Foundations

A Chinese philosopher once remarked that one should not attempt to open clams with a crowbar. In other words, any task demands the proper tools. Part 1 of this book is about the proper tools for the study of social problems. In chapter 1 we will distinguish social from personal problems and discuss the implications of defining a problem as social or as personal. Then we will examine several theoretical perspectives that have been applied to social problems. Finally, we will discuss the perspective used in this book. In chapter 2 we will examine various ways of thinking critically about social problems; and we will explore appropriate and inappropriate methods of getting the information we need to understand them. These chapters will lay the foundation for our study. They prepare us to delve into particular problems and to use the proper tools to open our clams.

Chapter 1

Understanding Social Problems

Learning Objectives

1. Explain the difference between personal and social problems.
2. Show how this difference affects our understanding of problems.
3. Understand the distinctiveness of the sociological approach to social life.
4. Know the various theoretical explanations of social problems.
5. Explain what is meant by viewing social problems as contradictions.

Focus Questions

1. How do personal problems differ from social problems?
2. What difference does it make if we define a problem as personal or as social?
3. How do various theories explain social problems?
4. How are social problems related to the quality of our lives?
5. What kinds of factors cause and help to perpetuate social problems?

Introduction

Who would be at fault if you were unemployed and poor? Would you be at fault because of your laziness or your unwillingness to begin at the bottom and work your way up? If so, you would have a personal problem. Or would factors such as the state of the economy be at fault? If so, you would be caught up in a social problem. Later in the chapter we will define social problems precisely. As a preliminary definition, think of social problems as behavior or conditions that are caused by factors external to individuals and that detract from the quality of life.

Actually, "we are all part of *some* social problem" (Lopata 1984:249). In fact, we are all part of the biggest social problem of all—the race to save the planet (Brown 2000). These assertions will become increasingly clear in subsequent chapters.

In addition, many people must deal with several problems simultaneously. It should not be forgotten, as the various problems are discussed, that individuals who are wrestling with a particular problem are likely to be coping with others as well. For example, the stress of poverty may lead to health problems, both mental and physical. If the impoverished individual is a woman or a member of a minority, the stress may be intensified. The same individual also may have to deal with unemployment or underemployment, poor performance at school by a child, and the threat of victimization by criminals. Social workers know many families that are coping simultaneously with the majority of the problems discussed in this book!

It is important, therefore, to understand the difference between social and personal problems. Americans tend to turn social problems into personal problems and to deal with them by trying to find out *who is at fault.* In this chapter we deal with what has to be the first task: understanding the distinction between personal and social problems. We will look at the difference defining a particular problem as personal or as social makes.

We also will look at the sociological approach and see why we are justified in calling certain problems *social* rather than *personal.*

We then will examine five theories that have been used to explain social problems.

Finally, we will present our own approach and definition of social problems, which will be the framework for our analysis of each problem discussed in this book.

Personal vs. Social Problems

We define a **personal problem** as one whose causes and solutions lie within the individual and the individual's immediate environment. A **social problem,** on the other hand, is one whose causes and solutions lie outside the individual and the immediate environment. The distinction is not based on the individual's experience of suffering, because a certain amount of suffering may occur in either case.

C. Wright Mills (1959:8–9) made a similar distinction, calling personal problems the "personal troubles of milieu" and social problems the "public issues of social structure." He offered many illustrations of the difference between the two. If one individual in a city is unemployed, that individual has personal trouble. The person may be lazy, have personality problems, lack skills, or have family difficulties that consume all of his or her

energy. But if there are 100 million jobs in a society and 150 million people are looking for work, we confront a public issue. Even if there are no personal problems, a third of the people will be unemployed. Such a problem cannot be resolved solely by dealing with individual personalities or motivations.

Similarly, a man and woman may have personal troubles in their marriage. They may agonize over their troubles and ultimately separate or divorce. If theirs is one of few marriages that experience such problems, we may conclude that they have personal problems and their marriage broke up because of some flaw in their personalities or in their relationship. But when the divorce rate soars and millions of families are broken up, we must look for causes and solutions beyond the personalities of individuals. The question is no longer "What is wrong with those people?" but "What has happened to the **institution** of marriage and the family in our society?"

In one sense, defining a particular problem as social or as personal makes no difference. The person who is poor and out of work will still be so whether the cause is laziness, lack of motivation, or the state of the economy. The couple that breaks up will still experience the pain of divorce whether the cause is their inadequacies as people or developments in the society that resulted in a general disruption of the institution of marriage and the family.

In other ways, whether we define a problem as social or as personal is crucial. The distinction determines the *causes of the problem* that we identify, the *consequences of the problem,* and how we attempt to *cope with the problem.*

The Causes of Problems

When asked why there is poverty in affluent America, a 31-year-old female bank teller said the poor themselves are to blame because most of them "are lazy and unreliable . . . and the little money they do make is spent on liquor and nonnecessities rather than for their economic advancement" (Lauer 1971:8). Such an answer illustrates a common approach to a problem: that it—in this case poverty—is a personal problem. The *victims of the problem are blamed,* and both the origin and the solution of the problem are identified with the victims.

Similarly, blacks are said to have problems because they don't want to work to advance themselves. Such individualistic explanations are widely held among whites who otherwise seem to show little or no prejudice. Such "reasoning" can influence whites' attitude about government policies designed to help raise the status of blacks (Kluegel 1990).

Thus, the way we define problems—as social or personal—has important consequences for identifying causes. In turn, the kinds of causes we identify affect the way we try to attack the problems.

A word of caution is in order here. We are not arguing that *all* problems are social problems, that personal problems have no social factors involved (as the following pages show, our behavior is always social), or that all social problems are free of any personal elements. There are certainly psychological and, in some cases, physiological factors at work. The point is that if we do not look beyond such factors, we have a distorted view of the causes of the problems.

All problems we will examine in this book affect a significant number of people. Problems are part of the social life of America, and, as such, we must search for their

causes in social factors. The importance of social factors will be underscored when we examine the sociological approach to understanding human life.

The Consequences of Problems

Just as our viewing a problem as either personal or as social leads us to identify different causes, our choice also leads to very different consequences. Consider, for example, a father who can obtain only occasional work and whose family, therefore, lives in poverty. If the man defines his problem as the result of his own inadequacies, he will probably despise himself to some extent and passively accept his poverty. Sennett and Cobb (1972:96) told of a garbage collector, a man nearly illiterate, who placed the blame for his lowly position entirely on himself: "Look, I know it's nobody's fault but mine that I got stuck here where I am, I mean . . . if I wasn't such a dumb ——— . . . no, it ain't that neither . . . if I'd applied myself, I know I got it in me to be different, can't say anyone did it to me." This man defined his problem as personal and, consequently, viewed himself as inadequate.

The *sense of inadequacy*—blaming or downgrading oneself—is not uncommon among the victims of social problems. Some children who grow up in impoverished homes evaluate themselves unfavorably, believing that their very impoverishment is proof of their inferiority. Some women who are beaten by their husbands feel that they have done something to deserve the abuse. Some people who lose their jobs during an economic crunch feel that they are failures, even though they had no control over what happened.

If a problem is defined as personal, *individual strategies* will be employed in efforts to cope with the problem. Thus, the victim of the problem will look inward for a solution. Sometimes that solution is found in an *escape mechanism,* such as neurosis, physical illness, heavy drinking, or self-destructive behavior. At other times the solution is sought from specialists such as psychotherapists or religious advisors who help individuals to change. These specialists may enable the individual to adjust to the problem but not ultimately resolve it. If America's troubled families sought the help of counselors, they might learn to cope with their troubles, or at least learn to bear up under them. But troubled families would continue to appear as fast as ever.

Helping individuals deal with personal problems is important; however, it can be only a stopgap approach to social problems. On the other hand, to see a problem as social is to put the problem in a much different perspective and lead to far different conclusions and action. Thus, if a man defines his poverty as the result of the state of the economy, he may join in collective action such as a social movement, a rent strike group, or an organization set up to relieve the plight of the poor. He will probably not despise himself, because he will not blame himself for his poverty. He may feel a certain indignation, but he will not hate himself. He will see that his problem is not only a personal problem but a problem of his society, and he will see that he is a victim rather than a culprit.

In subsequent chapters we will look at various ways of attacking social problems and cite examples that highlight the difference in coping with a problem when it is defined as social. Here, let us use rape as an example. Whether one defines rape as a social or personal problem will make a great deal of difference (fig. 1.1). To define it as a personal problem is to either *blame the victim* or castigate the offender. To define it as a social problem is to recognize the need for *collective action* that attacks factors outside individuals.
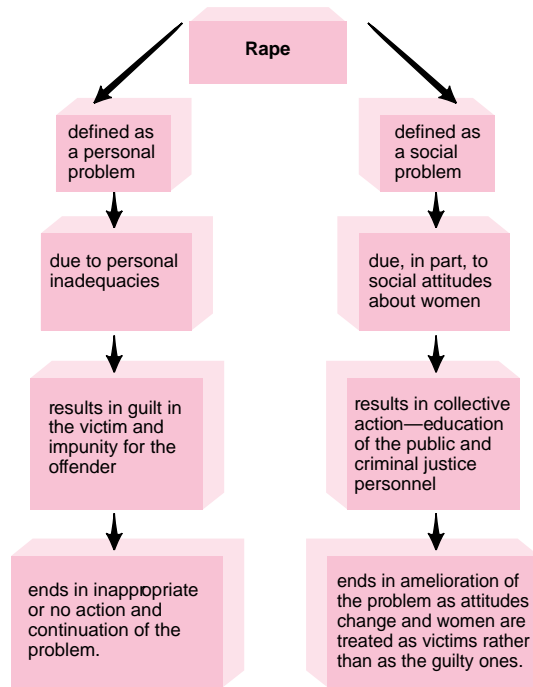
```
                              Rape

        defined as                    defined as
        a personal                    a social
        problem                       problem

        due to personal               due, in part, to
        inadequacies                  social attitudes
                                      about women

        results in guilt in           results in collective
        the victim and                action—education
        impunity for the              of the public and
        offender                      criminal justice
                                      personnel

        ends in inappropriate         ends in amelioration of
        or no action and              the problem as attitudes
        continuation of the           change and women are
        problem.                      treated as victims rather
                                      than as the guilty ones.
```

Figure 1.1   Some possible differences when a problem—rape in this case—is defined as social or personal.

