DEBATING SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Leonard A. Steverson and Jennifer E. Melvin

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Debating Social Problems emphasizes the process of debate as a means of addressing social problems and helps students engage in active learning. The debate format covers sensitive material in a way that encourages students to talk about this material openly in class. This succinct text includes activities that promote critical thinking and includes examples from current events.

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PREFACE

Debating Social Problems is a sociology text that seeks to develop students' critical thinking skills about social problems by using debate. The authors have attempted to select appropriate problems, including current ones, to be discussed, analyzed, and debated. New social problems are coming to public attention at an almost unbelievable pace and will present other possibilities for debate. It is hoped that the text will provide opportunities for student engagement through lively and spirited discussions that promote greater knowledge about social problems. Many students have gained insight on current issues in this format and hopefully many will continue to do so in the future.

The text provides a consistent format throughout its chapters: basic information about specific social problems are found in chapter sections labeled "About the Problem"; perspectives that seek to give some additional insight from sociology's primary theoretical positions—structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism—are located in "Theoretical Perspectives"; responses to the problems that seek to provide remedy are addressed in "Searching for Solutions"; and an overview of the problems' particular conceptions are found in "Key Terms". Some possible debate questions are provided in sections called "Now Debate!", though these can certainly be modified or substituted with others. Each chapter ends with a digest of that chapter's information in "Chapter Summary".

Debating social problems can help expand knowledge of our social environment and increase skills in argumentation. It can be a challenging but also an exhilarating exercise for both students and professors. We hope all who use the book will benefit from it and open, engaged dialogue.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Understanding Social Problems through Debate

KEY TERMS

Application of Sociological Knowledge
Debate
Social Problems
Sociological Imagination
Sociological Research
Sociological Theory
Sociology

THE DISCIPLINE OF SOCIOLOGY

Suppose we are concerned about one of the myriad social problems—or some or several of them—that exist in the world today (and hopefully we are). We would first need some understanding of human activities, human interactions, and human motivation. We would need to look at the internal forces (originating in the individual), and external forces (originating in the social environment), that are the causes or contributors to the social problems under study. The discipline of sociology is primarily concerned with the latter—the external or environmental aspects of the problem—however, if we use our sociological imaginations (to be discussed soon), we also seek to understand the relationship between these two forces. Before we begin with our discussion on some of the various social problems, we need to gain a better understanding of the social science discipline known as sociology. Since many people do not take sociology in high school, many students do not really understand this field of study.

Sociology is "the scientific study of social behavior and human groups" (Schaefer 2014:2). The main concern of this discipline is with understanding social life and the complex interactions that occur between the smallest social ordering of people (called a dyad) to entire cultures. There-fore, sociology covers a wide expanse of human relationships. As a social science discipline, it has as its siblings: anthropology (the study of cultures past and present), psychology (the study of individual mental processes), political science (the study of power and governmental systems), economics (the

> **Sociology** the scientific study of social behavior and human groups from micro to macro levels of analysis.

study of the management of production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services) and even history (the study of key human events and people of the past), along with other relatives such as social work, criminal justice, and others.

Although the study of social life began long before, in the nineteenth century early social philosophers such as St. Simon, Herbert Spencer, and Auguste Comte sought to make their observations more scientific. It was Comte who gave sociology its name, a strange mix of the Latin socio (from *socius* or "companion") and the Greek *logos* ("the study of"). These social philosophers and theorists, including Alexis de Tocqueville and Karl Marx, studied the major issues of society, primarily resulting from the problems associated with industrialization. The principal perspective taken by these thinkers involved an understanding of the cohesive elements that maintain social order on one hand, and the forces that push society to developmentally evolve on the other (Rubington and Weinburg 1989)—in other words, the great social thinkers were concerned with the issues of *order* versus *progress*.

From its beginnings in Europe, sociology has sought to explain social life, especially in times of trouble, turmoil, and of course, revolution. In America, sociology got its intellectual start in Chicago, a city that experienced an amazing population swell in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of these people were immigrants of other countries who brought with them their languages and other cultural traditions which created some major communication problems. Mixed with the advent of rapidly advancing industrialization, Chicago became a unique city which was of much concern to people whose job it is to study, understand, and act for social change where needed.

As it can easily be seen, periods of social change or unrest create conditions in which some trained analysts of society attempt to organize their observations in meaningful ways to better understand social phenomena. These people are sociologists. Wars, economic depressions, social movements involving race and gender, and a host of social changes has caused sociology to grow and change (for a discussion of the stages of changes in American sociology, see Rubington and Weinburg 1989).

In his very early text on social problems, a definition of sociology was offered by Ellwood (1935:3): "the science which deals with human association, its origin, development, forms and functions". A more recent definition is "the scientific study of social behavior and human groups. It focuses primarily on the influence of social relationships on people's attitudes and behavior and on how societies are established and change" (Schaefer 2014:3). This latter definition, the one preferred by the authors of this text, reflects the discipline's wide focus: from the personal relationships of a two-person group (a dyad) to the cultural practices of whole societies. It is this variance that makes sociology both interesting and sometimes hard to grasp.

Sociologist Kai Erikson (1997) notes the difficulties in providing a definition for the discipline, a problem that others such as philosophy, history, psychology, and others do not seem to have, at least to the same degree. A reason for this, according to Erikson, is that sociologists view our own discipline not as much as a body of knowledge of social life but as a perspective of viewing social life. In other words, sociologists' training, which has encouraged us to look critically at aspects of society, has also created a rather ambiguous way of defining our own discipline. Despite this unease, the study of sociology is fascinating and it allows us to grasp the complex world in which we live.

