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Methods of Intervention

Adam Jamrozik and Luisa Nocella

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## CHAPTER 1

*Introduction: Theoretical Perspectives on  
Social Problems*

Social problems are an integral part of social life. The term ‘social problem’ applies to social conditions, processes, societal arrangements or attitudes that are commonly perceived to be undesirable, negative, and threatening certain values or interests such as social cohesion, maintenance of law and order, moral standards, stability of social institutions, economic prosperity or individual freedoms. A social problem may also be experienced as a feeling of collective guilt created through an awareness of collective neglect to remove or alleviate certain undesirable social conditions that negatively affect some sections of society.

In this definition of social problems therefore there is no presumed value- or attitudinal-neutrality in perception, interpretation or intervention. This particular attribute differentiates social phenomena that are perceived to be social problems from other social or physical phenomena or conditions that are regarded as problems *tout court*, and that are perceived perhaps as not quite desirable or pleasant but without an element of threat. Furthermore, a social problem is also a condition ‘created’ by society that is, potentially at least, feasibly alleviated or solved by society. On the other hand, some physical phenomena or ‘natural disasters’ such as earthquakes, droughts or floods occur beyond social control, although the knowledge of their probability enables societies to take preventive or remedial actions. With such physical phenomena, the knowledge of the ability to take preventive or remedial actions but the failure to do so would then be perceived as a social problem.

In common perceptions and usage, the term ‘social problem’ may be applied to phenomena or conditions of non-societal origins such as those mentioned above. While undesirable, unpleasant or in some way

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threatening, these cannot legitimately be called 'social'. To be appropriately regarded as social problems, social phenomena or conditions must therefore have three identifiable minimum features: first, the condition must have an identifiable societal origin; second, the condition must constitute a threat or be perceived to constitute a threat to certain values or interests; and third, the condition must be amenable to removal or at least attenuation or solution. These three features may not always be immediately and clearly 'visible' in a condition, but can be revealed through appropriate sociological analysis.

### Theories of Social Problems

There are a number of sociological theories of social problems. These range from the 'social pathology' perspective that originated in the 19th century from theories formulated by Francis Galton, Cesare Lombroso and others, to 'conflict theory' and 'critical theory' derived from the sociological insights of Karl Marx, and formulated and elaborated upon by the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research. In between, there are other theories and perspectives, such as the 'disorganisation theory' originated in the Chicago School of Sociology in the 1920s; the 'anomie theory' of Robert Merton; and a range of social deviance theories developed by Howard Becker, John Kitsuse, Aaron Cicourel and others. One of the more recent sociological theories is the 'constructionist theory', which focuses not on social problems *per se*, but on the processes through which social problems are identified and on the social actors who identify them (Rubington and Weinberg 1995). A number of constructionist theories were formulated by American sociologists in the 1960s and early 1970s, at a time when issues of social order and social cohesion in the United States became a matter of grave concern. Most theories of social problems at that time were concerned with problems more appropriately defined as problems of social deviance, and for this reason analyses of these phenomena tended to focus on populations whose characteristics departed in various degrees from the 'norm', although what the desired 'norm' was supposed to be is not always clear. The constructionist theorists, however, shifted the focus from the 'deviant population' and its 'problems' to the people who made claims about certain phenomena as 'problems', and to the activities these people engaged in to make their claims accepted by society (Spector and Kitsuse 1987).

Although more recent analyses of society from the perspective of the postmodern era, such as the studies by Zygmunt Bauman (1992, 1995), do not focus specifically on social problems as such, they identify sources of social problems in the structural and ideological

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fragmentation of society and in the resulting lack of a dominant social model or dominant social value to be followed. The great variety of postmodern perspectives on contemporary society presents a new problem in social analysis, as such a variety challenges the possibility of objective perceptions or even the existence of phenomena that may be appropriately referred to as social in nature.

