1.2: Sociological Perspectives on Social Problems

Learning Objectives

1. Define the sociological imagination.
2. Explain what is meant by the blaming-the-victim belief.
3. Summarize the most important beliefs and assumptions of functionalism and conflict theory.
4. Summarize the most important beliefs and assumptions of symbolic interactionism and exchange theory.

The sociological understanding of social problems rests heavily on the concept of the sociological imagination. We discuss this concept in some detail before turning to various theoretical perspectives that provide a further context for understanding social problems.

The Sociological Imagination

Many individuals experience one or more social problems personally. For example, many people are poor and unemployed, many are in poor health, and many have family problems, drink too much alcohol, or commit crime. When we hear about these individuals, it is easy to think that their problems are theirs alone, and that they and other individuals with the same problems are entirely to blame for their difficulties.

Sociology takes a different approach, as it stresses that individual problems are often rooted in problems stemming from aspects of society itself. This key insight informed C. Wright Mills’s (1959) classic distinction between personal troubles and public issues. Personal troubles refer to a problem affecting individuals that the affected individual, as well as other members of society, typically blame on the individual’s own personal and moral failings. Examples include such different problems as eating disorders, divorce, and unemployment. Public issues, whose source lies in the social structure and culture of a society, refer to social problems affecting many individuals. Problems in
society thus help account for problems that individuals experience. Mills felt that many problems ordinarily considered private troubles are best understood as public issues, and he coined the term sociological imagination to refer to the ability to appreciate the structural basis for individual problems.

To illustrate Mills’s viewpoint, let's use our sociological imaginations to understand some contemporary social problems. We will start with unemployment, which Mills himself discussed. If only a few people were unemployed, Mills wrote, we could reasonably explain their unemployment by saying they were lazy, lacked good work habits, and so forth. If so, their unemployment would be their own personal trouble. But when millions of people are out of work, unemployment is best understood as a public issue because, as Mills (Mills, 1959) put it, “the very structure of opportunities has collapsed. Both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals.”

When only a few people are out of work, it is fair to say that their unemployment is their personal trouble. However, when millions of people are out of work, as has been true since the economic downturn began in 2008, this massive unemployment is more accurately viewed as a public issue. As such, its causes lie not in the unemployed individuals but rather in our society’s economic and social systems.

Another social problem is eating disorders. We usually consider a person’s eating disorder to be a personal trouble that stems from a lack of control, low self-esteem, or another personal problem. This explanation may be OK as far as it goes, but it does not help us understand why so many people have the personal problems that lead to eating disorders. Perhaps more important, this belief also neglects the larger social and cultural forces that help explain such disorders. For example, most Americans with eating disorders are women, not men. This gender difference forces us to ask what it
is about being a woman in American society that makes eating disorders so much more common. To begin to answer this question, we need to look to the standard of beauty for women that emphasizes a slender body (Boyd, et. al., 2011). If this cultural standard did not exist, far fewer American women would suffer from eating disorders than do now. Because it does exist, even if every girl and woman with an eating disorder were cured, others would take their places unless we could somehow change this standard. Viewed in this way, eating disorders are best understood as a public issue, not just as a personal trouble.

Picking up on Mills’s insights, William Ryan (1976) (Ryan, 1976) pointed out that Americans typically think that social problems such as poverty and unemployment stem from personal failings of the people experiencing these problems, not from structural problems in the larger society. Using Mills’s terms, Americans tend to think of social problems as personal troubles rather than public issues. As Ryan put it, they tend to believe in blaming the victim rather than blaming the system.

To help us understand a blaming-the-victim ideology, let’s consider why poor children in urban areas often learn very little in their schools. According to Ryan, a blaming-the-victim approach would say the children’s parents do not care about their learning, fail to teach them good study habits, and do not encourage them to take school seriously. This type of explanation, he wrote, may apply to some parents, but it ignores a much more important reason: the sad shape of America’s urban schools, which, he said, are overcrowded, decrepit structures housing old textbooks and out-of-date equipment. To improve the schooling of children in urban areas, he wrote, we must improve the schools themselves and not just try to “improve” the parents.

As this example suggests, a blaming-the-victim approach points to solutions to social problems such as poverty and illiteracy that are very different from those suggested by a more structural approach that blames the system. If we blame the victim, we would spend our limited dollars to address the personal failings of individuals who suffer from poverty, illiteracy, poor health, eating disorders, and other difficulties. If instead we blame the system, we would focus our attention on the various social conditions (decrepit schools, cultural standards of female beauty, and the like) that account for these difficulties. A sociological understanding suggests that the latter approach is ultimately needed to help us deal successfully with the social problems facing us today.

