

# Chapter One:

## Studying Social Problems in the Twenty-First Century

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# Chapter One Outline

## Sociological Insights to Social Problems

- What is a Social Problem
- Sociological Imagination
- Levels of Analysis

## Social Theory to Analyze Social Problems

- Functionalist Perspective
- Conflict Perspective
- Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

## Research Methods to Study Social Problems

- Field Research
- Survey Research
- Secondary Analysis

# Foundational Terminology

- Sociology: systematic study of human *society*
- Society: Individuals sharing geographic area and *culture*
- Culture: Knowledge, values, customs, material objects passed from one generation to next

# Defining a Social Problem:

- A social problem is:
  - a social condition
  - a behavioral pattern
- A social problem harms:
  - certain individuals
  - all people in a society
- A social problem causes:
  - public concern
  - collective action for change



**TABLE 1.1** Changing Perceptions of What Constitutes a Social Problem, 1950–2008

Nationwide polls taken over the last half century reflect dramatic changes in how people view social problems. Notice how responses to the question “What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today?” have changed over the years.

1950		1965		1975	
War	40%	Civil rights	52%	High cost of living	60%
The economy	15%	Vietnam War	22%	Unemployment	20%
Unemployment	10%	Other international problems	14%	Dissatisfaction with government	7%
Communism	8%	Racial strife	13%	Energy crisis	7%
1990		2005		2008	
Budget deficit	21%	War in Iraq	19%	The economy	35%
Drug abuse	18%	The economy/jobs	18%	Situation in Iraq/War	21%
Poverty, homelessness	7%	Terrorism (general)	6%	Health care	8%
The economy	7%	Health care	5%	Fuel/oil prices	8%
		Social Security	4%	Immigration/Illegal aliens	6%
		Moral/family values	4%	Unemployment/jobs	5%

Sources: *New York Times*, 1996b; The Polling Report, 2005; Gallup, 2008.

# *Sociological Imagination*

- Developed by C. Wright Mills (1959)
- Allows us to:
  - Connect private problems to public issues
  - Shift focus to a larger social context
- Personal problems such as job loss are caused by economic trends (downsizing, new technology)

# Levels of Analysis:

## Microlevel Analysis:

- Focus on-
  - small group relations
  - Individual interaction

Example:

How does fear of unemployment affect workers and their families?

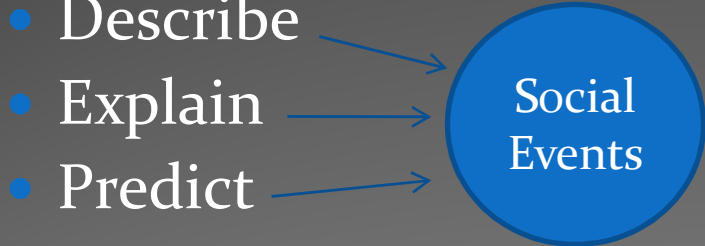
## Macrolevel Analysis:

- Focus on-
  - Processes at the societal level
  - Major social institutions

Example:

How has the loss of millions of U.S. jobs affected our economy?

# *Social Problems and Theory*

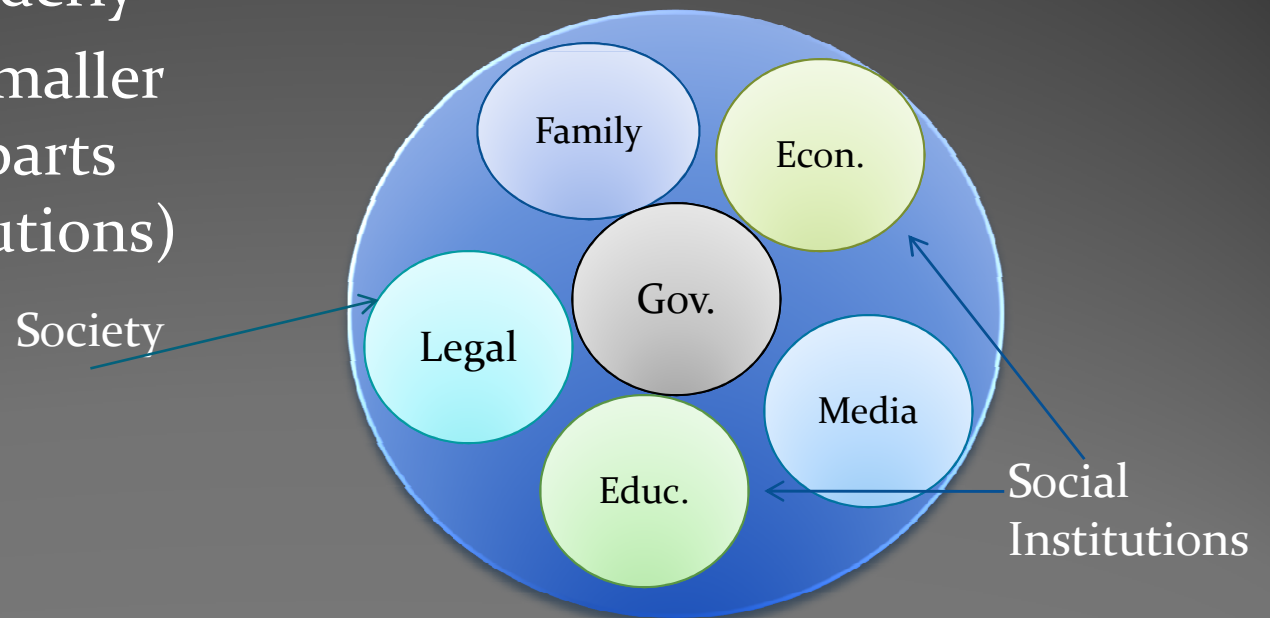
- Theory is:
  - A set of logically related statements
- Theory is used to:
  - Describe
  - Explain
  - Predict