A critical overview of sociological theories of social problems is presented in Chapter 2. With such a variety of theories and perspectives it is relevant to consider which aspects of society would constitute the field of study that might be legitimately called the sociology of social problems. Much sociological analysis is indeed concerned with aspects of society that are perceived to be in some degree 'problematic' and that are therefore the subject of concern and research interest. However, the problematic nature of certain social phenomena may simply mean either that the nature of a phenomenon is not clearly understood or that it is perceived and explained in such a variety of theories or perspectives that it creates confusion and uncertainty.

In contrast, a 'social problem', by definition, is a social condition that is regarded as in some ways 'undesirable' by society or by some sections of society, in that it represents a 'threat' of some kind – explicit, latent or potential. From a similar perspective, too, the term 'social problem' is commonly used and understood in everyday life. As Merton and Nisbet (1976) state, the term 'social problem' is applied to any social condition that is seen to differ from what people think it ought to be. The normative aspect present in studies of phenomena perceived in society or in some of its sections as 'social problems' is therefore important for the sociologist to consider, more so than in studies of phenomena where a 'threat' is not present in the problem. Nevertheless, because of the normative subjectivity in perceptions of what constitutes a social problem, it needs to be emphasised that studies of the sociology of social problems do not constitute an entirely discrete category of sociological studies.

Social problems, due to their very nature, can be adequately explained only in the context of the society in which they occur. Furthermore, although some social problems (e.g. violence in public places) may be experienced by the whole population of a society, others (e.g. unemployment among young people) may be experienced only by certain individuals or social groupings with similar characteristics. Most social problems do not occur in, or are not experienced in, the same frequency or intensity throughout the entire social structure. In Western industrialised societies, such problems as poverty, unemployment, violence, child abuse and so on are social phenomena that occur with greater or lesser frequency among certain population strata identified

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by social characteristics such as income, education, occupation and other attributes of social class. The nature and frequency of certain social problems also differ among population groupings identified by such attributes as age, ethnicity, religion, or geographic locality. Therefore, while the causes of social problems experienced by some population groupings rather than others can be explained by societal arrangements in the distribution of societal resources, the people who are experiencing social problems with greater frequency or intensity than others tend to be perceived as 'problem populations'. Such shifts of perceptions, from the social nature of the problem to the population experiencing the problem, distract attention from societal arrangements and effectively confirm and validate the legitimacy of these arrangements, thus validating a given social system and its structure of power. In effect, because social problems tend to be more frequently experienced in the 'lower' social classes of the population, they are perceived in class terms. However, in that perception the class structure of society is concealed because the problems are explained by the personal characteristics, real or imputed, of the affected population, and little attention is given to the problems' structural character. This is not surprising, as much research on social problems is carried out in a 'truncated perspective', being focused on the populations in which social problems are experienced with greatest frequency and intensity – a 'captive audience' of social researchers.

For these reasons, most currently prevailing theories of social problems do not adequately explain these problems' social nature and causative links. Consequently, when these theories are operationalised in intervention methods, they do not achieve the manifestly stated objectives – that is, they do not solve a problem that is intrinsically social because they do not address the source of the problem. Rather, the methods used reinforce beliefs that the problem is related to the characteristics of the affected population. Furthermore, because of the tendency for theories of social problems to perceive social problems as those of 'deviant' or 'problem' populations, the intervention methods based on such theories become a part of experience-based knowledge, or 'practice wisdom', and act more as methods of social control than as methods of problem solving. Practice wisdom becomes a kind of 'theory' acquired by people whose task is to intervene in social problems at the proverbial 'coal-face'. Here, the solution may be at best a remedy in individual cases to problems that are experienced repeatedly as the 'private problems' of the affected population. These problems are then perceived as being related to the characteristics of that population, not as social problems that are the outcomes of much wider societal arrangements.