Sociologist Peter Berger (1963:23) declared that "the sociologist travels at home—sometimes with surprising results", suggesting that we can learn a great deal about one's current social

surroundings by simply observing them from the perspective of a stranger, eliminating (as much as is possible) the constrictive lens that illuminate our preconceptions of the world. By looking beneath the "facades", we can begin to better understand the inner workings of social life.

A contemporary sociologist, George Ritzer, sees his role as that of a "social geologist", a scientist that drills beneath the surface to uncover nuggets of understanding that provide some insight into the hidden aspects of social life that are often not fully analyzed. He also notes the usefulness of approaching sociology as a "social archaeologist" that uses "historical perspectives" to better understand the field (Ritzer 1994:1–5).

Simply put then, the goal of sociology is to better understand social life with the hope that this understanding will lead to methods to improve it. Achieving this goal requires uncovering hidden aspects of society, aspects that are difficult to observe due to our own experiences and understandings of the social world. Certain tools are needed in this endeavor such as intellectual drills that dig beneath the surface, devices to see through walls, surveillance equipment, and vivid imaginations.

It was C. Wright Mills (Mills 1959) who coined the term **sociological imagination** to refer to a way of seeing how personal problems can be viewed from a broader social perspective. To understand the concept of marital problems, for example, one must understand how gender and economic inequality on a much broader social scale might contribute to an individual couple who are experiencing personal difficulties. According to Mills, an understanding between personal troubles (at the micro level) and social issues (at the macro level) must be attained for any real knowledge of a subject to occur.

> **Sociological Imagination** a tool to understand society by analyzing how personal problems can be viewed from a broader social perspective.

THEORY, RESEARCH, AND APPLICATION THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF SOCIOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

Sociology is still concerned with all the aspects of social life that intrigued, and in many cases, confounded, the early theorists. In their attempts to understand society, the social philosophers and early social theorists developed different perspectives, or theories, in their analyses of social phenomena. The three major approaches to **sociological theory** that emerged were structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.

> **Sociological Theory** a complex framework of ideas based on explaining social phenomena. The three major sociological theories are structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.

SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Structural Functionalism

Structural functionalism, referred to by some sociologists as simply functionalism, is founded on the observation that society is in many ways analogous to an organism or machine, which has various internal and interdependent parts that make up the whole. Another analogy is the human body; the human body is comprised of separate but mutually dependent parts, i.e., the heart, liver, lungs, and skin. Society is considered "healthy" if the parts are providing their various purposes, or "functions". Functional parts of society that have prescribed purposes are the social institutions—the economy, the government, education, families, and religion. Some proponents of structural functionalism

include August Comte, considered by many to be the "father of sociology"; Herbert Spencer, orig-inator of the concept of survival of the fittest; Emile Durkheim, and Talcott Parsons.

An important component of structural functionalist theory was created by Robert K. Mer-ton who distinguished between functions—those aspects of society that contribute to maintaining cohesion and order and dysfunctions—the aspects that undermine social stability. Merton noted how functions and dysfunctions have both manifest and latent properties: manifest refers to those properties of functions and dysfunctions that are easy to observe and are usually intended, and latent refers to the properties that are harder to observe and that are often unintended. Therefore, as an example, a manifest function of the internet would be the ease in getting information very rapidly while a manifest dysfunction would be incorrect or inappropriate material that could be received; a latent function of the internet would be the jobs that are created in the high-tech industry (which one day will be considered low-tech) and a latent function would be that as hardware changes, the old, outdated products will frequently end up in a landfill. Virtually all aspects of society can be viewed from this matrix and it can be a valuable tool in the development of a sociological imag-ination in studying social problems. This model is especially useful in our approach which uses a dialectic perspective that helps us to argue the sides of a debate; therefore, it is a key component of this text.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory, sometimes called social conflict theory, is another sociological perspective, and is rooted in the idea that some people in society create and perpetuate a social system in which they obtain and maintain power. Society is then split into the "haves" who have the power through greater access to social, economic, and political resources, and the "have nots" who lack this access. The haves try to maintain control and advantage and the have nots seek to attain equality. Therefore, class, racial, and gender distinctions (among others), create an unequal society—a veritable ball of conflict.

Along with its offshoot *critical theory*, conflict theory is important in understanding social phe-nomena from the perspective that power struggles are inherent as different groupings of people attempt to coexist. Conflict theorists point out that inequities must be rectified to promote a just society, therefore they maintain a vigilant focus on the issue of power differentials. Conflict theorists often have an element of activism in their approach as social change toward equality is a priority in their theorizing. Conflict theorists such as Karl Marx, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, W.E.B. Du Bois, and C. Wright Mills focused on the inequalities of society and promote measures to rectify them.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism, sometimes referred to as simply interactionism and the last of the "Big Three" sociological theories, is a theoretical position that uses a micro level of analysis (as opposed to the macro level approach of the structural/functionalists and conflict theorists) to understand society. Proponents of this perspective pay close attention to how the individual person is affected by the larger social systems. For example, social class distinctions often create labels for individuals that become hard to remove. A "self-fulfilling prophecy" often occurs when the individual then

begins to accept the label and play out the role that has been predicted for people of that class distinction.

Understanding that macro levels of analysis are sometimes incomplete in understanding human behavior, this microsociology examines the interplay that exists between people and groups and seeks to understand the symbols, including language and gestures that promote this interaction. Researchers who advocate an interactionist perspective often use ethnographies (or field studies) for, as we will see in the next section, this research methodology tends to better capture the lived experiences of the people and groups under study. Symbolic interactionists include George Herbert Mead, Herbert Blumer, the Chicago School of Sociology theorists, Erving Goffman, and Arlie Hochschild.

SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Sociological research is a key component of all scientific disciplines and, of course, sociology is no exception. Sociology relies on the scientific method which requires strong empirical verification of any claims about social life and doesn't accept common sense explanations. The process of understanding social problems, with the assistance of the scientific method helps reveal these answers—most sociologists find social problems fascinating, like putting together pieces of a complex puzzle (Dentler 1968:11).

> **Sociological Research** a systematic process of exploring phenomena using various methodologies to better understand the social world.

The sociologist studying social problems believes one must determine the "social facts" before launching into a study of specific problems (Dentler 1968). Durkheim ([1892] 2014) states we need to observe social facts as things, meaning we need to study a social phenomenon objectively, delving into it deeply and perceiving it as an external object. That is often easier said than done (suppose you want to study the sexual abuse of children) but being objective and "value free" in our research can help us tremendously. Max Weber believed instead that we should take an empathetic position in understanding the point of view of subjects we are observing—he referred to this subjective position as *verstehen* (Weber [1922] 2013).

Sociologists use a variety of methods to assist in this endeavor such as surveys, field studies (also called observational or ethnographic studies), experiments, analysis of existing data, and program evaluation. Sometimes a theoretical perspective drives the research process (called the deductive approach) and sometimes, the theoretical perspective arises in the course of the research (termed the inductive approach). Theory and research are both needed to promote scientific analysis. Social science research can be seen as progressing through a series of stages—although there are many stage models of this process, Schaefer (2014) proposes this formulation:

1. Identifying the problem under study

2. Conducting a literature review of other research studies in the area

3. Formulating an idea of the relationship between the variables under study (the hypothesis)

4. Gathering the data
   - Surveys
   - Field studies (also called observational studies or ethnographies)

- Experiments
- Use of existing sources

5. Analyzing the data (using statistical methods) and developing a conclusion

6. Preparing the study for examination by others (such as publication in peer reviewed journals or other media)

After the research is published, other social scientists interested in the topic will often complete their own studies, noting the strengths and weaknesses of previous ones to guide their own projects, moving us closer to a clearer understanding of the social problems under study, and hopefully provide some ideas on how to deal with them.

Social scientists use a specific approach for investigating answers to their research questions. These approaches are referred to as research methods since they are tools used to explore and explain phenomenon in the social world. The two main approaches or methodologies are qualitative methods and quantitative methods. Qualitative methods collect data in such a way that it can be converted to numbers, however the raw data itself may take the form of open-ended or semi-structured interviews, field notes taken while conducting observations or field research, or using archival records. These are methods of data collection that take social scientists out into the world as they "do sociology". The data collected is contextually rich and contains a great deal of information that must be coded carefully by the researcher.

In contrast, quantitative methods seek to answer research questions about the social world with information that is either already in numeric form or can be easily converted to numeric form for statistical analysis. Examples of quantitative research methods include using data that is collected through a survey in-person, online, or via the phone. Another approach is for a researcher to design a survey that is employed by field technicians in the respondents' home or place of business. This is more common when researchers want to measure concepts very precisely and a respondent may not know the answer (example, weight, memory tests). The data is then converted to numbers and imported into statistical software to find connections and look for causal relationships. The most common type of quantitative method is using secondary data, such as the U.S. Census data, to explore answers to a research question. In this case, the researcher does not collect data, they employ statistical software to analyze data already collected.

While quantitative approaches aim to state that one condition influences another through tests run in statistical analysis, qualitative approaches are more likely to describe social processes in rich detail. Increasingly, researchers utilize both quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate social life. This approach is called mixed methods. Quantitative methods are often used to provide demographic information and answers to close ended questions while qualitative methods are employed to elicit contextually rich details that tell a story. Through the use of both methods social scientists can stitch together various aspects of social life that take place across diverse platforms and domains. As social life grows increasingly complex and is experienced virtually through social media as well as through face-to-face interactions, the combination of these two methodologies will become increasingly useful for social scientists to unpack the multitude of ways social forces impact and are related to our individual lives.

Social science research is published in peer-reviewed academic journals. Peer-reviewed means that a published study has been thoroughly reviewed for correct methods, ethics, theory, etc. by

other social scientists practicing in the field. The most prestigious peer-reviewed sociological journals are published by the American Sociological Association (ASA), the national organization for sociologists. It is home to 14 scholarly journals, all of which can be accessed electronically for free for students through library database search engines. Other reliable sociological research can be accessed online in the form of research briefs from organizations such as the Pew Research Center, The U.S. Census Bureau, The Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, and other organizations affiliated with universities, academic think tanks, and the U.S. government. These are all valuable sources for the debates you will engage in during this course. Substantiating your argument with reliable data is the foundation of any debate in the social science issues.

APPLICATION/PRACTICE

Another key element in this trichotomy is the **application of sociological knowledge**. Being able to take the knowledge obtained from theory and research is hopefully transferred to actual practice, or application, to better the lives of people. Practitioners who work with homeless populations, in child advocacy programs, or are employed with women's shelters are examples of specialists who apply sociology in their work lives. While the focus on social theory and research is often referred to as "pure sociology", the focus on application is generally called "applied sociology" or, in a more specialized form such as family therapy, "clinical sociology". Another growing area of the discipline focuses on providing sociological knowledge to a general audience to promote social change, an area called "public sociology". Sociologists such as Jane Addams, Robert Park, and Louis Wirth, worked diligently to improve the lives of people by applying sociological principles to their work with the homeless, victims of crime, recent immigrants, children, and others.