Theoretical Perspectives

Three theoretical perspectives guide sociological thinking on social problems: functionalist theory, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionist theory. These perspectives look at the same social problems, but they do so in different ways. Their views taken together offer a fuller understanding of social problems than any of the views can offer alone. Table 1.1 “Theory Snapshot” summarizes the three perspectives.

Table 1.1 Theory Snapshot

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical perspective</th>
<th>Major assumptions</th>
<th>Views of social problems</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Functionalism</td>
<td>Social stability is necessary for a strong society, and adequate socialization and social integration are necessary for social stability. Society’s social institutions perform important functions to help</td>
<td>Social problems weaken a society’s stability but do not reflect fundamental faults in how the society is structured. Solutions to social problems should take the form of gradual</td>
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<td><strong>Conflict theory</strong></td>
<td>Society is characterized by pervasive inequality based on social class, race, gender, and other factors. Far-reaching social change is needed to reduce or eliminate social inequality and to create an egalitarian society.</td>
<td>Social problems arise from fundamental faults in the structure of a society and both reflect and reinforce inequalities based on social class, race, gender, and other dimensions. Successful solutions to social problems must involve far-reaching change in the structure of society.</td>
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<td><strong>Symbolic interactionism</strong></td>
<td>People construct their roles as they interact; they do not merely learn the roles that society has set out for them. As this interaction occurs, individuals negotiate their definitions of the situations in which they find themselves and socially construct the reality of these situations. In so doing, they rely heavily on symbols such as words and gestures to reach a shared understanding of their interaction.</td>
<td>Social problems arise from the interaction of individuals. People who engage in socially problematic behaviors often learn these behaviors from other people. Individuals also learn their perceptions of social problems from other people.</td>
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**Functionalism**

Functionalism, also known as the functionalist theory or perspective, arose out of two great revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The first was the French Revolution of 1789, whose intense violence and bloody terror shook Europe to its core. The aristocracy throughout Europe feared that revolution would spread to their own lands, and intellectuals feared that social order was crumbling.

The Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century reinforced these concerns. Starting first in Europe and then in the United States, the Industrial Revolution led to many changes, including the rise and growth of cities as people left their farms to live near factories. As the cities grew, people lived in increasingly poor, crowded, and decrepit conditions, and crime was rampant. Here was additional evidence, if European intellectuals needed it, of the breakdown of social order.

In response, the intellectuals began to write that a strong society, as exemplified by strong social bonds and rules and effective socialization, was needed to prevent social order from disintegrating. Without a strong society and effective socialization, they warned, social order breaks down, and violence and other signs of social disorder result.

This general framework reached fruition in the writings of ÉmileDurkheim (1858–1917), a French scholar largely responsible for the sociological perspective, as we now know it. Adopting the conservative intellectuals’ view of the need for a strong society, Durkheim felt that human beings have desires that result in chaos unless society limits them (Durkheim, 1952). It does so, he wrote, through two related social mechanisms: socialization and social integration. Socialization helps us learn society’s rules and the need to cooperate, as people end up generally agreeing on important
norms and values, while social integration, or our ties to other people and to social institutions such as religion and the family, helps socialize us and integrate us into society and reinforce our respect for its rules.

Today's functionalist perspective arises out of Durkheim's work and that of other conservative intellectuals of the nineteenth century. It uses the human body as a model for understanding society. In the human body, our various organs and other body parts serve important functions for the ongoing health and stability of our body. Our eyes help us see, our ears help us hear, our heart circulates our blood, and so forth. Just as we can understand the body by describing and understanding the functions that its parts serve for its health and stability, so can we understand society by describing and understanding the functions that its parts—or, more accurately, its social institutions—serve for the ongoing health and stability of society. Thus functionalism emphasizes the importance of social institutions such as the family, religion, and education for producing a stable society.

Émile Durkheim was a founder of sociology and is largely credited with developing the functionalist perspective.

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Similar to the view of the conservative intellectuals from which it grew, functionalism is skeptical of rapid social change and other major social upheaval. The analogy to the human body helps us understand this skepticism. In our bodies, any sudden, rapid change is a sign of danger to our health. If we break a bone in one of our legs, we have trouble walking; if we lose sight in both our eyes, we can no longer see. Slow changes, such as the growth of our hair and our nails, are fine and even normal, but sudden changes like those just described are obviously troublesome. By analogy, sudden and rapid changes in society and its social institutions are troublesome according to the functionalist perspective. If the human body evolved to its present form and functions because these made sense from an evolutionary perspective, so did society evolve to its present form and functions because these made sense. Any sudden change in society thus threatens its stability and future.
As these comments might suggest, functionalism views social problems as arising from society’s natural evolution. When a social problem does occur, it might threaten a society’s stability, but it does not mean that fundamental flaws in the society exist. Accordingly, gradual social reform should be all that is needed to address the social problem.

