Module 1

Social Problems

Lecture 1

Social Problems: Conceptual Understanding

In an effort to energise the students in Social Problems, we have chosen to use Stanley Eitzen, et al. (2009) *Social Problems* text. This text does not define and describe as much as it attempts to "look behind" the typical expectations associated with social problems. As the essentialists would contend, our text attempts to look past observable society, the descriptive level, to the causal level, which is often abstract and difficult to understand.

Students may find some of the material in Eitzen highly controversial. They may, in fact, vehemently disagree with some of the points raised. This is GOOD! You don't have to agree with the material. It is, after all, *only* a perspective – a way of looking at the social world – and we all have perspectives. We would hope that, in the process, students share their points of view. We would also hope that students will be open to understanding the perspectives encountered. There are seldom right or wrong answers in Sociology – only perspectives. The trick in a class like this is to be open to multiple perspectives.

Some Initial Observations

Social issues

> Social issues are political debates involving moral judgments about how people should live.

Social movement

> Social movements are an organized effort to encourage or discourage some dimension of social change.

Social policy

> Social policy is a formal strategy to shape some aspect of social life.

Social problems

> Social problems are societal induced conditions that harm any segment of the population. Social problems are also related to acts and conditions that violate the norms and values found in society.

Review of General Theory

Functionalist Theory

Understanding society from a functionalist perspective is to visualise society as a system where all the parts act together even though each part may be doing different things. Associated with the system is structure. In society, institutions, such as family, education, and religion are the parts of the social system. They are structures in society that social activity is organized around. The overall goal of the various structures (parts) is to maintain order in society. The structures in society promote integration, stability, consensus, and balance in society.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory is a theoretical framework which sees society as divided by inequality and conflict. Conflict theorists see society less as a cohesive system and more an arena of conflict and power struggles. Instead of people working together to further the goals of the "social system," people are seen achieving their will at the expense of others.

Symbolic Interactionist Theory

Symbolic interactionist theory is a theoretical framework that sees society as the product of individuals interacting with one another. The scope of investigation for these sociologists is very small. Interaction is generally face-to-face and addresses "everyday" activities. They are interested in the way individuals act toward, respond to, and influence one another in society. These kinds of sociologists are not interested in nation-states. They don't consider social institutions like the economy or government. Interactionists prefer to explore the interaction of individuals or groups of individuals. Each communication produces new perspectives, expectations, and boundaries that individuals use to assure continual interactions in the future. Society occurs as a result of interaction between individuals and small groups of individuals.

History of Social Problems Theory

The Medical Model

Eitzen et al. (2009: 6-7) contends that early sociologists replied on the medical model to understand society. They say "universal criteria for normality" and tended to assume that social problems were linked to "bad people." They were viewed as "abnormal because of mental deficiency, mental disorder, lack or education, or incomplete socialization.

These pathologies were a problem because they threatened to disrupt the moral order (Eitzen et al. 2009:7).

Absolutist Approach to Conditions in Society

In the 1920s and 1930's, using a variation on the above perspective, some sociologists focused on condition in society that fostered social problems. They investigated the process of migration, urbanization, and industrialization (Eitzen et al. 2009:7). They looked for "pockets of social disorganization" (e.g., areas of the city that have high rates of in and out migration also have high rates of crime).

Modern Studies of Deviance

In the recent past, sociologists have returned to "the study of problem individuals" (Eitzen et al. 2009:7). Eitzen et al (2009) point out two variations in the study of modern deviance.

(a) <u>Merton – Social Strain Theory</u>

Society provides goals and means to achieve those goals. Deviance occurs when there people recognize the goals, but don't have sufficient means to achieve those goals.

(b) <u>Labeling Theory</u>

Others explore the role of society in "creating and sustaining deviance through labeling those people viewed as abnormal. Social reactions are viewed as the key in determining what a social problem is and who is deviant" (Eitzen et al. 2009:7).

The Subjective Nature of Social Problems

Some argue that what is considered a social problems is dependent on time and audience" (Eitzen et al. 2009:8). Unemployment is not a problem for everyone. Nor is racism and sexism. Pollution is not viewed the same by everyone.

Social Problems or Social Issues?

This perspective explored how "phenomena come to be defined as a social problem" (Eitzen et al. 2009:8). Who influences those decisions?

Toward a Definition of Social Problems

Objective Reality to Social Problems

Eitzen et al. (2009:8) argue that some social conditions are detrimental in any situation. In this sense, they have an objective character. There are conditions in society such as poverty, racism, sexism that cause material or psychological suffering for parts of the population. They prevent members of society from developing and using their full potential. This sort of suffering exists regardless of personal or cultural opinion. Those conditions are, therefore, social problems in any social setting.

    (a) Subjectivity

        A problem with this is that subjectivity is ever-present. The process of choosing a social condition to study in the first place is subjective.

    (b) Bias

        Bias is a preference or an inclination for something. Bias can inhibit impartial judgment. Realizing that we have biases is important. We have feelings and values. Such feelings and values determine what we study. However, once we have acknowledged our biases, we cannot only report facts that we discover that support our point of view.

All Social Research is Political

Regarding the study of anything social, the research is either going to look at the characteristics of the individual or the social system within which a "problem" occurs. One approach accepts the definition of deviance and the other "undermines" that accepted definition. In this case, both approaches are political, "yet there is a tendency to label as political only the research that challenges the system" (Eitzen et al. 2009:9). When research does point to systemic issues that harm the position of the poor, often the charge of Bias is raised.

We hear the charge of bias when "research gives credence in any serious way, to the perspective of subordinate groups in some hierarchical relationship" (Eitzen, 1986:7). Seeing bias on these terms is peculiar because "it is easily ascertained that many more studies are biased in the direction of the interests of responsible officials than the other way around.

We must not automatically accept only those definitions that define social problems from the point of view of those in power.

Official Definitions of Social Problems

One reason Eitzen et al. (2009:9) warns against accepting definitions of social problems provided by those in power. "The powerful can define social reality in a way that manipulates public opinion."

In the old south, slavery was not considered a problem, but slave revolts were.

In Salem, the persecution of witches was not a social problem, but witches were.

In the South prior to the Civil Rights era, Jim Crow laws were not a problem, but Rosa Parks was a problem when she wanted to sit down on a bus in Montgomery, ALA.

Public Opinion and the Media

The mass-media is a primary source that defines social problems for many of us.

(a) The powerful control the media

Powerful interests control the mass media and, therefore, control public opinion. Often "relevant issues" are defined by those who wield power through the mass media.

The powerful, through the mass media, can set the agenda.

(b) Conditions that affect the powerless are ignored

The media may overlook conditions that are detrimental to the relatively powerless segments of society.

Attention is diverted to specific social instances and away from the cause of many social problems. There is a tendency to focus on the characteristics of individuals. As Skolnick and Currie notes: "conventional social problem writing invariable returns to the symptoms of social ills rather than to the source" of those ills (Eitzen, 2000: 7).

It diverts attention from problems with the existing social order (see Eitzen, 2000: 7). By focusing on those who deviate, it often overlooks the role of society's powerful.

- We study the criminal instead of the law or the prison system that tends to perpetuate crime.
- We scrutinize the mentally ill rather than the quality of life or social programs that initially bring on a mental breakdown. We don't study the role of social institutions that ultimately fail to accept responsibility by pushing the insane onto the street (deinstitutionalization) to "save the budget."
- We explore the culture of the poor rather than characteristics of the rich.
- We investigate the pathologies of students and their families rather than the inadequacies of higher education.
- We study the characteristics and consequences of poverty rather than the social structure that creates conditions that allow problems like poverty to exist.