DEVELOPING A SOCIAL ANALYTIC MIND

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The contents of this book were developed under an Open Textbooks Pilot grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), U.S. Department of Education. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

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PREFACE

This compilation aims to foster critical thinking and explore contemporary social issues. The book represents a synthesis of six open educational resources, carefully curated to provide a comprehensive understanding of crucial topics in today's society including *Critical Thinking Web*, *Social Problems: Continuity and Change*, *Urban Literacy: Learning to Read the City Around You*, *Public Policy: Origins, Practice, and Analysis*, *Human Behavior and the Social Environment II*, and *Understanding and Changing the Social World*.

With a deliberate focus on critical thinking and an examination of pressing social issues, this compilation emphasizes the intricate intersections of race, gender, class, and ecology within contemporary contexts. Each module is supplemented with original content and updated statistical tables and figures, ensuring relevance and currency in today's ever-evolving landscape.

Furthermore, the inclusion of learning objectives and practical applications in each module enhances the pedagogical value of this work, encouraging active engagement and critical reflection among readers. In recognition of the unprecedented global events that have shaped our collective experience, a dedicated section on global pandemics has been incorporated, providing insights and perspectives relevant to current realities.

As you embark on this intellectual journey, we invite you to reflect, probe, question, and investigate the concepts and ideas presented within these pages, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities that define our world. May this compilation serve as a catalyst for meaningful dialogue, inquiry, and transformative learning experiences.

LICENSES & ATTRIBUTIONS

NOTE TO OUR READERS

Dear Scholars,

In this book, we aim to foster an inclusive and reflective learning environment that values diversity and challenges conventional perspectives. As editors, we have made intentional choices to uphold these principles throughout the text.

The gender binary is a classification system that divides gender into two distinct, opposite, and mutually exclusive categories: male and female. It is important to note that we use the term Latinx/e as a means to opt out of the gender binary, acknowledging and respecting diverse gender identities within the Latin American community. Furthermore, we employ gender-neutral language where applicable, recognizing the importance of inclusivity in contemporary discourse.

The insets featured in this book offer glimpses into individual stories and life experiences, providing valuable context and insight into the topics discussed. These personal narratives enrich our understanding of complex issues and underscore the human dimensions of social phenomena.

The applications and exercises included in each module serve as opportunities to cultivate critical thinking skills and develop competencies essential for engaging with contemporary social issues. Through active participation in these exercises, readers can deepen their understanding and analytical abilities.

Additionally, we have compiled a list of key terms and concepts at the end of each module. These resources can be utilized to create personal study guides, reading journals, or as assignments for classroom discussions. We encourage you to explore these terms and concepts as you navigate through the material, fostering deeper engagement and comprehension.

Instances of both historical and contemporary social issues are incorporated in the book to establish a fundamental comprehension; however, not every aspect and concern pertaining to a given problem is addressed, allowing for individual exploration and learning. We encourage scholars to incorporate recent news, events, and case studies as they progress, providing an opportunity for dynamic engagement and application of knowledge.

MODULE 1. THE IMPORTANCE OF A SOCIAL ANALYTIC MIND

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

At the end of the module, students will be able to:

1. Define critical thinking and its relevance to understanding social issues.
2. Identify key components of a social analytic mindset.
3. Explain the value of critical thinking in addressing social problems.
4. Explore the role of a social analytic mindset in decision-making and problem-solving.
5. Evaluate the benefits and challenges of collaborative creativity in social contexts.
6. Apply sociological theories to analyze and interpret social problems critically.

KEY TERMS & CONCEPTS

Define and offer real-world illustrations of the fundamental terms and concepts as you read the module to encourage active participation and learning.

- Actively practice
- Alternative facts
- Analogies
- Analyticity
- Attitudes
- Blaming the victim
- Brainstorming
- Class consciousness
- Confidence in reasoning
- Conflict theory
- Creative thinking
- Critical thinking
- Different perspectives
- Feature list
- Feminist theory
- Functionalism
- Groupthink
- Inquisitiveness
- Knowledge of theory
- Maturity of judgment
- Metacognition
- Metacognitive skill
- Mindset
- Objective aspect
- Objective reality
- Open-mindedness
- Perspective shift
- Social analytic mind
- Social analytic mindset
- Social constructionist
- Sociological imagination
- Subjective aspect
- Subjective reality
- Symbolic interactionism
- Systematic search method
- Systematicity
- Truth-seeking