Functionalism even suggests that social problems must be functional in some ways for society, because otherwise these problems would not continue. This is certainly a controversial suggestion, but it is true that many social problems do serve important functions for our society. For example, crime is a major social problem, but it is also good for the economy because it creates hundreds of thousands of jobs in law enforcement, courts and corrections, home security, and other sectors of the economy whose major role is to deal with crime. If crime disappeared, many people would be out of work! Similarly, poverty is also a major social problem, but one function that poverty serves is that poor people do jobs that otherwise might not get done because other people would not want to do them (Gans, 1972). Like crime, poverty also provides employment for people across the nation, such as those who work in social service agencies that help poor people.

Conflict Theory

In many ways, conflict theory is the opposite of functionalism but ironically also grew out of the Industrial Revolution, thanks largely to Karl Marx (1818–1883) and his collaborator, Friedrich Engels (1820–1895). Whereas conservative intellectuals feared the mass violence resulting from industrialization, Marx and Engels deplored the conditions they felt were responsible for the mass violence and the capitalist society they felt was responsible for these conditions. Instead of fearing the breakdown of social order that mass violence represented, they felt that revolutionary violence was needed to eliminate capitalism and the poverty and misery they saw as its inevitable results (Marx, 1906; Marx & Engels, 1962).

According to Marx and Engels, every society is divided into two classes based on the ownership of the means of production (tools, factories, and the like). In a capitalist society, the bourgeoisie, or ruling class, owns the means of production, while the proletariat, or working class, does not own the means of production and instead is oppressed and exploited by the bourgeoisie. This difference creates an automatic conflict of interests between the two groups. Simply put, the bourgeoisie is interested in maintaining its position at the top of society, while the proletariat’s interest lies in rising up from the bottom and overthrowing the bourgeoisie to create an egalitarian society.

In a capitalist society, Marx and Engels wrote, revolution is inevitable because of structural contradictions arising from the very nature of capitalism. Because profit is the main goal of capitalism, the bourgeoisie’s interest lies in maximizing profit. To do so, capitalists try to keep wages as low as possible and to spend as little money as possible on working conditions. This central fact of capitalism, said Marx and Engels, eventually prompts the rise of class consciousness, or an awareness of the reasons for their oppression, among workers. Their class consciousness in turn leads them to revolt against the bourgeoisie to eliminate the oppression and exploitation they suffer.

Marx and Engels’ view of conflict arising from unequal positions held by members of society lies at the heart of today’s conflict theory. This theory emphasizes that different groups in society have different interests stemming from their different social positions. These different interests in turn lead to different views on important social issues. Some versions of the theory root conflict in divisions based on race and ethnicity, gender, and other such differences, while other versions follow Marx and Engels in seeing conflict arising out of different positions in the economic structure.
general, however, conflict theory emphasizes that the various parts of society contribute to ongoing inequality, whereas functionalist theory, as we have seen, stresses that they contribute to the ongoing stability of society. Thus while functionalist theory emphasizes the benefits of the various parts of society for ongoing social stability, conflict theory favors social change to reduce inequality.

Karl Marx and his collaborator Friedrich Engels were intense critics of capitalism. Their work inspired the later development of conflict theory in sociology.

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Feminist theory has developed in sociology and other disciplines since the 1970s and for our purposes will be considered a specific application of conflict theory. In this case, the conflict concerns gender inequality rather than the class inequality emphasized by Marx and Engels. Although many variations of feminist theory exist, they all emphasize that society is filled with gender inequality such that women are the subordinate sex in many dimensions of social, political, and economic life (Lorber, 2010). Liberal feminists view gender inequality as arising out of gender differences in socialization, while Marxist feminists say that this inequality is a result of the rise of capitalism, which made women dependent on men for economic support. On the other hand, radical feminists view gender inequality as present in all societies, not just capitalist ones. Several chapters in this book emphasize the perspectives of feminist sociologists and other social scientists.

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Conflict theory in its various forms views social problems as arising from society’s inherent inequality. Depending on which version of conflict theory is being considered, the inequality contributing to social problems is based on social class, race and ethnicity, gender, or some other dimension of society’s hierarchy. Because any of these inequalities represents a fundamental flaw in society, conflict theory assumes that fundamental social change is needed to address society’s many social problems.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism focuses on the interaction of individuals and on how they interpret their interaction. Its roots lie in the work of early 1900s American sociologists, social psychologists, and philosophers who were interested in human consciousness and action. Herbert Blumer (1969) (Blumer, 1969), a sociologist at the University of Chicago, built on their writings to develop symbolic interactionism, a term he coined. Drawing on Blumer’s work, symbolic interactionists feel that people do not merely learn the roles that society has set out for them; instead they construct these roles as they interact. As they interact, they negotiate their definitions of the situations in which they find themselves and socially construct the reality of these situations. In doing so, they rely heavily on symbols such as words and gestures to reach a shared understanding of their interaction.