Consider some actual cases of rape.[1] A physician, 39 years old, married, and the father of two children, confessed to raping 22 women and sexually attacking at least 10 other women, one of whom was a nun. The doctor was a respected member of his community by day but an attacker of women by night. In another city, a teenage girl decided to follow the example of others and cool herself off in a park fountain on a hot July day. Two young men tore off her clothes and raped her while at least three adults stood by without responding to the girl's screams for help. A young woman in another section of the nation met a man at a New Year's Eve party. The man's sister, whom the young woman knew, introduced the two of them. The man drove the two women home, taking his sister to her place first. Then he asked if he could come up to the young woman's apartment for coffee. He was a genial, polite man, and since she had no reason to suspect him, she agreed. Once in her apartment, however, the man forced her to participate in various sex acts. When she prosecuted, she discovered that the man was on parole for a prior rape conviction. But people who had been at the party testified on the man's behalf, claiming that they had seen the couple talking and that the woman had been drinking. The man was acquitted. Subsequently he was brought to trial again for the alleged rape of a 13-year-old girl.

How can we account for rape? Were the victims at fault in the preceding cases? Did they bring it on themselves by luring their attackers? A female student told the author,

"My father always said that if a woman was raped, it was her fault, that she somehow provoked the guy to do it." Or can the rapes be attributed to mentally ill or evil males? Are the rapists "sick" individuals who need therapy? Or are they evil men who ought to be castrated? We could blame the victims and say that they have personal problems—their wayward behavior. Or we could accuse the rapists of having personal problems—disturbed or evil natures.

In neither case would the problem be resolved for the victims. Women who fight, scream, and risk their physical well-being (and even their lives) to ward off an attacker can hardly be said to be luring the man. And the attackers were not mentally ill. The physician was a highly respected professional. Castration would not solve the problem either. Contrary to popular belief, castration does not prevent a man from having sexual intercourse. Castration has been used in a number of European countries to punish sex offenders. A study reported that, of 39 offenders in West Germany who had voluntarily agreed to castration, 11 could still have sexual relations a number of years afterward, and 4 of the men had sex one to three times a week (Heim 1981).

Rape is not a personal problem that can be solved by individual efforts. Like other social problems, rape requires collective action to attack such things as the social attitudes that legitimate exploiting women and a legal system that treats the victim as harshly as the rapist does. Thus, important differences result from defining a problem as social rather than personal. Unless we define problems like rape as social, we will fail to locate their causes, and we will be unable to effectively cope with them.

The Sociological Approach

We have seen that how we define problems makes a difference in the way problems will be handled.

The sociological approach demands that we look beyond individual factors and construct our understanding of human beings and their problems in social terms. In essence, the sociological approach is the scientific study of human behavior and social life in terms of the *social* factors involved. "Social," in turn, denotes regularities and patterns rather than idiosyncratic or unique factors. We will illustrate the validity of the sociological approach by giving evidence of the *social nature of human life*.

The Social Nature of Attitudes

What is your **attitude** about abortion? What is your attitude about homosexuals living together and being considered a family? More important for our purposes here, why do you have those particular attitudes? Is your position, for example, one that you developed on purely moral or rational grounds? Or have you been influenced by other people?

Consider the following, based on various public opinion polls. Do you agree or disagree with this statement: If a woman wants an abortion for any reason, she should be able to obtain a legal abortion. According to the polls, you are more likely to agree with the statement if you are white than if you are black. With respect to homosexuals, would you say that two homosexuals living together in a committed relationship constitute a family? According to the polls, you are more likely to agree that they are a family if you

are white rather than black, female rather than male, under 30 years of age rather than over 60, and a college graduate rather than having a high-school education.

The point is that our attitudes reflect the groups of which we are a part. Your attitudes are not simply the result of your own personal thinking and moralizing about something. You are influenced by other people, who help form your attitudes. In other words, attitudes are social, not purely individual. Your family, your religious group, your school, the people with whom you work, and your friends are among those who help shape your attitudes.

Because attitudes are social, we hold attitudes toward social problems that reflect our group memberships and not necessarily our experience or thinking or biological makeup. Thus, an individual might be prejudiced against those of other races not because of any experience with other races, but because of membership in a group (anything from the family to a racist organization) that practices and supports prejudice. Or an individual might favor the legalization of drugs not because he or she has thought through the issues logically, but because of friends who are users and who want their behavior to be legal. Or an individual might romanticize and support war not because that individual is genetically programmed to be violent, but because he or she works for a company that derives all its profits from military expenditures.

In sum, *our attitudes are formed in the matrix of our social relationships.* In turn, attitudes enter into our evaluation and understanding of social problems.

The Social Nature of Norms

Norms are shared expectations about behavior. "Normative behavior" is, therefore, prescribed behavior—the behavior that is expected of each of us by the rest of us. By definition, then, norms are social. However, many people would not accept this definition; they view standards for behavior in either individualistic or near-mystical terms. In the former case, standards are set by an individual who charts his or her own course regardless of what others may think or say. Americans have tended to exalt this fictional individual, the one who refuses to submit to majority opinion. He or she lives according to conscience (as long as that conscience, of course, does not violate traditional American values). In the latter case, the near-mystical view of standards, God or the nation or reason is the source of our norms. In this view, we all "know" what is right or wrong even though we may not always do what is right. Indeed, everyone "knows" right and wrong because everyone has a conscience or reason.

But norms, like attitudes, are social. We learn and abide by norms in accord with the groups of which we are a part. The norms may be widespread in the society, or restricted to a particular area, or found only within a particular, small group. Consider, for example, the following account from the study of a small Missouri town in the 1940s.

> A retired preacher recounted tales of a dozen murders that had occurred within his memory. He and many other people knew the motives and details of each murder, but when officers came into the community to investigate, practically everybody questioned withheld all important information. Part of this unwillingness to cooperate came from fear of reprisals by kinsmen of the guilty, but part of it came from the feeling that men should be allowed to settle disputes in their own way. (West 1945:97–98)
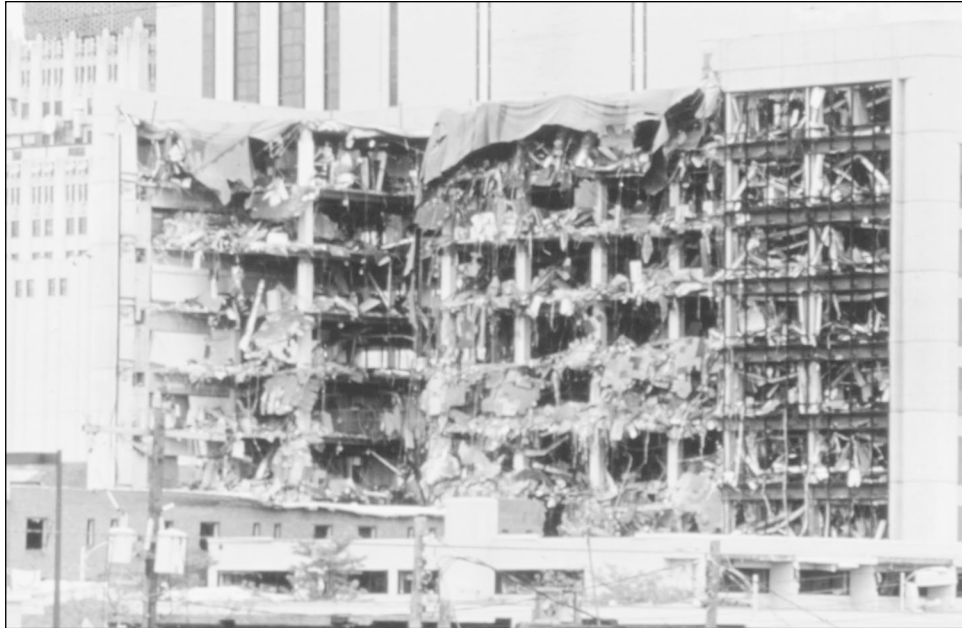
The bombing of the Alfred R. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City shocked most Americans, but this action was consistent with the norms of terrorist groups.

The townspeople, including the minister, upheld the "feud law," which gave people the right to settle their conflict even by murder. The norms of the community violated the laws of the land, but the norms were stronger than the laws.

In 1978 more than 900 people, followers of the Reverend Jim Jones, committed mass suicide in Guyana (Farrell and Swigert 1982:163–64). They had rehearsed the act a number of times before, and Jones told them that the time had come to actually do it. Some of the people in the community, which Jones had established as a home for the oppressed, tried to escape but were forced by armed guards to drink cyanide. Others, however, willingly drank the poison, and some mothers even fed the poison to their children before taking it themselves. Jones urged them on, crying out that they would all "meet in another place." At the end, all were dead. Jones lay at the altar, and nearly 400 of his followers' bodies were grouped around him, many of them with arms linked.

