

SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

‘Nearly a century ago, the great American Sociologist C. Wright Mills (1916 – 62) defined the *sociological imagination* as the ability to see the connection between personal troubles and social structures. The sociological imagination can help us distinguish between personal troubles and public issues. One of the sociologists’ main tasks is to identify and explain the connection between people’s personal troubles and the social structures in which they are embedded. What happens in the social world affects individual lives. This implies that individual problems may be connected to the global process. For example, domestic violence, though victims view it as a personal issue due to them being isolated and dominated, is very much a social issue. This means that inequalities learnt within the home, mixed with learnt violence, creates attitudes so deep-rooted into society that violence becomes the norm, and even accepted to an extent.

Domestic violence can happen to any individual, irrespective of gender, race, culture, religion and education, but there are societal factors which influence domestic violence to occur. An example of the sociological imagination at play is in regards to culture. In the Western world, violence is frowned upon and not accepted (though it still occurs), however, in the Eastern world where women are portrayed as property and their purpose is to produce children and honour their male counterparts, violence is accepted as a form of punishment should a woman ‘step out of line’. This is where the knowledge of the sociological imagination is important, because it reiterates and demonstrates the greater significance that personal experience is influenced by larger societal values.

Furthermore, the sociological imagination allows individuals to better understand the nature of domestic violence, and to understand that it is a societal issue due to external influences. One major influence is that violence ‘runs within the family’ as it can be a learnt behaviour, such as a child witnessing years of abuse between his parents, at a neighbouring house, and growing up believing that this is the norm and then start perpetrating this violence on future partners or entering relationships where abuse occurs. This evidence supports the argument that while perpetrators cannot blame their actions all on society, there are some elements to consider that society has definitely played a role in influencing violence to occur and this is what the sociological imagination is all about the ability for individuals to understand that society plays a part in everything and heavily influences solitary situations and decisions.

What happens in the social world affects individual lives. Economic trends, such as inflation or recession, and political decisions, allocating national resources to various sectors of society can affect you and your family. If you are unemployed or lack funds for your university education, your troubles often have broader social issues at their roots. This sociological perspective holds that you can best understand your personal experiences and problems by examining their broader social context, by looking at the bigger picture (Mills C. Wright, 2000).

In his essay, Mills (1959/2000) makes this connection in the case of unemployment. One man unemployed is his own personal trouble. Resolving his unemployment involves reviewing his current situation, reassessing his skills, considering his job opportunities, and submitting his résumés or job applications to employers. Once he has a new job, his personal trouble is over. However, what happens when your city or state experiences high levels of unemployment? What happens when there is a nationwide problem of unemployment? This does not affect just one person, but thousands or millions. A personal trouble has been transformed into a public issue. This is the case not just because of how many people it affects; something becomes an issue because of the public values it threatens. Unemployment threatens our sense of economic security. It challenges our belief that everyone can work hard to succeed. Unemployment raises questions about society's obligations to help those without a job. The sociological imagination challenges the claim that the problem is "natural" or based on individual failures, instead reminding us how the problem is rooted in society. We understand that we cannot resolve unemployment by changing one individual at a time. The sociological imagination identifies the structural bases of social problems, making us aware of the economic, political, and social structures that govern employment and unemployment trends and the cost of higher education.

C. Wright Mills explains that individual problems or private troubles are rooted in social or public issues; meaning that what is happening in the social world is outside of one's personal control. For Mills, many personal experiences can and should be interpreted in the context of large scale forces in the wider society.

An important step in broadening one's sociological awareness involves recognizing that three levels of social structure surround and permeate us.

- (i) **Microstructures:** these are patterns of intimate social relations. They are formed during face-to-face interaction. Families, friendship circles, and work associations are all examples of microstructures.

- (i) **Macrostructures:** these are patterns of social relations that lie outside and above your circle of intimates and acquaintances. Important macrostructures include the economy, politics, religious institutions and social classes
- (ii) **Global structures:** International organizations, patterns of worldwide communications, and the economic relations between and among countries are examples of global structures. Global structures are increasingly important because today, for instance, inexpensive travel and communication allow all parts of the world to become interconnected culturally, economically, and politically.

SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

The way sociologists conduct sociology and study social problems begins first with their view on how the world works. Theories in sociology provide us with different perspectives with which to view our social world. A perspective is simply a way of looking at the world. Sociological theories help us to explain and predict the social world in which we live. Sociology includes three major theoretical perspectives: the structural-functionalist perspective, the conflict perspective, and the symbolic interactionist perspective. We share also look at feminist perspective and how it explains social problems. Each perspective offers a variety of explanations about the causes of and possible solutions to social problems.

STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALISM

According to structural functionalism, society is a system of interconnected parts that work together in harmony to maintain a state of balance and social equilibrium for the whole. For example, each of the social institutions contributes important functions for society: Family provides a context for reproducing, nurturing, and socializing children; education offers a way to transmit a society's skills, knowledge, and culture to its youth; politics provides a means of governing members of society; economics provides for the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services; and religion provides moral guidance and an outlet for worship of a higher power.

Durkheim likened society to a human body. As a human body has essential organs, each with specific function in the body, he theorized that society has its own organs: the institutions of the family, economy, politics, education, and religion. These organs: or social structures have essential and unique functions. For example, the institution of the family maintains the health

and socialization of our young and creates a basic economic unit. The institution of education provides knowledge and skills for women and men to work and live in society. No other institution can do what the family or education does.

Structural functionalists use the terms *functional* and *dysfunctional* to describe the effects of social elements on society. Elements of society are functional if they contribute to social stability and dysfunctional if they disrupt social stability. Some aspects of society can be both functional and dysfunctional. For example, crime is dysfunctional in that it is associated with physical violence, loss of property, and fear. But according to Durkheim and other functionalists, crime is also functional for society because it leads to heightened awareness of shared moral bonds and increased social cohesion.

Sociologists have identified two types of functions: manifest and latent (Merton 1968). **Manifest functions** are consequences that are intended and commonly recognized. **Latent functions** are consequences that are unintended and often hidden. For example, the manifest function of education is to transmit knowledge and skills to society's youth. But public elementary schools also serve as babysitters for employed parents, and colleges offer a place for young adults to meet potential mates. The babysitting and mate-selection functions are not the intended or commonly recognized functions of education; hence, they are latent functions.

The functionalist perspective, as its name suggests, examines the functions or consequences of the structure of society. Social problems are not analysed in terms of how —bad|| it is for parts of society. Rather, a functionalist asks: Does the social problem serve a function? For example, the problem of crime supports the police service etc.

Structural-Functionalist Theories of Social Problems

Two dominant theories of social problems grew out of the structural-functionalist perspective: *social pathology and social disorganization*.

SOCIAL PATHOLOGY

The study of social pathology deals with the social problems which result from the dysfunction of the social structure. The concept of social pathology applies the medical metaphor of pathology to describe and explain social problems. From this perspective those individuals and

groups who deviate from social norms, or institutions that do not fit with core social norms, are sick or pathologic and a risk to the society's health.

According to the social pathology model, social problems result from some “sickness” in society. Just as the human body becomes ill when our systems, organs, and cells do not function normally, society becomes “ill” when its parts (i.e., elements of the structure and culture) no longer perform properly. For example, problems such as crime, violence, poverty, and juvenile delinquency are often attributed to the breakdown of the family institution; the decline of the religious institution; and inadequacies in our economic, educational, and political institutions.

Social “illness” also results when members of a society are not adequately socialized to adopt its norms and values. People who do not value honesty, for example, are prone to dishonesties of all sorts. Early theorists attributed the failure in socialization to “sick” people who could not be socialized. Later theorists recognized that failure in the socialization process stemmed from “sick” social conditions, not “sick” people. To prevent or solve social problems, members of society must receive proper socialization and moral education, which may be accomplished in the family, schools, churches, or workplace and/or through the media.

SOCIAL DISORGANIZATION

Social disorganization focuses on the malfunctioning of social institutions and structures rather than on the individual. This model argues that social problems results from rapid social change which disrupts or weakens the norms in society. When society changes rapidly, this creates a situation where norms start conflicting with each other thereby causing anomie or normlessness in society.