INTRODUCTION

A social analytic mind is a way of thinking where you can carefully examine and understand complicated social issues and situations. People with a **social analytic mind** can question ideas, challenge unfair beliefs, and look at social problems from different angles. They study issues closely to find out why they happen and what effects they have. They know that different social factors are connected and understand and respect the experiences of all kinds of people, especially those who are often ignored or

treated unfairly. They use facts and evidence to find solutions to problems and think about how big social, economic, and political ideas affect everyone's lives. They care about fairness and equality and work actively to make things better. They believe that everyone should have a say in solving problems that affect them, and they support ways for communities to take charge of their futures. In this book, we'll discover how having a social analytic mind involves thinking carefully, understanding different topics, caring about people, using information wisely, considering important ideas, standing up for fairness, and working with communities to make the world better, just, and equitable.

IDENTIFICATION AND DEFINITION

The United States and the rest of the world face many social problems such as poverty and hunger, racism and sexism, drug use and violence, and climate change, to name just a few. Why do these problems exist? What are their effects? What can be done about them? We will explore these challenges, addressing their origins, consequences, and potential solutions through the application of contemporary critical thinking methods and theory and research from sociology and other social sciences.

As we embark on this journey to understand the social problems we face, we must first learn to identify and define them. A social problem refers to any situation or behavior that negatively affects a significant number of people and is widely acknowledged as a matter that requires attention. This definition comprises both an **objective aspect**, based on observable consequences, and a **subjective aspect**, rooted in collective recognition.

In accordance with the objective aspect an issue must harm or negatively impact a significant number of individuals to be labeled a social problem. How do we know if a social problem has negative consequences? Reasonable people can and do disagree on whether such consequences exist and, if so, on their extent and seriousness, but ordinarily a body of data accumulates from academic studies, government agencies, and various sources to strongly indicate widespread and significant repercussions. The reasons for these consequences are often hotly debated, and sometimes, as we shall see throughout this book, the very existence of these consequences is disputed. For example, while a significant majority of climate scientists assert the reality and severity of climate change, a 2011 survey revealed that less than two-thirds of Americans (64%) expressed the belief that global warming is occurring (Leiserowitz 2010).

This discrepancy underscores the subjective aspect of defining social issues, emphasizing the necessity for a collective acknowledgment that a specific condition or behavior merits attention to be recognized as a social problem. This component lies at the heart of the social constructionist view of social problems (Rubington and Weinberg 2011). The **social constructionist** view of social problems posits that societal issues are not inherent or objective realities but are instead products of subjective interpretations, cultural values, and power dynamics within a given social context. According to this perspective, there are various negative conditions and behaviors. Some are deemed negative enough to be labeled as social problems, while others don't gain this designation. Additionally, certain conditions or behaviors are only recognized as social problems when individuals, policymakers, or other groups bring attention to them.

The shift in attention to rape and sexual assault in the United States from the 1970s onward illustrates this latter scenario. While instances of sexual violence against women likely occurred throughout history and were prevalent in the U.S. before the 1970s, they were largely overlooked by legal authorities,

college textbooks, and the media (Allison and Wrightsman 1993). Many people regarded rape and sexual assault as commonplace events. However, with the emergence of the contemporary women's movement in the late 1970s, there was a concerted effort to recognize these acts as serious crimes and reflections of women's inequality. This increased focus led to a change in public awareness, altered perceptions of these crimes, and prompted legal policymakers to address them more seriously. In essence, sexual violence against women evolved into a recognized social problem.

The social constructionist perspective prompts an intriguing question about rape and sexual assault. When does a social problem truly become one? According to certain sociologists embracing this viewpoint, negative conditions and behaviors aren't deemed social problems unless recognized as such by policymakers, large segments of the public, or other societal groups. Hence, these sociologists argue that rape and sexual assault before the 1970s weren't considered social problems since they received minimal attention from society at large. However, contrasting sociologists assert that negative conditions and behaviors should be regarded as social problems even if they attract little or no attention. In this view, rape and sexual assault before the 1970s are seen as social problems despite the limited societal acknowledgment at the time.

This ongoing debate bears a resemblance to the timeless question, “If a tree falls in a forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?” Similar to this enigma, it's not a straightforward answer, but it underscores a fundamental tenet of the social constructionist perspective. Perception holds as much, if not more, importance than reality. Aligned with this principle, social constructionism emphasizes that individuals, interest groups, policymakers, and other entities often vie to shape public perceptions of various conditions and behaviors. They seek to influence how these issues are portrayed in the media, shaping public perspectives on the severity and nature of negative consequences, the underlying reasons for the condition or behavior in question, and potential solutions to the problem.

