teachers and engineers have the same unemployment rates as social workers and art history majors? Probably not.

To determine what effect, if any, a college degree has on a person's employment status, you must control for other variables that might influence the results and lead to false conclusions. Control variables are factors that are kept constant to accurately test the impact of an independent variable. If you compare the rate of unemployment of people with college degrees to the rate of unemployment of people without college degrees, you must be sure that other factors such as race and gender are equivalent. In short, control variables take into account other features that might influence the outcome.

## CAUSE AND CORRELATION

Perhaps one of the most misunderstood concepts in research is the difference between cause and correlation. In common speech, we frequently claim causality when it doesn't exist. It's common to remark that a person "made me mad" when in fact it was you choosing to get angry. In sociological research, a causal relationship is one in which a condition or variable leads directly to a certain consequence. Such a finding is rare in sociology; some have even argued that it's impossible. Why? This is explored in the sections that follow.

## Causation

Causation is the relationship between cause and effect. For example, the H1N1 virus, a subtype of the swine influenza, causes flu-like symptoms. Therefore, if you catch swine flu, you must have caught the virus. But being exposed to someone with the virus doesn't necessarily mean that you will get sick. Why? Because, just like with any common cold, being around a sick person does not mean you will necessarily catch his or her disease. The virus causes the illness; being around someone doesn't cause the illness. Of course, if you hang around with people who have the flu, you're likely to catch it yourself. Being around an infected person is correlated with catching the disease.

## Correlation

Unlike causation, correlation is an indication that a factor *might* be connected to another factor. What does this mean for us in sociology? Correlation tells us that the variables we're studying are related in some way. In sociological research, we have numerous correlations and almost no causations. Let's say, for example, that those people who have college degrees are more likely to have jobs than those who don't attain such high levels of education. In this example, there is a correlation between education and employment rates. However, this doesn't mean that having a college degree means automatic employment (especially in the current U.S. economy). There are many other factors we must consider, such as age, race, location, and so forth.

Correlations exist in three forms: positive, negative, and spurious.

1. A positive correlation involves two variables moving in a parallel. In other words, the variables must increase or decrease *together*. For example, it's likely that a family who defaults on its mortgage payments will lose its home to foreclosure. Although both variables have a negative impact, they show a positive correlation because they both move in the same direction.
2. A negative correlation occurs when the variables move in opposite directions. If a community spays or neuters *more* of

**Cloud Computing Activities by Different Age Cohorts**  
Internet users in each age group who do the following online activities (%)

	18–29	30–49	50–64	65+
Use webmail services such as Hotmail, Gmail, or Yahoo! mail	77	58	44	27
Store personal photos	50	34	26	19
Use online applications such as Google Documents or Adobe Photoshop Express	39	28	25	19
Store personal videos	14	6	5	2
Pay to store computer files online	9	4	5	3
Back up hard drive to an online site	7	5	5	4
Have done at least <u>one</u> activity	87	71	59	46
Have done at least <u>two</u> activities	59	39	31	21

N=1,553 Internet users. Margin of error is  $\pm 3\%$ .

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project April-May 2008 Survey.

their pets, the community members would notice *fewer* strays wandering the streets. This situation results in a positive result, but it's still a negative correlation because the variables move in different directions.

3. The third form of correlation is *spurious*, meaning not genuine or authentic. A spurious correlation occurs when two variables appear to be related, but actually have separate causes. For example, the number of violent crimes generally increases in summer months. The consumption of ice cream also increases in summer months. Does this mean that ice cream causes violence? Certainly not. It could be the warm weather, the longer days, or one of many other factors. As you work your way through this course, be careful to avoid making spurious correlations.

## INTERPRETING TABLES

You're likely to encounter many tables and graphs when you're evaluating statistical data. This type of information is helpful because it means someone has already taken the time to collect and organize the information for you; all *you* have to do is interpret it. Even if you've had experience with scientific tables before, here are some tips to help you interpret data faster and more accurately. a look at the table on the previous page and walk through the steps below.