More recently, the nation was again shocked, this time by the bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City. On April 19, 1995, a trunk bomb destroyed the building, killing 168 people and wounding more than 500. While most Americans reacted with horror to this act of terrorism, a number of those in antigovernment militias applauded the bombing. Their norms violate not only the law but most standards of morality and rationality. But however outrageous, weird, irrational, or immoral some norms may appear to us, people who follow such norms are doing what we all do—abiding by the *standards of the group* or groups of which they are a part.

Our behavior standards are not created by us individually, nor are they mystical phenomena that come directly from God or intuitively through our minds. They are social, and to the extent that problems involve norms, those problems are social.

The Social Nature of Behavior

Why do people behave the way they do? Is it because of the kind of people they are? That is, does an individual engage in a violent act because he or she is an aggressive person by nature or has an aggressive personality? Is a man an alcoholic because he is "sick"? Is a woman a prostitute because she is evil or oversexed? As in the case of attitudes and norms, behavior is more than a matter of the kind of people with which we are dealing. Behavior is social in the sense that we behave as we do because of our experiences with other people and because of the social context in which we behave. Thus, violence, alcoholism, prostitution, and all other behavior must be understood in terms of the social factors at work.

A dramatic example of the *impact of social factors on our behavior* is provided by Philip Zimbardo (1972). In an effort to understand the psychological effects of imprisonment, Zimbardo and some associates set up an experiment in which about two dozen young men simulated a prison situation.

The 24 men selected had been screened from a group of more than 70 who had applied for the experiment. The final group was composed only of those who were physically and emotionally healthy. All were from middle-class homes and were intelligent college students. To motivate the young men to participate in the experiment, they were offered $15 per day.

With the flip of a coin, half the men were designated prisoners, and the other half were to act as guards. The guards worked out their rules for keeping order and respect in the prison. They were also free to develop new rules. They worked on eight-hour, three-man shifts. The men who acted as prisoners were picked up at their homes, searched, handcuffed, and fingerprinted at an actual police station. They were then taken to the experimental jail, where they were put into uniforms and taken to cells where they were to live for two weeks, three prisoners to a cell.

After six days, however, the prison had to be closed because the situation got out of control and developed in a way the experimenters had not anticipated.

> In less than a week the experience of imprisonment undid (temporarily) a lifetime of learning; human values were suspended, self-concepts were challenged and the ugliest, most base, pathological side of human nature surfaced. We were horrified because we saw some boys (guards) treat others as if they were despicable animals, taking pleasure in cruelty, while other boys (prisoners) became servile, dehumanized robots who thought only of escape, of their own individual survival, and of their mounting hatred for the guards. (Zimbardo 1972:4)

Three prisoners had to be released within four days because of their hysterical crying, confused thinking, and serious depression. All but three prisoners were willing to forfeit the money they had earned in exchange for parole. Visitors with experience in prison life indicated that what was happening was exactly the kind of thing that happens in real prisons.

Zimbardo brought the experiment to a halt, he says, because he realized he was no different from the subjects. He could have acted as brutally as the guards or as docilely and filled with hatred as the prisoners. The experiment forcefully and dramatically demonstrated how our behavior is the result of "social forces and environmental contingencies rather than personality traits, character, will power," or other qualities of individuals (Zimbardo 1972:6).

Human life, then, is social life. An individual's attitudes are not something unique to that individual, something created or developed in isolation from others. Rather, an individual's attitudes develop through interaction with others and are shared with the group or groups of which he or she is a part. Likewise, norms and behavior are social in the sense that everything we believe and do is a function of our relationships with others.

The sociological approach to problems is to identify those social factors that account for the problems—attitudes, norms, group memberships, and other factors that we will examine in subsequent chapters.

Theoretical Explanations

We must now ask how we can explain social problems. To say that a problem is social rather than personal is not to *explain* it.

Sociologists have developed a number of theories. In simplest terms, a *theory is an explanation.* We all use theories to understand the world in which we live. Some people explain poverty in terms of laziness. Their theory involves work, motivation, and innate qualities of individuals: A man is poor because he is the kind of person who is unwilling to work. Others might explain the man's poverty in terms of the economy. Their theory involves work, motivation, and the quality of a social institution: The man is poor because, although he is willing to work, the depressed state of the economy has shut off his job opportunities.

Sociological theories are more complex than these, but they too are efforts to explain. Moreover, sociological theories avoid reducing social problems to personal troubles. We will look at five kinds of theory that have been used to explain social problems, and then we will outline our own approach—social problems as contradictions.

The Social Disorganization Theory

One way to view any society is in terms of a *network of norms* about behavior. In this view, the stability of any society depends on *consensus* about what is expected of individuals within that society. If people agree on what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior, the society is stable, and the people should be well adjusted. But when the consensus breaks down for some reason, when the existing rules of behavior no longer hold and are not replaced by new rules, or when the existing rules are challenged by a new set of expectations, the society is said to be in a state of **social disorganization.** In other words, social disorganization is a state that signals change because people for one reason or another no longer share a set of expectations about behavior.

An early text argued that "the dynamic nature of social change inevitably entails a certain amount of disorganization" (Elliott and Merrill 1934:27). In turn, the text said, disorganization is manifested in such things as poverty, political corruption, vice, and crime. Recent work indicates that poverty, in particular, is central to the notion of social disorganization (Warner 1999). While there is agreement that social disorganization always results from some kind of social change, not all social change leads to social disorganization. Therefore, we will deal with social change as a separate category.

The consequences of disorganization are *stress for individuals* and *various problems for the society.* For example, suppose the expectations regarding the **roles** (the behavior associated with particular positions) of husband and wife break down. This would be a state of social disorganization in the institution of marriage. We would expect considerable individual stress (as husbands and wives groped for mutually agreeable expectations) and the social problem of instability in marriages and family life. The individual stress would result because neither mate would know precisely what the other expected, and neither would know precisely what to expect of the other. Human beings are oppressed by too few rules as well as by too many rules. The instability might be seen in increasing numbers of divorces and separations, and it would result from the conflict over role expectations. Such instability would be defined as a problem, because people view marriage and the family as the foundation for a healthy social order.

Shaw and McKay (1942) used social disorganization theory in their classic study of juvenile delinquency. Their work still generates interest and follow-up studies. A study of 238 localities in Great Britain reported that higher rates of social disorganization were associated with higher rates of crime and delinquency (Sampson and Groves 1989). An investigation of American Indian homicide linked the high levels of murder in reservation communities to social disorganization (Bachman 1991a and 1991b). Other researchers have reported a higher rate of crime generally, including a higher rate of wife assaults, in areas of social disorganization (Warner and Pierce 1993; Straus 1994).

Social disorganization also can help explain other problems, such as the disorganization resulting from rapid change that adversely affected the emotional health of some Bedouin adolescents in Israel (Elbedour, Van Slyck, and Stern 1998). In spite of such work, however, most sociologists no longer use social disorganization to explain social problems. For one thing, *approval of the status quo* is implied when the term *disorganization* is used, and many sociologists object to that implication. Moreover, the concept clearly does not apply to all problems. Wars, for example, are much easier to pursue when the societies involved show internal consensus rather than social disorganization. Nazi Germany was a well-organized nation when Hitler led it into World War II in 1939. Poverty in most societies continues because of the highly organized nature of the society; the poor may accept their lot because they support the existing rules. Thus, although the term *disorganization* implies something negative, social *organization* can be as deleterious in its effects.

Another reason social disorganization as a concept is not considered useful is that the concept itself may require explanation. If the role expectations in marriage and the family break down, the divorce rate may go up, but we need to ask why the rules broke down in the first place. We have not really explained the increased instability of the family until we account for the social disorganization.

The Social Change Theory

Social change refers to alterations in the patterns of interaction or in such aspects of **culture** as norms, values, and technology. Social change may include anything from changed attitudes about something to large-scale processes like urbanization (Lauer 1991:4).

Some sociologists identify social change as the primary cause of social problems. In particular, rates of change have been linked with social problems. Some sociologists believe that problems arise because the rates of change vary for different parts of the society. Others think that problems arise because of the rapid rate of change. The view that *conflicting or rapid rates of change cause social problems* is different from the idea that change causes disorganization and, thus, problems.

The notion that conflicting rates of change result in social problems was argued by William Ogburn (1938), who coined the term *cultural lag.* Ogburn said that various parts of modern culture change at different rates. The parts are interdependent, so change in one part demands change in other parts. For example, industry and education work together, with education training people so that they are capable of performing various tasks in industry. If a change in industry occurs, such as the introduction of computers into the production process, a change must occur in education, such as programs to train people in the various aspects of computer programming and data processing. Unfortunately, Ogburn said, there is typically a lag between the changes in the various parts of a culture, and during the lag there is "maladjustment." Social problems arise, then, because of conflicting rates of change and, in particular, because technology is changing more rapidly than other aspects of culture.

Ogburn's thesis is illustrated by modern medical techniques, which preserve and prolong life. When these techniques are introduced into an underdeveloped country, they typically cause an increase in population by reducing the death rate but not the birthrate. The increased population cannot be assimilated by the economy, and problems of poverty are intensified, perhaps with outbreaks of violence within the society. The problems are further intensified if traditional values forbid the use of birth control techniques. Eventually the economy and the values may "catch up" with the medical techniques, but in the meantime there are serious social problems in the society.

