

Perspectives of Social Problems

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Abstract

Social problems are described as perplexing questions about human societies proposed for solution. The distinctiveness of such questions as separate object of sociological study rests upon their topicality, currency and pragmatic derivation. Social problems are part of the climate of opinion in society, which centers on expressed needs for public policies and anticipated requirements for social control. The research on social problems consists of the ordering of perspectives and social facts in relation to the ends and means of collective action. At present our society is full of problems. A child dies because of lack of medical care, communal tensions arise as conflicts between two communities on one or other issue, robbery and murder occur with frightening frequency, a middle-class youth dies of a drug overdose, death due to starvation is quite common in some parts of the world and that physical suffering because of inadequate diet is even more common. Beside these, corruption, child abuse, violence against women, terrorism, poverty, unemployment, crime and many more are the issues, which result in toll of individual misery and misfortune and the din of group conflict some time seems endless. A social problem may be defined as a situation affecting a significant number of people that is believed by them or by a significant number of others in the society to be a source of difficulty or unhappiness and one that is capable of amelioration. Thus social problems consist of both an objective situation and a subjective social interpretation.

KEYWORDS: Social Problems, Social Pathology, Social Disorganization, Value Conflict, Cultural Lag, Personal Deviation, Anomie

Social problems are as old as man is. They are found in every society and in every historical time. The term social problem emerged in the nineteenth century (Schwartz 1997). Originally, it was singular and referred to the complicated, conflicted relationship between labour and capital in industrialized societies. However, by the end of century, it became plural. Sociologists have now recognized that there are many social problems and it is understood that they are not exclusively within the domain of sociology.

The definitions given by objectivist regarding social problem face three serious challenges. The first is that it must be very broad. The variation in the area of the social problem is as much that, it may be the act and experience of single individual (such as suicide and mental illness) or it may be the global phenomena (such as globalization or global warming). The challenge confronting any definition is obvious; that suicide and global warming have nothing to say about racism, crimes and other aspects of the social problems.

The second challenge is historical which indicates that the lists of social problems change with time. After 1970, few social problems texts dared to ignore sexism but earlier books had given little attention to gender issues. Similarly, it can be anticipated that books published in the near future will feature a chapter on globalization. To define social problems according to objective criteria, the challenge before sociologists is its dynamic nature and change in society.

The third challenge is practical i.e. social problem has not been proved to be a useful concept for sociological analysis. This was because the categories were too diverse and the phenomena that it encompassed had little in common, so the social problems rarely became the focus for either theoretical writings or empirical research. At first glance, this may seem to be a ridiculous claim. After all, a very large share of sociological work is about crime, racism and other topics, which were considered social problems; bibliographies for some of these topics feature thousands of entries. The concepts of alienation, anomie, class conflict, cultural lag, deviance, dysfunction and social disorganization focused on social problems. Surely, the literature on social problems is vast.

However, such arguments miss the point. To be sure, sociologists have written extensively about many of the phenomena that are considered social problems, but they have written very little about social problems as such or even about those social phenomena as social problems.

Sociologists viewed the study of social problems as a throwback to their discipline's early ties to social work; the research on social problems was tainted as being applied, whereas true sociology was a form of pure science and therefore more prestigious (Rose 1971). When the society to study the social problems (SSSP) was established, its first President, Ernest W. Burgess (1953) argued that one of its purposes was to bridge the gap between sociological theory and the study of social problems.

In principle, broad theoretical framework might be seemed to offer the ways of thinking about social problems. Functionalist argues that social problems are the result of dysfunction on the other hand, conflict theory insist that the social problems are the products of conflicting interests of the classes (Horton 1966). In fact, such efforts at theoretical statements were rare, probably because the variation within the broad category of the social problems made it virtually impossible to develop plausible generalizations, rather than presenting fully articulated theories of the social problems. Sociologists identified perspectives centered concepts such as social disorganization or value conflicts that might be applied in the analyses of the various specific conditions called problems (Rubington and Weinberg 2003).

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At present our society is full of problems. A child dies because of lack of medical care in a city hospital, communal tensions arise as conflicts between two communities on one or other issue, robbery and murder occur with frightening frequency, a middle-class youth dies of a drug overdose, death due to starvation is quite common in some parts of the world and that physical suffering because of inadequate diet is even more common. Beside these, corruption, child abuse, violence against women, terrorism, poverty, unemployment, crime and many more are the issues, which result in toll of individual misery and misfortune and the din of group conflict some time seems endless.