According to the social disorganization view of social problems, rapid social change (e.g., the cultural revolution of the 1960s) disrupts the norms in a society. When norms become weak or are in conflict with each other, society is in a state of **anomie**, or *normlessness*. Hence, people may steal, physically abuse their spouses or children, abuse drugs, commit rape, or engage in other deviant behavior because the norms regarding these behaviors are weak or conflicting. According to this view, the solution to social problems lies in slowing the pace of social change and strengthening social norms. For example, although the use of alcohol by teenagers is considered a violation of a social norm in our society, this norm is weak. The media portray young people drinking alcohol, teenagers teach each other to drink alcohol and buy fake

identification cards (IDs) to purchase alcohol, and parents model drinking behavior by having a few drinks after work or at a social event. Solutions to teenage drinking may involve strengthening norms against it through public education, restricting media depictions of youth and alcohol, imposing stronger sanctions against the use of fake IDs to purchase alcohol, and educating parents to model moderate and responsible drinking behavior.

CONFLICT PERSPECTIVE

Contrary to the structural-functionalism perspective, the conflict perspective views society as composed of different groups and interests competing for power and resources. The conflict perspective explains various aspects of our social world by looking at which groups have power and benefit from a particular social arrangement. The origins of the conflict perspective can be traced to the classic works of Karl Marx.

Marx suggested that all societies go through stages of economic development. As societies evolve from agricultural to industrial, concern over meeting survival needs is replaced by concern over making a profit, the hallmark of a capitalist system. Industrialization leads to the development of two classes of people: the bourgeoisie, or the owners of the means of production (e.g., factories, farms, businesses), and the proletariat, or the workers who earn wages. The division of society into two broad classes of people the “haves” and the “have-nots” is beneficial to the owners of the means of production. The workers, who may earn only subsistence wages, are denied access to the many resources available to the wealthy owners. According to Marx, the bourgeoisie use their power to control the institutions of society to their advantage. For example, Marx suggested that religion serves as an “opiate of the masses” in that it soothes the distress and suffering associated with the working-class lifestyle and focuses the workers’ attention on spirituality, God, and the afterlife rather than on worldly concerns such as living conditions. In essence, religion diverts the workers so that they concentrate on being rewarded in heaven for living a moral life rather than on questioning their exploitation.

Conflict theorists say that society is held together by power and coercion for the benefit of those in power. In this view, social problems emerge from continuing conflict between groups in our society – based on social class, gender, ethnicity, and race – and in the conflict, the powerful groups usually win. As a result, this perspective offers no easy solutions to social problems. There could be a total overhaul of the system, but that is unlikely to happen. The biggest social problem from this perspective is the system itself and the inequality it creates.

Conflict Theories of Social Problems

There are two general types of conflict theories of social problems: Marxist and non-Marxist. Marxist theories focus on social conflict that results from economic inequalities; non-Marxist theories focus on social conflict that results from competing values and interests among social groups.

Marxist Conflict Theories

According to contemporary Marxist theorists, social problems result from class inequality inherent in a capitalistic system. A system of haves and have-nots may be beneficial to the haves but often translates into poverty for the have-nots. Many social problems, including physical and mental illness, low educational achievement, and crime, are linked to poverty. In addition to creating an impoverished class of people, capitalism also encourages “**corporate violence.**”

Corporate violence can be defined as actual harm and/or risk of harm inflicted on consumers, workers, and the general public as a result of decisions by corporate executives or managers. Corporate violence can also result from corporate negligence; the quest for profits at any cost; and willful violations of health, safety, and environmental laws. Our profit-motivated economy encourages individuals who are otherwise good, kind, and law-abiding to knowingly participate in the manufacturing and marketing of defective products, such as brakes on American jets, fuel tanks on automobiles, and contraceptive devices (e.g. intrauterine devices [IUDs]). Marxist conflict theories also focus on the problem of **alienation**, or powerlessness and meaninglessness in people’s lives. In industrialized societies, workers often have little power or control over their jobs, a condition that fosters in them a sense of powerlessness in their lives.

The specialized nature of work requires workers to perform limited and repetitive tasks; as a result, workers may come to feel that their lives are meaningless. Alienation is bred not only in the workplace but also in the classroom. Students have little power over their education and often find that the curriculum is not meaningful to their lives. Like poverty, alienation is linked to other social problems, such as low educational achievement, violence, and suicide. Marxist explanations of social problems imply that the solution lies in eliminating inequality among classes of people by creating a classless society. The nature of work must also change to avoid alienation. Finally, stronger controls must be applied to corporations to ensure that corporate decisions and practices are based on safety rather than on profit considerations.