The importance of rate of social change was suggested by Sorokin (1942:206), who argued that mental illness and suicide increase measurably as a result of rapid change during periods of cultural transition. In those periods, said Sorokin, the "old sociocultural edifice is crumbling and no new structure has yet been erected," and conflict, including value conflict, is rife among people. The whole society is rapidly changing, and the people are filled with conflict. The result is intense stress that can lead to such things as mental illness and suicide. Some support for this thesis is provided by South (1987), who found high rates of suicide, violent crime, property crime, and divorce all associated with rapid in- and out-migration in American urban areas.

Similarly, changes in rates of homicide, robbery, and burglary in urban areas over time are better explained by changes in ethnic composition, household size, and household crowding than by such things as the extent of social disorganization (Miethe, Hughes, and McDowall 1991).

The value conflict between those who oppose and those who support abortion has led to angry confrontations.

While both conflicting and rapid rates of change may generate or facilitate the emergence of social problems, such explanations have limited applications. For one, they imply that change is necessarily disruptive or traumatic. A number of studies show, on the contrary, that a rapid rate of change may be considered desirable by the people experiencing it. It may occur without any evidence of psychic trauma, or, at least, without any substantial increase in psychic trauma. For example, change that is defined as desirable is unlikely to generate much stress (Lauer 1974). And people who are stressed by existing conditions may find the change a relief rather than a burden (Wheaton 1990). Under certain conditions, then, change is conducive to psychic well-being. If stress results, it is among those who do not participate in the change rather than those who experience it (Lauer 1974:511). Thus, a slow rate of change may be more stressful than a rapid one. Nations may go to war or protest groups may resort to violence because situations do not change rapidly enough.

Change also does not account for the perpetuation of a problem, though it may give insight into how and why a problem appeared. For example, why does poverty persist in the United States when there is general agreement that we have the resources necessary to eliminate it? The theories of conflicting or rapid rates of change are not helpful in trying to answer the question. Change, as an explanatory or causal concept, must be combined with other sociological concepts if we are to understand the rise and persistence of social problems.

The Value Conflict Theory

Are social problems primarily the outcome of the conflicting **values** of different groups in the society? While certain values—ideas about what is desirable—are common to virtually all groups in a society, many values vary from group to group. In other words, in any society there are both *shared* and *diverse values* among the various groups. In the United States, for example, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and some white, segregationist groups (such as the American Nazis) share the values set forth in the Declaration of Independence regarding the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. They come into conflict at the point where their values relate to the racial structure of society. The former believe in equality of the races, and the latter affirm the need to keep the races separate. Each group asserts that its values about racial distinctions, contradictory as they are, are crucial to the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. Therefore, conflict is inevitable.

The value conflict perspective was developed in the 1930s (Waller 1936; Fuller 1938). The argument, in essence, is that *any societal condition becomes a social problem when there are "value clashes" about the condition.* This perspective assumes that there is always a *power struggle.* Each of the contending groups with different values strives to establish social conditions that its values designate as preferable. For example, people who oppose the use of birth control devices often oppose them for everyone and not merely for themselves. People who advocate open housing do not tolerate any exceptions to their cause. People who advocate war against our "enemies" may define peacemakers as traitors. There is inevitably a struggle for power as each group strives to influence the society to act in accord with its values.

The conflict of values with the resulting power struggle is well illustrated by the continuing abortion controversy. Those who argue in favor of abortion believe, among other things, that a woman has the right to control her own fertility, that the physical and emotional well-being of the woman is at least as important as any rights of the unborn child, and that her quality of life is necessary for the child to have quality of life. Those who argue against abortion believe, among other things, that the fetus is a living human being and, therefore, abortion is murder. The unborn child, they say, has the same rights as anyone else. Both groups share a value about human life, but they differ about whether the life of the pregnant woman or the life of the unborn child takes precedence.

The struggle for power between these contending groups moved into the legal arena. Ultimately, a Supreme Court decision in 1973 overturned all state laws that limited a woman's right to abortion during the first three months of pregnancy. The struggle did not end with that decision, however, because anti-abortion groups began to agitate for a constitutional amendment and to support or oppose candidates for Congress in relation to their stand on abortion.

Various political maneuvers and legal decisions have alternately given pro-life and pro-choice supporters grounds for hope. But the nation remains strongly divided and even individuals often seem to hold contrary views. For example, a 1998 CBS News/*New York Times* poll reported that half of Americans agreed that abortion is the same as murder but 60 percent agreed that legalizing abortion was a good thing![2] Thirty-two percent of the respondents said that abortion should be generally available, 45 percent favored some limitations, and 22 percent said it should not be permitted at all.

The issue will continue to be a "hot" one for some time. Those who feel that abortion should never be permitted under any circumstances are in a minority, but many of them are vocal and active. They wage continuing battles in Congress, the courts, state legislatures, and local governments over such issues as public funding of welfare abortions and the right to attempt to disrupt the work of abortion clinics. On the other hand, there appears to be an increase in the number of Americans who accept abortion. From 1973 (the year of the Supreme Court decision) to 1980, the number of abortions per year more than doubled. In recent years, the number of abortions has decreased. However, nearly a fourth of all pregnancies end in abortion, and a fifth of all abortions are performed on teenagers (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1999e:87, 91). The United States has a higher abortion rate than Japan, Sweden, England, and many other nations in the free world. The controversy has raised some extremely difficult questions: Does human life begin at conception, at birth, or at some other time? What are the rights of the pregnant woman? What are the rights of the fetus? Such questions inevitably bring up values, and so the conflict continues.

When groups have different values, it means that the same conditions may be defined in different ways. Hence, *problems can be defined quite differently by diverse groups.* For instance, the problem of racial and ethnic relations is defined by some as due to outside agitators. Others see it as a problem of white racism. Still others view it as a problem of capitalist exploitation. And some deny that America even has a problem with racial or ethnic relations! Thus, differing values lead people to define the nature of a problem differently and even deny that a particular condition is a problem.

There are limitations to the usefulness of interpreting social problems in terms of value conflicts. If a problem is the result of values to which people are deeply committed, can it ever be resolved? Even if one group wins in the power struggle and imposes its own way on others, will not the struggle continue so long as the values are held? In other words, a problem may appear insoluble—unless or until people recognize that values may change over time and that values are affected by the conditions of existence.

Moreover, some problems may arise out of shared as well as conflicting values. For example, war may be the result of nations having the same values concerning political leadership, economic advantage, scarce natural resources, or territorial control as well as conflicting values about *who* should control. Racial conflict may be rooted in different groups having shared values about status, power, and privilege as well as their conflicting values about integration or segregation. Invariably, shared as well as conflicting values are involved, and a particular problem may represent one or the other kind of values, and perhaps both at once.

The Deviance Theories

In the discussion of social disorganization we pointed out that any society consists of a *network of norms* about behavior. The social disorganization point of view sees a social problem as the result of a breakdown of the network of norms. The **deviance** approach regards the problem as the *result of particular violations of the norms rather than a general breakdown.* Certain individuals or groups may assert their right to behave in a way that departs from the norms. They act, or assert their right to act, by *standards that conflict with the prevailing expectations* about appropriate behavior.

Obviously, not everyone who violates a norm is a criminal, delinquent, or immoral person. We have long known that the same behavior (and sometimes the same person) may be considered moral or immoral, healthy or pathological, ingenious or bizarre. The definition depends upon who or which group is defining the behavior. For example, Martin Luther was labeled both a saint and a heretic. And Ignaz Semmelweis, who greatly reduced hospital deaths by his insistence on sterile conditions, and who is regarded today as a pioneer in surgical antisepsis, was driven to insanity by the bitter opposition of his fellow physicians.

Furthermore, certain behavior may be defined, even within the same group, as deviant at one time and normal at another. At one time most Protestants viewed birth control as immoral. Today most Protestants probably would not even view the matter as a moral issue. Some would define the unregulated (rather than planned) conception of children as immoral.

If social problems are seen as violations of norms, the violators themselves may be defined variously as criminals, insane, unethical, freaks, or rugged individualists. Therefore, sociologists who advocate the deviance theory tend to assert or assume that deviants are as human and normal as the rest of us. They believe that *deviant behavior reflects social definitions rather than individual pathology.* In particular, they argue that the distribution of power in society determines which behavior is considered deviant and which is not. Thus, in America, individual thievery may result in a number of years' imprisonment for the offender, but corporate thievery may result in only a fine or an order to change the offensive behavior.

Advocates of the deviance viewpoint may well be asked why some people choose to break the norms of their society. A number of explanations have been offered. Some have been rejected by sociologists, such as the biological theories of criminality that were developed in the 19th century. One such explanation was that there is a criminal type of personality caused by hereditary and degenerative factors rather than social conditions. Later empirical studies disproved the claimed correlations between criminal behavior and particular physical characteristics. More recently, some researchers have tried to explain criminal behavior on the basis of a chromosomal abnormality. Most males have one X and one Y chromosome. In rare instances, a tall, white male will have an extra Y chromosome. This XYY pattern has been linked with violent crime and with mental retardation. Obviously, however, it cannot explain crime by women or by blacks. Biological explanations developed in the 19th or 20th century cannot adequately account for crime.

For a sociological view of deviance, we will examine Robert Merton's ideas about anomie, Edwin Sutherland's ideas about differential association, and ideas of the proponents of labeling theory. All three are variations of the deviance perspective.

