

INEQUALITIES AS SOCIAL PROBLEMS

PART

I

Chapter 1 Understanding and Solving Social Problems

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UNDERSTANDING AND SOLVING SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Kathleen Odell Korgen



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LEARNING QUESTIONS

- 1.1 What are social problems, and how are they social constructions?
- 1.2 What sparked the development of the science of sociology?
- 1.3 Why are some social conditions considered social problems while others are not?
- 1.4 How can the sociological imagination help us address social problems?
- 1.5 What are the steps of the social scientific research process?

WHAT IS A SOCIAL PROBLEM?

LEARNING QUESTION

- 1.1 What are social problems, and how are they social constructions?

Welcome to the study of social problems! While at first glance focusing on problems may sound rather negative, you will soon find that examining social problems from a sociological perspective will enable you to both recognize and help address harmful social issues in ways that can make your community and the world around you a better place for everyone.

The creator of the term *sociology*, Auguste Comte, saw sociology as the “queen” of all sciences, which could guide and improve society (Comte & Martineau, 1853). Indeed, early sociologists used the new discipline to understand and address the social problems of the 19th and early 20th centuries, such as racism and sexism. Now you may say, “But wait, we still have these problems! What good is sociology?” The short answer is that, before sociology, not only were many of these social conditions more severe, but most people did not even think of them as social problems! This leads us to an important question—why do some, but not other, conditions that hurt people become recognized as social problems we should address?

Social Problems Are Social Constructions

Social problems are social conditions *perceived* to be problematic by groups of people. Members of society, particularly those with the most power, determine what are social problems as they continually construct and reconstruct society every day. Like other **social constructions**, social problems are based on social perceptions that vary from society to society and over time. So what is considered a social problem can change over time and place. Let’s consider the social problems just mentioned: racism and sexism. Again, if you asked people in the early 19th-century United States if these were social problems, most would say no. They might even say, “What’s that?” Why do you think they would fail to see racism and sexism as social problems?

HOW I GOT ACTIVE IN SOCIOLOGY

KATHLEEN ODELL KORGEN

I slept most of the way through the SOC 101 course I took in college. The professor lectured, and we took notes (or not).

That SOC 101 course was the last sociology class I took until I found a sociology graduate program in social justice and social economy that encouraged sociologists to put sociological tools into action. In that program, I learned that sociology could show me how I can change society. As a researcher, I have worked on issues related to race relations and racial identity, evaluated social justice efforts and sociology programs, and helped create introductory textbooks that get students to *do* sociology as they learn it.

As a sociology teacher, I want students to know, right away, all that sociology offers them—and society. A major part of my work has been to help students use sociological tools to make a positive impact on society. In my classes, from SOC 101 to Public Sociology and Civic Engagement, students don’t just learn about sociology; they become sociologists in action.

Social Constructionism Perspective

Looking at society through a sociological lens can help us answer this question. The sociological theoretical perspective of **social constructionism** helps us see that individuals assign meaning to the world around them. Individuals’ perceptions, however, are not formed in a vacuum. We are all influenced by the society and time in which we live. Sociologists refer to this as “the social construction of reality.” Think about your taste in clothes, for example. Do you tend to prefer seeing a man in a shirt and pants or a djellaba (a hooded tunic common in Morocco)? If you are a woman and could have just one pair of jeans, would you choose skinny jeans or mom jeans? Were you born with these preferences, or did your society affect them?

We are all influenced by both **culture** (the rules, values, beliefs, and material goods created by members of our society) and **social structure** (the framework of society constructed through social institutions such as government, schools, economy, families, and religion) of our society. Think about

how your life would change if our form of government changed from a democratic republic to a dictatorship. Or imagine if our culture began to view obesity as a sign of prosperity, as was common in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. As our culture and social structures change, so does our society—and our lives within it.



Corsets, stiff undergarments that could be tightened to constrict women's waists, were once common.

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CONFRONTING SOCIAL PROBLEMS 1.1

YOU AND YOUR SOCIETY

What are social problems, and how are they social constructions?

In this exercise, you will consider how the time and society in which you live affects you.