Non-Marxist Conflict Theories

Non-Marxist conflict theorists, such as Ralf Dahrendorf, are concerned with conflict that arises when groups have opposing values and interests. For example, anti-abortion activists value the life of unborn embryos and fetuses; pro-choice activists value the right of women to control their own bodies and reproductive decisions. These different value positions reflect different subjective interpretations of what constitutes a social problem. For anti-abortionists, the availability of abortion is the social problem; for pro-choice advocates, the restrictions on abortion are the social problem. Sometimes the social problem is not the conflict itself but rather the way that conflict is expressed. Even most pro-life advocates agree that shooting doctors who perform abortions and blowing up abortion clinics constitute unnecessary violence and lack of respect for life. Value conflicts may occur between diverse categories of people, including nonwhites versus whites, heterosexuals versus homosexuals, young versus old, Democrats versus Republicans, and environmentalists versus industrialists. Solving the problems that are generated by competing values may involve ensuring that conflicting groups understand each other's views, resolving differences through negotiation or mediation, or agreeing to disagree. Ideally, solutions should be win-win, with both conflicting groups satisfied with the solution. However, outcomes of value conflicts are often influenced by power; the group with the most power may use its position to influence the outcome of value conflicts. For example, when Congress could not get all states to voluntarily increase the legal drinking age to 21, it threatened to withdraw federal highway funds from those that would not comply.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST PERSPECTIVE

Both the structural-functionalist and the conflict perspectives are concerned with how broad aspects of society, such as institutions and large social groups, influence the social world. This level of sociological analysis is called *macrosociology*: It looks at the big picture of society and suggests how social problems are affected at the institutional level. The symbolic interactionist perspective is a micro-level perspective because it focuses on an individual and smaller group of people. An interactionist focuses on how we use language, words, and symbols to create and maintain our social reality. This perspective highlights what we take for granted: expectations, rules, and norms that we learn and practice without even noticing. In our interaction with others, we become the products and creators of our social reality. Through our interaction, social problems are created and defined.

So, how do social problems emerge from interaction? Firstly, for social problems such as alcoholism or criminality, an interactionist would argue that the problem behaviour is learned from others. According to this perspective, no one is born a criminal. Like any other role we play, people learn to become criminals. Although the perspective does not answer the question of where or from whom the first criminal learned this behaviour, it attempts to explain how deviant behaviour is learned through interaction with others.

Secondly, social problems emerge from the definitions themselves. Objective social problems do not exist; they become real only in how they are defined or labeled. A sociologist using this perspective would examine who or what group is defining the problem and who or what is being defined as deviant or social problem.

Symbolic Interactionist Theories of Social Problems

A basic premise of symbolic interactionist theories of social problems is that a condition must be *defined or recognized* as a social problem for it to *be* a social problem. Three symbolic interactionist theories of social problems are based on this general premise.

Blumer's Stages of a Social Problem

Herbert Blumer (1971) suggested that social problems develop in stages. First, social problems pass through the stage of *societal recognition*—the process by which a social problem (for example, drunk driving) is “born.” Second, *social legitimation* takes place when the social problem achieves recognition by the larger community, including the media, schools, and churches. As the visibility of traffic fatalities associated with alcohol increased, so did the legitimation of drunk driving as a social problem. The next stage in the development of a social problem involves *mobilization for action*, which occurs when individuals and groups, such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving, become concerned about how to respond to the social condition. This mobilization leads to the *development and implementation of an official plan* for dealing with the problem, involving, for example, highway checkpoints, lower legal blood-alcohol levels, and tougher regulations for driving drunk.

Blumer's stage-development view of social problems is helpful in tracing the development of social problems. For example, although sexual harassment and date rape occurred throughout the 20th century, these issues did not begin to receive recognition as social problems until the 1970s. Social legitimation of these problems was achieved when high schools, colleges, churches,

employers, and the media recognized their existence. Organized social groups mobilized to develop and implement plans to deal with these problems. Groups successfully lobbied for the enactment of laws against sexual harassment and the enforcement of sanctions against violators of these laws. Groups also mobilized to provide educational seminars on date rape for high school and college students and to offer support services to victims of date rape.

Labeling Theory

Labeling theory, a major symbolic interactionist theory of social problems, suggests that a social condition or group is viewed as problematic if it is labeled as such. According to labeling theory, resolving social problems sometimes involves changing the meanings and definitions that are attributed to people and situations.