Proceeding beyond this general statement to a more precise definition of social problems poses a complicated task of sorting out the wide diversity of views held by sociologists towards the nature of the subject matter and the perspectives from which it should be studied. These conflicting viewpoints, as well as salient misgivings shared by many as to whether social problem is a field or can validly be included with sociology, are in part understandable in the context of the origins and history of sociology itself.

Six different ways of looking at the social problems in sociology are social pathology, social disorganization, value conflict, deviant behaviour, anomie and cultural lag.

Social Pathology

Society is made up of individuals bound together in social relationship and the social pathology is referred to the maladjustments in the social relationships. Pathological conditions in society may result from lack of ability in an individual to keep pace with the changing ideals and institutions of the society or the failure of society to keep in pace of its functional machinery with the changing conditions in the world in which he lives. Social pathologists defined social problems as those behaviours, which in their judgment, ran contrary to the maintenance of a healthy society i.e. a society that harboured little or no deviance.

According to social pathology perspective social problems are the violation of moral expectations. The ultimate cause of social problems is the failure in socialization. The people who contribute to the social problems are normally viewed as sick and as criminal in its extreme circumstances. The early social pathologists considered some people inherently defective and believed that defective, dependent and delinquent classes tend to perpetuate themselves through inbreeding. Later social pathologists began to see the social environment as the important condition contributing to the social pathology. Smith says that, social diseases are so prevalent as to create the social problem and are rarely found without a bad environment of some sort or other. Social pathology is rooted in the organic analogy and its primary concern is with the ills, or pathologies of the society. From this perspective, social problems are seen as violation of moral expectations. Their cause is thought to be socialization failure, which was attributed first to genetic inheritance and later to social environment. The result of such moral failure is moral erosion.

Social Disorganization

The concept of social disorganization emerges from the concept of social organization. The notion of social organization implies to that society or organization

whose parts are in the prescribed order. On the other hand, social disorganization is that condition of the society, community or the group in which there is a breakdown of social control or social order or formal and informal norms that define permissible behaviour. It is characterized by the lack of cooperation, common values, unity, discipline and predictability. Warren (1949) had described it as a condition involving lack of consensus, lack of integration of institutions and inadequate means of social control. Social disorganization occurs when there is a change in the equilibrium of forces or there is a breakdown of the social structure so that the former patterns no longer apply and the accepted forms of social control no longer function effectively. This disruptive condition of society, which is evidenced by normlessness, role conflict, social conflicts and demoralization perceived as the social problems.

The social disorganization approach did focus on the deviant behaviour of the individuals but more attention is paid to the influence of the social environment in explaining deviance. This concept enabled to pay more attention to the immediate environment within which problematic behaviour is found. As the concept focused on such environment, it was discovered that deviant behaviour is likely to be expressed only under some kind of societal conditions. By focusing on the working of society, rather than on presumed psychological or biological traits of individuals, this social disorganization perspective was sociological.

The adherents of the social disorganization approach rejected the biological conception of society. Rather, they saw society as a complex organizational unit, a social system, whose parts were interrelated and interdependent. The organization of society was made possible by set of norms or rules of appropriate behaviour. Norms were dictated and flew from culture. If all members of society accepted and adjusted their behaviour to these norms, i.e., if they fulfilled their appropriate social roles, the social system would function smoothly. In this case, the social system will be in a state of equilibrium and would grow and progress by the means of natural evolutionary tendencies contrary to this condition is disorganized society. For sociologists' social problems is an index of social disorganization.

Value Conflict

Values are generalized principle of the behaviour to which members of a group have strong and emotionally toned positive commitment and which provide a standard for judging specific acts and goals. Each member of the group is expected to remain committed to the values accepted by the group. Different groups have different sets of values. Incompatibility between the values of two or more groups to the extent that there is interference in the role performance of the individuals called the value conflict. This state of conflict may last only a short while or it may be a persistent problem.