Think about what your parents have told you about their lives when they were young adults, in their late teens and early 20s. Write your answers to the following questions with that time period in mind:

1. How have your parents described the values, beliefs, and social rules they were expected to follow? List three ways that U.S. culture (social rules, values, beliefs, and material objects) has changed over the past 50 years. For example, you might consider changes surrounding the value of education, rules around dating and romantic partners, and so on.
2. How has the U.S. economy changed (e.g., the skills and credentials needed to gain a well-paying job, what occupations have the most job openings, which jobs are viewed as appropriate for women and men)?
3. How have the changes you described in your answers to Questions 1 and 2 affected your (1) dating and (2) career options? Explain how these changes and their effects illustrate the social construction of reality.
4. Explain why social problems are also social constructions that can vary over time and place. Be prepared to share your responses in accordance with your instructor's directions.

Check Your Understanding

1. What is a social problem?
2. How can you show that social problems are social constructions?
3. What does the theoretical perspective of social constructionism help us see?
4. What is culture?
5. What is social structure?
6. What are some examples of how changes in the culture and structure of our society can change society—and our lives within it?

SOCIOLOGY AND THE STUDY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

LEARNING QUESTION

1.2 What sparked the development of the science of sociology?

Sociology developed as intellectuals noted the dramatic changes resulting from the Enlightenment (1685–1815) and the Industrial Revolution (from the late 1700s to the late 1800s). The Enlightenment ideas, values, and beliefs that put reason, rationality, and freedom above tradition, religion, and monarchies changed cultures, and the Industrial Revolution transformed economies. Both dramatically changed individuals and societies, creating social upheaval in the process.

CONFRONTING SOCIAL PROBLEMS 1.2

LEARNING TO ASK WHY

What sparked the development of the science of sociology?

In this activity, you have the opportunity to ask “why?”

Sociology developed to answer the question of why society works as it does—and how we might make it better.

Write answers to the following questions:

1. How might your perspective on society change if you started to ask why
 - economic inequality today is much greater than most Americans think it is,
 - only men have become president of the United States,
 - White people have about 10 times the wealth of Black Americans, and
 - many boys and men feel they cannot show weakness in public?

What would knowing the answers to these questions allow you to do?

If everyone knew these answers, would it help or hurt society? Why?

Auguste Comte and other early sociologists believed that sociology could help make sense of the tremendous social changes brought about by the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution. They also believed that sociologists could use their research to inform efforts to improve society. Here, we briefly look at the work of two early sociologists in the United States: Jane Addams and W. E. B. Du Bois.

Jane Addams (1860–1935)

Born into a wealthy and well-connected family (her father was an eight-term senator from Illinois), Jane Addams rebuffed the gender expectations of her day. She earned a college education and established, with her college friend Ellen Gates Starr, Hull House—one of the first settlement houses in the United States. While traveling in Europe after college, she and Starr visited a settlement house in a poor East London neighborhood. There, college students lived and worked together for social reforms. Inspired, the two women bought a large mansion situated in what had become a poor immigrant neighborhood in Chicago. Hull House became a hub for sociological research, education, and social services for low-income immigrants.

Addams and her colleagues not only conducted research to provide data on issues of social inequality but also used their findings to (1) argue that these issues were social problems and (2) propose and advocate for policies and laws to address them. They convinced policy makers to tackle many social issues, such as the criminal justice system treating children like adults (advocating for a juvenile justice system) and the exploitation of children and women in factories (sponsoring the Illinois Factory Act of 1893 that made hiring children illegal and limited working hours for women to eight hours a day; Pleck, 2018). Other accomplishments by Addams include co-winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931 and helping establish

- regulations of tenement houses,
- inspections of factories,
- compensation for workers injured on the job,
- the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU),
- women's suffrage,
- the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP),
- the National Council of Social Work (of which she was the first woman president), and
- the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963)

W. E. B. Du Bois grew up in a predominantly White town in western Massachusetts, with a single mother who was employed as a domestic worker. The only Black student in his elementary school, Du Bois excelled academically. He began to experience racism and to recognize the racial injustice embedded in U.S. society while in high school. Calling attention to those injustices and proposing solutions to them became the focus of his life and work as a sociologist (Gates & Du Bois, 2014).