For example, so long as teenagers define drinking alcohol as “cool” and “fun,” they will continue to abuse alcohol. So long as our society defines providing sex education and contraceptives to teenagers as inappropriate or immoral, the teenage pregnancy rate in the United States will continue to be higher than that in other industrialized nations.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is another symbolic interactionist theory of social problems. The social constructionist perspective focuses on how a problem becomes defined. In particular, it examines how powerful groups, like politicians, religious leaders, and the media, can influence our opinions and conceptions of what is a social problem. Similar to labeling theorists and symbolic interactionism in general, social constructionists argue that individuals who interpret the social world around them socially construct reality. Society, therefore, is a social creation rather than an objective given. As such, social constructionists often question the origin and evolution of social problems. For example, most Americans define “drug abuse” as a social problem in the United States but rarely include alcohol or cigarettes in their discussion. A social constructionist would point to the historical roots of alcohol and tobacco use as a means of understanding their legal status. Central to this idea of the social construction of social problems are the media, universities, research institutes, and government agencies, which are often responsible for the public’s initial “take” on the problem under discussion.

Social constructionists argue that when people interact, they typically assume things are naturally or innately what they seem to be. However, apparently natural or innate features of life are often

sustained by *social* processes that vary historically and culturally. For example, many people assume that differences in the way women and men behave are the result of their different biological makeup. In contrast, social constructionists show that many of the presumably natural differences between women and men depend on the way in which power is distributed between them and the degree to which certain ideas about women and men are widely shared.

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

Rosemarie Tong (1989) explains that —feminist theory is not one, but many theories or perspectives and each feminist theory or perspective attempts to describe women’s oppression, to explain its causes and consequences, and to prescribe strategies for women’s liberation. By analyzing the situations and lives of women in society, feminist theory defines gender and sometimes race or social class as a source of social inequality, group conflict, and social problems. For feminists, the patriarchal society is the basis of social problems. Patriarchy refers to society in which men dominate women and justify their domination through the devaluation of women (e.g. gender based violence). However, the definition of patriarchy has been broadened to include societies in which powerful groups dominate and devalue the powerless (Kaplan 1994).

Patricia Madoo Lengermann and Jill Niebrugge-Brantley (2004) explain that feminist theory was established as a new sociological perspective in the 1970s, due in large part to the growing presence of women in the discipline and the strength of the women’s movement. Feminist theory treats the experience of women as the starting point in all sociological investigations, seeing the world from the vantage point of women in the social world and seeking to promote a better world for women and humankind.

Although the study of social problems is not the centre of feminist theory, throughout history, feminist theory has been critical of existing social arrangements and has focused on such concepts as social change, power, and social inequality (Madoo Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 2004). Although sociologists in this perspective may adopt a conflict, functionalist, or interactionist perspective, their focus remains on how men and women are situated in society, not just differently but also unequally.

Propositions

1. Feminist theory focuses on various aspects of patriarchy, the system of male domination in society. Patriarchy, feminists contend, is as important as class inequality, if not more so, in determining a person's opportunities in life.
2. Feminist theory holds that male domination and female subordination are determined not by biological necessity but by structures of power and social convention. From this point of view, women are subordinate to men only because men enjoy more legal, economic, political, and cultural rights.
3. Feminist theory examines the operation of patriarchy in both micro- and macro-level settings.
4. Feminist theory contends that existing patterns of gender inequality can and should be changed for the benefit of all members of society. The main sources of gender inequality include differences in the way boys and girls are reared; barriers to equal opportunity in education, paid work, and politics; and the unequal division of domestic responsibilities between women and men.

Feminists, however, differ greatly in their views on why inequality occurs and how to overcome it. Drawing from Marx's emphasis on economics, **Marxist feminism** argues that capitalist economic structures favor men—for example, with higher paying jobs. Solutions rely on eliminating capitalism as the source of the problem.

Liberal feminism argues that inequality lies in a lack of opportunity and education for women as well as traditional views of gender that limit women's roles. Liberal feminists feel that if women are allowed to compete equally with men in all areas of society, they will do so successfully.

Radical feminism argues that, regardless of economic system and other inequalities women face in their lives (e.g., racism), male domination is the most fundamental and violence is one key method of controlling women. Solutions lie in eliminating all forms of sexual violence and enhancing women's culture and lives.