Symbolic interactionism focuses on individuals, such as the people conversing here. Sociologists favoring this approach examine how and why individuals interact and interpret the meanings of their interaction.

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An example is the familiar symbol of shaking hands. In the United States and many other societies, shaking hands is a symbol of greeting and friendship. This simple act indicates that you are a nice, polite person with whom someone should feel comfortable. To reinforce this symbol’s importance for understanding a bit of interaction, consider a situation where someone refuses to shake hands. This action is usually intended as a sign of dislike or as an insult, and the other person interprets it as such. Their understanding of the situation and subsequent interaction will be very different from those arising from the more typical shaking of hands. As the term symbolic interactionism implies, their understanding of this encounter arises from what they do when they interact and from their use and interpretation of the various symbols included in their interaction. According to symbolic interactionists, social order is possible because people learn what various symbols (such as shaking hands) mean and apply these meanings to different kinds of situations. If you visited a
society where sticking your right hand out to greet someone was interpreted as a threatening gesture, you would quickly learn the value of common understandings of symbols.

Symbolic interactionism views social problems as arising from the interaction of individuals. This interaction matters in two important respects. First, socially problematic behaviors such as crime and drug use are often learned from our interaction with people who engage in these behaviors; we adopt their attitudes that justify committing these behaviors, and we learn any special techniques that might be needed to commit these behaviors. Second, we also learn our perceptions of a social problem from our interaction with other people, whose perceptions and beliefs influence our own perceptions and beliefs.

Because symbolic interactionism emphasizes the perception of social problems, it is closely aligned with the social constructionist view discussed earlier. Both perspectives emphasize the subjective nature of social problems. By doing so, they remind us that perceptions often matter at least as much as objective reality in determining whether a given condition or behavior rises to the level of a social problem and in the types of possible solutions that various parties might favor for a particular social problem.

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### Applying the Three Perspectives

To explain armed robbery, symbolic interactionists focus on how armed robbers decide when and where to rob a victim and on how their interactions with other criminals reinforce their own criminal tendencies.

Geoffrey Fairchild – The Robbery – CC BY 2.0.

To help you further understand the different views of these three theoretical perspectives, let’s see what they would probably say about armed robbery, a very serious form of crime, while recognizing that the three perspectives together provide a more comprehensive understanding of armed robbery than any one perspective provides by itself.

A functionalist approach might suggest that armed robbery actually serves positive functions for society, such as the job-creating function mentioned earlier for crime in general. It would still think that efforts should be made to reduce armed robbery, but it would also assume that far-reaching changes in our society would be neither wise nor necessary as part of the effort to reduce crime.
Conflict theory would take a very different approach to understanding armed robbery. It might note that most street criminals are poor and thus emphasize that armed robbery is the result of the despair and frustration of living in poverty and facing a lack of jobs and other opportunities for economic and social success. The roots of street crime, from the perspective of conflict theory, thus lie in society at least as much as they lie in the individuals committing such crime. To reduce armed robbery and other street crime, conflict theory would advocate far-reaching changes in the economic structure of society.

For its part, symbolic interactionism would focus on how armed robbers make such decisions as when and where to rob someone and on how their interactions with other criminals reinforce their own criminal tendencies. It would also investigate how victims of armed robbery behave when confronted by a robber. To reduce armed robbery, it would advocate programs that reduce the opportunities for interaction among potential criminal offenders, for example, after-school programs that keep at-risk youths busy in “conventional” activities so that they have less time to spend with youths who might help them get into trouble.

Key Takeaways

- According to C. Wright Mills, the sociological imagination involves the ability to recognize that private troubles are rooted in public issues and structural problems.
- Functionalism emphasizes the importance of social institutions for social stability and implies that far-reaching social change will be socially harmful.
- Conflict theory emphasizes social inequality and suggests that far-reaching social change is needed to achieve a just society.
- Symbolic interactionism emphasizes the social meanings and understandings that individuals derive from their social interaction.

For Your Review

1. Select an example of a “private trouble” and explain how and why it may reflect a structural problem in society.
2. At this point in your study of social problems, which one of the three sociological theoretical perspectives sounds most appealing to you? Why?