Chapter One
How Sociologists View Social Problems

• The Sociological Imagination
  • Three questions that all sociologists should ask There are Three Questions that sociologists asks, that directly reflect the sociological imagination:
    • What is the structure of society as a whole? (components, relationships, similarities, differences, change, etc.)
    • What is the society’s place in history? (characteristics, changes, etc.)
    • What are the individuals in the society like? (types, dominant, treatment, interaction)
      • What is Human Nature?

• The term sociological imagination refers to an understanding between personal experiences and the social forces that shape them:
  • The sociological imagination enables us to see how the larger social forces in society effect us

• Sociological perspective and the sociological imagination
  • Sociological perspectives sensitizes us to the social forces that shape our experiences and our view of social problems
  • Sociological perspective points to the social context and social locations that shape our view of social problems

• Social contexts/social locations that shape our attitudes and behaviors to a social issue such as abortion:
  • Age and abortion
  • Gender and abortion
  • Race and abortion
  • Religion and abortion
  • Region of country and abortion

• It boils down to how the sociological imagination provides us with the tools to see how our social location age, gender and social class influence our attitudes and behaviors towards social problems
  • The sociological perspective gives us a framework for understanding social problems
• What Is a Social Problem?
  • The essential elements of a social problem

  • A social problem is something that is a concern in society and a condition that people want to change:
    • Social problem as an objective condition
      • Some aspect of society that can be measured or experienced
        • (Abortion: are they legal, who gets them, and why)
    • Social problem as a subjective concern
      • Concern that a significant number of people (or a number of significant people) have about the condition
        • (Abortion: pro choice vs. pro life views)

  • Social change and social problems
    • As society changes so do social problems:
      • Change results in new objective conditions
        • (Laws of divorce, homosexuality, abortion, etc.)
      • Change results in new subjective concerns
        • (Sexual beliefs, cohabitation, etc.)

  • Abortion as a social problem over time:
    • Abortion and objective conditions over time
    • Abortion and subjective concerns over time

• Social problems are relative to:
  • Group values
    • A social problem for some may be the solution for others
    • Look at Table 1-2 (pg. 6)
  • How one defines an issue (such as abortion)
  • Differences in group interests
  • Power and the ability to define and promote one’s definition of a social problem
    • Ability to get what you want regardless of what obstacles are in your way
    • Get people to do something they wouldn’t do
• The Natural History of Social Problems
  • Social problems have a history a life cycle of their own.
    • The First Stage: Defining the problem, the emergence of leaders, and beginning to organize:
      • Defining an objective condition as a problem
      • Leaders define the problem and bring it to the attention of other’s
      • Organizing the debate over the objective condition
    • The Second Stage: Crafting the official response:
      • Public forums and legislative hearings
      • Crafting the response to the social problem
    • The Third Stage: Reacting to the official response
      • Reactions to social problems can invoke strong emotional responses from all sides of an issue
    EXAMPLE:
      • The case of abortion for and against:
        • Pro-abortion
        • Anti-abortion
      • Official responses can lead to a new definition of a social problem and a reaction to it
    • The Fourth Stage: Developing alternative strategies
      • Anti-abortion groups and alternative strategies:
        • Antiabortion groups have focused their efforts on the state level
        • Eliminating federal funding for abortion such as the Hyde amendment
        • Antiabortion groups and the creation of crisis pregnancy centers
    • The Fourth Stage: Developing alternative strategies
      • Pro-abortion groups and alternative strategies:
        • Campaigning for pro-abortion politicians
        • Lobbying against restrictive legislation
        • Increasing public support
• Anti and pro abortion as a social movement

• Supreme court as an arbitrator between the two movements
  • The Supreme Court and Abortion
    • Roe v. Wade 1973
    • Webster v. Reproductive Services 1989
    • States have no obligation to finance abortion
    • States have a compelling interest to protect fetal life
    • Casey v. Planned Parenthood 1992
      • Women under age 18 obtain parental consent and 24 hour waiting period
    • Another important decision occurred in 1993 requiring picketers at abortion clinics to maintain a distance of 300 feet
• The Role of Sociology in Social Problems
  • Sociology as a tool for breaking through emotions and defenses
    • Five ways that sociology accomplishes breaking through emotions:
      • Measure objective conditions
      • Measure subjective concerns
      • Apply the sociological imagination
      • Identify different means to intervene in a social problem
      • Evaluate the consequences of social policies
  • Sociology and common sense
    • Going beyond common sense by debunking myths about social problems
    • Sociologist do this by applying the sociological approach to the study of social problems
  • Principles of the sociological approach:
    • Do not base conclusions on emotions or personal values be objective
    • Use the sociological imagination
    • Use of the scientific method
• **Methods for Studying Social Problems**
  • The vast majority of sociological studies follow one of four research designs.

  • **Case Study** a design used to obtain in depth information:
    • Focus on one case
    • Detailed information

  • **Survey** a method for the collection of information from a population to be studied:
    • Population to be studied
    • Random sample from the population
    • Generalize the findings back to the study population

  • **Experimental research** designs are a method for collecting data in a controlled environment much like a laboratory:
    • Research subjects are assigned to one of two groups
    • Experimental group and control group
    • Test the affect of an experimental variable in the experimental group

  • **Field studies** are research designs that are used to study people in their natural settings

• **Four basic methods of gathering data:**
  • **Interviews**
    • Structured
    • Unstructured

  • **Questionnaires**
    • Questions open ended and closed ended

  • **Documents**
    • Court records
    • Vital statistics
    • Letters
    • Diaries
    • Many types of records

  • **Observation**
    • Observing and recording
    • Overt
    • Covert
• **Issues in Studying Social Problems**
  • Should sociologists take sides?
    • Should sociologists define social problems?
      • Sociologists as scientific professionals
      • Sociologists as private citizens