1

Preparing to Solve
Our Social Problems

Have you ever been concerned about a social problem? I imagine that you have. You may have been concerned about poverty, racial/ethnic inequality, or the inequality between men and women. Well, you are not alone. Many other Americans and people in other countries are also concerned about these and other social problems. One way to address these concerns is to read about and study social problems and think about how we might address these problems realistically. This book is a good place to start.

Before we begin to study specific social problems and consider how we can solve them, we need to learn a few things that will provide a base or foundation on which to build a more comprehensive understanding of social problems. With a fuller understanding, we will be more sophisticated in our study of social problems and better prepared to think about how we can solve these social problems. So, let us first build this foundation of understanding in Chapters 1 and 2, and then we will be ready to address our social problems.

What Is a Social Problem?

Before we turn to the main emphasis of this book, namely how we can solve our social problems, we need to define what a *social problem* is. One thing it is not is a personal problem that others do not experience. As C. Wright Mills, a respected American sociologist, pointed out, a personal problem can also be a social problem if a number of people experience the same

personal problem when certain social conditions are causing these people to experience the same personal problems. For example, many families experience poverty personally, but all of them are a part of a larger social pattern of unemployment, a social factor not caused by these families (Mills, 1959). Consequently, a key element in deciding whether something is a social problem is to discover how people's personal problems are related to the social conditions of a society.

Many social problems, such as poverty, racial/ethnic discrimination, and gender inequality, occur at the societal level. However, local communities can define certain social conditions as social problems (Fuller & Myers, 1941). In addition to recognizing local and societal social problems, we are becoming more aware of global social problems, such as the world's population problem: where many people throughout the world do not have enough water to drink and enough fertile land to grow sufficient food. A social problem can therefore be at the local, societal, or global level.

Part of defining a social condition as a social problem is that we subjectively say to ourselves that something is wrong and that we believe it should be changed. For example, we say that we believe poverty is wrong and that we as a community, society, or world should do something about this. In addition to our personal concerns, Fuller and Myers (1941) asserted that social problems need to have objective elements to them (p. 320). That is, we need to show that there is empirical evidence of a social problem. For example, when we collect data to show that poor people have lower incomes, lower quality of housing, and lower quality of life than do nonpoor people, we demonstrate that a social problem also has an objective element to it. We therefore need to have both subjective and objective elements in a definition of a social problem.[1]

Taking all of these things into consideration, we include the following elements as part of a definition of a social problem. First, certain social conditions cause personal problems. Second, social problems can be local, societal, or global. Third, social problems consist of both subjective perceptions and objective evidence. Hence, we use the following definition:

> A social problem exists when people subjectively perceive and have empirical evidence to show that social conditions combine at a local, societal, or global level to cause personal problems.[2]

History of Studying Social Problems

People have thought about social problems for a long time. In fact, the field of sociology—the scientific study of society and social interaction—developed

during the early 1800s. Early social thinkers (they were not called *sociologists* back then) during the late 1700s and early 1800s were concerned about all of the social changes that were occurring and wondered whether societies were falling apart. At that time, more and more people were moving from rural areas to cities to get new kinds of jobs called *factory jobs*. Slums and crowded housing were created. Some people lost their jobs and experienced extreme poverty. The people who had no jobs and therefore no income would at times steal or rob, thereby making crime a social problem. As a result of these social changes, social problems of inadequate housing, poverty, and crime grew and became a typical part of the urban scene.

So much social change was occurring that some people such as Auguste Comte, a social thinker in France during the early 1800s, became conscious of and concerned about this social change and the resulting social problems.[3] He believed that society was falling apart due to too much disorder. Something needed to be done to bring some semblance of order and harmony to people's lives. Comte concluded that a new discipline was needed to study society—how it works, why it works that way, and where it is headed. He was concerned about what could be done about all of the social problems people were facing. Under these conditions, he created the new discipline of sociology to study society scientifically to see what could be done to make a more stable and orderly society in light of all the social changes. The new discipline of sociology was born out of Comte's desire to understand order and change in society.

Later during the 1800s and early 1900s, other social thinkers, like Comte, began to think about society in general and about social problems in particular. Emile Durkheim, a French sociologist, had concerns similar to those of Comte.[4] With the fall of monarchies and the apparent decline in the influence of religion, Durkheim wondered how modern society could keep any sense of order. German social thinkers, such as Karl Marx during the mid-1800s and Max Weber during the early 1900s, also became interested in how society worked and the social problems people faced.

Marx was greatly troubled by the increasing poverty and inequality he saw around him.[5] He was concerned that people had factory jobs that were alienating because the jobs were so boring, people were paid so poorly that they could hardly survive, and yet they worked 12 hours per day, 6 days per week. Moreover, people did not have much choice. They either took alienating factory jobs or had no jobs and hence no means to sustain themselves. They were stuck in a social system that was brutal and inhumane, and they did not know what to do about their situation. As Marx pointed out, previous generations created the very conditions that factory workers lived in—poverty, alienating jobs, and the lack of much choice in life. He further

asserted that because our ancestors created these social conditions, we could—and should—change these social conditions. Marx helped us to realize, possibly more than any other social thinker, that we, as humans, created our social conditions and could therefore change our social conditions. We did not need to accept the existing social conditions as the only way to live.

Marx developed solutions to these problems that he thought would create a more humane society. He focused on what he thought was the main cause of many modern social problems: capitalism. He noted that although capitalism produced material benefits for many people and much profit for some people, at the same time it created alienating jobs, poverty, and much inequality. He concluded that we could do better than this and that we had the power to create a more humane and just society and world.

Another giant in the field of sociology was Max Weber.[6] He was concerned about the modern social problem of all the bureaucracies we live in and how these bureaucracies have considerable power over us. He predicted that individuals would feel helpless in the face of such large organizations. Consequently, Weber wondered how we would be able to solve the problem of our powerlessness in the face of these modern bureaucracies.