> **Application of Sociological Knowledge**   the practical use of the findings from sociological theory and research to assist in solving human problems.

Majoring in Sociology

College students and graduate students who major in sociology are trained to research and synthesize information as well as to analyze statistical data to find patterns and trends. This breadth of skills can translate to career opportunities in research and analysis. Research analysts use quantitative methodology to analyze data from surveys and studies. For example, the U.S. Census Bureau survey data must be analyzed and sociologists are often employed to analyze raw data and turn it into the charts and graphs you see in your textbooks on various social issues such as average household income, poverty statistics, etc. Private companies also collect data for their own use and employ trained sociologists to analyze their data as well. Sociologists are also employed at research think tanks and government agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control, the Brookings Institution, the Human Rights Watch and many other large national organizations. These agencies employ sociologists to analyze data and to conduct research and communicate findings in data briefs or reports.

Sociology majors have excellent communication, research and analytic skills coupled with an understanding of demographics. This makes them attractive to marketing, advertising and public relations firms where they are employed to assist companies in understanding their target audience and working in marketing and advertising.

Community organizations such as non-profits often hire sociologists since they are trained to understand and work with marginalized and diverse sub-populations. These types of careers range from working in the community to heighten awareness about social issues, to working as social media managers, or training and recruiting employees. Sociologists are also well represented in education, as high school teachers or with advanced degrees, as college professors.

According to research by the American Sociological Association's Research and Development department, nearly two-thirds of individuals with sociology degrees reported holding jobs closely related to what they learned as sociology majors and these respondents also indicated they were very satisfied with their current jobs (Spalter-Roth and Vooren, 2008).

SOCIAL PROBLEMS AS A SUBFIELD OF SOCIOLOGY

Sociology, as we have seen, is a very broad science discipline. The study of human social life obviously encompasses many aspects such as the sociology of deviance, race, ethnicity, gender, stratification, and the social institutions of government, economy, family, religion, and education. Sociology has even stretched its tentacles into the study of sports, urban legends, modern technology, and pop culture. A glance through the sociology offerings in colleges and universities will show the rich variation in topics of study in the discipline. Among the various subfields is the scientific study of social problems, which is the focus of this text.

Social Problems the subfield of sociology that deals specifically with understanding the problems that confront society.

When one mentions the term **social problems**, many things often come to mind. Certainly, in our current epoch, terrorism would be considered a salient social problem, as would poverty and unemployment, crime, drug abuse, violence, school dropout, and discrimination in its various forms. Many academic disciplines are concerned with social problems, some with special problems as their focal point relevant to those areas of study. For example, the discipline of political science might be concerned with political terrorism and illegal immigration, economics might be primarily concerned with poverty and unemployment, and education might be concerned with school dropout rates and childhood obesity in the school system. Sociology is especially equipped to deal with the wide array of social problems, including those mentioned above, primarily due to its broad focus. To better understand the discipline of sociology, it is perhaps beneficial to look at some definitions.

The reader of this book should be aware that there is no single, standardized, commonly accepted definition of social problems. In fact, sociologists and other social scientists and theorists have attempted for a very long time to define and analyze the term. Some questions arise:

- What constitutes a social problem?

- Who determines when something is a social problem?

- Can a social problem exist if people are unaware of it?

- Can it (or should it) be eliminated in full or part?

- What is the origin of the problem?

- What is the scope of the problem?

- What will happen if it is eliminated (i.e., will other problems be created)?

Writing very early about this subfield, Case (1924) offers some insight into the terminology of the term "social problems" by explaining that a *problem* is anything "thrown upon", or pushed into someone's field of attention; a social problem, then, is a current condition that "attracts the attention of a considerable number of competent observers within a society, and appeals to them as calling for readjustment or remedy by social, i.e. collective action, or some kind or another" (p. 627). This early interpretation closely resembles the more modern definition of social problems by Kornblum and Julian (2009) as "when enough people in a society agree that a condition exists that threatens the quality of their lives and their most cherished values, and they also agree that something should be done to remedy that condition" (p. 4).

Dentler (1968) provides us with this insight about social problems:

A social problem is not a thing but an event located in the changing network of relations between social groups, the environment, and technology. The magnitude of any one social problem is a product of the scale of the network in question. A vast social problem like war is, for the most part, located in the relations between whole societies. Poverty tends to be rooted in relations between a national economy, the political structure, and the family system.

(Dentler 1968:7)

Therefore, social problems are intricately connected with various social institutions and vary in interest and intensity due to the conditions of different time periods.

Social problems then, as a subfield of sociology, studies and addresses the concerns of social life: problems in the social institutions, problems in social structure, and problems of inequality and seeks to offer reform strategies for those problems. We will now turn to an examination of the essential elements that comprise a social problem.

ELEMENTS OF A SOCIAL PROBLEM

Jamrozik and Nocella (1998:2) give some additional insight into the definition of a social problem by considering its essential elements. They claim that to be considered a social problem the situation in question must:

- Have a clearly identifiable origin

- Contain a real or perceived threat to a society's values and beliefs

- Possess the potential for remediation, resolution, or alleviation of the problem

Without an understanding of the origin of an individual level problem, it is difficult to analyze, much less develop ways to deal with it; the same is, of course true with a social problem. For example, attempting to understand and alleviate poverty is an area that would be difficult without an understanding of the factors that lead to the condition (called the "etiology" of the problem). Social scientists rely on theoretical perspectives, as addressed earlier, to assist in this endeavor; for example, those sociologists who adopt the structural/functionalism theoretical position might consider how

the role of social disorganization might be the primary contributor to poverty; proponents of the conflict model might note how greed in a capitalist society is a prime contributor; and symbolic interactionists might observe how the labeling of individuals creates situations that make it difficult to better their living conditions, leading to poverty.

