

Lecture 2

Social Problems: Characteristics, Types, Causes and Reactions

Characteristics of Social Problems

On the basis of the above definitions, we can identify the following characteristics of social problems:

- All social problems are situations which have injurious consequences for society.
- All social problems are *deviations* from the “ideal” situation.
- All social problems have some *common basis* of origin.
- All social problems are *social and political in origin*.
- All social problems are caused by pathological social conditions.
- All social problems are *interconnected*.
- All social problems are *social in their results* – they affect all sections of society.
- The *responsibility* for social problems is *social* – they require a collective approach for their solution.
- Social problems occur in all societies (Ahuja 2002: 5).

Types of Social Problems

Norm Violations

Norm violations assume that a standard of behaviour exists.

People who study norm violations are interested in society's failures like the criminal, the mentally ill, or the school dropout.

Eitzen et al. (2009:10) contend, however, that norm violations are symptoms of social problems rather than the problem itself. Deviants, for example, are victims and should not be blamed entirely.

The system in which they live is blamed as well.

Social Conditions

Eitzen et al. (2009: 11) suggest that a second type of social problem involves conditions that cause psychic and material suffering for some category of people. The focus is on how society operates and who benefits and who doesn't benefit under existing social arrangements. “What is the bias of the system?”

- How are society's rewards distributed?
- Do some categories of people suffer due to the way schools are organized

- Are some groups of people put at a disadvantage because of the manner juries are selected?
- Do some categories suffer because of the way health care is delivered?

Eitzen et al. (2009:12) cites Maslow when describing the basic needs of human beings. They are the need for shelter, sustenance, security, group support, esteem, respect, and self-actualization (the need for creative and constructive involvement in productive, significant activity).

When these needs are not met, individuals will be hostile toward society and its norms. The frustration will be expressed in "withdrawal, alcohol and other drugs, or the violence of crime, terrorism, or aggression" (Eitzen et al. 2009:12).

As people withdraw from the system that fails to meet their needs, they will be defined by that society as "bad people, but this is so because they live in bad societies" (Eitzen et al. 2009:12).

Institutionalised Deviance

Often, when one attempts to understand deviance, they will look at characteristics of the individual to explain deviance. Eitzen et al. (2009:12) suggests that the source of deviance is found within the social structure. Society plays a role in creating and sustaining deviance by labeling those viewed as abnormal.

Institutional deviance is a term Eitzen (2009:12) uses to describe a situation when the institutions of society serves a selected few people who are generally powerful.

Institutional deviance exists when society and its formal organizations are not meeting the needs of individuals.

Causes of Social Problems

The causes of social problems may be three-fold but cannot be treated in isolation:

- (i) Individual
- (ii) Cultural
- (iii) Structural

The social evils that are plaguing our society today could hardly be catalogued. They are very uncountable in the true sense of the assertion. Prominent among them are: juvenile delinquency; child abuse; escalating crime waves such as armed robbery; arson; fraud; drug peddling; currency trafficking; bribery and corruption;

embezzlement of public funds; student and youth unrest; cultural violence; religious intolerance; boundary disputes; stack dishonesty; election rigging; coups and counter coups; lack of commitment to duty; examination malpractices; filthy and gross indiscipline; result racketeering; disrespect for other species; gross economic inequality; poverty; disease and hunger; widespread illiteracy; lack of gainful employment opportunities; open injustice; ostentatious spending; abuse of authority; hoarding of essential commodities; cheating and exploitation of the masses; discrimination and ethnic jingoism; inordinate ambition; cultism; lack of realisation of human potential; narrow education resulting in ill-informed citizens; civil wars; famine; drought and unchecked desertification; human trafficking and child labour.

Reactions to Social Problems

Different people react differently to social problems. The differences may be explained in terms of the following four factors:

- (i) An attitude of unconcern: Many people and the State at times remain indifferent to a problem thinking that it does not affect them. At times their own individual problems like family tensions and job pressures keep them so engaged that they do not find time to be interested in what affects others. It is only when their own interests are involved that they become agitated and start taking interest in the problem. The indifference and passivity of the State only add to the problem further.
- (ii) Fatalism: Some people are so fatalistic that they attribute everything to destiny. Issues like poverty and unemployment are also explained in terms of misfortune and past *karma*. They, therefore, suffer the misfortune quietly and wait for some miracle to happen.
- (iii) Vested interests: Some people take no interest in the existing problems because they stand to gain so long as the problem exists. Motivated by self-interest, they describe the problem as insoluble and talk about its eradication as a waste of time.
- (iv) Absence of expert knowledge: Some people, though deeply concerned about the problem, do not take much interest in it believing that its solution is impossible unless people change their attitudes and values. As the changes must be initiated by a change in outlook they remain unconcerned about finding alternative possibilities of treatment. Dowry is one such problem in our society.

The Sociological Imagination

The sociological imagination refers to the ability to see the relationship between individual experiences and the larger society (Kendall, 1998:7).

As opposed to looking at isolated events (like slavery or drug abuse) by themselves, the student of social problems is encouraged to look at social problems in relation to other aspects of society like the economy, culture or religion.

According to Mills (in Eitzen et al, 2009:14) "the task of sociology is to realize that individual circumstances are inextricably linked to the structure of society."

To paraphrase C. Wright Mills (1959), people do not usually define their personal problems in terms of historical change and institutional contradictions. People do not usually think of the connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history.

People live out biographies in the context of world events that are in turn determined by historically specified conditions. Both the lives of individuals and the course of world history is understood simultaneously.

- The sociological imagination is stimulated by a willingness to view the social world from the perspective of others.
- It involves moving from thinking about the individual and his problems and focusing on social, economic, and historical circumstances that produce the problem

The Cause of Homelessness: Individual pathology or public policy

- The sociological imagination requires a detachment from the taken-for-granted assumptions about social life.