As you can see, from its beginning, the new discipline of sociology focused on the study of social problems and how these problems could be solved. Contemporary sociologists have the same focus. We too are curious about how society works, why it works the way it does, and what may happen in the future. We too are interested in how social conditions create social problems. And we too are interested in how we can change social conditions to solve our social problems.

Teaching About Social Problems in Today's World

In sociology today, there are courses and textbooks devoted solely to the study of social problems. In these courses and the textbooks that are used for these courses, there is usually a focus on 10 to 15 social problems that are of current concern. Some of these problems are a concern and have been so for many years. For example, in our country we have been especially troubled about poverty, crime, and racial prejudice and discrimination. Other social problems have become of increasing concern to us since the 1950s, including the growth in the world's population and the burden it plays on our limited resources, the deterioration of our global environment, and the continuing inequality between women and men in our country and throughout the world.

In our social problems courses, we focus on certain aspects of a social problem. For example, we describe a social problem, such as how many people are

affected and where the problem is most prevalent (in cities, in the lower social classes, among women, and so forth). We search for the causes of the problem, usually finding that there are a number of causes for each social problem and that some causes have greater impacts than others. We point out the intended consequences that are readily apparent and dig deeper to discover the unintended consequences that are not so apparent. We also make predictions as to what will most likely occur given certain social conditions. Finally, we discuss possible solutions, which is what this book addresses specifically.

How Can Sociologists Address Social Problems and Yet Remain Objective?

The study of social problems presents a dilemma for sociologists. The dilemma does not occur at the point of choosing a topic of research, of gathering facts in the research process, or of choosing certain methods of gathering data such as the survey, participant observation (when a sociologist lives with a certain group for a period of time to learn about the group), and/or the interview. Sociologists, in general, agree that these kinds of activities are what sociologists need to do. These activities are an integral part of our being sociologists. The dilemma also does not occur at the point of discovering the causes or uncovering the unintended consequences related to each social problem. Sociologists, in general, seek to pinpoint causes and find unintended consequences.

The dilemma, however, occurs at the point of dealing with the solution part of social problems. That is, what should we say about the solving of social problems? Should we say what we personally think should be done? Should a group of sociologists come together to decide what should be done? Should we remain objective and not take a personal stance on what should be done and yet, in some way, contribute what we know about the solving of social problems?

Many sociologists contend that our role is to state only what is—that is, to study only what occurs, focusing on description, causes, consequences, and prediction but not saying what should occur.[7] They begin to feel uncomfortable when it comes to the solving of social problems because they worry that they or other sociologists may go beyond their role in being objective. They fear that if the general public no longer sees sociology as objective, sociology will lose its credibility.

The result would be that sociologists would be seen as just another interest group with its own vested interests, with sociologists looking out for what benefits them instead of being a group that the public and government

can trust to report valid data and provide objective knowledge about a subject so that others can make more informed judgments as to what should be done. Consequently, a number of sociologists conclude that, rather than risk our credibility as an objective source of data, knowledge, and understanding, maybe it is better to stay away from recommending solutions. Instead, we need to leave this area to the policymakers of the society, such as members of Congress or state legislatures, and focus solely on descriptions, causes, consequences, and predictions.

There is another group of sociologists who see their role not only as stating what *is* but also stating what *should be*. Their belief is similar to that of Marx ([1845]1972), who said, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it" (p. 107). That is, these sociologists ask, What is the point of doing all of this studying of society, collecting mountains of data, and discovering causes and consequences if we do not take the next step to change the society for the better? They argue that if we study the problem more than anyone else in society and understand it best, why not take the next step and say what should be done about it? After all, they say, sociologists are the most expert on the study of social problems.

It seems to be a great waste of our knowledge and understanding of social problems if we cannot, in some way, venture into the realm of solving social problems. The key question then becomes the following: How can we study the solving of social problems and yet maintain our objectivity and credibility? Is there, in other words, a common ground to stand on for all sociologists?

Yes, there is a common ground on which we all can stand. On this common ground, there are at least five areas within which we can achieve the goal of contributing to the solving of social problems and yet remain objective and maintain our credibility.

One way sociologists can help to solve social problems is to look at what sociologists know about social patterns in social problems and how knowing about these social patterns can help us to solve our social problems. We have a good idea of a number of social patterns that typically occur within various kinds of social problems.

A second way in which sociologists can contribute to the solving of social problems and yet remain objective is to study the aspects of a social problem that prevent it from being solved. That is, sociologists can help us to become more aware of the barriers that prevent a social problem from being solved. Once we know these barriers, we can focus on how we can work around these barriers.

A third way sociologists can remain objective and yet contribute to solving our social problems is to study empirical examples of how social problems

have been solved or lessened in the past or in other countries and reflect on how these solutions could be applied to the solving of our current social problems. That is, what can we learn from the social problems that we have already solved, or at least ameliorated, that can be applied more generally to the solving of other social problems?

Fourth, all sociologists stand on a common ground when they make predictions about potential new social problems on the horizon and about where existing social problems are likely to go in the future, given current social policies and attempts to solve these social problems. By predicting new and emerging social problems and predicting where current social problems are likely to go in the near future, sociologists can provide information that can be of considerable use to policymakers.

A fifth common ground for all sociologists is the ability to suggest various solutions and what their consequences might be for individuals, groups, communities, societies, and global social systems. Note that sociologists are not recommending a preferred solution. Instead, we are outlining what we think the possible solutions are, thereby helping policymakers to know more clearly what their options are. Contributing such knowledge could provide a great service to policymakers, because this knowledge would give them more comprehensive information as to what they could do next.

What Social Problem Should We Solve First?