The issue under consideration as a social problem must also carry a real or perceived threat to a group's cherished cultural values. Real threats are an obvious concern—a terrorist attack is a tangible danger to human life and basic beliefs (i.e., in a free society, people should be protected from unprovoked attacks). Perceived, as opposed to actual threats, are also a concern because, as the Thomas Theorem states, if people perceive situations as real, even though they are not based on fact, the situations can be very real in their consequences (Thomas and Thomas 1928). For example, if it is believed by the populace that an elected governmental official is going to push for measures to take away certain citizen rights, even if these claims are simply a matter of negative campaigning by the opponent, it could cost the candidate votes, even if the politician has no intention of doing so.

The potential for a remedy for, or at the least alleviation of, the problem is also a major condition for designation as a social problem. There is no social problem for which there is no possible means for at least alleviation of the effect to some degree. Structural functionalists would normally agree that the social institution whose function it is to help correct the problem needs to enhance their abilities to do so or to receive assistance from other institutions that have a lesser role regarding the problem, at least in the short run. Conflict theorists would ascertain that intervention efforts be implemented that will create equality in society. Symbolic interactionists would seek remedy on a more micro level, such as in the family or community. We will now look at various ways in which social problem formulation has been conceptualized as a process.

THE PROCESS OF SOCIAL PROBLEM FORMATION

It is useful to use a stage model to better understand the process that many social problems go through. Although, there have been many process models to explain how social problems develop, Best's model (2013) provides a highly beneficial way to understand this process. He adopts a natural history model that posits a universal series of stages in the process. These stages include:

- Claimsmaking, in which people assert that a certain social problem exists and needs remedy

- Coverage by the media that report the alleged social problem to a wider audience

- Public awareness and a resulting call for action

- The development of policies by lawmakers and other agents

- Social problems work, whereby the policies are put into place

- Evaluation of the outcomes or responses that were enacted to address the problems

In these models of social problem development, it is noted there must be an observation of a suspected problem followed at some point by actions promulgated to remedy the problem. But at

what point is there a consensus that the situation is indeed a problem for society to address? And what method is used to analyze the problem (analysis of the second part of our definition of social problems, if you remember). And lastly, what process allows open discussion about facets of the problem and possible solutions? Crone (2007) asks an important question in this regard: which social problem should we (as a society) attempt to solve first? Should we look at the perceived degree of seriousness of the various problems? Or perhaps attempt to determine how many people are negatively affected by the problem? These should be questions we address in our college classrooms debates.

Although there are experts in all areas considered social problems, they are often not the voices that are heard or endowed to have the final word on remediation. For example, if research studies result in data that are not acceptable to politicians, it can simply be suppressed or denied. In democratic societies, there must be a consensus that the thing is indeed a problem and there is a preferred way to fix it. This is where the activity called debate comes in to the picture.

USING DEBATE IN ADDRESSING SOCIAL PROBLEMS

A good question a student of social problems might ask is: why debate? Why not just read about social problems or even discuss them informally? Debate in an academic format offers many benefits to students. Freeley (1990) lists seventeen such benefits but for purposes of this persuasive argument, We have merged them into fewer categories:

- Debate develops critical thinking through focused inquiry, investigation, and careful analysis of contemporary social problems

- Debate develops other skills such as critical listening, note-taking, and enhanced speaking ability

- Debate is great preparation for future participation in a democratic society

- Debate promotes mature judgment, courage, discipline, and self-esteem

- Debate encourages student participation in discussion, competition, and scholarship by better understanding all sides of an argument

- Debate promotes ethical decision-making, rapid and logical responses, and argumentation skills in general

- Debate helps promote quality instruction by creating a focused and meaningful mentor/ protégé relationship between teacher and student

- Debate develops specific skills that can be useful in fields such as law, politics, business, government or any other discipline requiring human discourse

- Debate's interdisciplinary approach provides a more comprehensive student education experience by introducing or enhancing student knowledge of sociology, philosophy, political science, economics, psychology, and others.

In addition, Pfau, Thomas, and Ulrich (1987) add this one:

- Debate develops proficiencies that can be useful later in professional training such as law school (p. 14). Also, graduate training in many areas of social science will certainly also benefit from a knowledge and history of debating. Anyone who has ever defended a graduate level thesis or dissertation can vouch for this.

Debate has had a long history in attempting to deal with the various social problems throughout the ages. Debating these issues has helped to illuminate them, and to expose them for greater analysis, and hopefully to ascertain which policies might better alleviate these policies. If the primary reasons to study social problems are to gain greater understanding of them and to promote policy efforts to eliminate them or to reduce their deleterious effects, debate can be a very useful tool in addressing the goals of social problems. We will now observe how history has, and can be, useful in studying social problems, especially in college classrooms.

> **Debate**   a rational process of arguing both sides of an issue with the hope of developing critical thinking skills.

Debate is defined by Pfau, Thomas, and Ulrich as "a process in which people argue for opposing sides of a conflict, using rational rules and methods in preference to force or emotions, to obtain a decision for one side or the other by an objective third party" (1987:4). It is closely related to argumentation, which is "an evidence based process by which one person may convince another of the rightness of his or her point of view" (Joshi 2016:279). Successful classroom debate, then, involves a comprehensive understanding of a subject, derived through the process of producing evidence and convincing someone to accept a perspective as valid. Through this process, critical thinking on important matters can occur.