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In the study of social problems it is the society's dominant value system and the corresponding social structure of power in which a given problem occurs that have to be understood first. For example, if it is accepted that Australia is a class society – social class being the most significant dimension of social structure and its divisions, and overriding differences of sex and gender, age, ethnicity or religion – then the presence, perception and interpretation of (as well as any methods of intervention in) phenomena perceived as social problems will be determined by that structure. Similarly, if for example it is believed that the dominant feature of Western societies is the power of patriarchy, then all social phenomena, especially those perceived to be social problems, will tend to be perceived, interpreted and acted upon from this perspective. Again, if a certain social condition such as chronic poverty or unemployment is believed to be a manifestation of 'flawed' personalities or characters of the people experiencing the condition, then intervention methods will predictably be aimed at 'correcting the flaw'.

As stated earlier, social problems are social phenomena that threaten, or are seen to threaten, the values and dominant interests of a society. Values and interests are most clearly revealed when they are threatened; or, as Martin Rein has pointed out, 'concealed sources of power and prestige come to the fore when their position is threatened' (1976:37). It is therefore in the study of social problems that sociology can achieve its great potential as a social science. By examining the kind of phenomena to which societies react or feel compelled to react, or do not react and do not feel compelled to react, the societies' manifest as well as underlying values and dominant interests are revealed.

**Theoretical Assumptions of this Book**

In this book we examine the existing sociological theories of social problems and then present a theory that draws on these theories while being grounded in empirical observations of social problems in contemporary industrialised societies. We think our theory adequately reflects and explains the nature of social problems in contemporary societies. The main theoretical assumption underpinning the analysis in the book is that the so-called pathological conditions that are commonly referred to as social problems – such as poverty, unemployment, family dislocation and so on – emerge logically from societally pursued dominant values, interests and corresponding goals. These unwelcome negative conditions constitute a 'residue' of those mainstream activities directed at the pursuit of such dominant values, interests and corresponding goals. In other words, social problems do not arise so much

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from the disjunction between societal goals and institutionalised means provided for their fulfilment, as Merton (1957) has argued (however important this disjunction might be), but from the pursuit of the dominant values *per se*. The problems constitute a 'normal' by-product, a residue, of these pursuits. In this kind of dialectical relationship, 'each silver lining creates a cloud'.

The system of goal pursuit has, as it were, a built-in failure rate, and the extent or negative intensity of failure tends to be directly related to the value and difficulties attached to the attainment of the pursued goal. Paradoxically, a higher rate and intensity of failure enhances the value of the pursued goal. For example, the value of a position in an organisational hierarchy is enhanced by the number of people applying for the position, all applicants except one necessarily failing in the process. Similarly, persistence in pursuing certain goals that are promoted as universally desirable leads to directly related failures. Pursuing wealth through business activities or through gambling is a notable example of such activities. It follows, then, that the solution or attenuation of any such problems would have to entail interference in, or modification or abandonment of, the pursuit of certain goals.

In other words, the solutions of social problems are to be found in changing the structural arrangements of society. It may therefore be expected that such solutions would not be welcomed by society's dominant interests. For this reason, social problems tend to be explained either in terms of external causes (and therefore beyond the society's control), or as related to the behavioural or personality characteristics of the affected population, with solutions then sought in changing that population's attitudes and behaviour. At best, the solution is sometimes sought in marginal adjustments of the existing arrangements 'on the periphery', which might provide certain flexibility in those arrangements and perhaps a marginal attenuation in the frequency or intensity of the problem, and thus demonstrates and even reinforces the legitimacy and success of the system and its structure of power.

Being a direct outcome of the pursuit of cherished goals that are striven for through a variety of institutional means, social problems tend to acquire an intergenerational continuity. Social reproduction of values, interests and organisational structures therefore also entails a reproduction of social problems. This is particularly evident in problems emanating from the operation of social institutions concerned with the allocation of society's resources and of those concerned with education, socialisation, maintenance of social order, the labour market and industrial relations. At the same time, as the form or even the nature of activities performed by these institutions changes, this leads to new situations, outcomes, and corresponding social problems. If the means