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The emphasis on perception in social constructionism leads to a thought-provoking idea, a condition or behavior might not be acknowledged as a social problem despite a substantial basis for this perception, and conversely, it might be considered a social problem even with little or no basis for this perception. A historical instance illustrating the latter scenario is the "issue" of women in college. During the late 1800s, prominent physicians and medical researchers in the United States authored journal articles, textbooks, and newspaper columns advising women against pursuing higher education. The rationale behind this advice was they were concerned that the challenges of college life might negatively impact women's menstrual cycles, and they also worried that women wouldn't perform well in exams during their menstrual periods (Ehrenreich and English 2005). We have gained better understanding since then, but the biased beliefs of these authors transformed the concept of women attending college into a social problem and contributed to the reinforcement of restrictions by colleges and universities on admitting women.

In a similar scenario, different entities can manipulate certain facets of an existing social problem, politicians might deliver speeches, the news media could employ sensational headlines and extensive coverage to grab the attention of readers or viewers, and businesses might use advertising to influence news coverage. The news media's reporting on violent crime offers numerous instances of this

phenomenon (Robinson 2011; Surette 2011). The news media tends to sensationalize violent crime, which is less frequent than property crimes such as burglary and larceny. By disproportionately highlighting stories about violent crime, media coverage fuels public anxiety about crime. Moreover, media narratives about violent crime are often more prevalent when the accused perpetrator is Black and the victim is White or when the offender is a juvenile. This kind of reporting is believed to reinforce public biases against African Americans and contribute to unfavorable perceptions of teenagers.

Understanding social constructionism and the process of identifying and defining social problems is connected to the skill of critically evaluating and analyzing social conditions, settings, and political motivations. To enhance our ability to comprehend and address social problems, we need to engage in various facets of critical thinking, improving our skills as thinkers and decision-makers. Acquiring critical thinking skills is a gradual process that requires consistent practice. By doing so, we enhance our rationality and reduce dependence on our subjective perspective.

The Value of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is the capacity to approach decisions and ideas with clear and rational thinking (Lau and Chan 2004-2024). It involves the skill to think independently and reflectively. A person with critical thinking skills can:

- Comprehend the logical relationships among decisions and ideas.
- Recognize, form, and assess arguments.
- Spot inconsistencies and typical errors in reasoning.
- Systematically address problems.
- Discern the significance and relevance of decisions and ideas.
- Reflect on the justification for one's own beliefs and values.

A critical thinker can draw consequences from their knowledge, apply information to solve problems, and seek pertinent sources of information to stay informed.

Critical thinking should not be mistaken for being argumentative or overly critical of others. While these skills can be applied to identify mistakes and flawed reasoning, critical thinking also plays a crucial role in collaborative reasoning and constructive tasks. It aids in acquiring knowledge, refining theories, and reinforcing arguments. By employing critical thinking, we can improve work processes and enhance social institutions.

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Some individuals think that critical thinking limits creativity since it involves adhering to the principles of logic and rationality. However, critical thinking is entirely consistent with thinking creatively, challenging established norms, and exploring unconventional approaches. If anything, critical thinking is a fundamental component of creativity because it enables us to assess and enhance our creative ideas.

Developing Critical Thinking Skills

The ability to think clearly and rationally is beneficial in all areas of our lives. Effective problem-solving and systematic thinking help understand and tackle social issues. Scientific pursuits require the thoughtful use of reason in both experimentation and confirming theories. A successful democracy depends on citizens who can employ critical thinking about social issues to shape their evaluations of governance and to overcome biases and prejudice.

Critical thinking is a **metacognitive skill**, signifying that it operates at a higher cognitive level, involving "thinking about thinking" (Lau and Chan 2004-2024). It entails an awareness of sound reasoning principles and reflection on our thought processes. Moreover, it frequently demands a deliberate commitment to self-improvement, overcoming biases, and sustaining objectivity, which can be challenging. While everyone possesses the ability to think, honing the skill of effective thinking often necessitates prolonged training. Like mastering various skills, proficiency in critical thinking involves three crucial elements: theory, practice, and attitude.

If we want to think correctly, we need to follow the correct rules of reasoning. **Knowledge of theory** includes knowledge of these rules (Lau and Chan 2004-2024). These are the basic principles of critical thinking, such as the laws of logic, and the methods of scientific reasoning, etc.