1. Read the table and figure out why someone created it—what is the information trying to tell you? In this example, the researcher wants to convey that use of the Internet varies between age groups. What else might this tell you?

2. Pay attention to subheadings; they often exist to present new information necessary for analyzing the contents of the table. In this case, the subtitle clarifies that the data represent the percent of Internet users in multiple age groups who participate in the following online activities.

3. Read any information printed below the table. This is where you'll find the source of the original material and any other information the author wants you to understand. In this table, you'll note that the number (N) of people surveyed was 1,553 and that the study was published in early 2008. The source information also tells us exactly where to find the original data.

## ETHICAL CONCERNS

Sociological research, especially when it deals with social problems, is often a snapshot of society at its worst. You may be discouraged to learn that not many sociologists spend their time researching the dining trends of rich, healthy, happily married couples. In sociology, we need to study the worst problems in society to be able to solve them. Sometimes, our research involves sensitive topics such as prostitution or drug abuse. Sociologists must approach these issues ethically and with delicacy. Ethics is a system of values or principles that guide one's behavior. The American Sociology Association provides five universal principles that all sociologists must adhere to in their studies.

Researchers must be *professionally competent*, limiting their studies to areas in which they've had previous experience. Personal beliefs and opinions must be ignored because all sociologists have a *professional and scientific responsibility*. They must also show *integrity* and never coerce their subjects into telling them what they want to hear. Likewise, scientists need to show *respect for people's rights, dignity, and diversity*. Discrimination is detrimental to any form of research and goes against the

**NEGATIVE CORRELATION** occurs when the variables move in opposite directions.

**SPURIOUS CORRELATION** occurs when two variables appear to be related, but actually have separate causes.

**ETHICS** refers to a system of values or principles that guide one's behavior.

**QUANTITATIVE DATA** refer to data based on numbers and used for macro analysis.

**QUALITATIVE DATA** refer to information that may include words, pictures, photos, or any other type of information that comes to the researcher in a non-numerical form.

**TRIANGULATION** is the process of using multiple approaches to study a phenomenon.

very foundations of sociology. Last, researchers have a *social responsibility* to mankind. Sociologists must remember that the work they do affects real human lives.

Why so many rules? Because research subjects shouldn't have to be worried about their safety while being studied. If they have concerns, it won't be long before no one will want to participate in sociological research.

## Quantitative and Qualitative Methods

There are two categories of research that sociologists use. Neither of them is necessarily linked to functionalism, conflict theory, or symbolic interactionism. There are no set rules about which methods must be applied to each of the theories, but sociologists have found that each framework uses data in different ways. Quantitative and qualitative data are the foundation for these differences.

### QUANTITATIVE METHODS

The term **quantitative data** refers to data based on numbers and used for macro analysis. Physicians often ask their patients to rate their pain on a scale of 1 to 10. The patient's response would be an example of this type of data. Another type of quantitative data are research numbers, such as the number of recent arrests involving domestic violence. Methods of quantitative analysis include participant observation, case studies, and ethnographies.

### QUALITATIVE METHODS

**Qualitative data** may include interviews, pictures, photos, or any other type of information that comes to the researcher in a non-numerical form. These data tend to be used for microanalysis. A good example is content analysis, a type of research in which sociologists look for common words or themes in newspapers, books, or structured interviews. Methods of qualitative analysis include cross-sectional, comparative, and longitudinal studies, as well as surveys and experiments.

## Triangulation

Think back to our discussion of overlapping theories. We learned that sociologists often frame their thinking by borrowing ideas from the three major paradigms. Similarly, sociologists sometimes use both qualitative and quantitative methods to collect data from different angles, providing a larger picture of an issue or event. Triangulation is

SOCIAL POLICIES refer to deliberate attempts on the part of society to solve social problems.

the process of using multiple methods to study a phenomenon. For example, perhaps you want to study the influence of after-school recreation on high school students. First, you'd want to look at quantitative data such as the number of students who are and aren't involved in after-school activities. Then, you'd conduct a qualitative study that looks into what these students do during their free time and how the activity, or lack thereof, influences their education and grades. The idea is that if you can't gather the information you need from one type of data, the others will help fill in the gaps.