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and methods of intervention designed to ameliorate or control such social problems do not take the new situations into account, they become ineffective or even irrelevant. Thus, for example, due mainly (if not exclusively) to changes in the nature and technology of economic production, the nature of unemployment in Australia and throughout the industrialised world has significantly altered in recent decades, becoming increasingly entrenched in certain sections of the population. Yet perceptions of unemployment and corresponding remedial measures have remained largely unaltered. Indeed, the prevailing recommendations for solutions are seen in the time-honoured search for greater productivity, an increase in the gross domestic product, lower wages (for workers but not for managers), freedom of employers to hire, retrench or dismiss staff, reduction of services provided by the public sector, and greater international competitiveness. None of these measures appears to be achieving the desired results, and entrenched unemployment has therefore become a 'normal', permanent state of affairs that is seemingly beyond solution.

Like all social phenomena, social problems are 'social constructs' – that is, they are social conditions, activities, attitudes and so on that at some stage may be perceived as 'problems', although they might have existed in society for some time without being seen in this way. The change in perceptions signifies a change in values, attitudes or interests, or new knowledge and awareness of a real or potential threat. Changes in attitudes towards air pollution caused by petrol fumes, towards ecology, towards the treatment of children, and towards racist views are some examples of such changes in perceptions.

On the other hand, certain phenomena that might be perceived initially as social problems but that acquire a somewhat 'permanent' character may also acquire the character of 'normalcy' and so obtain acceptance by society. Paradoxically, this change in attitude may be assisted by, and be an outcome of, the methods of intervention initially applied to control, attenuate, or solve the perceived problem. For example, single parenthood was initially perceived as a social problem, but later acquired a degree of legitimacy through public income-support measures. In Australia, such support measures were at first provided as a 'supporting mother's benefit' designed to alleviate the extremes of poverty in such situations; this has now become a 'sole parent pension', thus changing the formal quality of the support and also changing the social status of the recipients towards a degree of legitimacy. Another example of a socially significant change has occurred in the perception of organised gambling. Historically, Australian society has been perceived as a society of gamblers but, except for the past two or three decades, organised gambling (however small-scale, such as

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playing cards for money) was a breach of the law and was pursued as such by law-enforcement authorities. Now, organised gambling in a variety of forms – casinos in every capital city and poker machines in every hotel and club – has become one of the most actively pursued state-sponsored and state-promoted activities, being regarded as an important economic activity and a significant source of government revenue (Legge 1996, McCrann 1996). This new legitimacy, in turn, creates a new social problem defined in a personalised perspective as a ‘problem gambler’.

Certain social problems function to legitimate dominant values and interests. As Christian religions, in order to maintain believers’ allegiance, once needed sinners and the demonstration of the penalty such sinners would incur in a future life, so does any political and economic system need to maintain its legitimacy by demonstrating the penalty for failure to follow its values, principles and methods of operation. The legitimisation function of ‘failures’ was well demonstrated by Emile Durkheim in his argument that crime had a positive function in increasing social cohesion and solidarity (since society felt the need to ‘close ranks’ in the face of a threat to its security and safety). Today, the vulnerable position of early school leavers in the labour market might be regarded as a social problem, but it also serves to emphasise the value of education; in a similar way, statistics on the increasing frequency of housebreaking are good news for the security industry.

Certain social problems appear to be intractable, despite sustained efforts to alleviate or solve them. Indeed, if we observe policies and methods of intervention in social problems we will see that such policies and methods are repeatedly used, in a rather ritualistic fashion, although the claimed or expected results are not forthcoming. Why, then, do such policies and methods of intervention continue to be used? This suggests that policies and methods of intervention might have other aims that are equally or even more important than the solution or control of a given problem – namely, the need to demonstrate that the problem is being addressed. Such demonstration shows a commitment to the maintenance of social order and serves as a public assertion, or re-assertion, of dominant values and interests, and the legitimisation of such values and interests.