Du Bois's first study after gaining his doctorate, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), is one of the earliest examples of data-driven sociological research in the United States. He modeled his data collection methods on the work of Jane Addams and her colleagues (Deegan, 1988). Du Bois lived in a poor Black community in Philadelphia for 2 years and interviewed 5,000 residents. Using this data plus information from the U.S. census, he created maps illustrating the social and economic conditions of residents in the community. His findings revealed how the high poverty, unemployment, and crime rates among



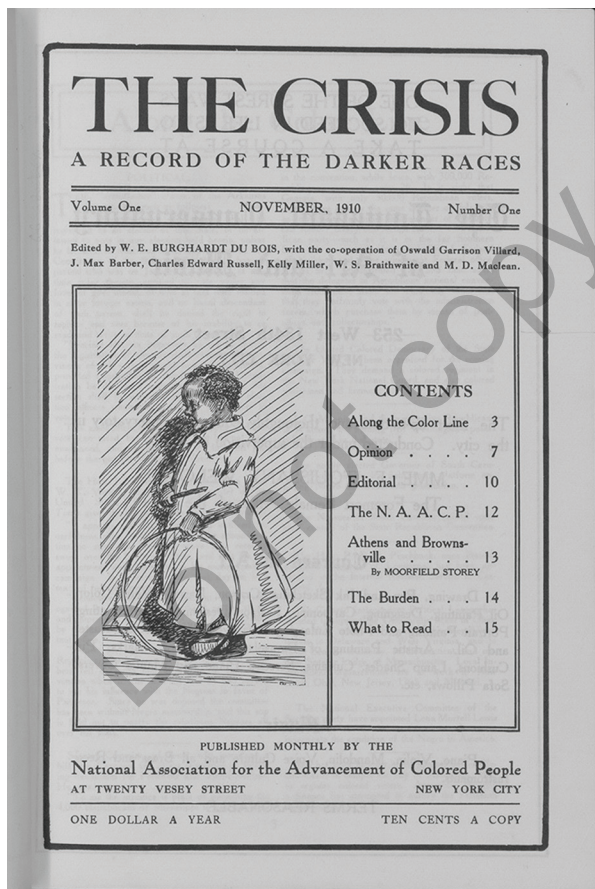
Jane Addams

Universal History Archive/UIG via Getty images

the residents related to historical and current institutional discrimination against Black Americans (Du Bois, 1899). In doing so, he helped reveal the falsehood of negative racial stereotypes about Black people and that racism is a social problem that harms society as well as people of color.

Du Bois spent his long life using his sociological skills to understand, propose, and advocate for solutions to racism. Some of his many accomplishments include

- being the first Black person to earn a PhD from Harvard (after receiving scholarships to fund his undergraduate and graduate studies);
- cofounding (with Jane Addams and others) the NAACP and editing its journal, *The Crisis*;
- publicizing and denouncing the lynching of Black Americans;
- cofounding and heading the Niagara Movement, which led the fight for equal rights for Black people and successfully pushed back on the dominant idea that Black Americans should accept a lower social and political status than Whites;
- writing *The Souls of Black Folk*, the foundational text for movements advocating equal rights for Black people;
- countering the myth that Reconstruction in the South after the Civil War failed because of the incompetence of Black leaders with *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935); and
- promoting the rights of African people and their descendants across the globe through his pan-African organizing efforts.



W. E. B. Du Bois was a cofounder of the NAACP and its publication, *The Crisis*, now the oldest Black publication in the world.

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Du Bois and Addams were sociologists *in action*. They used their sociological skills to convince people that social injustices such as racism and sexism are social problems that society should address—and to figure out ways to help mitigate them. Today, people with sociological training follow in their footsteps, using their sociological tools to improve society in a variety of ways. You will learn about many in the “Sociologist in Action” features in each chapter. From helping the military assess and improve their basic training programs to assisting communities in organizing to fight environmental injustice, professionals and students are using sociology to understand and address social problems.

This brings us back to the question raised earlier: Why are some, but not other, social conditions considered social problems? We noted that social problems are social constructions that vary over time and from society to society. But how does society determine what social conditions are social problems?

Check Your Understanding

1. Why did intellectuals create the discipline of sociology?
2. Who was Auguste Comte, and what was his vision for sociology?
3. Who was Jane Addams? How did she contribute to her society’s understanding of social problems? How did she help address social problems?
4. Who was W. E. B. Du Bois? How did he contribute to his society’s understanding of social problems? How did he help address social problems?

WHY ARE SOME, BUT NOT OTHER, SOCIAL CONDITIONS CONSIDERED SOCIAL PROBLEMS?

LEARNING QUESTION

1.3 Why are some social conditions considered social problems while others are not?

Do you live in fear of quicksand? Your answer to that question reflects your age—and helps illustrate how social problems do not always reflect the greatest threats to society. Like many fears (e.g., of sharks, ghosts, witches—and quicksand), social problems are socially constructed and change over time.

What Sparked the Quicksand Fear?