Anomie: Robert K. Merton

Merton (1957) argued that *rule breaking* would be normal for some segments of any society. Every society has certain *cultural goals* and certain *legitimate means of reaching those goals,* and every society has individuals or groups who are blocked from the legitimate attainment of the goals. Merton called this situation **anomie**—*a structural breakdown characterized by incompatibility between the culturally approved norms and goals and the available means to act in accord with those norms and goals.* For example, in the

	Are culturally approved means of reaching goals accepted?		
	Yes	No	No, and new values substituted
Yes	Conformity	Innovation	
No	Ritualism	Retreatism	
No, and new values substituted			Rebellion

Are culturally approved goals accepted?

Figure 1.2   Merton's typology of modes of adaptation.

United States "success" is generally considered a worthy goal attainable by all. While a few Americans are nonconformists and reject the legitimacy of the goal, most pursue that goal and define it as worthy and attainable. But, in fact, there are not sufficient opportunities for everyone to be successful. For various reasons, the rags to riches story (or even the small wealth to great wealth story) will always characterize only a few persons. Thus, we have a social structure that pressures many individuals toward nonconforming behavior as they try to come to terms with the legitimacy of the goal and their own inability to achieve it.

What will an individual do when faced with a culturally legitimate goal and limited possibilities for attaining the goal through legitimate means? Merton suggested a variety of responses, which he called *modes of adaptation* (fig. 1.2). One mode is *conformity:* the individual defines both the cultural goal and the culturally appropriate means of achieving the goal as legitimate and desirable. Another mode is *innovation:* the goal is accepted but the means adopted are illegitimate. A third is *ritualism:* the individual compulsively follows the legitimate means even though the goal has been rejected or abandoned. A fourth mode is *retreatism:* rejection of both the goals and the means. A fifth is *rebellion:* not only rejection of both goals and means but also commitment to replace them with a different system. Merton emphasized that these modes of adaptation refer to behavior in specific situations, not to generalized personality traits. A person might alter the mode of adaptation as he or she goes from one social activity to another (for example, from economic to religious or political activity).

The scheme is illustrated by the American goal of monetary success and the means available to achieve that success. Obviously, not everyone can become wealthy. There are sufficient opportunities for only a few. People will adapt to this limitation in various ways. Some will conform and "succeed." Others, the innovators, will try to succeed

through crime. The ritualists will continue to work hard and press for their children to achieve what they know they cannot achieve. The retreatists will succumb to such deviant behavior as mental illness or drunkenness. And the rebels will become political radicals, pressing for structural changes in what they believe is a debilitating economic system.

In sum, Merton's explanation of deviance involves a social structure in which there are generally accepted cultural goals and generally accepted means of reaching those goals. While the goals are universally attainable in the ideology, only a few are attainable in practice. People adapt to the contradiction between the ideals and the reality in various ways. Some conform, but others deviate by rejecting goals or means or both. There is some evidence that at least one of the factors in crime is the perception of blocked opportunities that Merton talked about (Burton et al. 1994). But we are still left with the question of why individuals choose a particular mode of adaptation through one kind of deviance rather than the others that are possible.

Differential Association: Edwin Sutherland

The **differential association** theory was developed with specific reference to crime (Sutherland 1939). While the theory has been modified over time, the initial formulation argued that criminal behavior is learned in the process of social interaction, particularly in the individual's **primary groups** (those people with whom the individual has frequent intimate, face-to-face interaction, such as parents, spouse, children, and close friends). As Sutherland noted, we are all exposed to various and contradictory ideas of right and wrong behavior. Even those who consider themselves and their acquaintances prime examples of law-abiding citizens share some ideas that are deviant. For example, a "pillar" of the community once informed us how to minimize our personal property tax by making a false declaration of the worth of the property. The procedure was not considered illegal or unethical, however, because "everyone" did it.

Which standard, then, will we choose? Will we follow the official, legal standard or the one "everyone" follows? Sutherland said that *we will tend to accept those definitions of behavior that we encounter most often in our primary group interaction,* even if we are dealing with criminal or noncriminal, conformist or deviant behavior by the official, legal standard. The process is illustrated by the delinquent boy who was asked by an exasperated judge, "Why do you do such things?" Reflecting upon the question later in his life, the boy noted that it made no sense to him at the time, because everyone he knew did the things that incensed the judge. Most of the people with whom he associated, and whose approval he wanted, defined as appropriate behavior the acts that appalled the judge.

Obviously, Sutherland's theory involves *learning.* Individuals learn to be deviant through exposure to more definitions of what behavior is acceptable though illegal than to definitions that conform to the law. Yet, simple exposure is not enough. The exposure must be measured in terms of the frequency, duration, priority, and intensity of **interaction** with others significant to that individual (in the sense that their approval is important to the individual). Interaction preponderantly with those who favor illegal behavior increases the tendency toward criminal behavior. Furthermore, the concept of "priority" in this context means that those who learn illegal behavior early in life are more likely to be influenced by it than are those who encounter it later. The "intensity" condition stresses the point that interaction with those to whom we have emotional ties, instead of just anyone, is what counts.

Delinquent and criminal behavior is learned through social interaction with others, particularly with members of an individual's primary group, including close friends whose approval is important.

We should note one further point about Sutherland's theory. An individual does not automatically become a criminal because of heavy exposure to definitions favorable to illegal behavior. In later work, Sutherland pointed out that there also must be opportunity for the individual to behave illegally. Even with exposure to a preponderance of definitions favorable to illegal behavior, the individual will not become deviant without opportunities.

Differential association theory can be combined with social disorganization or other theories to explain delinquent behavior (Matsueda and Heimer 1987; Joseph 1995). For example, one characteristic of social disorganization is a large number of broken homes. In turn, broken homes tend to mean less parental supervision, which may lead to delinquent companions, definitions favoring delinquent behavior, and the behavior itself.

Differential association theory also can be combined with Merton's anomie theory. Albert Cohen (1955) attempted to synthesize the two in his analysis of delinquent **subcultures.** A subculture is a group within a society that shares much of the culture of the larger society while maintaining certain distinctive cultural elements of its own. Cohen argued that working-class boys who have to adapt to anomie do so by creating *a subculture that contradicts middle-class values.* Once the subculture is established in a gang, for

instance, others learn its norms through differential association, because a gang is a primary group. Members exhibit illegal behavior in order to *gain status* in the gang. Cohen's formulation was extended by Cloward and Ohlin (1960), who identified different kinds of delinquent subcultures that arise as working-class boys attempt to adapt to anomie. In one subculture, boys learn to be thieves; in another they have fights with other gangs; in a third they retreat into things such as drugs.

How useful is the combined Merton and Sutherland deviance theory? The suggestion that illegal behavior may be considered appropriate by some groups may puzzle or outrage some people, but there are good social-psychological grounds for the theory. We all behave with reference to people whom we define as significant to us. We all need social approval. We all adopt and support the viewpoints of groups to which we belong. In these respects, people who are criminal or delinquent are not different from other people. They are different, however, in their *exclusion* or *isolation* from the conventional segments of society and the conventional channels for attaining approved goals.

Whether combined with other theories or used alone, differential association theory helps us understand such problems as crime and delinquency (Reinarman and Fagan 1988). The theory also helps explain drug and alcohol use (Johnson 1988). It does not, however, offer much help for other problems. It does not aid our understanding of war and poverty. Even in areas where a deviance theory is most useful, certain difficulties arise. In a later chapter we will discuss one such area—white-collar crime. The name applies to crimes committed by middle-class people in the course of their work and includes such things as falsified expense accounts, kickback schemes, and false advertising. Such crime clearly violates societal rules, but it may not be legally defined as criminal, and often the offenders are not treated as criminals.

Finally, and unfortunately, the word "deviance" has negative connotations. It implies that the existing social order is desirable. In fact, many social problems arise because the existing order is undesirable for some segments of the population. "Deviance" may in such cases be a healthy reaction against an unjust social order.

Labeling

Labeling theory has a different emphasis from the variants of deviance just described, although, like them, it identifies social problems as violations of societal expectations. *Labeling theory focuses on the process by which individuals are defined and treated as deviants.* Contradictions in the social structure are not emphasized, nor are the consequences of participating in certain groups. The theory is concerned with how a deviant identity is imposed on certain individuals, who thereby receive certain negative treatment and perhaps develop a negative image of themselves.

There are a number of assumptions in labeling theory (Filstead 1972:2). First, the *reactions of others* are what make the individual aware that his or her behavior is deviant. Behavior is defined as deviant not in reference to some universal and absolute moral values, but only in reference to the reactions of other people.

Second, *no behavior is inherently deviant.* The kind of behavior considered deviant varies from one society to another, as cross-cultural studies have illustrated. For example, many Americans have typically considered obscene language less appropriate for females than for males. However, among certain aborigines of Australia, females are ex-

pected to use such language, while it is immoral for males to do so. Similarly, while premarital sex has typically been disapproved of in America, it has been the norm in certain other societies.

A third assumption of labeling is that the distinction between deviant and conventional behavior is vague, since *what is defined as deviant changes with time and place.* Behavior defined as acceptable at one time may be unacceptable at another time. In colonial America all religious groups allowed drinking in moderation. During the 19th century, however, total abstinence emerged as the norm for a number of religious groups.

The labeling theory arose out of the work of Edwin Lemert (1951) and was extended by the work of Howard Becker (1963). Deviance, according to Becker, is not a particular type of behavior but is the consequence of some particular behavior being defined as deviant. The deviant is simply someone who has been successfully labeled an outsider. To say "successfully" labeled implies, among other things, that everyone who behaves in a particular way will not actually be labeled. It also implies that some people may be unfairly labeled, having broken no rules. There are four different outcomes with respect to any particular behavior: (1) The individual may have *violated a rule,* and **sanctions** are applied; (2) the individual may have violated a rule but escapes sanctions; (3) the individual may conform to rules but still have sanctions applied; or (4) the individual may conform to rules and escape sanctions (Becker 1963:19).