## Social Policy and Statistics

### SOCIAL POLICY

Social policies refer to deliberate attempts on the part of society to solve social problems. For example, unemployment insurance is a social policy designed to help people survive until they regain employment. In times of economic hardship, such policies keep many people from losing their homes.

### CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Students in my classes always seem to ask the same question, "What can we do?" Throughout this book, we'll address this issue in the Social Policy section of each chapter. One simple thing you can do to help research and understanding of your own country is to comply with the U.S. Census Bureau's population survey. The census is important because it tracks data about changes in communities, which aids social policy efforts. For example, a census might indicate that the number of senior citizens in a specific area has doubled since the last survey was conducted, or that the number of children under five years old has decreased dramatically. Planning committees use this information to allocate resources accordingly, such as building new retirement communities

in lieu of day care centers or elementary schools. It also makes sure that your community receives its equal share of government funding, and it determines your area's representation in Congress.

The Census Bureau has made major changes to the 2010 census survey to ensure accuracy of the population's socioeconomic status. As of 2010, every home will receive a short form to tally the number of residents; these ask only for very basic demographic information. But another affiliated poll—the American Community Survey—will capture detailed socioeconomic data every year, instead of every 10 years. A small sample of the population will receive this survey on a rotating basis. If the process works, no home will receive the survey more than once in five years. Similar to the Bureau's "long form," The American Community Survey is important because it aids government in determining which areas need resources for issues such as health care, education, transportation, and regional improvements. Why is the U.S. Census Bureau making this change? Cost savings are the main reason. Sampling a population is extremely expensive and difficult to do, but if the sample is taken accurately, the advantages are well worth the cost. One way you can aid public policy research is by filling out this survey when it arrives at your door.

### STATISTICS

Social policies are often hotly debated. People on all sides seem to have statistics to back up their points of view. But are all statistics equal? Take a look at a few pointers below to help you determine the value of the statistics you read.

#### Five Pitfalls of Statistical Analysis

- ✓ **Be cautious of headlines.** Newspapers and newscasts will do anything they can to sell their story. Sometimes they present faulty information in their attempts to form concise reports. For example, "Eye Drops off Shelf," "Man Struck by Lightning Faces Battery Charge," and "Lack of Brains Hinders Research" are all examples of actual published headlines. These are comical, but you can imagine how you could be misinformed if you took headlines at face value without researching further.

## Types of Field Research



- ✓ **Double-check the definition of terms.** Be cautious of studies that include terms that may be interpreted in various ways. For example, two researchers may not identically define the term *biracial*. Barack Obama's mother was a white woman of English descent, and his father was a black man from Kenya—yet he is considered the first African American to be elected president. Of course, he embraces this label, but some might dispute its accuracy.
- ✓ **Investigate the source.** It's important to find out who has stake in the study you're researching. The agencies that fund projects are often affected by the outcomes. It's no surprise that the tobacco industry has funded and published multiple studies "disproving" the harmful effects of smoking.
- ✓ **Beware of selective causes.** Be sure that the results of the data are actually attributable to the outlined causes. Remember our discussion on independent and dependent variables; has the researcher taken into account all applicable explanations?
- ✓ **Watch out for hidden agendas.** Politicians and policymakers have timetables and goals. Be cautious of statistics and claims presented as facts—those people with an agenda may manipulate or adjust data to benefit themselves.<sup>21</sup>



- ^ Sociologists can only collect so much data **through studies, surveys, and experiments.**
- ^ Sometimes, the best way to understand society is to study it in action.

## From Classroom to Community } Looking at Issues of Inequality

Aaron was a sophomore at King's College in New York City. He had worked hard in high school and received several scholarships that allowed him the chance at higher education. His family had lived in poverty as long as he could remember, and he often wondered why no one on the outside was doing anything to help them. The memories of his childhood were still very vivid in his mind, so it was no surprise that he chose the topic of poverty for his Social Problems final paper. When they met during office hours, his professor asked him exactly what he was planning to do in his assignment. Aaron replied, "Solve poverty. No one really cares about it, and obviously no one's doing anything about it."