Given our limited resources, we cannot solve all of our social problems at one time. Consequently, it would help to have criteria to decide what social problem we should tackle first, then second, and so on.[8] This leads to the question: What are the most important criteria in deciding which social problem to address first? The following criteria can help us to get started. One criterion is the degree to which a social problem seriously endangers the lives of people; for example, one social problem causes little more than an inconvenience to people, whereas another social problem endangers their lives. A second criterion is the number of people being hurt by the social problem; for example, one social problem hurts hundreds of people, whereas another social problem hurts millions or billions of people. Using these two criteria, we can create the two-by-two table shown as Figure 1.1 as a visual means of deciding what social problem we should address first.

Applying these two criteria, we can conclude that a social problem that endangers the lives of people and affects many people (lower right cell) could be the one we address first, whereas a social problem that does not endanger people's lives and affects relatively few people (upper left cell) could be

Figure 1.1   Two-by-Two Table for Addressing Social Problems

	Not Endanger Lives	Endanger Lives
Affect Some	Least serious	
Affect Many		Most serious

the social problem we address last. As to the other two cells, I am not sure what would need to be chosen next. Maybe additional criteria will help us to answer this question. The point, however, is that given the limited resources we can apply to the solving of social problems, it is fruitful for us to use criteria to help us gain clarity as to what social problem we may want to tackle first and then second and so on.

How Might Sociological Theory Help Us to Solve Social Problems?

If we can understand the nature of a social problem better by applying sociological theory to it, we are in a better position to solve that problem. Let us first define what *theory* is before we begin using it. In sociology, theory has usually meant one of two things: either it is a collection of interrelated concepts and ideas, or it is a set of interrelated propositions that are applied to social phenomena to help us understand those social phenomena.[9] The "interrelated propositions" kind of theory needs a little bit of explanation, so we discuss this type of theory first before discussing a number of theories that consist of a collection of interrelated concepts and ideas.

With respect to a theory that is a set of interrelated propositions, you may ask, "What is a proposition?" A *proposition* tells us how one variable causes another variable to change. For example, say that you are interested in what causes poverty. You create a hypothesis, which is a predicted causal relationship between two variables, in which you hypothesize that as the rate of unemployment (one variable) goes up, the rate of poverty (the second variable) goes up. Because unemployment is doing the "causing," we call this variable the *independent* variable. Poverty is the *dependent* variable, because it is being influenced by unemployment.

We test our hypothesis to see whether what we think is occurring is really occurring. We collect data in some way, such as through participant observation, the interview, and/or the survey, to see whether our hypothesis is supported by the data. If we test our hypothesis a number of times and find that, indeed, as

the rate of unemployment goes up, the rate of poverty goes up, we begin to conclude that our hypothesis is probably true. As a note of caution, however, we know that we might never be 100% sure, because there could be another independent variable that is causing the rate of poverty to go up. However, we can do what is called *controlling for other possible independent variables;* that is, if we have a random sample of data that does not allow for other variables to vary, such as a sample made up of all females (no males so that the variable of sex cannot vary), all African American women (no white, Hispanic, Native American, or any other kind of racial/ethnic group so that the variable of race/ethnicity cannot vary), all high school-educated women (no middle school- or college-educated women), only women with two children under 5 years of age (no women with no children, with one child, or with three or more children), all women who are 30 years of age (no women who are any other age), and so on, we now know that these variables cannot vary in our study.

We test our two variables. As these women in our sample increase in unemployment, do more and more of them also fall into poverty? If the data show that there is still a relationship (or correlation) between the rate of unemployment and the rate of poverty, we are closer to being confident in saying that unemployment is probably a cause of poverty. Once various sociologists find the same data in different studies, we begin to be cautiously confident that the independent variable in our hypothesis is a cause of the dependent variable in our hypothesis.

Once our hypothesis is firmly established, we can begin to say that it may be a *theoretical proposition*, that is, a hypothesis that not only is found to be true but also is more abstract; that is, it can apply to various social conditions in this society and other societies, and it can apply over time or to various times in history. In other words, the more a proposition applies to more diverse social conditions and the more it applies throughout more of history, the more abstract the proposition is. Ideally, we in sociology—as well as researchers in other social sciences—would like our theoretical propositions to be more abstract so that they apply to more social conditions over more time. In reality, some theoretical propositions are very abstract, and some are more concrete, in that they apply to a limited number of social conditions over a smaller amount of time.

Let us go one step further and connect one theoretical proposition with another theoretical proposition, that is, where one of the variables is present in both propositions. When we begin to do this, we begin to call this *theory*. For example, let us relate the proposition—the higher the rate of unemployment, the higher the rate of poverty—to another proposition, where either the rate of unemployment variable or the rate of poverty variable is one of the variables in the second proposition.

Let us say that the United States is losing factories to other countries and that nothing else is taking the factories' place in the United States. Companies are moving their factories to Mexico, South Korea, Thailand, and China to get the benefit of paying lower wages and not providing workers with health and retirement benefits, thereby making more profit for the companies and making more money for the investors who own stock in those companies. This process has been occurring since the 1960s and is known as *deindustrialization.*

We can now make a second proposition that connects to our original proposition: The greater the rate of deindustrialization in a community or society, the greater the rate of unemployment in that community or society. Notice that we connected this second proposition with the original proposition by using one of the variables that occurs in both propositions, that is, the rate of unemployment. Here are the two propositions so that you can see how they are connected:

> *Proposition 1:* The greater the rate of deindustrialization in a community or society, the greater the rate of unemployment
>
> *Proposition 2:* The greater the rate of unemployment, the greater the rate of poverty

Now we can create more propositions that help us to further develop a theory, say of poverty. We could, for example, state the following proposition: The greater the rate of poverty, the greater the rate of homelessness. Notice that the rate of poverty becomes the independent variable, which we predict causes the rate of homelessness to increase.