Also, understanding what to avoid is valuable for correct reasoning. This implies acquiring basic knowledge about common mistakes, including typical fallacies (faulty reasoning) and misconceptions. Furthermore, psychologists have identified enduring biases and limitations in human reasoning. Familiarity with these helps us recognize potential issues in our thinking.

However, simply understanding the principles that differentiate effective and ineffective reasoning is insufficient. Unless we **actively practice** critical thinking, we may struggle to apply it when needed. Developing proficiency in critical thinking involves internalizing theoretical principles so that they become second nature in our daily lives. There are at least two approaches to achieve this. One is engaging in a variety of high-quality exercises, which extend beyond formal classroom activities to include discussions and debates in our daily interactions. The other method involves delving deeper into the principles we've learned. In the human mind, memory and comprehension are enhanced by establishing connections between ideas.

Effective critical thinking skills require more than just knowledge and practice. Consistent improvement through practice is possible only when accompanied by the right kind of motivation and attitude. Certain **attitudes**, while not uncommon, can hinder critical thinking:

- A preference for receiving correct answers rather than figuring them out independently.
- A reluctance to engage in deep thought about decisions, relying solely on gut feelings.
- A tendency to avoid reviewing mistakes.
- Discomfort with receiving criticism.

To enhance our thinking abilities, it's crucial to recognize the significance of reflecting on the reasons behind our beliefs and actions. Additionally, we should be open to engaging in debates, breaking old habits, and addressing the complexities of language and abstract concepts.

The *California Critical Thinking Disposition Inventory* is a psychological assessment designed to gauge individuals' disposition towards critical thinking. It assesses seven distinct thinking habits, prompting us to reflect on the extent to which they align with our thinking:

1. **Truth-seeking**: Are you committed to understanding things as they truly are? Is seeking the truth of interest to you?
2. **Open-mindedness**: How open are you to new ideas, even those that initially conflict with your intuition? Do you give them a fair consideration?
3. **Analyticity**: Are you inclined to understand the reasons behind things, or do you make impulsive decisions without evaluating pros and cons?
4. **Systematicity**: Is your thinking systematic? Do you break down complex problems into manageable parts?
5. **Confidence in Reasoning**: Do you always defer to others, or do you have confidence in your own judgment? Can you articulate the reasons behind your confidence and evaluate your thinking?
6. **Inquisitiveness**: How curious are you about the world around you?
7. **Maturity of Judgment**: Do you tend to jump to conclusions, or do you consider various perspectives and incorporate others' experiences?

Additionally, psychologists have identified cognitive biases that can influence human reasoning, such as overconfidence and a tendency to focus on evidence that supports pre-existing opinions. It's crucial to be aware of these biases in our attitudes toward our own thinking.

Fostering a Social Analytic Mindset

Subjective reality refers to the notion that perception and personal experiences shape an individual's understanding of the world, meaning that reality can vary significantly from one person to another based on their perspectives, beliefs, and emotions. This contrasts with **objective reality**, which is independent of individual biases and interpretations. **Alternative facts**, a term popularized in contemporary political discourse, refers to statements or assertions that deviate from established, evidence-based facts, often presenting a skewed or false version of reality. The concept of alternative facts undermines the notion of a shared, objective truth by promoting subjective realities that can be manipulated for various agendas, leading to confusion and misinformation.

Metacognition is knowing more about our thinking processes and being able to monitor and control them (Lau and Chan 2004-2024). Critical thinking must involve some metacognition because we need to become aware of our own reasoning and find ways to improve it.

Developing into a proficient and effective thinker involves more than merely acquiring knowledge of logic and other reasoning principles. It necessitates self-awareness to comprehend our individual strengths and weaknesses. A grasp of human psychology, including awareness of common cognitive biases influencing our decisions, is also crucial. Furthermore, the practical application of theoretical knowledge is contingent on possessing the appropriate personality and attitude. Traits like persistence in problem-solving and a robust commitment to self-improvement are valuable attributes that contribute to the long-term enhancement of our thinking skills.

The mind is a powerful tool with limitless potential to shape countless realities through consciousness as its framework, ultimately enabling individuals to live life to the fullest. **Mindset** represents the human

inclination to conclude conscious thought processes in the form of perspectives, providing meaning to one's life.