Becker emphasized the impact of labeling upon the individual. He argued that deviance is the result of social interaction after the fact and is not an expression of a flawed personality. When a person first behaves in a deviant fashion, it is described as **primary deviance,** which means that the individual still considers himself or herself to be a conforming member of the society. Once successfully labeled, however, the person is likely to continue in the deviance because others respond to him or her as a deviant. The individual has now entered **secondary deviance** (Lemert 1951:75–76). The deviant behavior has become incorporated into the individual's *self-concept.* The difference between the two is illustrated by a young woman who first engages in sexual intercourse for money and argues, "I'm not a prostitute; I just had to get the money," and then continues her behavior and soon says, "I am a prostitute."

According to labeling theory, the crucial matter is not the behavior of the deviant, but the *societal reaction*—the fact that the individual is labeled as a deviant by others. A person may be so labeled without breaking any rules, particularly if he or she is relatively powerless and belongs to a minority group or a low socioeconomic class. This is not to say that the individual is purely a passive recipient, however. Those who are labeled may actively try to reduce the stigma associated with the label or disavow the label of deviant (Nusbaumer 1983). Of course, trying to "reduce the stigma" implies some negative consequences. And indeed, even if a label does not directly produce deviant behavior, it may have certain negative consequences. For example, mental patients believe that they will be devalued and face discrimination in the job market. A study of patients and nonpatients in New York found that the nonpatients agreed that most people will reject mental patients, and the patients approved of such things as secrecy, withdrawal, and education as ways to deal with the problem (Link et al. 1989). Even if labeling did not produce the mental illness, it certainly affected the quality of life of the patients and their efforts to rebuild a normal life for themselves.

Labeling theory has been applied to a number of problems. It has been used to analyze the ways that those with disabilities are affected by being stigmatized and to analyze the behavior of check forgers, drug users, delinquents, the mentally ill, and homosexuals (see, e.g., Downs, Robertson, and Harrison 1997; Zhang 1997). Like other theories, it is useful for some problems but certainly not for all. Even where labeling theory applies, it may not explain. Labeling theory does not account for those who choose or who are committed to some type of deviant behavior: For them, the label identifies a prior reality. Are there not persons already committed to an illegal career before the authorities labeled them criminals? Are not some individuals labeled deviant because they have already become deviants?

Labeling theory also fails to explain the reactions of persons who resist the effort to be labeled. There always have been people who were members of groups labeled as inherently inferior or rightfully subordinate but who rejected the label and the behavior it implied. The lower **castes** in India, the burakumin in Japan, and various ethnic and racial groups in the United States have been labeled as inferior. But there have always been individuals in those groups who resisted the label and asserted their right to equality with the larger society.

The Social Structure Theories

This is the final type of sociological explanation of social problems to be considered. Finding a descriptive name to cover the *critical and radical theories* included is difficult. The entire society may be considered to be the problem, including the total institutional network and the dominant ideologies. The fundamental problem may be narrowed to the capitalist system of production and the consequent exploitation and alienation. In any case, these theories share an *underlying rejection of the structure of the society,* in contrast to the other theories, which often support the basic social structure. The solution suggested is also radical: The social order must be restructured if the problem is to be resolved.

The social structural views include Marxist and neo-Marxist theories, although not exclusively. They all have a holistic viewpoint, insisting that we must look not to individuals or particular groups but to the structure of the entire society.

Thus, Paul Blumberg (1989) calls ours a "predatory society," one in which corruption, exploitation, and dishonesty are rife. It is not that all people are corrupt. Rather, people who are otherwise good citizens, kindly parents, and decent individuals who would not knowingly harm another person in a face-to-face encounter behave like criminals in their work. Blumberg cites such cases as the company that knowingly made defective brake systems for American jet fighters and one that knowingly made defective firefighting equipment for navy ships. He notes the automobiles that were marketed even though they were known to be dangerous and certain to result in a number of accidents and deaths. He asks how moral people could take drugs and chemicals banned as hazardous in this country and sell them to Third World countries. He discusses the numberless petty frauds and swindles committed by small business owners in the course of their daily work.

What is the problem? It is the system itself:

> There is no question that the profit system is the central villain in all these instances of workplace immorality. In each case, calculations of gain simply superseded

> every other value. In an economic system based exclusively on motives of self-interest and profit, such behavior is inevitable. (Blumberg 1989:106)

There are a number of other aspects to the system that facilitate immoral behavior at work. Any injury to others is likely to be impersonal, since the workers do not know the customers personally. Each worker also is likely to perform but a small part of the overall operation and is working under orders from a superior, so that "someone else" is always responsible for the overall outcome.

Not everyone cheats or behaves immorally, of course. But, Blumberg argues, the majority do. Deception in business "though certainly not universal, represents the chronic essence rather than the occasional excess of the system" (Blumberg 1989:224). We are a nation of basically decent people who are impelled by the system itself to behave chronically in immoral ways.

The social structural view is also used to explain gender inequality. Those who advocate this view use the arguments explained by Barbara Deckard (1975:414–26). The socialist feminists follow Engels in attributing the oppression of women to the class system. They argue that men and women were equal in primitive society because both did work that was necessary for survival. As the primitive social structure gave way to a society marked by social classes, state power, and male-headed families, women lost their position of equality. This change was a consequence of the transition from hunting, gathering, and primitive agriculture to a more developed form of agriculture and animal raising.

In other words, a new economic pattern resulted from increased production. As people began to create a surplus above their own needs for survival, social classes developed, with some producing and some receiving the surplus. Furthermore, the surplus was controlled by a few individuals who were able to build up their private property. The nature of the economy—large-scale agriculture and animal raising—allowed men to assume the dominant roles and control the surplus. Marriage and families became necessary so the accumulated wealth could be transmitted to one's heirs. Marriage allowed a husband to own his wife and thus be assured of legitimate sons to inherit his property. The wife's role, no longer that of an equal in production, was reduced to bearing children for the man who owned her.

Women thus lost their equality and became an oppressed group. They have continued to live in oppression in all societies with social classes. As this argument suggests, the oppression of women serves useful functions for capitalism. Women provide the system with a cheap reserve labor force that helps keep profits high.

Obviously, the social structural theories are much broader than the others we have examined. They leap over the deficiencies of the others by focusing our attention on some of the larger historical processes and social forces that generate social problems. However, they also have limitations, particularly when used as an explanatory framework for all social problems. For example, if racism is the natural outgrowth of a capitalistic social order, how do we account for race problems in noncapitalistic societies? It is possible to recognize that racism pervades the institutions of American society and works to the advantage of some Americans without concluding that it is the inevitable outgrowth of capitalism.

Theories as Complementary

The several theoretical orientations discussed seem contradictory in that certain problems appear to be more fully explained by one theory rather than another. Yet these theories are complementary. If we try to explain all social problems within the framework of a single theory, we are as simplistic as the person who attributes every problem to personal faults of individuals: War results from bad leaders, poverty is due to lazy heads of families, and racism comes from rednecks. The theories offer options to this fault-of-the-individual explanation, but no theory is sufficient by itself. As illustrated by Hayes (1997) in his analysis of delinquency, integrating a number of theories together can sometimes explain a problem better than can any single theory.

Together, the theories suggest two things of importance. First, *social problems have multiple causes.* In studying any particular problem, we might find a breakdown of rules, stimulated by social change, facilitated by the institutional structure, and compounded by value conflicts. The different theories are not wrong, but they are inadequate when used separately as complete explanations.

Second, *social problems are manifested at various levels of human organization.* A particular problem may exist at the individual, the group, the societal, and even the global level. These insights represent the viewpoint in this book, which we will now examine in detail.

Social Problems as Contradictions

Our approach will be complex because social life is complex. Social problems involve multiple causes and are manifested at multiple levels of human life. Our attitudes, our ideas, the expectations we have about people's behavior, the ways we relate to people, the typical practices and policies of various organizations, the exercise of power by political and business leaders—these and other factors enter into social problems.

The concepts that we will use to discuss problems are diagrammed in figure 1.3. The pairs of arrows indicate *mutual influence.* For example, social structural factors affect the way people interact. Norms and roles may lead a white person and a black person to treat each other as equals at the factory but not in other settings. The influence can go both ways: Patterns of social interaction can alter the social structural factors, too. In recent years, for instance, women have insisted on interacting with men in ways that have altered the female role. Similarly, blacks have persisted in interacting with whites in ways that have changed traditional roles. An **ideology** of white supremacy can help to create and maintain a subservient role. But as blacks refuse to accept the role and assume instead the same kinds of roles as whites, the ideology will be rejected by increasing numbers of people.