Now that you know what a theory of interrelated propositions is, I share with you what I call a *theory of conflict and social change* as a way to help us better understand and solve our social problems.

A Theory of Conflict and Social Change: A Way to Better Understand and Therefore Solve Our Social Problems

In this theory, I have created a number of interrelated propositions that will help us to understand how social problems can be solved or at least ameliorated. I have not included here every variable that influences a social problem, but I have included a number of variables that I believe play a large role in what happens to social problems.

Before we talk about specific variables, I mention again that we, as humans, have socially constructed our reality.[10] That is, whether you realize it or not, humans have created all kinds of social phenomena, such as slave systems, various kinds of prejudice and discrimination, democracies and dictatorships, economic systems such as capitalism and socialism, and norms, values, and beliefs that are important in one culture or at one point in history and are not present in another culture or at another time in history. We have created all of these things and yet, as Marx ([1844]1964) pointed out, these can come to control us—many times for hundreds or thousands of years. Over the years, we come to forget that someone back in history socially constructed these social phenomena and typically created ideologies, laws, and customs to legitimize, that is, to justify these social creations. Over time, we come to accept society the way it is and live a certain socially constructed way of life for generations. It is as though we say to ourselves, "This is the way it is and has been, and this is the way it will always be."

Then something happens in society (I elaborate soon) to cause people to realize that what seemed to be beyond us as humans was actually constructed by humans and therefore could be changed. Once this realization occurs, there is also created the possibility that people can seek social change.

Given these initial ideas on the human constructedness of our social world, we can now proceed to create a theory of conflict and social change that consists of a number of interrelated propositions where each proposition consists of one variable influencing another variable. Taken together, these propositions create a theory of conflict and social change that will help us to understand the nature of social problems and solve these problems.

One key variable that seems to be related to many social problems is the amount of inequality in a community, society, or global social system. By *inequality,* I mean that some people, groups, organizations, and societies have more money (income and/or wealth), power, and prestige than do others.[11] There are many causes of inequality in contemporary society, but I assume that the following social factors explain much of the inequality that we have had, and currently have, in our society: various kinds of prejudice and discrimination, a capitalistic economy, and unequal exchange relationships that are supported by accepted norms, vested interests, ideologies, laws, and customs.

As you may already know, those who experience prejudice and discrimination will have fewer chances and opportunities, hence creating more inequality. In capitalism, some people are owners and make a profit, whereas others are workers and earn a wage. Typically, owners make a lot more money in making profit than workers do in earning wages, thereby

creating inequality. In every society, there are exchanges of goods and services. Sometimes those exchanges are unequal; the norms that are created say, "This is the way it should be; when we exchange something for something, you get this and I get that." This kind of norm is called a *norm of reciprocity,* in which people accept the prevailing exchange relationships as legitimate (Gouldner, 1960). Once people accumulate more money, power, and prestige, they develop *vested interests* in keeping, or even increasing, these resources. Given these vested interests, many times people will socially construct ideologies, laws, customs, and informal norms to justify and maintain the resources that they have accumulated. If these ideologies, laws, customs, and informal norms are accepted as legitimate by the rest of the people, those who have the extra resources will retain these resources. All of these socially constructed social factors together create a certain amount of inequality in a given society. Consequently, here are the first theoretical propositions dealing with what contributes to inequality in a society:

1. The more prejudice and discrimination that occur, the more inequality will occur.

2. As capitalism develops, some people will make profit while others will earn wages, thereby creating more inequality.

3. As unequal exchanges occur, more inequality will occur.

4. As norms of reciprocity that justify unequal exchanges occur, more inequality will occur.

5. Those people who make and accumulate more money, power, and prestige will be more likely to develop vested interests in maintaining, or even increasing, the existing amount of inequality, thereby leading to more inequality.

6. Those people who make and accumulate more money, power, and prestige will be more likely to create ideologies, laws, customs, and norms to maintain, or even increase, the existing amount of inequality, thereby leading to more inequality.

Another key variable is the amount of opportunity people have. Some people have many opportunities, whereas others have few opportunities. For example, we know that poor people, African Americans, and women do not start at the same "starting line" of equal opportunity as do others such as middle-class Americans, white Americans, and male Americans. Consequently, here is the next theoretical proposition:

7. The more inequality there is in a social system (group, organization, community, society, or global social system), the less opportunity people who are at the bottom of the system of inequality will have.

As people have less opportunity, they will be less likely to be upwardly mobile. This situation is especially important in a class-type society versus a caste-type society. People in a class society are socialized to "get ahead," whereas people in a caste society, such as India in the 1800s are socialized to "stay in their place." In a class-type society such as the United States, people who have less opportunity to get ahead will be less upwardly mobile than people who have more opportunity. In other words, given the structural situation of less opportunity, we should predict that people with less opportunity will experience less upward mobility. Consequently, we add another proposition:

8. The less opportunity people have, the less upwardly mobile they will be compared with people who start life with more opportunity.

Assuming that no other variable influences people at the lower end of a system of inequality, people are likely to accept the prevailing system of inequality as legitimate and will therefore live within this system and do nothing to attempt to change it. However, if these people are able to and begin to communicate with each other about their respective conditions, and if a charismatic leader communicates dissatisfaction regarding the current system of inequality, people can begin to develop an awareness or consciousness of their unequal situation. These additional variables of the ability to communicate and the presence of a charismatic leader suggest two more propositions:

9. The more people at the bottom of the system of inequality can communicate with each other about their situation, the more aware they will become of their situation.

10. The more a charismatic leader communicates the unequal situation that people experience at the bottom of a system of inequality, the more aware people will become of their situation.

As people are able to communicate with others who are in the same unequal situation as they are, and as a charismatic leader is successful at communicating this unequal situation, the situation is ripe for people to begin to develop a feeling of unfairness. Hence, we need the next proposition:

11. The more aware people become of their unequal situation, the more likely they are to develop a feeling of unfairness.

