

SECOND EDITION

SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Readings with Four Questions

JOEL M. CHARON
LEE GARTH VIGILANT



Social Problems

Readings with Four Questions

Second Edition

Joel M. Charon

Minnesota State University Moorhead

Lee Garth Vigilant

Minnesota State University Moorhead

THOMSON

WADSWORTH

Australia • Canada • Mexico • Singapore • Spain
United Kingdom • United States

D 771/104

Social Problems: Readings with Four Questions, Second Edition
Charon, Vigilant

Acquisitions Editor: Robert Jucha
Technology Project Manager: Dee Dee Zobian
Assistant Editor: Elise Smith
Editorial Assistant: Christina Cha
Senior Marketing Manager: Wendy Gordon
Marketing Assistant: Annabelle Yang
Advertising Project Manager: Linda Yip
Project Manager, Editorial Production: Annette Pagliaro

Senior Print Buyer: Mary Beth Hennebury
Production Service: International Typesetting and Composition
Cover Designer: Yvo Riezebos Design
Cover Printer: Malloy Lithographing
Compositor: International Typesetting and Composition
Printer: Malloy Lithographing
Cover Image: The Image Bank/Getty Images

© 2006 Thomson Wadsworth, a part of The Thomson Corporation. Thomson, the Star logo, and Wadsworth are trademarks used herein under license.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution, information storage and retrieval systems, or in any other manner—without the written permission of the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 08 07 06 05

For more information about our products,
contact us at:

**Thomson Learning Academic
Resource Center
1-800-423-0563**

For permission to use material from this
text or product, submit a request online at
<http://www.thomsonrights.com>.

Any additional questions about permissions
can be submitted by email to
thomsonrights@thomson.com.

**Thomson Higher Education
10 Davis Drive
Belmont, CA 94002-3098
USA**

Asia (including India)
Thomson Learning
5 Shenton Way
#01-01 UIC Building
Singapore 068808

Australia/New Zealand
Thomson Learning Australia
102 Dodds Street
Southbank, Victoria 3006
Australia

Canada
Thomson Nelson
1120 Birchmount Road
Toronto, Ontario M1K 5G4
Canada

UK/Europe/Middle East/Africa
Thomson Learning
High Holborn House
50-51 Bedford Road
London WC1R 4LR
United Kingdom

Library of Congress Control Number:
2005921586

ISBN 0-4950-0460-X



Preface

Like many sociologists, we were drawn to sociology because we were disturbed by the social problems we saw all around us. We believed that sociology would help us understand why these problems existed and perhaps show us how they could be solved. We wanted to understand and we wanted to help bring justice to society. We came to realize that no matter what we thought the world should become, we must try to be as objective as possible in our understanding. We also came to realize that we knew very little about society and its problems, and that it would take patience and a critical attitude to overcome our own ignorance and come to some partial understanding.

We also came to believe that social problems should be the concern of everyone in society, not just social scientists and politicians. Sociology should give students the vocabulary and the theory to understand and explain their own life situations. This is a reflexive sociology as it concerns social problems. By reflexive, we mean that the sociological study of social problems *must* always come back to individuals, and the questions that guide our study of social problems should reflect a concern for how people are impacted by social problems. The true gift of sociology is that it helps us to see the “small picture” by assisting in our understanding of how social problems have impacted our life experiences thus far and our future life chances.

PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

The purpose of this reader is to examine society and its problems *critically* and *sociologically*. By “critically,” we mean that these readings should encourage us to recognize the biases that we have developed as individuals, groups, and as a society, and to question our most basic beliefs about society and its problems. We are all victims to some extent: victims of

our cultural bias. If that cultural bias is not faced and understood, it will inevitably get in the way of our understanding and dealing with social problems intelligently. By “sociologically,” we mean that the authors of the readings regard society itself to be the source of the problems they discuss. The purpose of sociological study is to uncover, identify, and understand these problems. The advantage of a collection of readings over a standard textbook is that it can display a wider range of problems and diverse approaches; students gain an opportunity to examine a number of perspectives rather than a single individual’s views. Social problems such as discrimination, oppression, and exploitation both fascinate and disturb us. As sociologists, we want to understand them; as people who seek a better society, we want to deal with them in an intelligent manner. As teachers, we believe that learning is accomplished in part through organizing what is to be learned. Students are often told simply to read a collection of unrelated articles and to figure out what is important. We have sought a useful structure for understanding what the authors are saying about society, one that might help students read, understand, listen to, or express an intelligent opinion about any social problem they might encounter.