### **Theories and Methods of Intervention**

The observations and propositions mentioned in the previous section are explored in depth in the following chapters. By presenting the phenomenon of social problems in a theoretical perspective that draws on a number of sociological theories and empirical observations of social problems in contemporary societies, this book aims to



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demonstrate and enhance the relevance and value of sociology to current societal issues and to intervention methods practised by the 'helping professions' (such as social work, psychology and related professions), and thus potentially to improve the effectiveness of their endeavours. At present, the input of sociological knowledge into the education curricula of these professions is either minimal or non-existent. If there is some sociological input, it is usually limited to the presentation of certain theories at a level of abstraction that makes it difficult for students to see the theories' relevance or usefulness in applications to professional practice. The gap between theory and practice seems to remain as large as ever, continuing the difficulties of applying theories formulated at the macro-level of social organisation to problems encountered by the helping professions at the level of individuals or small social groupings (such as families on low incomes, or groups of young people with certain common characteristics such as unemployment), or at the level of certain localities such as the 'disadvantaged' suburbs of large cities. The problem of the relationship between public issues and private problems, identified by C. Wright Mills (1959), remains largely unresolved.

In our attempt to examine the nature of social problems and intervention methods in an integrated perspective, we do not suggest any intervention methods that would provide ready solutions to social problems. However, we think that a better understanding of these processes, which we aim to achieve and convey to readers, may lead to more effective intervention methods. A sociologist interested in the study of social problems once said that a "social problem" is, first and foremost, the problem of knowing society, both actually and potentially. What to do about improving society at any particular point depends upon assumed knowledge about the facts of social structure and social forces' (Small 1898:114).

The perception of, interpretation of, and methods of intervention in social problems are influenced by political considerations of governments and of dominant interests in society. Potentially effective solutions might not be taken because they may create other problems more threatening to the existing structural arrangements than the original problems themselves. Therefore, social problems need to be perceived in the framework of society's structure of power. Conceptually (but closely related to social reality), this structure may be presented as an interrelated three-level activity of social organisation: political, administrative and operational (Jamrozik 1992; see Figure 1.1). In this perspective, the activities that take place at one level of the structure are perceived as a form of social action that affects the actions at the other two levels. Together, actions at any of the three levels are seen to

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produce a sequence of interaction processes through which dominant values and interests are integrated into the existing structure of power. This perspective facilitates identification of the 'intervening variables' that fill the conceptual gap between the macro-structure of social organisation – that is, the level at which dominant values and interests are translated into policy decisions on the allocation of resources – and the micro-structure of everyday life where the consequences of these decisions are experienced. Social problems may emerge at any or all of the three levels, and the intervention methods may also be directed at the relevant level or levels. However, the perception of social problems is different at each level. Consequently, any remedial measures devised to control, alleviate or solve the problem will also be different at each level. The examples in this book, especially those in Chapters 5 and 6, identify certain social problems in Australia (e.g. unemployment) that have been converted into personal problems with attached connotations of personal pathologies. Other problems (e.g. child care) that at first emerged as personal problems have been converted into social problems, either completely or partially, and have since remained in the political sphere as issues demanding government attention.

Social problems, which from our theoretical perspective emerge as a negative residue from the pursuit of certain goals, corresponding structural power arrangements and allocation of resources, are therefore intrinsically political in nature. It follows that effective solutions for such problems can be found only in changing those structural arrangements and pursued goals. However, as will be seen in later chapters, especially Chapter 3, prevailing intervention methods practised by the helping professions focus almost solely on the micro-structure – that is, on the population experiencing a given problem. The social problem is then perceived and attended to as a private, personal problem. The problem attended to at the operative level has therefore been 'converted' from one of a social and political nature within the social sphere into a personal problem in the private sphere. It is then related to the person's individual characteristics, such as attitudes, psychological make-up, abilities of intellect, or personal relationships.

Such conversions of social problems are taken for granted, and the intervention methods pay little if any attention to the intervening variables that link the problems of a particular population group, stratum or class to the political level of social organisation where decisions affecting the well-being of the population are made, and where the source of the problem can most often be found. The processes of conversion of social problems and the social and political significance of these processes' legitimating role for the dominant structure of power in society constitute the main issues examined in this