In its various forms, the practice of debating has been used differently across the world with a common purpose—to persuade others on a point. Ancient Romans and Greeks used debate to influence major policy decisions. Greek philosopher Socrates, his follower Plato, and later Plato's heir apparent Aristotle, saw debate to better understand the human condition and to develop ways to enhance social life, in contrast to the sophists (itinerant instructors) who thought the goal of debating issues should be to develop competitive skills. Throughout the world, debaters have argued points to combat social conditions deemed harmful to society. Since debate is an intellectual exercise, it is no wonder it has been used in university settings around the globe.

In mid-eighteenth century America, students at Harvard and Yale universities debated theological issues in college classrooms, though the subjects of debate eventually changed to discussions of secular concerns; these debates were delivered in the vernacular, rather than Latin. Along with literary societies, debating societies formed in the universities and such great minds as Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, Daniel Webster, William Jennings Bryan, and Thomas Jefferson were developed in the art of debate. Therefore, students who are actively involved in the debate process are following in the path of some of the great minds who worked to alleviate the country's social problems.

Debating in America's colleges and universities has changed since the early days but the purpose of analyzing social problems through the dialectic process of weighing two sides of an issue is the same process by which laws and policies are made on a larger stage. Careful deliberation and logical reasoning on various concerns assist citizens (or students in a college classroom) in creating a clearer picture of the issue. Each chapter in this text is oriented to giving the student information

about the specific problem under review and promoting critical thinking through debates. As we become better educated about social problems and obtain skills in debating these issues in the class-room, we should be better equipped to deal with them in the real world.

GUIDELINES FOR DEBATES

There are many ways to structure debates for the use in classroom debates. Some of these are formal such as the Lincoln-Douglas style, in which two participants (one-on-one) take turns at a podium or other central location to debate issues. This style is normally used for those issues which have strong moral or ethical foundations. This type of debate focuses on logic and the communication of ideas.

There are also the parliamentary styles which have American and British formats and consist of two teams which address issues with little preparation for the topic—the topic is announced just prior to the debate. This format has four construction speeches and two rebuttals which are timed. This style of debate focuses on prior logical reasoning and persuasion more than the understanding of the content under debate.

Spontaneous argumentation is an informal style of debate in which two debaters are given a topic with little advance preparation. While this type of debate develops skills in persuasion and communication, it also does not require a full understanding of the topic under study.

While any of these styles can be used in classroom debates, the goal in this course is to intro-duce students to pressing social issues which require remedy, rather than just promoting argumen-tation skills, as with the parliamentary and spontaneous formats. And since the one-on-one format of the Lincoln-Douglas and spontaneous debates fails to have the benefits of group engagement, it is recommended that students work in two groups—one for and one against a certain issue; two to four people per group seems to work well. The group works together and individually in research-ing a topic and together create a strategy in presenting their side's argument.

The professor will provide a list of ground rules for the debaters (e.g., to be respectful, to respond directly to the responses of the other team) and for the audience (e.g., to remain quiet during the debate, to respectfully comment on issues after the debate). As moderator, the professor will then identify who goes first (by coin flip or some other means), and that group provides an opening statement of their position which will be followed by an opening statement of the oppos-ing side. Then follows a point/counterpoint volley until the moderator decides it is time to end the debate, at which time both sides provide a summation of their arguments. When the debate is over (and normally after an applause from the audience—the other students in the class), discus-sion continues as the audience makes comments about observations and/or their points of view. The audience participation is an important part of the debate as other perspectives are discussed and shared, augmenting the information received from the debate itself. A rubric for debating will be provided and your professor will share how the debates will be graded in your class syllabus. It should be remembered the goal of debating social issues in the classroom should always be the acquisition of critical learning skills rather than focusing solely on competition, therefore "winning" a debate is not a focal point. It is recommended that students use as many sociological concepts as possible in their debates. It is also recommended that students use Merton's concept of manifest/

latent functions and dysfunctions to create a more sociologically focused debate and to explore not only the obvious aspects of a particular side but also those hidden beneath the surface. We should always remember that the person we learn from is the person who offers an alternative perspective.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- The discipline of sociology is concerned with understanding social life. One means of pursuing this end is using the sociological imagination, a device that helps understand individual troubles as larger social issues.

- The sociological enterprise has its foundations in theory, research and application. The "Big Three" theoretical perspectives are structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism; these act as guides in understanding the complexities of social life. Structural functionalism sees the world as an interactive system of parts (social institutions) that are interdependent and function to create a healthy society. Conflict theory notes the inequalities that exist in society between those that have access to resources and those who do not. Symbolic interactionism is a micro level theory that focuses on small group interactions and how information is communicated to other groups and these interactions produce social norms.

- With its various methodologies, research involves a systematic process of understanding the science of society. The research process, involving quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods, seeks to discover the meanings, often hidden, in social life.

- The application of sociological knowledge, the product of this enterprise, uses what we learn from theory and research to benefit society. This is especially important in social problems, as applied sociologists seek to find remedies for these problems.

- Social Problems is a subfield of sociology and seeks to understand those dysfunctions that exist in society and seeks to remedy, or at least alleviate, those dysfunctions. There are a variety of models that assist sociologists in this aim.

- Debate can be an effective way to develop the critical skills needed to fully grasp the complexities of social problems and the possible interventions that could assist in correcting these problems. By examining the latent as well as the manifest functions and dysfunctions of the interventions, we can hopefully come to a better understanding of social problems.

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CHAPTER 2

Work and the Economy

KEY TERMS

Alienation	Mixed Economy
Capitalism	Production
Communism	Socialism
Consumption	Social Mobility
Distribution	Social Stratification
Economy	Socioeconomic Status

ABOUT THE PROBLEM: WORK AND THE ECONOMY

Concepts Associated with Work and Economy

Economy
production, distribu–
tion, and consumption
of goods and services.