Growing up in the United States in the 1960s meant that you were probably on the lookout for quicksand. In an agonizing scene in one of the most popular movies of the 1960s, *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), a boy dies after falling into desert quicksand. Quicksand also appeared in popular TV shows of that era. The Monkees encounter it in Season 2 of their show (Ross, 1967). It even appeared in arguably the most famous speech of the decade: Martin Luther King Jr. declared, “Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice,” in his “I Have a Dream” speech (King, 1963).

So quicksand scared a lot of people for quite some time. By 2010, however, quicksand could not scare a group of fourth graders interviewed on the topic. “I usually don’t think about it,” said one. They were more afraid of things like aliens, zombies, ghosts, and dinosaurs. But they understood that it was something people *used* to be afraid of: “My dad told me that when he was little his friends always said, ‘Look out, that could be quicksand!’”

Writer Daniel Engber decided to find out what happened to the fear of quicksand. He found a group of people who had created a list of every movie from the 1900s to the 2000s that included quicksand, and he used these data and information on the total number of movies made to show that about 3% of movies made in the 1960s included quicksand scenes. The percentage of movies featuring quicksand then dropped, with relatively few (less than 1%) doing so in 2000. Quicksand almost completely disappeared from television shows as well.

Children who grew up more recently were also less likely to think they might run into quicksand as they played outside in the woods or fields around their homes. In fact, parents’ fears (which you will learn more about in Chapter 12) and the advent of the Internet and video games led to fewer kids playing outside at all. The hours children spent in unsupervised play between 1981 and 1997 decreased by 16% and most of the remaining free play took place inside. Kids spent more time on computers or watching television than on outside adventures with friends (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001). Meanwhile, television shows like *Mythbusters* debunked many of the purported dangers of quicksand, and with the Internet, kids could learn for themselves that it’s very unlikely you will sink, drown, and die in quicksand.

Quicksand, while an irrational fear for a generation of children, never became a social problem. Looking at the rise and fall of the fear of quicksand in the United States, however, allows us to see how societies construct and (sometimes) deconstruct social problems. It also helps us begin to understand why some issues become social problems and others do not. Perception, rather than facts, is the key driver behind the creation of social problems.

Social Problems and Power

The quicksand example, along with other non-fact-based fears (e.g., witches, Bigfoot, crossing paths with a black cat, stepping on a crack in the pavement), allows us to see that fears are not always rational. How many people have died at the hands of Bigfoot? Did you ever break your mother’s back by stepping on a crack? Likewise, social actions or conditions perceived as social problems do not always hurt many people (e.g., think of every immigrant group once seen as “taking over” or “ruining” the United States). Even more puzzling, some social actions or conditions that *do* hurt many people do not become

social problems. The social problems mentioned already (racism and sexism) have harmed many millions of people for hundreds and thousands of years. Why, then, weren't they always considered social problems?

The short answer is power. Those with the most power in society have the most influence over what people believe—including what they believe are social problems. Those with high positions in the major social institutions in our society have a great deal of power. For example, government officials can influence the laws and policies we must follow, and owners of major corporations can influence our local, national, or even global society by creating and producing goods, impacting the environment, creating or destroying jobs, and influencing our views of society through school curricula and the media. In Chapter 9, you will read about how the media (supported by advertisements funded by corporations) tends to cover crimes committed by low-income people, rather than corporations—even though we are more likely to be harmed by the crimes of the latter.

The Power of Organized People

The good news is that even people outside of high-status positions can gain power when they organize themselves and others and work together. Throughout history, ordinary people have used social movements to gain power and change society. For example, people in the civil rights and women's rights movements, like those in all successful social movements, carried out the following steps. They

- identified a goal (social issue) they could rally others around (e.g., the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which prohibits racial discrimination in voting; Title IX of the Education Act of 1972, which bars any educational institution receiving federal money from discriminating on the basis of sex),
- formed an organized group,
- created an effective strategy (researched the problem and potential solutions, figured out how to gain support from people and organizations that can bring about change),
- mobilized enough resources (people and money),
- organized effective actions (marches, rallies, boycotts, etc.), and
- built power to reach their goal by completing the steps above (Christensen, 2020).