As people continue to talk about their unequal situation and develop a feeling that their situation is unfair, they are more likely to do something that those in power and those who want to maintain the status quo do not want them to do; that is, to question the legitimacy of the existing social construction of reality. In other words, people at the bottom of a system of inequality may come to question ideologies, laws, customs, and informal norms and to question why other people have so much money, power, and prestige. They may say to themselves, "Why do we need to live like this? Why should we have so little while they have so much?" This kind of thinking can lead people to question the very foundation of a society.[12] With this in mind, let us add another proposition:

12. The more people develop a feeling of unfairness about the current system of inequality, the more likely they will begin to question the legitimacy of a social system and possibly various aspects of the society in general, that is, how that society socially constructs its reality.

Given these conditions, we may begin to see the formation of a group or an organization that begins to organize itself around solving a social problem. For example, in 1955, Martin Luther King Jr., a soon-to-become charismatic leader, and members of the African American community of Montgomery, Alabama, began to focus their efforts on forming an organization to boycott the segregated bus system. Hence, we need another proposition at this point:

13. The more people question the legitimacy of a social system, the more likely they will form a group or an organization to take action to address a social problem.

Once people have formed a group or an organization, they are more likely to take some kind of action to change the current social situation, meaning that they will have some kind of conflict with people, groups, and organizations that do not want to change the social system. The conflict can be one of two types: peaceful or violent. In reality, there can be both types—on the part of people who want change or on the part of people who do not want change. People seeking social change and the solution or amelioration of their problem can use peaceful means of conflict, such as writing letters to legislators, attending town meetings to express their grievances, walking in protest marches, and boycotting stores, buses, and restaurants. They can also use more violent methods, such as rioting. Those who want to keep the status quo can urge the seekers of change to "go by the law" and "stay in your place" and use laws to enforce the status quo. If need be, they can use

governmental force in the form of the police or military or use informal methods of threat, torture, and murder, such as those of the Ku Klux Klan, an organization of whites started in the late 1860s who have been prejudiced against and have discriminated against African Americans.

With conflict (peaceful and/or violent) comes the possibility that something can change in the social system and possibly solve or ameliorate a social problem. Once conflict has occurred, we may notice various kinds of social change. We might see social change in ideologies: for example, from a segregation ideology to an integration ideology. We might see laws change: for example, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 through which public places were open to African Americans and the Title IX Act through which females were given equal opportunity in schools that receive funds from the federal government. We might see change in informal norms: for example, people are expected to be friendlier toward each other and more respectful of each other. We might see a change in the redistribution of money, power, or prestige or a combination of these three dimensions of inequality in the form of new social services offered: for example, the creation of Social Security, Medicare, and Section 8 subsidized housing. We might see more opportunities made available to people so that they can be more upwardly mobile: for example, programs such as Head Start and grants and loans for poorer people to go to college or trade school. Hence, we need two final propositions:
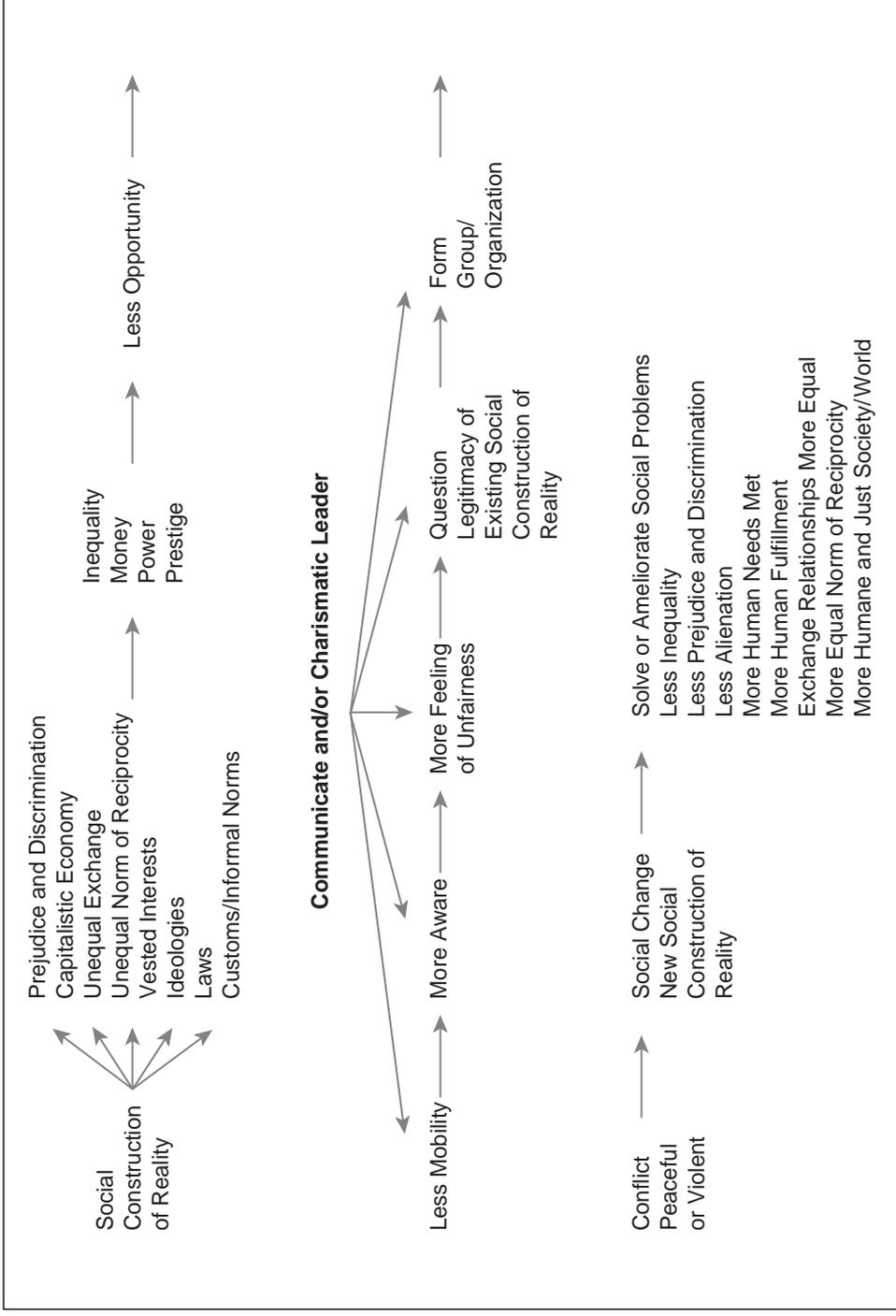
14. The more a group or an organization carries out conflict (peaceful and/or violent) with the intent of solving or ameliorating a social problem, the more likely one or more kinds of social change will occur and result in a new social construction of reality.

