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978-0-521-59932-0 - The Sociology of Social Problems: Theoretical Perspectives and Methods of Intervention

Adam Jamrozik and Luisa Nocella

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THE SOCIOLOGY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Theoretical Perspectives and Methods of Intervention

Social problems such as unemployment, poverty and drug addiction are a fact of life in industrialised societies. This book examines the sociology of social problems from new and challenging perspectives. It analyses how social problems emerge and are defined as such, who takes responsibility for them, who is threatened by them, and how they are managed, solved or ignored. The authors examine and critique existing theories of social problems before developing their own theoretical framework. Their theory of residualist conversion of social problems explains how certain social problems threaten legitimate power structures, so that problems of a social or political nature are transformed into personal problems, and the 'helping professions' are left to intervene. This book will become a key reference on class, inequality and social intervention, and an important text for students in sociology and social work courses.

Adam Jamrozik and Luisa Nocella both work in the School of Social Work and Social Policy at the University of South Australia. Jamrozik has previously held positions at the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of NSW and the Department of Sociology at Flinders University. He is the author of *Class, Inequality and the State*, *Children and Society* and co-author of *Social Change and Cultural Transformation*, published by Cambridge University Press in 1995. Nocella, a practising social worker, is currently a doctoral candidate.

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Preface and Acknowledgements

Social problems are integral to our daily living. Some social problems emerge unexpectedly, and disappear equally fast from our concerns. Other problems acquire a perennial quality. Unemployment, poverty, urban traffic congestion are on our minds and on our television screens. Social problems are of concern to sociologists, social workers, politicians, and, at one time or another, to all of us. They are studied, remedied, sometimes even solved; often they are forgotten because they do not affect us personally. Nevertheless, social problems are always with us.

This book is about the sociology of social problems. It examines how social problems emerge, who is concerned about them, who is threatened by them, and how societies attempt to solve them, attenuate them or perhaps ignore them. This is a theoretical book. The text is based on a theoretical framework that we have developed to enable us to systematically analyse social problems as social phenomena that emerge in society as a form of threat to values and interests dominant in society at a given time and that lead to methods of intervention designed to attenuate, control or solve such problems. In our theoretical framework, a social problem is a form of a 'negative residue' that logically emerges from the everyday pursuit of dominant values and interests. We have defined our framework as a 'Theory of residualist conversion of social problems'.

The types of social problems we examine in this book are problems that often affect the whole community, but through certain methods of intervention are converted into individuals' problems (usually individuals and families in the lower social strata). Other problems remain in the public arena and are solved or controlled through political action such as legislation, allocation of funds or change in policy. Yet other problems become our constant companions.

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This book has been written for sociologists and other professionals who are concerned with social problems – as researchers, administrators, and members of the ‘helping professions’ (such as social workers, psychologists, counsellors etc.) – who provide services to individuals and families experiencing social problems as their personal problems. It should also be of relevance to anyone who is interested in what happens in society. It is not a ‘how to’ book, but one that seeks to explain how social problems emerge and why. It looks at the social actors concerned with social problems. It is a theoretical book, but a readable one.

This book is the fruition of three years of research and teaching in sociology at Adelaide’s Flinders University and in social work at the University of South Australia. It has been a joint effort, and although Adam Jamrozik did a bit more of the writing, Luisa Nocella contributed her share through writing, research, and especially the chapter on the family. Other people have also contributed to this effort. We wish to particularly acknowledge assistance from the Australian Research Council’s Small Research Grants, which we received in the Department of Sociology at Flinders University, and some additional assistance from the Faculty Research Performance Fund at the School of Social Work and Social Policy, University of South Australia. For assistance with research we want to thank Gail Smith for her efforts in finding research material and contributing helpful comments. To Ruth Errey go our thanks for editing the manuscript. Jonathan Flynn also edited some work and provided useful suggestions. Finally, our sincere thanks and appreciation must go to Phillipa McGuinness, Commissioning Editor of the Cambridge University Press, and her associates Sharon Mullins, Rosemary Perkins and Jane Farago, as well as Glenys Osborne, the copy-editor.

ADAM JAMROZIK AND LUISA NOCELLA