The commonly used definition of the **economy** is "the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services". We will review the components of this definition in a few minutes but let's first have a good sociological examination of this necessary social institution. The economy is one of several other social institutions along with the family, government, education, and religion. Social institutions are macro level establishments created by human societies to meet some social need. The social institution of the economy is concerned with how goods (tangible creations) and services (activities done for others) are produced, distributed, and consumed, or in the case of services, pro-

Production the
process of creating
goods for human needs
and wants.

vided. **Production** refers to how *goods* are made. For example, factories produce cars, appliances, clothes, and other items. Individuals or small groups are also involved in the production process by making items such as baked goods, leather and other crafts, clothes, etc. *Services* are also created by both large and small organizations and involve such activities provided for others such as clothes dry cleaning, haircuts, private investigation, car repair, ride sharing, and others.

Distribution the
process in which
goods and services are
allocated, dispensed, or
rendered.

  Distribution refers to how goods and services are allocated, dispensed, or rendered to others. The movement of goods and provision of services to people keep the economy running. There is a growing area of business called "logistics" which involves this idea of distribution. Goods must be moved to different areas in a variety of ways (railroad, air, trucking, and perhaps one day, drones) and they must also be stored in a variety of places (storage centers and warehouses, distribution centers) and they must also be protected by security agencies (private or public), using personnel, signage, cameras etc.

Consumption refers to how goods and services are used by people who obtain them. People consume food and other items and often employ such services as a lawn service to maintain their yards. We are obviously all consumers of both goods and services. Consumerism is a very important area of concern in modern society and is obviously a concern of businesses, which operate on a supply and demand model of production based on how people consume goods and services.

So, every society must have some means of dealing with how economies fulfill the functions of production, consumption, and distribution of its goods and services. In fact, even very early human societies had traditional economies which were primarily agrarian and created customs and ritualistic behavior. Now many economies are considered global in scope (not surprisingly, these are called global economies) and many countries and cultures are involved in the transnational trade of goods and services. It is not difficult to see how relationships based on global economies shape the political relations between countries.

Other terms should be noted here: *income* refers to the wages people earn and is distinguish-able from *wealth*, which consists of the financial assets of people or corporations. *Assets* are things that people own that have value and that can be used in an exchange if desired. Currently most Americans have few assets and normally their homes and private real estate property constitute their largest asset (Rousseau 2004:121).

> **Consumption** the way in which goods and services are used; the final process in the utilization of goods and services.

FIGURE 2.1 An example of changes in the institution of marriage – specifically the legal marriages of same-sex couples.

Source: Sira Anamwong/Shutterstock.com

Social Stratification
a process in which
people are located
in levels based on
their socioeconomic
situations.

**Socioeconomic
Status**   a certain
social status that places
a person within the
economic system.

Social Mobility   the
potential for people to
move from one social
stratum to another.

Closely related to the economic concepts mentioned above are social class, social status, social role, socioeconomic status, social stratification, and social mobility. *Social class* refers to a category of people who have a similar lifestyle or set of life circumstances. *Social status* refers to a position that a person occupies within one of the various groups he or she occupies and the related term *social role* refers to the set of expectations that come with occupying a status. **Social stratification** involves a hierarchal distinction which is often depicted as a ladder, pyramid, or teardrop with gradients; some classes of people are at the top of this structure—the capitalist or upper class, and are followed in descending order by the upper middle, middle, working class, and lower class. A person's **socioeconomic status** (commonly referred to as SES) reflects that person's position in this hierarchy and is generally measured by that person's income, education, and type of occupation.

Social mobility refers to the potential for someone to move from one of these social levels to another; this movement could be upward, downward, or consist of a slight movement within the same strata. Therefore, someone might occupy a status (position) of a working–class employee, and have the expectation (role) of being a hard-working person who strives to move up in the occupation. The status the person occupies is contained within the stratification system and different levels of drive, aptitude, luck, and life circumstances help determine if the person will be able to obtain social mobility, normally desired as upward mobility and within the same generation.

Wealth inequality exists due to the varied levels of access to resources and has significant implications for society. Wealth inequality (including income inequality) can be observed at different levels—inequality that exists among a nation's citizens, inequality as compared between nations, and inequality as observed from a global perspective (see Milanovic 2011). At the national level, the issue of changes in the U.S. economy that have created inequality are especially troubling due to four factors: the decrease in wages results in a corresponding decrease in labor participation by males and lower marriage rates, which are correlated with higher poverty rates; a large wage gap in social mobility and opportunity resulting in greater social distance between social groups; higher unemployment rates due to people believing they are unable to overcome barriers to opportunity; and a lessening of civil engagement (such as voting) which can be detrimental to democratic ideals. Interestingly, American concerns over inequality are more related to economic and social dysfunctions as opposed to European countries where income inequality draws more concerns over ethics and morality (Blank 2011).

It is indeed part of the American Dream to be able to move from a lower class to the higher classes in one generation, a movement termed upward *intrageneration mobility*; however, it is more likely that *horizontal mobility*, moving slightly upward within the same class, is more likely for most people. Examples of the much beloved "rags to riches stories" are admired in our culture as reinforced by the media; however, this idea can be more myth than reality (Rousseau 2004:133). In addition, this ideal can create inspiration for some to work hard to obtain upward mobility; it can also be defeating to those who have numerous barriers to overcome to achieve financial rewards.

Although there are many different variations of economic institutions, there are two basic structures, based on complex economic theories: capitalism and socialism/communism. We will examine both in more detail.