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graph LR; A[Describe] --> B((Social Events)); C[Explain] --> B; D[Predict] --> B;
```
- Theory gives us a framework for viewing society called a sociological perspective.



# Functionalist Perspective

- Macrolevel analysis
- Views society as:
  - Stable and orderly
  - Made up of smaller interrelated parts (social institutions)

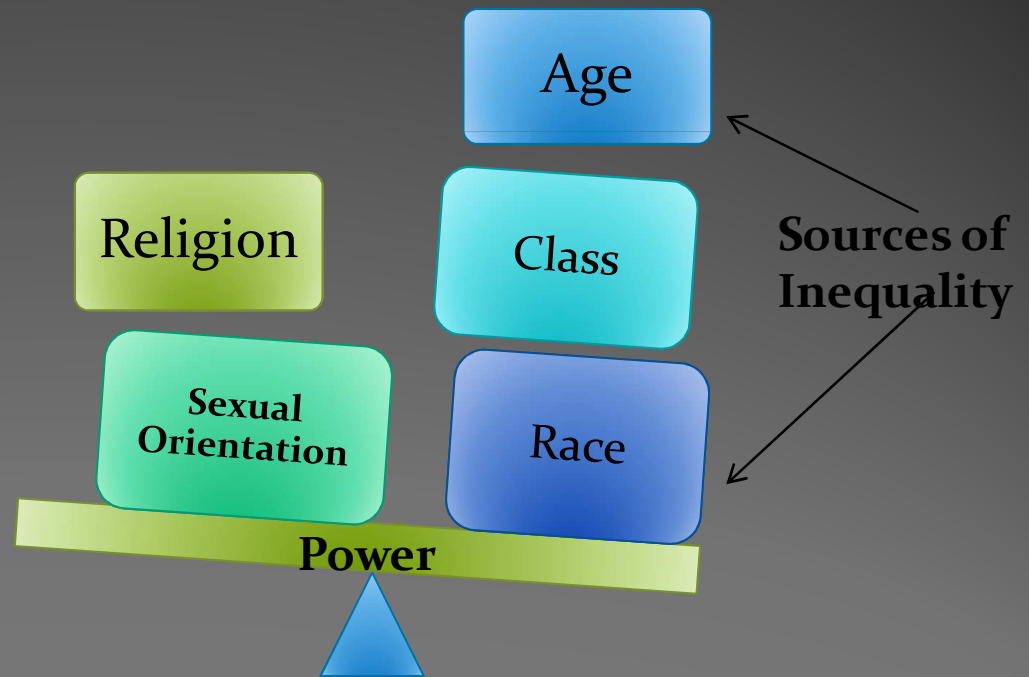


# Functionalist cont.

- Manifest function:
  - Intended and recognized activity of a social process
  - Overtly recognized as the purpose of the process
- Latent function:
  - Unintended consequences of a social process
  - Not usually overtly recognized by society or institution
- Dysfunction:
  - Undesirable consequences of a social process
  - Can lead to social disorganization (conditions which undermine ability for institutions to govern)

# Conflict Perspective

- Macrolevel analysis
- Assumes inherent power struggle
- Different groups working to control scarce resources



# *Symbolic Interactionist Perspective*

- Microlevel analysis
- Society is sum of interactions between groups and individuals
- Must have shared set of symbols for interaction to be meaningful

# *Sociological Explanations of Violence*

- **Functionalist:**
  - Violence increases when social institutions are weakened
  - Solution: Strengthen social institutions (family, schools)
- **Conflict:**
  - Violence is a response to inequalities in society
  - Solution: Reform political and economic institutions to change inequality.
- **Symbolic Interactionist:**
  - Violence is learned behavior
  - Solution: change societal values which encourage violence

# Research Methods

- Strategies or techniques to collect data about society
- Uses a systematic approach
- Produces results that are:
  - Quantitative: explanations using numbers
  - Qualitative: explanations using interpretive descriptions (words)



Field  
Research



Survey  
Research



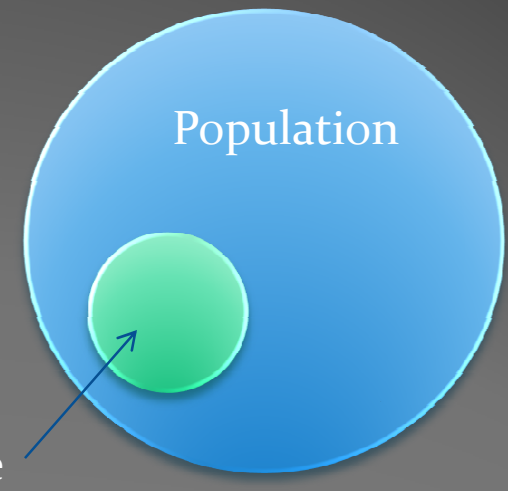
Secondary  
Analysis

# Field Research

- Observe behavior in a natural setting
- Can be an outsider or observe as a participant
  - Participant observation: joining the group you are observing
- Can gain a complete understanding by seeing all aspects on the interaction taking place

# Survey Research

- Respondents asked a series of questions
- Data collected through questionnaires or interviews
- Most frequently used method
  
- Allows researchers to target smaller samples of people who are representative of the larger population





# Secondary Analysis

- Use of already existing data
- Unobtrusive: researcher has no contact with subjects
  - Examples: public records, U.S. Census Bureau data
- Includes Content Analysis:
  - Systematic examination of artifacts or documents
  - Extraction of thematic data to explain social life
  - Examples: television programming, lyrics to songs, political speeches