By the very nature of social life, there are numerous *contradictions* among the elements in figure 1.3. When the contradictions are defined as incompatible with the *desired quality of life,* we have a social problem. For example, the role allowed the aged in our society (see chapter 16) contradicts our value of human dignity and is incompatible with the desired quality of life of the elderly. The role allowed the elderly thereby constitutes a social problem.
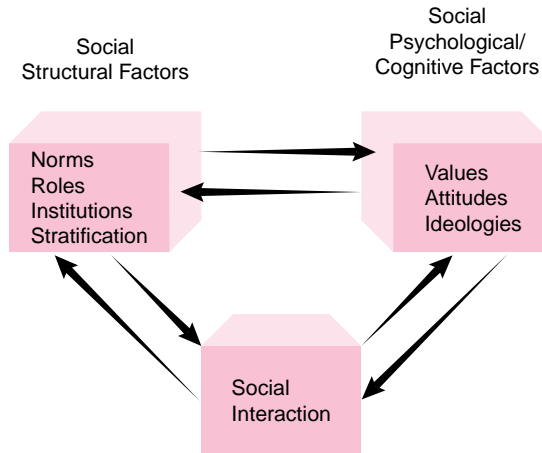
Figure 1.3   A model for analyzing social problems.

The term **contradiction** here means that opposing phenomena exist within the same social system. The phenomena are opposed in the sense that both cannot be true or operative. This tends to create pressure for change, and ultimately the contradictions may be resolved through change.

Social problems arise when one or more of the opposing phenomena are defined as incompatible with the desired quality of life. This means that not all societal contradictions signal social problems, only those defined as detracting from the quality of life. Objective data alone do not comprise a problem. Only when people define a situation as problematic and persuade others to view it in the same way is there a social problem (Fine 2000). For instance, religion tends to be a unifying force, proclaiming a duty to love, to make peace, and to establish brotherhood. But religious leaders on both sides of a war frequently assure their people that "God is on our side." This is a contradiction, but religion is not considered a social problem by most observers.

Whether people generally define something as detracting from their quality of life depends upon such things as how the problem is presented in the media, how the problem squares with people's experiences, and how readily people can understand the various facets of the problem. Such factors help explain why ozone depletion, for example, is more widely accepted as a problem than is global warming (Ungar 1998).

The opposing social phenomena that are defined as problems may be contradictory sets of *norms,* conflicting *values,* different *rates of change,* a contradiction between *ideology* and *reality,* a contradiction between *values* and *patterns of interaction,* and so forth. In fact, any particular social problem tends to involve a number of contradictions.

Consider the problem of gender inequality. Among the opposing phenomena involved in the problem are

1.   The *ideology* of equal opportunity vs. the *reality* of female opportunities for participation in the economy.

2. Our *value* of the pursuit of happiness vs. the narrowness of the traditional female role.
3. Our *value* of human dignity vs. male–female *interaction* in which females are treated as intellectual inferiors.

Each of these oppositions involves some element incompatible with the desired quality of life of many women.

Quality of Life

What is this *quality of life* that plays so prominent a role in determining whether a contradiction will be defined as a social problem? In recent years, concern about the quality of life has grown in this country. It ranges from concern about safety standards for children's toys to governmental subsidies for the arts. Few people disagree with Thoreau's desire to avoid discovering, at the point of death, that

> . . . I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life . . . (Thoreau 1968:113)

Our own desire to "live deep," to maximize the quality of our lives, is reflected in the proliferation of studies in recent decades. Concern with the quality of life is quite old, of course. But the number of studies mushroomed during the 1970s. In quality-of-life studies, cities and states are evaluated in terms of such things as equality of opportunity, agriculture, crime rates, technology, education, climate, the economy, cultural opportunities, and health and welfare. The cities and states are then ranked according to the resulting overall "quality of life" offered.

After decades of such studies, we know now that there is considerable agreement about what influences the quality of life and about what Americans define as important to the quality of their lives (Ferriss 2000). In essence, Americans evaluate their quality of life according to how well they are doing financially, physically, emotionally, socially, and culturally. We want well-paying and meaningful work. We want financial security. We want good health and access to good health-care facilities. We want the opportunity for a good education. We want the facilities and opportunities for participation in cultural activities. We want to live and work in areas where there is minimal crime. We want to have respect from other people. We want to be able to respect ourselves and to have a sense of our own worth. We want to be able to live without fear and with reasonable freedom from stress.

To the extent that we lack these things, we perceive the quality of life to be diminished. Thus, research shows that quality of life is diminished by such things as personal health problems (Woodruff and Conway 1992), work demands that interfere with non-working time (Rice, Frone, and McFarlin 1992), and the environmental problems that affect us all in some way or another (Tickell 1992).

Quality of life, then, involves far more than income. You may be able to purchase the best medical care, but you can't buy freedom from all illness. You may be able to

I n v o l v e m e n t

What? Why? How?

What if everyone defined abortion as perfectly acceptable? What if everyone agreed that prostitution is a good way for women to make a living and a good sexual outlet for men? What if everyone believed that a certain proportion of the population inevitably will, and even should, be poor? Would any of these be social problems? As indicated in the text, something becomes a social problem only when people—at least a small minority of people—define it as such.

What do Americans define as our problems? Interview 5 to 10 people. Ask them to name the most important social problems facing America today. Then ask them what they believe to be the causes of those problems, how they would go about resolving them, and in what ways, if any, the problems directly affect them.

What are the problems they name? Why do they believe the problems exist? How would they resolve them? Do they see the problems as primarily personal or social? Is there consistency between their explanations of causes and their suggestions for resolutions? How are their lives affected by the problems they name? What differences do you think there would be in the responses if you selected a different kind of sample (e.g, different racial composition, different social-class background, different age or sex composition)? A good way to answer the last question is to have the entire class participate in this exercise, assigning different kinds of samples to various class members.

purchase security measures for your home, but you can't buy total peace of mind when the newspapers regularly remind you of the pervasiveness of crime. You may be able to afford the best seats in the house, but that's meaningless if your community lacks cultural opportunities. You may live in the most expensive area available, but you can't shut out the polluted air that engulfs your property. And so on. Money does not and cannot ensure the highest quality of life.

We should also note that the undesirable conditions that diminish the quality of life affect us both directly and indirectly. For example, some people are directly victims of criminal activity—they are mugged, robbed, assaulted, raped, or cheated, for example. But all of us have some *fear of criminal victimization,* even though we have never been directly victimized. That fear may put limits on where we go or what we do or how secure we feel, and those limits reduce the quality of our lives.

In sum, there are numerous contradictions in our society that create conditions incompatible with our desired quality of life. All of us are affected, though some suffer far more than others. Because of the diminished quality of life, we define these contradictions and the conditions they create as social problems.

Multiple Levels of Social Problems

Social problems are manifested at *multiple levels of social life.* The factors that cause, facilitate, and help to perpetuate social problems are found at the individual, the group, the societal, and, in some cases, the global levels.

Consider, for example, the problem of racial and ethnic relations (for brevity's sake, we shall refer to this problem by the commonly used phrase "race problem," though the "problem" is not race per se, but the relationships between people of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds). The various theories we have examined all contribute to our understanding of the problem, and they apply at different levels. For instance, the social disorganization theory might locate the breakdown of rules about racial interaction in migration or technological change. If we look at the race problem in terms of social change, we could also point to migration and technological developments. Or we might stress the different rates of change in the society (the legal system has altered interaction patterns, some of which are still resisted by existing norms, values, and attitudes). We could focus on the different values of whites and blacks that lead them to struggle for different aims. Applying the deviance theory, we could emphasize that legitimate means for attaining goals have been closed to blacks or that the negative labels applied to blacks have been used to justify discrimination. Finally, in accordance with the social structure theory, we might emphasize the functions of racism in a capitalist economy.

Social interaction patterns, social structural factors, and social psychological factors are all part of the problem, and the factors involved occur at multiple levels. The inclusive approach in this book stresses the need to consider factors at all levels in order to gain a complete understanding.

Consider race again. At one level the problem may be manifested as an attitude of prejudice combined with a value of individualism (meaning that the government should not force us to interact with other races). Add to that an ideology that defines the oppressed race as inferior and therefore deserving of an inferior position. These values, attitudes, and ideology explain and help to perpetuate a structure in which the oppressed race remains in the least desirable roles, institutional positions, and socioeconomic stratum. Furthermore, interaction between the races is restricted, permitting little opportunity for reevaluation and change.

However, interaction can never be so confined as to prevent the development of new values, attitudes, and ideologies, and with that development come changes in interaction patterns and in the social structure. Diverse ideologies usually are available in any social order to legitimate a change in interaction patterns.

Some members of the oppressed race may perceive a contradiction between an ideology of the free pursuit of happiness and the realities of their situation. They may use the ideology and the contradiction to shape new attitudes and values among the oppressed. They may also create new ideologies, such as a myth of their own superiority. They may restructure their interaction with their oppressors and strive to alter patterns of interaction and elements of the social structure. They may attempt to change the content of education, the power structure of the government, the practices and policies of the economy, and the activities and ideologies of religion.

The race problem appears at multiple levels of human life. It is not only a question of breakdown of norms, of social change, of conflicting values of different groups, of labels

There is considerable agreement about what Americans consider to be important to the quality of their lives.

applied by one group to another, or of the structure of institutions. The race problem involves all these things.

Social Action for Resolution

Social problems often give rise to *protest groups* and intergroup conflict as expressions of social action. Such groups arise because not everyone in the society will define a particular situation the same way. For example, the contradiction between the ideals of American life and the reality of life for most African Americans is not defined by all Americans as incompatible with the quality of life. Some deny that blacks have less access than whites to desirable aspects of American life. In other words, they deny the existence of a contradiction. Perhaps they deny that the contradiction represents a *social* problem. If blacks have not attained the quality of life that whites have, some people argue, the blacks themselves are at fault; they lack the necessary ambition or the required intelligence.

If all Americans denied the contradiction, there would be no race problem in this country (even though a foreign observer might see the contradiction). On the other hand, if all Americans affirmed the contradiction and demanded change, the problem might be quickly resolved. Because the contradiction is defined differently by different collectivities, intergroup conflict plays a part in resolving social problems.