The professor provided Aaron with a copy of *The End of Poverty*, by Jeffrey Sachs, and suggested that he start by researching individual people's opinions.

Over the course of a month, Aaron's project led him to investigate local attitudes toward the poor. To his surprise, he found that the majority of students surveyed shared similar views about the causes and nature of poverty, and had many of the same ideas about how to solve it. Claiming that "no one cares" is the same as declaring that "society is broken"—it doesn't tell the whole story. "Poverty,"

Aaron wrote in his paper, "is not an individually caused event, but a result of collective decisions made by many different independent actors. However, poverty does have many implications to the individuals trapped within. If society is serious about ending such social problems, it must first look into the issue of inequality." When handing back the papers, the professor remarked that he had the makings of a conflict theorist. Aaron simply replied, "Power to the people."



**WHAT IS A SOCIAL PROBLEM** 4

any condition that affects the quality of life for an individual or society as a whole; social problems are defined by history, cultural values, cultural universals, and awareness

**HOW DO SOCIOLOGISTS USE THEORETICAL PARADIGMS TO FRAME THEIR THINKING?** 8

macro theories such as functionalism and conflict theory help sociologists understand how individuals affect society as a whole; symbolic interactionism—a micro paradigm—helps explain how events or circumstances affect how individuals interact with each other

**WHAT IS THE ROLE OF RESEARCH AND SOCIAL POLICY IN UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL PROBLEMS?** 12

sociologists develop solutions to social problems through specific research methods and organized steps; social policy functions when people become aware of problems and take the initiative to solve them

## get the topic: **WHAT IS A SOCIAL PROBLEM?**

The Sociological Imagination	4	The Three Major Paradigms of Sociology	8	Research Methods	12
The Essential Elements of a Social Problem	5	What Types of Questions Do Sociologists Ask?	9	Quantitative and Qualitative Methods	15
Factors that Define a Social Problem	5	The Three Paradigms—How Are They Interrelated?	10	Triangulation	15
		Emerging Paradigms	10	Social Policy and Statistics	16

## Theory

**CONFLICT THEORY** 8

- looks at how society's structures contribute to conflict, such as the "broken" economic system of the United States
- those in power use their dominance to benefit themselves and ignore the pain inflicted on others

**FUNCTIONALISM** 8

- the system evolves due to some need that must be met
- people create social structures to meet these needs and balance society; society isn't "broken"; we just need a "tune-up"

**SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM** 9

- asks "What does 'broken' mean?"; definitions vary for different socioeconomic groups
- acknowledges that social definitions are always in flux
- to define and/or deal with social problems requires that we first acknowledge their existence and, secondly, find new ways to view the situation so that they will be avoided in the future

## Key Terms

social problem is an issue that negatively affects a person's state of being in a society. 4

sociology refers to a systematic and objective science that investigates human behavior in the social environment. 4

sociological imagination is the ability to look beyond the individual as the cause for success and failure and see how one's society influences the outcome. 4

macro is a large scaled point of view. 4

micro is a small-scale reference. 4

objective condition is any aspect of society that can be viewed without bias. 5

subjectivity refers to making judgments based on personal feelings and opinions rather than external facts. 5

values are a part of a society's nonmaterial culture that represent cultural standards by which we determine what is good, bad, right, or wrong. 6

cultural universal is any aspect of one's social life that is common to all societies. 6

awareness is the ability of a person or group to bring a problem into public recognition. 7

social movements are activities that support or protest social issues organized by nongovernmental organizations. 7

campaigns are organized and ongoing efforts that make claims targeting a specific authority in the society. 7