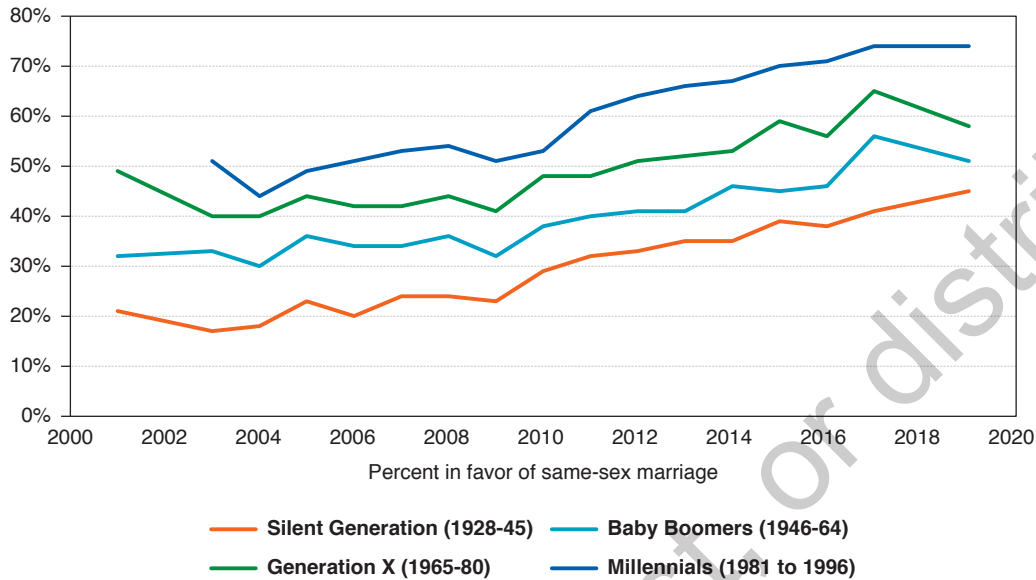
These movements led many people to change their perceptions of people of color and of women and, in the process, convinced them that racism and sexism are social problems that society needs to address. This happened because people (like W. E. B. Du Bois and Jane Addams) organized and effectively countered the prevailing beliefs that people of color are inferior to White people and women are inferior to men.

Same-Sex Marriage Movement

The same-sex marriage movement also followed these steps with great success. It had a dramatic impact on the public's perception of people attracted to members of the same sex and changed the definition of marriage and the laws surrounding it. Through effective media campaigns, legal strategies, and persistent organizing efforts, the movement changed people's attitudes toward same-sex marriage. In just a decade (2007–2017), the percentage of people in favor of same-sex marriage in the United States increased from 37% to 62% and, as Figure 1.1 shows, across all generations. The American Sociological Association submitted an amicus brief to the Supreme Court, pointing out that the overwhelming social science evidence indicates that having same-sex parents does not put children at risk. By the time of the Supreme Court ruling in 2015, a majority in the United States believed that discrimination against same-sex marriage was a social problem that the government should address. The increase in public support indicated that the public was ready for the *Obergefell v. Hodges* Supreme Court 2015 decision that required all states to recognize and certify same-sex marriages.

Using problem-solving sociological tools, many sociologists today, like Du Bois and Addams, do not just study social problems such as racism and sexism but offer solutions to them as well. You do not have to be a professional sociologist to use sociological tools to address social problems, however. We now look at how sociologists, and students in social problems courses, can better understand society—and make it better!

FIGURE 1.1 ■ Percentage of U.S. Adults Favoring Same-Sex Marriage, by Generation (2001–2019)



Source: "Attitudes on Same-Sex Marriage." Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (May 14, 2019) <https://www.pewforum.org/fact-sheet/changing-attitudes-on-gay-marriage/>

CONFRONTING SOCIAL PROBLEMS 1.3

CONSTRUCTING A SOCIAL PROBLEM

Why are some social conditions considered social problems while others are not?

In this activity, you will consider how you might bring attention to an issue that is not now, but you think should be, considered a social problem.

Think of an issue that you think your school or local community should address but seems to overlook. Now, using the description of the steps successful movements take, describe how you might start a movement to draw attention to it.

Check Your Understanding

1. How does the rise and fall of quicksand as a social problem show us how societies can create social problems?
2. Who has the most influence over what society considers social problems? Why?
3. How can ordinary people gain power to create and address social problems?
4. What are the steps of a successful social movement?
5. How did the same-sex marriage movement convince people that discrimination against same-sex people who want to marry was a social problem that needed addressing?

HOW CAN PROFESSIONAL SOCIOLOGISTS—AND YOU—HELP SOLVE SOCIAL PROBLEMS?