We use the term *collectivity* here in reference to members of opposing groups in the conflict who agree on particular issues. The race problem, for example, is not simply a

matter of white vs. minority. The abortion problem is not a case of Catholics vs. Protestants. Gender inequality is not men vs. women. Poverty is not the rich vs. the poor. In each case there are members of both groups on either side of the issue.

All social problems are characterized by opposing groups with opposing ideologies and contrary definitions of the contradiction. One side will argue that the contradiction is incompatible with the desired quality of their lives, while the other side will argue that there is no contradiction, that the contradiction is necessary, or that the contradiction exists but is not rooted in the social system (in other words, the victims of the contradictions are blamed for their plight). Such conflict is the context in which efforts to resolve problems take place.

In subsequent chapters we will discuss the ways in which problems may be attacked by social action. There are many reasons why resolution of most social problems through social action will be slow and agonizing: Problems are manifested at multiple levels of social reality; numerous factors are involved in causing the perpetuating problems; and intergroup conflict surrounds most problems.

The Changing Nature of Social Problems

One additional factor adds to the difficulty of resolving social problems—both the definition and the objective aspects of a particular problem change over time. Sometimes the change may be so rapid that an issue barely has time to be a problem. Until the exceptionally hot and dry summer of 1988, the public failed to respond much to the warnings of scientists about global warming (Ungar 1992). That summer helped make the problem a prominent one. However, subsequent events and issues soon made the problem decline in importance in the public mind.

Other problems similarly *rise and decline in perceived importance,* as is well illustrated by poverty. First, we note that definitions of poverty have changed over time. A 1952 edition of a social problems text omitted the two chapters on poverty that had appeared in the original 1942 edition (Reinhardt, Meadows, and Gillette 1952). The omission reflected the tendency during the 1950s for Americans to believe that poverty was largely a problem of the past. Even the 1942 edition reflected more the opinion of the sociologists than the public. As shown by Gallup opinion polls on the most important problem facing the nation, taken since November 1935, the public did not consider poverty as an important problem until 1965 (Lauer 1976). Interest and concern for poverty peaked in the 1960s and 1970s. By the late 1990s, only 10 percent of Americans considered the combined issue of poverty and homelessness as an important problem (Gallup 1998b).

The objective conditions of poverty also have changed over time; the amount of poverty has changed (as measured by some standard such as family income); the composition of the poor has changed (such as the relative proportions of racial, ethnic, and age groups); and the organization of antipoverty efforts has changed (such as the vigor and focus of protest groups and official attitudes and programs).

Recognizing such changes in problems is important to both our understanding and our action. For example, many people continue to identify poverty as essentially a problem of work—the poor are thought to be unemployed. As we will see, the problem of

poverty would be changed little even if every able-bodied person in America had a job. It is true that during the depression of the 1930s a considerable number of the impoverished were unemployed. Many people who lived through that period continue to associate poverty with unemployment, failing to recognize the changed nature of the problem. To continue associating the two concepts is to misunderstand the contemporary problem and thereby fail to take appropriate action. At one time in our history, providing more jobs would have had a greater impact on poverty than it would have today. Today, increasing the number of jobs will not significantly alter the poverty problem.

As we study the various problems, we will see fluctuations in all of them. Some appear to be getting better, and some appear to be getting worse. It is important to remember that improvement does not mean that the problem is resolved (gains can be quickly lost in the ongoing struggle for justice and equality), nor does deterioration mean that the problem is hopeless (lost ground may be regained and new ground may be gained dramatically when appropriate social action is taken).

A Definition

Social problems have been defined in various ways. The definition presented now follows directly from the above discussion: *A social problem is a condition or pattern of behavior that (1) contradicts some other condition or pattern of behavior and is defined as incompatible with the desired quality of life; (2) is caused, facilitated, or prolonged by factors that operate at multiple levels of social life; (3) involves intergroup conflict; and (4) requires social action to be resolved.*

This definition applies to all the problems discussed in this book. It might be argued, for example, that the drug addict is engaged in self-destruction but does not harm others, or that prostitution is a "victimless" crime that only involves consent between adults. But, as we will see, people define these and other problems as being incompatible with the desired quality of life. We will see that there are good grounds for that definition because all the problems have consequences for a considerable number of people who may not be directly involved. The drug addict's behavior is more than self-destruction; it is a threat to the citizen who may be robbed to support the drug addict's habit and an expense to the citizens who pay (through taxes) for the criminal justice system and rehabilitation programs.

The definition given earlier will shape our examination of the particular problems considered in this book. First, we will "get the feel" of the problem by seeing how it affects people's lives: We will examine how the problem involves a contradiction and is defined as incompatible with the desired quality of life. Second, we will analyze the multiple-level factors involved in the problem. We will not be able to relate every factor identified in figure 1.3 to every problem—research has not yet identified the components of each problem. In every problem we will see multiple-level components that will show how that problem arises and tends to be perpetuated. Third, we will consider social action designed to resolve the problem. Our examination will be sketchy (any adequate treatment would require a book in itself), but we will discuss some kinds of social action for each problem we discuss.

$\boxed{\textbf{S}}$ ummary

We need to distinguish between personal and social problems. For the former, the causes and solutions lie within the individual and his or her immediate environment. For the latter, the causes and solutions lie outside the individual and his or her immediate environment. Defining a particular problem as personal or social is important because the definition determines the causes we identify, the consequences of the problem, and how we will cope with the problem.

To understand social problems—problems whose causes lie beyond the individual's qualities—we need a theoretical perspective. Sociologists have developed a number of theories to explain social problems, including social disorganization, social change, value conflict, deviance, and social structure.

The social disorganization theory traces problems to the breakdown of norms, often caused by social change. The consequences of disorganization are stress at the individual level and problems at the societal level.

The social change theory may be linked with the idea of social disorganization, or it may emphasize conflicting or rapid rates of change. Conflicting rates occur when different parts of a culture change at different rates, leading to cultural lag. A rapid rate creates the trauma known as "future shock."

The value conflict theory views social problems as the clash of contrary values of different groups in a society. Within any particular society, different groups have both shared and dissimilar values. The latter leads to the definition of some condition or behavior as a social problem.

The deviance theory includes the anomie theory of Merton, the differential association theory of Sutherland, and the labeling theory developed by Lemert. Anomie theory locates social problems in the denial of culturally valued goals to many people (at least through culturally legitimate means). Differential association theory stresses the importance of the individual's primary relationships in defining different kinds of behavior. Labeling theory posits that the societal reaction to deviant behavior affixes the label to an individual and that the labeling itself becomes the cause of social problems.

The social structure theory identifies the structure of the society as the problem. It may be a capitalist economy or the whole system of interrelated institutions, but all social problems stem from the notion that that structure is debilitating for people.

The theoretical framework we will use considers social problems as contradictions. It emphasizes the view that multiple-level factors cause and help perpetuate problems. We must understand social problems in terms of the mutual influence between social structural factors, social psychological/cognitive factors, and social interaction. Our definition of a social problem, therefore, is that it is a condition or pattern of behavior that is a defined contradiction incompatible with the desired quality of life; it is caused, facilitated, or prolonged by multiple-level factors; and social action is required for its resolution.

K ey Terms

Anomie
Attitude
Caste
Contradiction
Culture
Deviance
Differential Association
Ideology
Institution
Interaction
Labeling Theory
Norm

Personal Problem
Primary Deviance
Primary Group
Role
Sanctions
Secondary Deviance
Social Change
Social Disorganization
Social Problem
Subculture
Values

S tudy Questions

1. Using rape or some other problem as an example, how would you distinguish between a personal and a social problem?
2. What difference does the distinction between personal and social problems make in our understanding of the causes and consequences of problems?
3. What do we mean by the social nature of attitudes?
4. What are norms, and what is the source of the norms we follow?
5. What do each of the major theoretical perspectives identify as being the primary cause of social problems?
6. What is meant by quality of life, and in what way is it a part of social problems?
7. In the author's model for analyzing social problems, what are the important concepts?
8. Define each of the concepts in the author's model and illustrate how each can enhance our understanding of social problems.

F or Further Reading

Elliott, Mabel A., and Francis E. Merrill. *Social Disorganization.* New York: Harper & Row, 1961. Originally published in 1934, this work still represents one of the best efforts to analyze social problems from the social disorganization perspective. A wide range of problems is discussed, from prostitution to revolution.

Heiner, Robert, ed. *Social Problems and Social Solutions: A Cross-Cultural Perspective.* Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1998. Uses conflict theory to analyze problems in other nations. Also discusses some efforts at resolution in various other countries.

Lemert, Edwin M. *Social Pathology.* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1951. A treatment of problems in terms of personal and social deviation; contains the original formulation of labeling theory.

Nussbaum, Martha C., and Amartya Sen, eds. *The Quality of Life.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Various authors discuss how to measure the quality of life and compare differing societies on quality-of-life scores.

Shreve, Susan Richards, Porter Shreve, and James Reston. *How We Want To Live: Narratives on Progress.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1998. Essays on the notion of progress and how the American pursuit of progress affects our quality of life.

Simon, David R. *Elite Deviance.* 6th ed. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1998. An excellent example of the social structural approach to social problems, showing how scandals are built into the structure and functioning of American institutions.

N otes

1. These incidents were reported in *Time,* September 5, 1983, pp. 28–29.
2. Reported in *The San Diego Union-Tribune,* January 17, 1998.