Social Problems v3 1st edition Barkan Solutions Manual

SKU: 9798887944913-SOLUTIONS



Social Problems: Continuity and Change v3.0

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Published By:
FlatWorld

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Chapter 1
Understanding Social Problems

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Section 1.1: Learning Objectives

1. Define *social problem*.
2. Explain the objective and subjective components of the definition of a social problem.
3. Understand the social constructionist view of social problems.
4. List the stages of the natural history of social problems.

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What Is a Social Problem?

Social problem: any condition or behavior that has negative consequences for large numbers of people and that is generally recognized as a condition or behavior that needs to be addressed

- Social problems have the following components:
  - *Objective*—for any condition or behavior to be considered a social problem, it must have negative consequences for large numbers of people.
  - *Subjective*—there must be a perception that a condition or behavior needs to be addressed for it to be considered a social problem.

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What Is a Social Problem? (continued)

Social constructionist view: the belief that negative social conditions or behaviors do not become social problems unless citizens, policymakers, and other parties call attention to the condition or behavior and define it as a social problem

- COVID-19 illustrates the importance of perception as emphasized by the social constructionist view—on an objective level, it was a serious problem, but it was not a social problem until it became recognized as such (three months later) when American society shut down.

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What Is a Social Problem? (continued, 2)

Most social problems go through a *natural history* which consists of four stages of development.

- **Claims-making process:** the use of arguments to try to influence public perception of a social problem, the reasons for it, and possible solutions to it
- Legitimacy
- Renewed claims making
- Development of alternative strategies

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Section 1.1: Key Takeaways

The definition of a social problem has both an objective component and a subjective component. The objective component involves empirical evidence of the negative consequences of a social condition or behavior, while the subjective component involves the perception that the condition or behavior is indeed a problem that needs to be addressed.

The social constructionist view emphasizes that a condition or behavior does not become a social problem unless there is a perception that it should be considered a social problem.

The natural history of a social problem consists of four stages: emergence and claims making, legitimacy, renewed claims making, and alternative strategies.

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Section 1.2: Learning Objectives

1. Define *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.

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Sociological Perspectives on Social Problems

Sociology stresses that individual problems are often rooted in problems stemming from aspects of society itself.

Personal troubles: the personal problems that many individuals experience

- **Public issues:** problems in society that underlie personal troubles
- **Sociological imagination**: the realization that personal troubles are rooted in public issues

  A telling example of this is the high U.S. unemployment rate which stemmed from the coronavirus pandemic—millions of people suddenly lost their jobs through no fault of their own.

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Sociological Perspectives on Social Problems (continued)

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.

Blaming the victim: the belief that people experiencing difficulties are to blame for these problems

Blaming the system: the belief that personal difficulties stem from problems in society

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Sociological Perspectives on Social Problems (continued, 2)

There are three theoretical perspectives that guide sociological thinking on social problems:

Functionalism: the view that social institutions are important for their contributions to social stability

Conflict theory: the view that society is composed of groups with different interests arising from their placement in the social structure, and these various parts of society contribute to ongoing inequality

Symbolic interactionism: a perspective that focuses on the meanings people gain from social interaction

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Table 1.1: Theory Snapshot

Theoretical Perspective	Major Assumptions	Views of Social Problems
Functionalism	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 ensure social stability. Slow social change is desirable, but rapid social change threatens social order.	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 social reform rather than sudden and far-reaching change. Despite their negative effects, social problems often also serve important functions for society.
Conflict theory	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.	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.
Symbolic interactionism	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.	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.

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Section 1.2: 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.

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Section 1.3: Learning Objectives

1. Explain what is meant by this book's subtitle, "Continuity and Change."
2. List the three sources of changes to social problems.
3. Describe how the United States compares to other democracies regarding the seriousness of social problems.

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Continuity and Change in Social Problems

Social problems are persistent—they have continued for decades and even centuries, and they show no sign of ending anytime soon.

It is also true that certain problems are less serious now than in the past, and change is possible.

- An example are the conditions that many workers face—those who are unemployed, have low wages, or work in substandard and even dangerous workplaces are immeasurably better off than a century ago, thanks to the U.S. labor movement that began during the 1870s.