LEARNING QUESTION

1.4 How can the sociological imagination help us address social problems?

Get ready; this course will change the way you view the world. Once you have developed a sociological eye, you will have it forever. The sociological eye is one of the two core commitments of sociology that we discuss next (Collins, 1998). We will also explain how you can use your sociological imagination to connect what's going on in your own life with patterns in society. Finally, we will look at how sociologists collect data and how sociological skills can help you understand how society works and address social problems in it.

The Core Commitments of Sociology and the Sociological Imagination

Gaining a sociological perspective comes with two obligations, or **core commitments of sociology**—developing and using a sociological eye and social activism (Collins, 1998). A **sociological eye** allows you to see beneath the surface of society and recognize social patterns. Then, when you see unjust patterns, you must use your sociological skills to fulfill the second obligation, social activism, by understanding, publicizing, and addressing them.

To gain a sociological eye, you must first attain a **sociological imagination**, the ability to connect personal experiences with public issues and the broader social and historical context (Mills, 1959). This will allow you to recognize that society influences and limits your choices but also that you can influence society. With a sociological imagination, you can understand how to address social problems from a societal, rather than merely an individual, perspective.

Imagine that the food in your school cafeteria is of poor quality and overpriced. What can you do? Looking at the problem from an individualistic perspective, there are not many good options. You can try to find food elsewhere, complain with your friends while you all continue to eat the food in the cafeteria because it is the most convenient place to eat, and/or skip as many meals as possible.

If you look at the food problem from a sociological perspective, however, you can start to figure out why the problem exists and recognize that it affects not just you and your friends but every other student who relies on the cafeteria for food. In fact, you may discover—if other colleges use the same vendor—that this problem affects many thousands of students across the nation. That means that you can gain power to address the issue by creating a social movement across campus—or even across the country! Suddenly, you realize that you and other students, together, can gain enough power to make your school either put enough pressure on the vendor to improve the quality of the food and lower the prices or find a different vendor that will. There are many ways you and other students can use your power to address social problems.

CONFRONTING SOCIAL PROBLEMS 1.4

USING THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION TO ADDRESS STUDENT DEBT

How can the sociological imagination help us address social problems?

In this exercise, you will use your sociological imagination to figure out how to address a social problem most effectively.

Consider a personal experience that many college students face—student debt. Explain how your strategy for addressing this problem would differ depending on whether you use an individual perspective or your sociological imagination by answering the questions following the scenarios below:

1. You see student debt as an individual (your) problem: How might you address it?
2. You recognize that student debt is not just a problem for you but part of a pattern across society. You see it as a social issue that has a social solution: How might you address it?
3. Imagine you are successful in both types of efforts. What would be the results of each for (a) you and (b) you and other students?

One of the keys to successfully tackling social problems is good information. You must know how to collect data, analyze them, and use them effectively. The first two steps involve understanding the social scientific research process.

Check Your Understanding

1. What are the obligations, or core commitments, that come with gaining a sociological perspective?
2. What can you do with a sociological eye?
3. What does the sociological imagination give you?

HOW TO CONDUCT SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

LEARNING QUESTION

- 1.5 What are the steps of the social scientific research process?

All social scientists, including sociologists, follow the **social scientific research process** to ensure that their research takes advantage of previous findings, is as unbiased as possible, does not cause harm, and can be replicated by other researchers. To conduct research on a social problem, professional sociologists—and you—should follow these steps:

1. Pick a social problem.
2. Conduct a review of the existing literature on the social problem (called a literature review) to understand what is already known and what still needs to be known about that social problem.
3. Decide what new data would help you better understand the social problem and how to address it.
4. Determine how to collect data so you can make good generalizations (and include a description of your sample and methodology in your report so others can replicate it).
5. Collect and analyze the data.
6. Describe how your findings, and those from previous research, led you to propose how to address the social problem.
7. Determine how to implement your proposal.
8. Work with others to publicize your findings and carry out your plan.

One of the benefits of learning how to conduct social scientific research is that you also learn to spot bad or misleading findings.

CONFRONTING SOCIAL PROBLEMS 1.5

WHY CAN YOU TRUST THE SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH PROCESS?

What are the steps of the social scientific research process?

In this exercise, you will have the opportunity to defend the social scientific research process.

You have just read that a Pew Research study shows that most people in the United States now support same-sex marriage. Your friends say, “No way is that true. None of our family or friends do.” How do you convince your friends that they should believe you?

Write an e-mail to your friend that describes the steps of the social science research process and explains why they should trust the Pew Research study—and other social scientific research that adheres to those steps.