CHANGES TO THE SECOND EDITION

The second edition of *Social Problems: Readings with Four Questions* comes with significant changes. The authors, in conjunction with the publisher, analyzed a survey of professors using the first edition. The professors’ criticisms and accolades of the text were crucial to the revisions that appear in this edition. The first changes were in the addition of 15 new articles and in the organization of selected topics. The selection and organization of the readings in this edition match leading social problems textbooks. This makes it much easier for professors to bundle the second edition with any of the popular textbooks on the market today. Also, the second edition places a much stronger emphasis on violence among people who are connected to each other in some way: from the violence of extreme poverty and social exclusion that scars America’s inner cities, to the soft violence of rankism, the abuse of power in both formal and informal settings. The evaluations of students who read the first edition were also influential in the making of the second. These students’ insights on which articles in the first edition were interesting, provocative, informative, and challenging, as well as which ones were not, were pivotal. The authors took their suggestions to heart when selecting contributions for the second edition. Finally, the updated questions that accompany each selection make for a reader that is easy for instructors to teach with and for students to grasp the central argument of each author.

FEATURES AND ORGANIZATION OF THE READER

The structure of the reader is sociological: all the problems have their origin in society. The structure is also critical: social patterns are questioned and how society actually works is examined. Finally, the reader is organized around four central questions:

What is a problem?

What makes a problem a *social* problem?

What causes a social problem?

What can be done about a social problem?

These four questions should help students determine the central issues in each article.

The reader is divided into eleven parts. Part 1 examines the meaning of social problems and introduces the four questions in detail. Parts 2–5 focus on social inequality, probably the most important social problem for sociologists. Parts 6–10 examine institutional problems in crime, drugs, family, education, health care, politics, violence, and terrorism. Part 11 focuses on social problems related to population, aging, and the environment. Each part is prefaced by a brief summary of the articles to follow, and each article is introduced by a list of topics covered that students can use to find links and overlaps among articles and the social problems they discuss. Each selection also returns to the four basic questions: What exactly is the problem this author is identifying? Does the author convince us this is a social problem? What does the author tell us is the cause of the problem? Does the author make a suggestion as to what to do about this problem? Finally, the selections are followed by discussion questions that offer opportunities for students to articulate their own responses to the readings.

SUPPLEMENTS

Online Resources:

- Extension: Wadsworth's Sociology Readings Database is an online database from which an instructor can review and then select articles and book excerpts from original source material to create customized printed readers for their courses. Consult your Thomson Wadsworth sales representative for details.
- The companion website for this text is located at **Virtual Society: The Wadsworth Sociology Resource Center** at <http://sociology.wadsworth.com>.
- **InfoTrac® College Edition . . . now with InfoMarks!**

It is possible to bundle free with this text a four-month access to InfoTrac College Edition's online database of more than 18 million reliable, full-length articles from 5000 academic journals and periodicals (including *The New York Times*, *Science*, *Forbes*, and *USA Today*). This includes access to InfoMarks—stable URLs that can be linked to articles, journals, and searches. InfoMarks allow you to use a simple “copy and paste” technique to create instant and continually updated online readers, content services, bibliographies, electronic “reserve” readings, and current topic sites. Consult your Thomson Wadsworth sales representative for details.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We wish to thank the following instructors and colleagues who generously provided reviews for the preparation of the second edition: Robert Bausch, Cameron University; Heather Dillaway, Wayne State University; Laurel Holland, State University of West Georgia; Richard Loder, Syracuse University; Thomas Philips, Suffolk County Community College; and Brenda Wilhelm, Mesa State University.