15. To the degree that social change occurs with the intent of solving or ameliorating a social problem, the more likely a social problem will be solved or ameliorated.

Causal Model: A Picture of Our Theory

Now let us create a picture of our theory to visualize how the propositions are tied together. When we create a picture of a theory, this is called a *causal model* (Turner, 1991, pp. 15–28). That is, we show how the preceding propositions are related by connecting them with arrows indicating the direction of causality (Figure 1.2).

As you can see when you analyze Figure 1.2, the variables at the left of the causal model influence the variables to the right. As you can also see, there will be some kind of conflict that can result in some type of social

Figure 1.2 Causal Model: Theory of Conflict and Social Change

Social
Construction
of Reality

Prejudice and Discrimination
Capitalistic Economy
Unequal Exchange
Unequal Norm of Reciprocity
Vested Interests
Ideologies
Laws
Customs/Informal Norms

Inequality
Money
Power
Prestige

Less Opportunity

Communicate and/or Charismatic Leader

Less Mobility

More Aware

More Feeling
of Unfairness

Question
Legitimacy of
Existing Social
Construction of
Reality

Form
Group/
Organization

Conflict
Peaceful
or Violent

Social Change
New Social
Construction of
Reality

Solve or Ameliorate Social Problems
Less Inequality
Less Prejudice and Discrimination
Less Alienation
More Human Needs Met
More Human Fulfillment
Exchange Relationships More Equal
More Equal Norm of Reciprocity
More Humane and Just Society/World

change. Part of this social change can involve the solving or ameliorating of a social problem. Given that these theoretical propositions are valid,[13] we should be better able to analyze social problems and to come up with ways to solve these problems because we will be more conscious of the key variables that are a part of social problems. The more conscious we are of these key variables, the more we can make changes in these variables as a way to solve our social problems.

My Own Theoretical Orientation

Professors in sociology, like professors in other social and natural science disciplines, tend to favor one theoretical perspective over others when analyzing certain social phenomena because they think that a particular theory provides a fuller explanation. In the analysis of social problems and how these problems can be solved, I favor the conflict theoretical perspective that I just outlined because I think the reason why we have so many social problems has a lot to do with the interrelations among money, power, inequality, vested interests, ideologies, and legitimation—all of which are integral parts of a conflict theoretical approach. So, as you make your way through this book, you will notice that I continually use conflict theory, especially as formulated in the theory, propositions, and causal model that we just discussed. I also use other sociological theories, from time to time, if I think that they will help us to increase our understanding of social problems. With this in mind, I share with you these other sociological theories.

Other Sociological Theories That Can Help Us Understand and Solve Social Problems

Functional Theory

One theory that is well known in sociology is *functional theory,* also known as *structural–functional theory*. Although it was originally developed by Parsons (1951), I use just part of this theory, as elaborated by Merton (1967) in his work, *On Theoretical Sociology.* In this work, Merton defined the concepts of manifest and latent functions and dysfunctions. Here I define, explain, and combine these concepts and discuss how they can help us to understand and solve social problems.

I define *function* as consequences that increase the survival of a social system (a group, an organization, a society, or a global social system). For example, let us say that Company A gets a major contract with Company B to

produce a certain product for Company B. This is functional for Company A because getting the contract has the consequence of increasing the company's survival. Notice that I am talking about increasing the survival of Company A and that I did not make the value judgment that this was positive or negative or right or wrong.

In other words, function does not deal with positive or negative or with right or wrong; rather, it deals with whether or not something has the consequence of increasing a social system's survival. Let me give an example in American history to show the distinction. We can hypothesize that the laws in the southern states during the 1700s and early 1800s had the consequence of increasing the survival of the slave system. These laws were therefore functional for the survival of the slave system. However, whether the slave system was positive or negative, or whether it was right or wrong, is another question. So, we might personally believe that the slave system was negative and wrong. However, as sociologists, we want to discover how something, whether we like it or not, is functional for a certain social system; that is, how something increases the survival of that social system.

Another concept, *dysfunction,* deals with consequences that decrease the survival of a social system. For example, prejudice and discrimination against a group of people will have the consequence of decreasing the survival of that group. Given prejudice and discrimination, this social group will have fewer choices of jobs, fewer chances to get more education so as to get better-paying jobs, and fewer chances to join voluntary organizations—such as churches, country clubs, and other organizations—that provide the opportunity to get to know networks of people who have connections that help people to get jobs, give advice on how to get ahead, and give financial support so that they can get ahead. In other words, prejudice and discrimination will have consequences for decreasing the survival of a certain group of people by decreasing their chances at gaining more money, power, and prestige.