Finding and Collecting Good Information

As you conduct a literature review, you must be able to differentiate between good and untrustworthy sources of information. For example, you need to look at who funded the research, the political biases of the organization sponsoring and publicizing it, and—most important—how the researcher(s) collected the data. Avoid using findings if you cannot find this information about them.

When looking at any source of information online, you should find the “About” tab and learn about the organization presenting it (does it have a political or profit-driven mission that might lead it to promote misleading findings?). Know that “.edu” (accredited educational institution) or “.gov” (government) websites contain data collected by professional researchers. This is also true for information in peer-reviewed articles in journals (articles reviewed by other professionals and usually revised based on their feedback before publication). Your school library gives you access to search engines that will help you find innumerable articles on all sorts of social problems. When reading a news article that cites research, be sure to dig deeper and find out who conducted the research—and how.

How do you know if researchers collected their data the “right” way? In general, they must show you that their sample reflects the population studied. For example, imagine that you read in your student newspaper that most students at your school think there is no need for more parking on campus. You note that the author says that her information is based on a survey conducted by a student for a class project. And the sample? Students hanging out in front of the student center on a day she had time to hand out surveys. Can you trust those findings? No! The students who happened to be in front of the student center at that time do not provide a representative sample of *all* students at your school. In fact, you can’t even be sure they *are* students at your school. What if they included prospective students who happened to be taking a campus tour then? What would they know about the parking situation for students?

Of course, it would be great if you could use an online program to survey the entire population of undergraduate students at your school and require them to answer your questions (but no school would allow it, and researchers cannot force people to participate in studies). A better idea would be to survey students in required courses that every undergraduate must take (including transfer students) at different points in their undergraduate career. That way, you can ensure that you have a (somewhat, at least) representative sample of students, including a cross section of majors and students from different years.

As we discuss in the concluding chapter, the ability to discern good from bad information is particularly important in a democratic society where most people obtain their information from social media. This skill will help you avoid attempts to manipulate you with misleading data.

What Social Problems Do You Want to Address?

So now that you know what it takes to do social scientific research on social problems, what social problem do you want to tackle? As you read the following chapters, you will continue to develop and use your sociological eye. What patterns will you see? What social problems will you notice, study, and

begin to address? In the following “Sociologist in Action” essay, sociology professor Kathy Shepherd Stolley describes how students at her school, working with community partners and school employees, established a program to help meet the needs of the homeless population in their area.

Sociologist in Action

“Shelter”

Kathy Shepherd Stolley

In 2007, Virginia Wesleyan began hosting an on-campus emergency winter homeless shelter that has become a signature program here. We created “Shelter,” in partnership with Portsmouth Volunteers for the Homeless (PVH), to serve the homeless, dispel stereotypes, raise awareness about the structural factors leading to homelessness, and reflect the university’s mission. After a decade of operation, we shifted into the community and currently serve in shelters in three local cities (Portsmouth, Norfolk, and Virginia Beach) rather than providing a shelter on campus.

When our campus operated “Shelter,” for 1 week each January during our short winter term, we welcomed about 60 adults every night to a gymnasium for respite from the wintry weather. Our guests would arrive in time for dinner, then leave each morning for breakfast at a local soup kitchen. We were one stop on a shelter schedule rotating weekly among numerous houses of faith from fall through late spring. There were no other educational institutions on this shelter schedule, and we are not aware of any other colleges or universities elsewhere that provide shelter using this model.

Two sophomores envisioned “Shelter” and presented it to our administration and PVH as a sustainable project to address hunger and homelessness, sponsored by our former Office of Community Service (now Wesleyan Engaged: Center for Civic Leadership and Engaged Learning). In collaboration with PVH as a community partner, “Shelter” was established as, and remains, a student-led project. A small student management team volunteers more than 100 hours of time, often without class credit, to oversee shelter activities and volunteers. My initial role with the shelter was as a founding faculty adviser; I then joined an interdisciplinary team that continues to co-teach a service-learning class connected to “Shelter.”