Contents

PREFACE

x

PART I

An Introduction to Social Problems

1

1 *An Introduction to the Study of Social Problems*

3

Joel M. Charon

2 *How Do We Decide What Are Social Problems?*

11

Joseph R. Gusfield

3 *What's Wrong with Declaring War on Social Problems?*

18

Joel Best

4 *Somebodies and Nobodies: Rankism and What It Means*

28

Robert W. Fuller

PART II

Social Problems: Economic Inequality and Poverty

37

5 *What's Wrong with the American Dream?*

39 9/12

Jennifer L. Hochschild

6 *The Have-Mores and Have-Lesses*

50

Donald L. Barlett and James B. Steele

3

7	<i>The Invisible Poor</i> Katherine S. Newman	59	9/12
8	<i>The Global Economy, the Privileged Class, and the Working Class</i> Robert Perrucci and Earl Wysong	73	9/14
9	<i>Inheritance and Privilege</i> Thomas M. Shapiro	82	2
10	<i>Poverty in the United States</i> John Iceland	93	9/12

PART III

Social Problems: Work and Unemployment

11	<i>The Demeaning of Work</i> Barry Schwartz	109	111	9/14
12	<i>Work in the Strawberry Fields</i> Eric Schlosser	119	9/14	
13	<i>Globalization and the Race to the Bottom</i> Jeremy Brecher and Tim Costello	127	9/14	
14	<i>The Most Dangerous Job</i> Eric Schlosser	135		
15	<i>The Vanishing Middle Class</i> Griff Witte	143		

PART IV

Social Problems: Racial and Ethnic Inequality

16	<i>Laissez-Faire Racism</i> Lawrence D. Bobo and Ryan A. Smith	153	155
17	<i>Latino Lives in a Changing America</i> Roberto Suro	165	
18	<i>From Institutional to Jobless Ghettos</i> William Julius Wilson	173	
19	<i>The Revolution Is about Basketball</i> Nathan McCall	183	
20	<i>Eliminating the Waste of Racism</i> Joe R. Feagin and Hernan Vera	187	

PART V

Social Problems: Gender Inequality and Issues
in Sexual Orientation

199

- 21 *Socialization into Gender* 201
Barbara J. Risman
- 22 *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* 209
Sharon Hays
- 23 *The Betrayal of the American Man* 222
Susan Faludi
- 24 *Sexual Violence Against Women and Girls* 228
Michael L. Penn and Rahel Nardos
- 25 *Flat Broke with Children* 238
Sharon Hays
- 26 *Homosexuality and American Citizenship* 249
Michael Bronski

PART VI

Social Problems: Crime and Drugs

255

- 27 *The Possibilities for Crime Prevention* 257
Elliott Currie
- 28 *Violence and the Inner-City Code* 266
Elijah Anderson
- 29 *White-Collar Crime* 277
Stephen M. Rosoff, Henry N. Pontell, and Robert Tillman
- 30 *Three Fatal Flaws in the War on Drugs* 288
Eva Bertram, Morris Blachman, Kenneth Sharpe, and Peter Andreas
- 31 *From Prison to Home* 298
Jeremy Travis and Michelle Waul

PART VII

Social Problems Related to the Family

309

- 32 *Sex Codes and Family Life Among Poor Inner-City Youths* 311 12
Elijah Anderson
- 33 *The Politics of Teenage Pregnancy* 324 14
Kristin Luker

- 34 *Divorce in Perspective* 338 11
Stephanie Coontz
- 35 *The Incidence and Causes of Wife Abuse* 347 15
Maxine Baca Zinn and D. Stanley Eitzen
- 36 *What's Wrong with Child Care in America* 356 13
Barbara Bergmann and Suzanne Helburn

PART VIII

Social Problems Related to Education 363

- 37 *What No School Can Do* 365 4
James Traub
- 38 *American Education: Savage Inequalities* 370 5
Jonathan Kozol
- 39 *The Debasing of Education* 378 6
Barry Schwartz
- 40 *The Social Roots of School Shootings* 387
Katherine S. Newman, Cybelle Fox, David Harding,
Jal Mehta, and Wendy Roth
- 41 *Making Schools Work* 397 7
William G. Ouchi with Lydia G. Segal

PART IX

Social Problems Related to Health Care 405

- 42 *The Cultural Revolution in Health Care* 407 22
Ronald W. Dworkin
- 43 *Protection of the Least Well-Off* 413 23
Charles J. Dougherty
- 44 *Health Care Costs and Cost Containment* 421 24
Grace Budrys
- 45 *Why AIDS in Africa* 425
Tony Barnett and Alan Whiteside