A function can be either *manifest* (that is, intended) or *latent* (that is, unintended). For example, when there is intended prejudice and discrimination against Group A by Group B, the members of Group B will increase their survival because the intended prejudice and discrimination will typically have the consequence of giving them more choices, chances, and connections. Hence, a manifest function states that there are intended consequences that increase the survival of a certain social system. Again, notice that I am not saying that this is positive or negative or that it is right or wrong; rather, I am saying that something has the consequence of intentionally increasing the survival of some social system.

A manifest dysfunction, in contrast, states that there are consequences that are intended to decrease the survival of a social system. For example,

using the preceding example, whereas Group B's intended prejudice and discrimination have consequences of increasing its members' survival, it has consequences of decreasing the survival of Group A members who are being prejudiced and discriminated against. Thus, what is functional for one social system can be dysfunctional for another social system.

Finally, something can be a latent function or a latent dysfunction for a certain social system; that is, a function or a dysfunction can have an unintended consequence for a certain social system. For example, many African Americans migrated from the South to northern cities during the 20th century in search of better-paying jobs and more freedom. That is what they intended to do. However, what they did not intend to do, but what ultimately happened was that as blacks congregated in certain inner-city neighborhoods in northern cities because of intended racial segregation by whites, they became a political power by voting in black mayors, city council members, and members of Congress. Increasing their political power was not what blacks originally intended when they moved north. They moved north because they intended to get better-paying jobs and experience relatively more freedom. However, their migration north also turned out to be a latent function, that is, an unintended consequence that increased their survival in that they began to have more political power in local, state, and national governments.

So, you can see how using the ideas of manifest and latent function and dysfunction can help us understand many social problems, such as racial and gender inequality, poverty, the world's population problem, and the world's environmental problem, and help us solve them.

Symbolic Interaction Theory

Another well-known theory in sociology is *symbolic interaction theory*. Whereas functional theory deals with the functions and dysfunctions of social systems, symbolic interaction theory focuses on the micro level of society, on interactions between and among small numbers of people. We use ideas such as Cooley's (1902) concept of the "looking glass self" (looking glass was the term used for mirror at that time), in which he pointed out that we will many times look to others and observe how they see us and judge us as a way to decide how we see and judge ourselves. How have African Americans, women, and poor people at various times in American history been seen and judged? And how did they come to see and judge themselves?

These looking glass selves can help us to understand social problems, in that the perception of the self can be a barrier to people being able to get ahead. That is, not only do objective conditions of prejudice, discrimination, and poverty affect people's chances of getting ahead in life, but also the

kinds of selves people are socialized to have can act to hold them back. Hence, we need to apply theoretical ideas from symbolic interaction theory to help us gain a greater understanding of our social problems and what steps we can take to solve these problems.

Anomie Theory

Another well-known sociological theory that will help us to understand social phenomena such as crime and deviance is *anomie theory* by Merton (1938). In his article titled "Social Structure and Anomie," Merton noted that most people are what he called *conformists,* in that they have the legal opportunities available to them to gain the goals of society such as money, power, and prestige. However, there are others in society who, because of their social conditions, have faced blocked opportunities as they attempted to attain the goals of society. Due to these blocked opportunities, they are more likely to use illegal means to attain the goals of society. Merton called these people *innovators.* These people become innovators because the social conditions in which they live make it much more difficult for them to use legal means to achieve the goals of society. Merton's theory will help us to understand the deviance that occurs in a society because of the blocked opportunities that the existing social structure creates for certain groups of people. Using his theory will help us to reflect on how we can change the social structure to give more legal opportunities to people. As we give more legal opportunities to people who do not currently have these opportunities, we will unlock another door that will help us to solve our social problems.

Reference Group Theory

Another theory that will help us to understand our social problems and how to solve them is *reference group theory* (Merton, 1968a, 1968b). This theory holds that we all refer to certain groups in our lives to decide how to think, feel, and act. We usually use as reference groups many different groups: our family, a group of friends, a team, a fraternity or sorority, or some other social organization. While we are members of some of these groups, we may not be members of others—yet we can still refer to them to decide how to act, think, and feel. These groups, whether or not we are members of them, can be positive or negative in our eyes. Regardless, we still refer to them. We may refer to our family and how we were socialized to decide how to act in a certain way; for example, you were taught to be considerate of all people regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation, and you act in that way. Other individuals may have been

taught by their families to be prejudiced and to discriminate, and—not surprisingly—they think, feel, and act differently from how you do.

Reference group theory does not say that you act exactly the way you were taught by the reference groups you have, but it does say that you will refer to these groups in *deciding* how you are going to act, think, and feel. Remember that outside social factors in our lives do not totally determine how we think, act, and feel, but they do tend to have a substantial influence on us even though we are not always aware of such influence. This is what Durkheim ([1895]1938) meant when he said that society is external to us and yet coercive on us. That is, society's laws, values, beliefs, and customs are outside of our minds when we are born, but through the process of socialization, these social phenomena are put into our minds and influence us more than we realize. Most of the time, we go through our daily lives and do not realize how much we are influenced by what we have been taught by our reference groups.

Differential Association Theory

Another sociological theory that can help us gain greater clarity, especially with respect to social problems such as crime, drugs, and the problems of families, is Sutherland's (1940) *differential association theory*. Sutherland, in focusing on crime, hypothesized that criminality "is learned in direct or indirect association with those who already practice the behavior" (p. 10) and that "those who learn this criminal behavior are segregated from frequent and intimate contacts with law-abiding behavior" (pp. 10–11). Knowledge of this theory will help us, for example, understand why people depart from the norms of the society and commit crimes and other acts of deviance (for example, a member of the Ku Klux Klan may be more willing to discriminate because he or she learns this behavior in association with others who have learned this behavior). We apply this theory to various social problems to help us better understand how the associations people have can place them in the social problems they experience; a change in their associations may help them to no longer experience these social problems.