(continued)

repertoire is the second element of a social movement. 7

WUNC refers to worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitments, which are the characteristics shown by members of a social movement. 7

paradigms are theoretical frameworks through which scientists study the world. 8

functionalism is a theoretical framework that defines society as a system of interrelated parts. 8

conflict theory is a theoretical framework that views society as being in a constant struggle over scarce resources. 8

symbolic interactionism is a theoretical framework that focuses on how individual interactions between people influence their behavior and how these interactions can impact society. 9

gender-inequality theories focus on sexist patterns that limit women's opportunities for work, education, and other social needs. 10

theories of gender oppression refer to a situation in which men purposefully maintain control over women through discrimination and the use of power, leading to oppression. 10

structural oppression theories refer to the fact that women's oppression is rooted in capitalism; patriarchies keep women on the margins of the social world. 10

research methods are scientific procedures that sociologists use to conduct research and develop knowledge about a particular topic. 12

objectivity refers to the ability to conduct research without allowing personal biases or prejudices to influence them. 12

independent variables are variables that are deliberately manipulated to test the response in an experiment. 13

dependent variables are the responses to the manipulated variable. 13

control variables are variables that are kept constant to accurately test the impact of an independent variable. 14

causal relationships are relationships in which a condition or variable leads to a certain consequence. 14

causation is the relationship between cause and effect. 14

correlation is an indication that one factor *might* be the cause for another factor. 14

positive correlation involves two variables moving in a parallel. 14

negative correlation occurs when the variables move in opposite directions. 15

spurious correlation occurs when two variables appear to be related, but actually have separate causes. 15

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quantitative data refer to data based on numbers and used for macro analysis. 15

qualitative data refer to information that may include words, pictures, photos, or any other type of information that comes to the researcher in a non-numerical form. 15

triangulation is the process of using multiple approaches to study a phenomenon. 15

social policies refer to deliberate attempts on the part of society to solve social problems. 16

## Sample Test Questions

These multiple-choice questions are similar to those found in the test bank that accompanies this textbook.

- Which of the following is an example of an objective condition?
  - Poverty affects education.
  - Society is broken in Britain.
  - The unemployment rate is higher than it was two years ago.
  - Society is responsible for displaced workers and the homeless.
- Geoff was an employee of the Chrysler Corporation for 40 years. Last June he was laid off, causing his family to lose their home. Geoff is upset, but he understands that Chrysler's bankruptcy will ultimately lead to a stronger overall economy. Geoff is approaching his crisis through
  - subjectivity.
  - functionalism.
  - a sociological imagination.
  - a conflict theorist point of view.
- A negative correlation exists when
  - variables increase or decrease together.
  - a variable is not able to be measured.
  - two variables move in the opposite direction.
  - one factor directly causes a negative effect.
- Which of the following is *not* an example of conflict theory?
  - The powerful exploiting the common citizen
  - Homelessness as a sign of inequality in a society
  - The upper class controlling a community's wealth
  - Society thinking of the homeless as bums because the upper class has labeled them as such
- A symbolic interactionist might try to discern the expected and unexpected consequences of an event.
  - True
  - False

ANSWERS: 1. c; 2. b; 3. c; 4. d; 5. b

## ESSAY

- Do you agree or disagree with David Cameron's assessment that society is broken? On what factors do you base your opinion?
- What are the most pressing social problems in your community? What action is your community taking to solve these issues?
- Suppose that you wanted to study the causes of the recent housing collapse. What research methods would you use and why?
- Howard Becker believes that the labels assigned to a person often lead to self-fulfilling prophecies. What labels do you believe society has placed on you? Have you taken on these identities?
- Considering what you now know of the three major paradigms—functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism—which do you use most often to view the world around you? Why?

## WHERE TO START YOUR RESEARCH PAPER

For a wide range of information on labor economics and statistics, go to <http://www.bls.gov/>

For a guide to sociological Internet sources, check out <http://www.socioweb.com/>

To read an in-depth sociology dictionary, go to <http://www.webref.org/sociology/sociology.htm>

To review an abbreviated version of the American Sociological Association (ASA) style guide, go to <http://www.asanet.org/>

For U.S. Census facts and information, go to <http://www.census.gov>

To learn more about social policy, see <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/>

Remember to check [www.thethinkspot.com](http://www.thethinkspot.com) for additional information, downloadable flashcards, and other helpful resources.