PART X

Social Problems Related to Political Institutions,
Violence, and Terrorism 431

- 46 *Resurrecting a Civil Society* 433 27
Charles Derber

47	<i>The Corporation as Invisible Government</i> Charles A. Reich	441
48	<i>The Origins of Group Violence</i> Ervin Staub	449
49	<i>The Global Rise of Religious Violence</i> Mark Juergensmeyer	455
50	<i>Democracy in an Age of Terror</i> Michael Ignatieff	461

PART XI

Social Problems Related to Population and the Environment

51	<i>The Elderly—A Demographic Tidal Wave</i> Laurence J. Kotlikoff and Scott Burns	471
52	<i>Seeing the Population Issue Whole</i> Donella H. Meadows	473
53	<i>Ecology for the Money</i> Michael Parenti	483
54	<i>Three Views of the Future</i> Allen Hammond	488

INDEX	501
-------	-----

PART I



An Introduction to Social Problems

For many students, one of the attractions of sociology is a passion to understand social problems so that understanding can help students work toward making the world a better place. This inspiration is what sociologist Peter L. Berger describes as “a Boy Scout view” of sociology. Sociology, of course, is much more than this once people study it, but this “social problems” inspiration remains part of what we sociologists are and part of what the discipline has become.

It goes without saying that every society has social problems and that social problems will never cease to exist. We should also recognize that social problems are not usually obvious to people, that they are not easily solved, that they are caused by many complex social conditions, and that their origins are almost always in society itself. The topic of social problems is a difficult one in part because it is difficult to understand exactly what social problems are, because people are often not familiar with the sociological approach to understanding social problems, and because sociologists differ from one another as to which problems are significant.

Part I comprises four selections. Each one attempts to introduce and explore the four questions asked throughout this book: What is a problem? What makes a problem a *social* problem? What causes a social problem? What can be done about a social problem?

Joel Charon, one of the authors of this Reader, wrote the first selection to highlight these questions and lay out systematically some of the issues involved in trying to answer them. He introduces three perspectives that sociologists take toward studying social problems: the *conflict perspective*, the *consensus perspective*, and the *interactionist perspective*. Throughout this selection he emphasizes the importance of understanding all social problems in the context of the larger society—its patterns, its forces, and its conditions.

There are many good introductions to the meaning and importance of social problems. One of the best is by Joseph Gusfield and is the second selection in Part I. Gusfield's message is that social problems become social problems only when public debates make them so. There is, he writes, a contest in society as to which problems will be identified and dealt with. Power plays a large role in this contest, and those who perceive problems always have the aim of creating a consensus in society so that policies can be applied. Gusfield distinguishes between "political issues" and "social problems," and illustrates that people try to turn political issues into social problems.

Joel Best has one basic goal in the third selection: to criticize the use of war metaphors in relation to social problems. For example, he examines the so-called "war on drugs" and the "war on poverty." What is misleading in this metaphor is the idea that social problems should be and can be "solved," that we can ultimately "defeat them," that we can be "victorious." Through the criticism of this metaphor, Best explores this book's four questions, describing what problems are, what social problems are, what causes social problems and, most important, examining what can be realistically done about social problems.

In the fourth selection Robert W. Fuller describes the problem of rankism, or the abuse of power in social interaction. This selection is very basic to the sociological view of social problems since social inequality weaves itself throughout almost all the problems discussed in this book. Fuller sees the abuse of rank as a social problem that often escapes notice, but one with profound implications.

These four selections raise many issues, and they do not necessarily agree on the answers to the four questions that structure this book. Together, however, they introduce us to some of the possible answers to these questions:

What is a problem?

What makes a problem a *social* problem?

What causes a social problem?

What can be done about a social problem?

1 An Introduction to the Study of Social Problems

Joel M. Charon

The Four Questions

1. *What is a problem?*
2. *What is a social problem?*
3. *What is a social cause?*
4. *How can we solve social problems?*

Topics Covered:

Social problems
 Values and goals
 Objective and subjective problems
 Social cause
 Social condition
 Social issue
 Conflict perspective
 Consensus perspective
 Interactionist perspective
 Social pattern
 Solving problems

WHY BOTHER?