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Continuity and Change in Social Problems (continued)

Sources of change in social problems:

- Social science theory and research
- The actions of individuals and groups
- Policymakers (elected or appointed officials and other individuals) who pass laws or enact policies that successfully address a social problem
- Lessons learned from other nations' experiences with social problems

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Section 1.3: Key Takeaways

Social problems are persistent, but they have also changed over the years, and many social problems are less serious now than in the past.

Three sources of change to social problems include social science research, the efforts of citizens acting alone or especially in social change groups, and the experiences of other nations.

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Section 1.4: Learning Objectives

1. List the major advantages and disadvantages of surveys, observational studies, and experiments.
2. Explain why scholars who study social problems often rely on existing data.

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Table 1.2: Major Sociological Research Methods

Method	Advantages	Disadvantages
Survey	Many people can be included. If given to a random sample of the population, a survey's results can be generalized to the population.	Large surveys are expensive and time consuming. Although much information is gathered, this information is relatively superficial.
Experiments	If random assignment is used, experiments provide fairly convincing evidence of cause and effect.	Because experiments do not involve random samples of the population and most often involve college students, their results cannot readily be generalized to the population.
Qualitative research	Observational studies and intensive interviewing may provide rich, detailed information about the people who are observed.	Because observation studies and intensive interviews do not involve random samples of the population, their results cannot readily be generalized to the population.
Existing data	Because existing data has already been gathered, the researcher does not have to spend the time and money to gather data.	The data set that is being analyzed may not contain data on all the variables in which a sociologist is interested or may contain data on variables not measured in ways the sociologist prefers.

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Doing Research on Social Problems

Sound research is an essential tool for understanding the sources, dynamics, and consequences of social problems and possible solutions to them.

The survey is the most common method by which sociologists gather their data.

- An example is the Gallup poll, which gathers its data with the help of a questionnaire that is given to a group of **respondents**.
- Another type is a face-to-face survey, which can yield much information because interviewers typically spend at least an hour asking their questions, and because of their high **response rate**.
- Other examples include telephone and internet surveys, and the ease and low expense of conducting them are making them increasingly popular.

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Doing Research on Social Problems (continued)

- Experiments are the primary form of research in the natural and physical sciences, but in the social sciences they are for the most part found only in psychology.
- The major advantage of experiments is that the researcher can be fairly sure of a cause-and-effect relationship because of the way the experiment is set up.
- The typical experiment consists of an **experimental group** and a **control group**, with subjects *randomly assigned* to either group.
- The most difficult issue with experiments is that their results may not be generalizable beyond the specific subjects studied.

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Doing Research on Social Problems (continued, 2)

Two forms of qualitative research:

- Observational research, also called field research, which consists of both **participant observation** and **nonparticipant observation**
- Intensive interviewing

Observational studies and intensive interviews provide a richer account of people's lives than surveys do, and they are important methods of research on social problems.

Sometimes sociologists do not gather their own data but instead analyze *existing data* that someone else has gathered, this is known as **secondary data analysis**.

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Doing Research on Social Problems (continued, 3)

- Its advantage to sociologists is that someone else has already spent the time and money to gather the data.
- A disadvantage is that the data set being analyzed may not contain data on all the topics in which a sociologist may be interested.

Sound research should follow the rules of the scientific method:

- Formulating hypotheses
- Gathering and testing data
- Drawing conclusions

An overriding principle of the scientific method is that research should be conducted as *objectively* as possible.

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Section 1.4: Key Takeaways

The major types of research on social problems include surveys, experiments, observational studies, and the use of existing data.

Surveys are the most common method, and the results of surveys of random samples may be generalized to the populations from which the samples come.

Observation studies and existing data are also common methods in social problems research. Observation studies enable the gathering of rich, detailed information, but their results cannot necessarily be generalized beyond the people studied.

Research on social problems should follow the scientific method to yield the most accurate and objective conclusions possible.

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Key Terms

social problem
social constructionist view
claims-making process
personal troubles
public issues
sociological imagination
blaming the victim
blaming the system
functionalism
conflict theory
class consciousness
feminist theory
symbolic interactionism
respondents
random sample
response rate
experimental group
control group
participant observation
nonparticipant observation
secondary data analysis

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