“Shelter” preparation includes orientation sessions, role-playing, and other interactive activities, as well as various readings, guest experts, and lectures covering micro, meso, and macro aspects of homelessness and poverty. Students journal and reflect during and after the shelter experience, then are challenged to apply their sociological imaginations to creative projects addressing these social problems. Annual pre- and postvolunteer surveys have shown shifts in student participants’ attitudes toward the homeless. Alumni who were student managers say their experience with “Shelter” gave them transferable skills that benefit them in their postcollege lives. The entire campus—from students to top administrators, plus alumni, parents, and members of the local community—is invited to engage with the issue of homelessness through “Shelter.” It has led to honors projects, internships, awards, scholarly publications, conference presentations, media attention, improved organizational health, and even a short documentary: “Winter Shelter, on Campus: College Students Encounter Homelessness at Home” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GyjEc8uinZ0>). Most important, however, people in need have been provided safety and respect and have become immeasurably important members of our campus community.

“Shelter” provides an example of the evolution, reach, and impact of student action combined with intentional sociological application. Never underestimate your potential to build community and change our world for the better.

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Discussion Questions: Why do you think students’ attitudes toward the homeless changed after their experience with “Shelter”? What similar experiences have you had or would you like to have?

Check Your Understanding

1. If you want to understand and address a social problem using social scientific research, what steps must you follow?
2. How do you know if a sample is a representative sample?
3. Explain how you could obtain a representative sample of the undergraduate population at your school.

CONCLUSION

In this course, you will have the opportunity to fulfill the core commitments of sociology by learning the causes of a wide range of social problems and how you can use sociological tools to address them. This introductory chapter gives you just a taste of what you will learn in the chapters ahead. They each focus on one of the major social problems facing society today. We start, in Chapter 2, with one of the social problems that leads to many more—economic inequality.

REVIEW

1. What are social problems, and how are they social constructions?

Social problems are social conditions *perceived* to be problematic by groups of people. Members of society determine what are social problems as they continually construct and reconstruct society every day. Like other social constructions, social problems are based on social perceptions that vary from society to society and over time. Looking at the rise and fall of the fear of quicksand helps us recognize that societies construct and (sometimes) deconstruct social problems.

2. What sparked the development of the science of sociology?

Sociology developed as intellectuals noted the dramatic changes resulting from the Enlightenment (1685–1815) and the Industrial Revolution (from the late 1700s to the late 1800s). Both dramatically changed societies—and the lives of the people in them—creating social upheaval in the process.

Auguste Comte and other early sociologists believed that sociology could help make sense of the tremendous social changes brought about by the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution.

They also believed that sociologists could use their research to inform efforts to improve society.

Jane Addams and W. E. B. Du Bois were two early sociologists who helped construct some unjust social conditions (e.g., sexism and racism) as social problems that society must address.

3. Why are some social conditions considered social problems while others are not?

Those with the most power in society have the most influence over what people believe—including what they believe are social problems. For example, government officials can influence the laws and policies we must follow, and owners of major corporations can influence our local, national, or even global society by creating and producing goods, impacting the environment, creating or destroying jobs, and influencing our views of society through the media.

The good news is that even people outside of high-status positions can gain power when they organize themselves and others. Throughout history, ordinary people have used social movements to gain power and change society. For example, people in the civil rights movement, the women's rights movements, and the same-sex marriage movement addressed social problems by changing the structure (laws) and culture (people's views) of society.

4. What can be done to help address social problems?

Through gaining a sociological perspective and taking on the two obligations or core commitments (the sociological eye and social activism) that come with it, you can recognize and help address social problems. A sociological eye allows you to see beneath the surface of society and recognize social patterns. Then, when you see unjust patterns, you must use your sociological skills to understand, publicize, and address them. To gain a sociological eye, you must first attain a sociological imagination, the ability to connect personal experiences with public issues (Mills, 1959). Social problems must be addressed from a societal, rather than merely an individual, perspective.

5. What are the steps of the social scientific research process?

All social scientists, including sociologists, follow the social scientific research process to ensure that their research takes advantage of previous findings, is as unbiased as possible, does not cause harm to people, and can be replicated by other researchers.

One of the benefits of learning how to conduct social scientific research is that you also learn to spot bad or misleading findings.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can you prove that social problems are social constructions?
2. If you were a sociologist in action, what social problem might you focus on? Why?
3. What are three problems in society today that are not now, but should be, considered social problems?
4. How is your ability (or not) to walk in your neighborhood without fear of harassment or physical harm connected to public issues?
5. How might you get a representative sample of the undergraduate population at your school? What classes would you choose to survey?

KEY TERMS

Core commitments of sociology (p. 12)

Culture (p. 4)

Social constructionism (p. 4)

Social constructions (p. 4)

Social problems (p. 4)

Social scientific research process (p. 13)

Social structure (p. 4)

Sociological eye (p. 12)

Sociological imagination (p. 12)

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