In 1759 a man named Voltaire published a book in France. It was called *Candide*, and it had a great and lasting effect on European intellectuals. It is still read in universities today all over the world, being one of the most outstanding satires in the history of thought.

Candide is the name of a naive young man. To him, as bad as the world was, it still was "the best it could be." His teacher taught him a philosophy of optimism: to accept the world as it is, to believe that God meant the world to be as it is, to always look on the bright side. Candide saw instances of evil, including murder, rape, robbery, and poverty, yet he always declared "the world is the very best it can be." Terrible situations were made into acceptable and even good ones. Like Candide, Europe was also naive, Voltaire believed; Voltaire would say that many of us today are naive.

This optimistic philosophy might be tempting for many of us to accept, but according to Voltaire and other philosophers who wrote during his time, humans should not accept evil in the world, and they need to

address and solve social problems. Progress is possible, and we should work toward it. This philosophy became the basis for democratic thought, which led to the modern search for a democratic society. This philosophy also had a lot to do with the development of sociology in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It is the basic inspiration for the study of social problems as well as the efforts of many people in the world today to work to shape a better world for all.

For many people, the study of social problems has little use, either because, like Candide, they do not recognize the problems, or because, like Candide, they believe that nothing can be done about them. Others might understand the existence of problems and even the possibility for improvement, yet they have other priorities in life.

I would like to make a simple case for studying social problems, a case that I have tried to make explicit through my teaching and writing.

- From a *moral standpoint*, social problems need to be identified, understood, and dealt with because a large number of people are being seriously harmed.
- From a *democratic standpoint*, social problems need to be identified, understood, and dealt with because democracy's most basic concern should be a commitment to bettering the human condition.
- From a *societal standpoint*, social problems need to be identified, understood, and dealt with because they may seriously threaten the continuation of society as we know it.

This book is meant to be an introduction to social problems. It is one sociologist's attempt to identify what he considers to be serious social problems according to his personal understanding and value system. I know that many readers will, and should, disagree with my choices partly because their values or understandings are different from mine. But I believe that these articles illustrate well a sociological view of social problems; they are also insightful and well written and will inspire thinking and discussion.

Throughout the book readers must continue to ask themselves: Why should I care? What difference does it make anyway? Is understanding all this a waste of my

time, or is there something important here that I should know and think about?

In order to help you understand social problems and to press you to consider their importance, I encourage you to examine each selection from the standpoint of four questions. Sometimes the author will answer these four questions directly; sometimes the four questions, although not addressed directly, will be implied by what the author writes. You should therefore try to infer how the author might address these questions.

Please remember: These selections are usually from previously published books and you do not have the entire book in front of you, so please do not blame the author for not answering the four questions directly. Of course, this should not let the author off the hook either; be prepared to criticize the author if his or her arguments are not clear or convincing or if the questions are poorly answered.

Here are the four questions that address each selection in one way or another. These questions should help you understand what this book is all about and, I hope, inspire you to understand and think about social problems.

1. **What is a problem?** What makes something into a problem? Specifically, what is the problem in this selection that the author is identifying, and do I agree that it is a problem?
2. **What makes a problem a social problem?** What distinguishes a *social* problem from other types of problems? Specifically, is the problem described in this selection really a *social* problem?
3. **What causes a social problem?** What conditions or forces in society create social problems? Specifically, what is the author identifying as the cause or causes of the problem, and do I agree that these are the causes?
4. **What can be done about a social problem?** Can the problem be solved? Can we—as individuals, groups, or society—successfully do something about it? Specifically, does the author suggest a way of dealing with the problem, or, at least, does the author imply a strategy for making it less serious?

QUESTION 1: WHAT IS A PROBLEM?

As you will see throughout this book, it is not easy to define what constitutes a problem for an individual, for a group, or for a society.

Values and Problems

A problem depends, first of all, on people's *values*. What are values and how do they relate to problems?

Values are the cherished beliefs of what is good that people are committed to. They are broad, abstract guides to what people do. They have the force of "right," "good," "valuable," or "desirable," and underlie an individual's belief as to what life "should be." Values shape people's actions. If people believe in goodness, they try to act morally. If they value materialism, they try to accumulate material goods. If people value freedom, they might fight for the right for all people to think and act as they choose.