Having a disciplined and reflective mindset is crucial for enhancing thinking abilities and developing a **social analytic mindset**. This involves tasks like ensuring accuracy, evaluating progress, and making well-informed decisions regarding time and mental effort allocation in problem-solving or solving social issues. Scholars like Tishman, Jay, and Perkins (1993) and Halpern (1998) emphasize the self-monitoring and self-regulatory aspects of metacognition, which include being attentive to our reasoning and tracking our progress. While it's important to be aware of our thinking, we often overestimate our abilities and underestimate our vulnerability to biases. Furthermore, there is a need to cultivate social and cultural awareness, emotional intelligence, leadership and self-management skills. To foster a social analytic mindset, we must take responsibility for our own learning and personal growth, considering our unique circumstances. This involves placing critical thinking within a broader framework of higher-order cognitive skills, enabling us to embark on a lifelong journey of self-development.

Creative Problem Solving

For many individuals, creativity is often associated with scientists or artists, overlooking the fact that we encounter numerous challenges in our daily lives. **Creative thinking** is instrumental in devising solutions to these problems, whether we're contemplating how to increase income or enhance the well-being of our loved ones (Lau and Chan 2004-2024).

There is a common misconception that creativity is a realm of waiting for inspiration to strike. The process of generating inspiring ideas is sometimes viewed as mysterious, and certain individuals are considered inherently more creative than others. However, it would be incorrect to perceive creativity as a passive state of mind. While there might not be a specific algorithm for creativity, there are teachable thinking skills and actionable steps to boost one's creativity. To embark on this journey, it's crucial to grasp three fundamental principles that underlie creativity.

Principle one: New ideas are composed of old elements.

Critical thinking primarily revolves around accurate thinking, whereas creativity explores alternative possibilities, aiming to generate novel and valuable ideas. These ideas could manifest as new theories, products, solutions to problems, or concepts for artistic endeavors.

Creativity involves producing something distinctive and special, necessitating a readiness to deviate from the ordinary and the traditional. Many people tend to adhere to instructions and shy away from challenging the status quo or exploring new territory. This underscores the importance of possessing a courageous, exploratory attitude, and curiosity.

But where do new ideas originate? The straightforward answer is that new ideas essentially rearrange old ones in a fresh manner. In this context, the saying "there is nothing new under the sun" holds true. This principle applies to conceptual or theoretical creations and to the initiation of new fashions or cultural trends.

The process of generating new ideas from old ones typically involves combining different elements, altering or removing certain components. Take the example of a mobile phone—an amalgamation of the ideas of wireless information transmission and a telephone.

Practically, this principle suggests that the creative ingredients one can access depend on the reservoir of ideas available for recombination. A limited knowledge domain translates to fewer resources for forming new ideas. Intellectual curiosity and a broad knowledge base can significantly augment creativity, providing access to a diverse array of concepts, theories, and experiences. Seeking solutions by consulting individuals with different expertise can also prove beneficial.

Principle two: Not all new ideas are equal.

Creativity extends beyond merely generating new ideas; it involves the ability to produce novel and valuable ideas that fulfill crucial needs or initiate impactful trends.
Creativity can be categorized into cognitive and artistic forms. Artistic creativity involves creating artwork and expressing ideas and emotions through various art forms. While critical thinking is not in opposition to artistic creativity, enhancing critical thinking skills may not necessarily improve artistic creativity. However, critical thinking is imperative for cognitive creativity, which revolves around devising solutions to practical or theoretical problems, such as formulating a new scientific theory or launching a commercial product.

Cognitive creativity comprises two facets, generating new ideas and evaluating and modifying them. Critical thinking plays a vital role in assessing the relevance and effectiveness of ideas when tackling problems. Constructing a rocket to reach the moon requires adherence to logical principles and the laws of physics. Therefore, the evaluation of any proposal must incorporate sound critical thinking.

While it is suggested that creativity may sometimes demand defying conventional norms, it is essential to recognize that good critical thinking doesn't imply perpetual criticism. If experience indicates the usefulness of brainstorming or temporarily setting aside critical judgment to generate and list new ideas before evaluation, it is a rational approach. This aligns with the principles of critical thinking, dispelling the misconception that critical thinking and cognitive creativity are mutually exclusive.

Principle three: Creativity thrives on detecting connections between ideas.

While our store of ideas provides the raw materials for generating new ones, it is crucial to acknowledge that valuable ideas may emerge from unexpected sources. Successful marketing campaigns, for instance, might draw on psychological studies and relate to societal trends. This requires recognizing connections between the specific subject of interest (the marketing exercise) and seemingly unrelated subjects (sociology and psychology).