The root causes of social problems are conflicts of values or interests. Various groups with different interests find themselves in opposition. Once opposition crystallizes into conflict, a social problem is born background conditions affecting the appearance, frequency, duration and outcome of social problems are competition and contact between groups. When two or more groups are in competition with one another than the conflict cannot be avoided. Conflicts can be abrasive and costly. They set a tradition of ill feeling among the groups. The value conflict perspective suggests three ways in which social

problems arising out of the clashing interests and values may be resolved: consensus, trading and naked power. If the parties can resolve the conflict on behalf of a set of higher values shared by both parties, then consensus wins the day. If the parties can bargain, then a trade of values in all the spirits of democratic process can take place. If neither consensus nor trading works, then the most powerful group gains control. From the perspective of value conflict social problems are seen as arising from conflicts of values.

Cultural Lag

Cultural lag is a situation in which some parts of a culture change at a faster rate than other related parts resulting in the disruption of integration and equilibrium of the culture; for example, the material culture changes more rapidly than the non-material culture in industrial societies because of rapid advancement in science and technology (Ogburn 1966). The theory of culture lag, in particular holds that in modern societies there has been a tendency for change in the political, educational, family and religious institutions to fall behind technological changes. It is thus easy to see how culture lag can create social problems. Even after rapid industrialization in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and in the first quarter of the twentieth century, some people were so influenced by the rigid restrictions of the caste system that they refused to work with members of other castes in the industries and preferred to remain unemployed and poor. The first quarter of the twentieth century, thus, remained a period of culture lag. It took more than a generation to adapt ourselves to technological development in agriculture and industry. Our social institutions, thus, retained the traditional flavour whereas technology has advanced in the world.

Personal Deviation

Deviation is non-conformity to social norms. It is different from abnormal behaviour because the latter connotes psychological illness rather than social maladjustment or conflict. Thus, people who deviate from social norms are not necessarily mentally ill.

In the social disorganization approach to the social problems, one looks at the rules that have broken down and the changes that have taken place because of the breaking of the rules. In personal deviation approach, one looks at the motivation and behaviour of the deviants which are instrumental in causing the problems. Two factors that need explanation in the personal deviation approach are: (i) development of personal deviation (ii) What types of personal deviation are frequently involved in social problems? Personal deviancy develops because of either an individual's inability to follow generally accepted norms or an individual's failure to accept generally accepted norms. The first is caused because of a person's emotional, social or biological deficiency, i.e., some persons are so constituted biologically, emotionally or socially that they are incapable of adhering consistently to generally accepted standards. The social deficient person does not truly violate norms; rather they manifest an inability to learn and follow the norms. The cause of emotional deficiency is bio-psychological. The deviants that contribute social problems often require the medical, psychiatric and the environmental or social therapies. On the other hand, an individual's failure to accept social norms has something to do with deficiency in socialization. These individuals,

though have learnt the norms and values like honesty, truthfulness, integrity, justice and cooperation, they cannot put them into practice. They remain disposed to telling lies, cheating, exploiting, and defaming other when it suits their purposes. Their deviance does not produce any guilt feeling or shame in them. They may change side abruptly and completely on a social issue if it serves their purpose. They care little whether social problems exist, whether they are being solved or not. They remain silent as long as the situation is being used for their stake.

Anomie

This approach was propounded by Merton. Anomie is a condition characterized by the relative absence or weakening or confusion of norms and values in a society or a group. The concept of anomie was originally developed by Durkheim to explain division of labour and suicide but it was Merton who used this concept 41 years after the publication of Durkheim's book *Suicide* to explain deviant behaviour in terms of functioning of social and cultural structures in the society, (Merton 1938). Anomie involves a breakdown in the cultural structure, occurring particularly when there is disjunction between cultural norms and goals and the socially structured capacities of members of the group to act in accordance with them.

Anomie is the counterpart of the idea of social solidarity. Just as social solidarity is a state of collective ideological integration, anomie is a state of confusion, insecurity and normlessness. According to Merton, the disjunction between goals and means and the consequent strain lead to the weakening of men's commitment to the culturally prescribed goals or institutionalized means, i.e. to a state of anomie. Merton maintains that people adapt themselves to this disjunction either by rejecting the cultural goals or the institutionalized means or both. He gives four varieties of deviant behaviour. Merton locates the sources of strain not in the characteristics of individuals but in the culture or social structure. He says that, the social problem arises not from people failing to live up to the requirement of their social statuses but from the faulty organization of these statuses into a reasonably coherent status.

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