Exchange Theory

Finally, one more sociological theory that I use in this book from time to time is Blau's *exchange theory* (1964).[14] Blau asserted that we not only exchange material goods but also exchange nonmaterial things such as love, time, attention, support, and sympathy. Many of our interactions with other people, groups, and organizations are interactions that include some kind of exchange. In addition to going to a car dealer and exchanging money for a

new car, or going to a food store and exchanging money for groceries, we give our time to someone or some group and typically receive something in return, such as approval, acceptance, love, or attention.

A parent gives us love, and we give back love, time, or trust to that parent. We give a girlfriend or boyfriend time, attention, and love and hope that he or she gives us these things in return. In fact, a relationship tends to continue based on mutual giving and receiving. However, the relationship is in jeopardy if, for example, you give love, time, and attention to your boyfriend or girlfriend but he or she no longer gives these things to you. When someone gives something to someone else (for example, love, time, attention) and expects something similar in return but does not receive anything in return, this is called *breaking the norm of reciprocity* (Gouldner, 1960). That is, whether we realize it or not, we create expectations of exchange when we create various kinds of relationships—whether parent–child, boyfriend–girlfriend, husband–wife, teacher–student, coach–player, employer–employee, or another relationship. In other words, we create norms in exchanges whereby if we give something, we expect something in return. The exchange might not necessarily be equivalent, but there is an expectation of receiving something in return. For example, if you are a college student and say hello to someone you know as you walk across campus, you probably expect a hello in return. If that person looks the other way and ignores you, you will probably become immediately conscious that there was a breaking of a norm of reciprocity between you and the other person.

Bob likes Sue. Sue likes Bob. They want to give each other time, attention, sympathy, and love. Bob, however, is also a football player and spends 2 to 3 hours each day practicing or playing in a game. He is also expected to spend time with his fraternity brothers. He has little time left to be with Sue. Sue, on the other hand, has lots of time to be with Bob. She is not in a sorority or on a team. She wants to spend more time with Bob. Bob cannot spend as much time with Sue as she wants. He cannot be with her on Friday nights, on Saturday afternoons, or at other times. Sue pays a lot of attention to Bob (calling him and asking him, "When can we be together again?"), but Bob can spend only a certain amount of time with Sue. Sue's feelings are hurt because she tries to give so much time and attention to Bob but he does not reciprocate with the same amount of time and attention. Sue can feel that the norm of reciprocity is broken, and this can place the relationship in jeopardy.

Although the example I just used is a romantic example, exchange theory and the norm of reciprocity can also be applied to social problems. Millions of people in our country work 40 hours per week but get paid wages considerably below the poverty line. These people may conclude that this relationship is an unfair exchange and may go on strike or take some other social action because

they believe that the norm of reciprocity has been broken. Hence, the breaking of the norm of reciprocity can lead to conflict and some kind of social change. So, exchange, the norm of reciprocity, and the breaking of the norm of reciprocity all can be integral parts of a social problem and the possible solving of that problem. Consequently, you can see how exchange theory can be a part of my theory of conflict and social change (outlined earlier in the chapter) whereby various inequalities of exchange or the breaking of expected exchange relationships can be causes for conflict and subsequent social change.

Concluding Thoughts on Theory and Social Problems

Note that as we work our way through this book, we continually use the theory of conflict and social change as a main means of understanding and solving our social problems. But we also apply the other theories just outlined to give us additional insight into a particular social problem. As you make your way through this book, you will see how beneficial it will be to apply theory to social problems so as to better understand and solve these problems.

Addressing Social Problems Within Capitalism

I want to make a comment on the context within which we address our social problems. I suggest actions to solve or ameliorate our social problems within the context of a U.S. and worldwide capitalistic economy. The reason I say this is that I think that Americans, as well as people throughout the world, will live our lives, at least for the immediate future, within a capitalistic economy. How long will this be? I do not know, and I imagine that no one else does either.[15] Capitalism during the past 300 to 400 years has continued to evolve, adapt, and adjust to the times. Will it continue to do so? I do not know. However, given capitalism's ability to adjust so far, its current pervasive influence in the world, and the legitimacy it carries among many powerful people, I predict that a capitalistic economy will continue to survive in the United States and throughout the world for some time to come. So, with this in mind, my book is about what we can realistically do to solve our social problems within the context of a U.S. and worldwide capitalistic economy.

The Next Chapter

Before we discuss our first social problem, we focus in the next chapter on three things: (1) the barriers to solving our social problems, (2) the possibilities for

solving our social problems, and (3) how sociology can help us to solve our social problems. So, read and reflect on Chapter 2 to prepare yourself to tackle the social problems we address in later chapters.

Questions for Discussion

1. Should we, in sociology, go beyond our role of being objective and say what we think should happen?

2. How much should sociologists be a part of changing society?

3. What might be other criteria, besides the number of people affected and the problem's potential to endanger lives, that we could use to decide which social problem we should tackle first?

4. Can we do without bureaucracies such as the government and large corporations?

5. If we need to have bureaucracies, are there some ways that we, as individuals, cannot be so powerless against them and be able to feel that they are not so impersonal to our human needs?

6. Why do people, at times, accept their unequal situations as long as they do?

7. What are some ways that we can become aware of social problems in our current society and world?

8. Why is there not much social change even when a number of people want it?

9. How might our theory of conflict and social change apply to a social problem that we have today?

10. What are some things we can do in society and the world that can help us to have peaceful conflict versus violent conflict?

The Internet: For Further Study

http://www.sssp1.org/

http://personal.kenyon.edu/mmmarthy/Objectivity.htm

http://web.grinnell.edu/courses/soc/s00/soc111–01/IntroTheories/IntroTheories Index.html

http://www.people.vcu.edu/~jmahoney/define.htm