Groups develop values, as do societies. Individuals are socialized to accept these values, and most do although some do not. Sometimes we are punished because we do not accept the values of our society; too often, we do not critically evaluate its values. In a complex society such as the United States, it might seem as though we agree on few values, but even here, there tends to be general, although not perfect, agreement about some values. In my own analysis of American society, I believe that we tend to value materialism, the present or the immediate future, physical beauty, individualism, the free market, and the family. Some would say we value equality, education, creativity, and freedom of thought, but I am less certain that these are important to many of us, especially when we try to define what these values are. Some groups and societies value war, oppression, slavery, violence, and power. Others value God and salvation above all else, or friendship, order, or the search for truth. Values are what people consider to be worthwhile; values give meaning to people's lives and direction to their thoughts and actions.

Values are important to defining problems. *A problem is an existing condition that is inconsistent with or threatening to our most important values.* People can never totally agree on what constitutes a problem because they have different values. A problem for some is inevitably seen by others as a positive quality.

A problem is not simply something that objectively exists "out there" that reveals itself to people; instead, it is a condition that is "wrong" because it violates or threatens people's values. To those who value a liberal arts education, the growing emphasis on education aimed at career placement is probably a problem. They do not believe that this is what education should be. To those who value order, extremist attacks on the courts and law might be a problem. They do not believe that people should act this way if we are going to have order and

cooperation in society. Because what is and is not a problem depends on violations of values, there is always a subjective aspect to what a problem is—for the individual and for the group or society. For many people, abortion is a problem; for others, threats to abortion rights is a problem. For many people, violation of the law is a serious problem; for others, unjust laws are the problem.

Goals and Problems

Goals are ends that people work toward. People establish goals and tend to organize their actions to achieve these goals. In most cases, goals are not achieved completely; sometimes a serious condition gets in the way and makes a goal difficult to achieve. This condition becomes a problem to the extent that it interrupts the actor's achievement. In society, a condition that prevents the achievement of a goal that many people hold important is a problem.

Goals, like values, are guides to our actions. They are specific and practical and are often guided by values, which are more general, more morally based, more cherished, and more long range. Goals can be achieved, whereas values are continuous guides. Values guide our actions and our goals; goals organize our actions. We might have a strong commitment to education (a value), so we might try to choose classes in which we are going to learn something that will be useful for our understanding the world (a goal). On the other hand, we might value being successful in the world of computer science, so we might try to seek classes that are relevant to our career and necessary for our graduating on time. We might value contributing to the lives of others and decide to act toward a degree in social work.

Goals and values influence what we do and determine the problems that exist for us. Problems are either threats to or violations of values that the individual, group, or society believes in, or they are conditions that stand in the way of people achieving their goals. The individual holds values and pursues goals; problems arise in relation to these. A group or society also holds values and pursues goals; social problems arise in relation to these.

Any problem is therefore relative, relative to the particular values and goals held by an individual, group, or society. People will ultimately disagree as to what constitutes a problem in large part because each has a different set of values and goals.

Throughout this book, the authors of the selections identify what they consider to be a problem; always basic to their judgments are their own values and goals.

Each one is trying to persuade you that these are important problems to solve. You might or might not share the author's values and goals. Of course, every article in every magazine that describes a "problem," every book, every sermon in church, and every lunchroom discussion that describes a "problem" assumes a value orientation or a goal to be achieved. This is one of the central points of this book.

Difficulties in Identifying Problems

Values and goals make a problem subjective. We disagree about what is and is not a problem in part because our values and goals are different. This is true for groups and societies as well as individuals. We cannot escape our values and goals when we examine problems.

Problems, however, are far more complex than this. If we think a situation prevents us from acting according to our value system, or achieving our goals, does this thinking alone make the situation automatically into a problem? Does a problem exist only if we are able to see it, or can it exist even if we do not recognize it?