Capitalism

Capitalism an economic system in which the means of production and property are privately owned through the activity of free competition, profit accumulation, and limited governmental regulation.

Capitalism is so imbedded in our understanding of the economy in the U.S., we rarely think about it. We work for someone who pays us for our products or services and we hope to make more

income than we must expend on other things we want or need. Hopefully our wages will allow us to pay our rent, tuition, automobile costs, recreation, etc., and hopefully put money in savings. We understand our boss will make more than us, and that people at the higher levels will make more than those below. We also understand that our wages will be taxed. But we rarely consider all the ramifications of this economic system.

Reflecting the economic thought of Adam Smith (amply outlined in his book *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776/1994), normally just shortened to *The Wealth of Nations*), capitalism refers to an economic structure that focuses on a free market system rather than government intervention to set up the structure of providing, distributing, and consuming goods and services. In a capitalistic system, there is a private ownership of the means of production, a profit motive, free competition, and a laissez-faire form approach to government. Private ownership of components of the economic system is therefore a key characteristic in capitalism, removing the government of functions in this area.

The motivations for maintaining these functions are primarily the accumulation of money and financial gain. The profit motive is to obtain a surplus, of money in financial transactions. In other words, a company tries to make a profit by making more than it expends; if a bicycle manufacturer must spend a certain amount of money for parts to create the products (the bicycles) such as tires, chains, and headlights, and labor costs to people to put them together, the manufacturer hopes to sell the bikes for more than expended to produce them. This surplus, or profit, is what drives the capitalistic system. People and businesses work hard to create profits for themselves which will be used to purchase other goods and services from other providers.

Free competition is another important component in capitalism. People are allowed (and, of course, encouraged) to freely compete against each other in attempts to gain more profits for themselves and their business organizations. According to this ideology, unregulated (or loosely regulated) competition ("laissez-faire") results in better products and services since people are constantly trying to, according to an old saying, "build a better mousetrap", or more appropriately today, "build a better smart phone". If a corporation comes up with a great new technological innovation and everyone scrambles to buy this product, competitors will then "up their game" to outdo the competition in attempts to gain the most profit. For this to happen, there must be unfettered access to the competitive field, in other words there must be a "level playing field" for the players in the competition. Obviously, capitalists espouse an absence of regulation of competition; a monopoly, in which one business concern has total access to a market, cannot be allowed in capitalism. For example, if one company has exclusive access to a certain industry, competition cannot occur. The role of government in capitalism should be to simply regulate any possibility for a business concern monopolizing an industry, but not get involved in the production, distribution, or consumption process. A possible inherent problem here is that although companies compete to eliminate the competition (so they can make more profit), they cannot eliminate competition completely, or the system will be prevented from working.

For capitalism to work in its purest form, the government must adopt a laissez-faire (hands off) approach and not get involved in regulation of the economy. The idea is to let the "invisible hand" of supply and demand run the economy as it is believed freedom from government regulation and a reliance on the system itself is more effective. The concept of a "trickle-down" economic model follows this logic—less regulation and additional incentives to the capitalists results in more

investments in business, allowing economic opportunity to "trickle down" to the workers, who are then able to experience higher incomes and upward social mobility.

Is "trickle-down economics" an effective economic policy to strengthen the U.S. economy and increase jobs?

Pro: Cutting taxes for high-income tax brackets leaves more money for investors to boost the economy.
Con: High-income tax brackets should pay higher taxes to help the government invest in the economy.

For capitalism to work correctly, businesses (or individuals for that matter) must be motivated by *self*-interest, that is, they must be concerned about creating profits for themselves and not worry about the welfare of competitors. While this may sound self-serving or apathetic about the needs of others, the idea of a self-interest motivation is logical in this framework. If a business is concerned about a competitor and reduces its level of innovation to help the competitor keep up, no one benefits. The business does not create a profit because it is being "pulled down" by a less capable competitor, the competitor gets some of the profits even though they are undeserved, and consumers are negatively affected because they receive an inferior product or service, or one that takes longer to surface. Obviously, there is an element of "survival of the fittest" here—the most capable producers or servicers will stay in business and create wealth while others will reap less of a surplus or simply disappear from the scene.

A common complaint about capitalism centers around the idea that self-interest being a good and desirable thing—some say this is a justification for acting in an egoist, or self-serving way and to treat people who are in financial straits with derision. The "survival of the fittest" idea mentioned earlier also serves as a justification for those with more money to feel superior to those without.

Socialism and Communism

Socialism an economic system in which the means of production are collectively possessed and the motivation is to provide for all citizen's needs.

Communism per Marx, the phase after socialism in which the economic conditions create a classless system.

The intellectual and theoretical position of socialism/communism was best developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. In their writings, they decried what they saw as the inherent problem with capitalism—the idea that capitalism creates and helps maintain inequality in society. **Socialism** is an economic structure that seeks to thwart social inequality through the public ownership of the means of production, the removal of a profit motive, a reliance on government to control economic activity and equal allocation of resources. **Communism**, in Marxist thought, will follow socialism and will no longer require resource allocation by government officials.

It would be ideal if everyone had an equal playing field (to use the maxim mentioned earlier), but this is not the case. Some people who are equally capable of benefitting society as their wealthy counterparts never get the chance because they did not have the same "connections" or other advantages. For example, many people in the top tiers of business went to the better preparatory schools, Ivy League universities, and rubbed elbows with other well-to-do individuals. Better than anyone, Marx, with his colleague Engels, extrapolated what many see as the evils of capitalism. In direct opposition to Adam Smith, Marx and Engels saw capitalism as not being a case of survival of