This question is not easily answered, except to contend that whatever problems may exist—in society or in nature—will always be perceived on the basis of our own values and goals, and this introduces a subjective element into the definition. Objective conditions may exist that we do not recognize or understand, however, and these might be more serious problems in relation to what our goals and values are. This is because it is difficult to define the problem accurately, and it is only through careful analysis that our subjective definition can be accurate; only through careful analysis can we understand the real situation that prevents us from achieving our goals or acting according to our values. Understanding problems begins with our own goals and values (usually socially influenced), but these goals and values only guide us in the direction of understanding; only careful analysis allows us to understand the problem and its origins.

For many people, the oppression of women constitutes a problem. This may be related to the fact that these people value equality and have as a goal the creation of equal rights for men and women. The intentional oppression of women may or may not be an important problem even if we believe in these goals or values. Instead, the real problem may be the traditions and institutions that define and divide labor in such a way as to prevent women from taking advantage of opportunities in society. In this case, only changes in the division of labor will contribute to more equality. Simply saying that the problem is the intentional oppression of women does not make that

the problem and may actually cause us to identify an *inaccurate* problem.

I am emphasizing this point simply to underline the fact that problems constitute a complex mixture of subjective values and goals on the one hand and careful understanding of the world as it is on the other. We must remember that if we are concerned about our values and our goals, it is important not to chase imagined problems.

The selections in this book are meant to show the difficulties that exist in identifying and understanding social problems. The four questions posed throughout the book are meant to give you a map for analyzing social problems and seeing their complexity and seriousness.

This first question—what is a problem?—must be asked first whenever we read a selection that tries to persuade us that a problem exists. Then we can move to the second question.

QUESTION 2: WHAT MAKES A PROBLEM A SOCIAL PROBLEM?

There are individual problems and social problems. For instance, suppose I am trying hard to pass a class. I am failing, jeopardizing my goal of passing the class. The instructor might be the problem, or my inability to read might be the problem. This is an *individual* problem; it is not yet a *social* problem. To become a social problem, my failure in the class must meet three criteria: It must be social in origin; it must harm many people; and it must harm society. These criteria should be understood as a matter of degree:

A Social Problem	Not a Social Problem
Origin/cause is social	Origin/cause is not social
Harms many people	Does little harm to few people
Harms society	Does not harm society

Some problems are caused by factors besides social factors; for example, earthquakes, genetics, and physical illness can all cause problems. Some, we must face as individuals, but few people share these problems, or the problems are not very harmful. For example, a car may

not always start, a love affair may go sour, we may get a poor grade in a class, or we may not have enough money to go to a concert. Other problems exist in society but probably do little real harm to society at large; for example, overcrowded highways, a 4 percent unemployment rate, or the loss of friendship or meaning in life may harm individuals but not society in general.

Normally, but not always, these three points are interrelated: *The more the origin/cause is social, the more people are affected and society itself is affected.* If crime, for instance, is caused by social conditions, then large numbers of people will be affected, and society will be threatened in some important way. Furthermore, *the more people who are affected, the more likely the cause is social and society is affected.* Thus, if large numbers of people are experiencing unemployment, poverty, crime, or alienation, the cause is likely to be social and there will be a negative effect on society. And finally, *the more society is affected, the more likely the cause is social and many people are affected.* Thus, if society is negatively affected because people are not able to read, then the origin of the problem is undoubtedly social, and large numbers of people are hurt by that fact.

A problem is a social problem, then, to the degree that its causes are social, to the extent that large numbers of people are affected, and to the extent that conditions threaten society as we know and accept it. Crime is a serious social problem if its causes are overwhelmingly social, if large numbers of people are harmed one way or another, and if the social order is undermined and institutions are threatened.

There is another matter to consider here. Even though a social problem is objectively something that exists because it is harmful to people, threatening to society, and caused by social forces, most sociologists consider one more point in its definition. *A full-blown social problem also relies on an agreed-upon recognition by a large number of people that something is wrong and needs to be corrected.*

This might be clearer if we distinguish between a social *condition*, a social *issue*, and a social *problem*. A social condition exists as a neutral quality identified in society: for example, globalization, a market economy, marriage, divorce, class distinctions. It evolves into a social issue when people begin to debate whether or not the condition is a problem. The social issue evolves into a social problem when those who consider it a problem are able to persuade enough people that it is, and a consensus develops among many people that something needs to