Consider the example of the "fastskin" swimsuits introduced by Speedo around 1996. Designing a swimsuit for athletes involves minimizing drag, and researchers drew inspiration from sharks' V-shaped ridges. Emulating sharkskin, the swimsuits reduced drag and turbulence, proving highly successful at the Sydney Olympics in 2000.

To foster creativity, it is essential to explore connections between different domains. This involves building a broad knowledge base, as creative individuals often read widely, possess a strong sense of curiosity, and explore topics without immediate benefits. Additionally, the learning process should aim

for a profound understanding of connections between key concepts, ensuring that information is examined from various angles and systematically reformulated for better comprehension.

The creativity cycle

Certainly, there is no precise formula for ensuring creativity. However, the following informal procedure has proven quite useful, resembling the working routines of many successful individuals. While it may appear straightforward, success results from the consistent application of this procedure over an extended period.

Step 1. Research

When confronted with the task of generating ideas to address a problem, it is beneficial to conduct research and explore existing knowledge on the topic. If effective solutions already exist, there's no need to reinvent the wheel. However, even in unsolved scenarios, understanding existing approaches and their limitations is crucial. During the initial research phase, gather a wealth of information without concerning yourself too much about relevance.

Some useful actions to take:

- Obtain relevant information from scientific literature or consult experts.
- Investigate the historical context of the problem.
- Conduct case studies on individuals who have tackled similar issues.
- Consider analogous situations.
- Engage with the people directly involved.

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Step 2. Explore the connections between ideas

While collecting data, engage in preliminary study to gain deeper insights into the problem. Whether during or after data collection, reflect on the gathered information, assess its importance, and identify potential connections between ideas. Creativity often involves transferring concepts from one field and applying them in another.

Step 3. Relax and wait

Many of us have experienced moments where ideas spontaneously emerge during activities like showering or after a good night's sleep. While sorting out connections between ideas, persistence is crucial. Allocate an extended period to keep various ideas in mind, allowing some to remain in the background, possibly entering unconscious thinking processes. After intense efforts, it's essential to step back, engage in relaxing activities, and stimulate the mind differently. This may involve forgetting less important ideas to let more relevant ones surface. Allowing time for ideas to gestate is crucial. If a breakthrough is elusive, further research and exploration of connections may be necessary.

Step 4. Apply, review, and follow up

Upon generating potential ideas, carefully examine them to ensure they address the problem. Evaluate whether improvements are possible and determine the implementation process. Even successful ideas should undergo thorough review, seeking ways to enhance the overall process for future endeavors.

Creative heuristics

If the essence of creativity lies in manipulating ideas, it's essential to explore various methods that can aid in generating testable ideas. Below, we present some heuristics or mental shortcuts that can be beneficial:

A **feature list** for an object or process is essentially a compilation of its primary features. Once such a list is obtained, one can systematically examine each feature and contemplate potential modifications. For instance, a conventional table has a fixed, round or rectangular flat top supported by one or more poles. A creatively designed table might feature movable, multi-level worktops of irregular shapes supported by a wire frame.

Utilizing **analogies** can assist in envisioning new features. By comparing X with Y, one can explore whether unique features of Y could find analogues in X. For example, thinking of an airplane as a bird prompts consideration of applying evolutionary solutions for aviation in birds to the construction of aircraft. Similarly, a novel swimsuit designed to reduce drag for swimmers was inspired by the features of shark skins.

Sometimes, problem-solving involves sifting through a lengthy list of potential solutions. In such cases, employing a **systematic search method** becomes crucial. Thomas Edison, when designing the electric light bulb, faced the task of searching for a suitable filament—conducting electricity well enough to emit light but resistant to burning up or melting. He classified different material types (ceramic or metallic) systematically to narrow down the search. When dealing with a vast search space, dividing it into segments and conducting a systematic search, along with tests on representative samples, helps eliminate unlikely candidates.

Image by Ivan Bertolazzi on Pexels

When tackling a problem involving people, considering the issue from **different perspectives** can be valuable. For instance, when aiming to enhance a company's efficiency, one can explore the problem from the CEO's viewpoint or from the perspective of the sales department. Shifting between different perspectives may uncover difficulties or opportunities not previously considered.

Perspective shift also entails contemplating various ways of formulating a problem. If fixated on a particular aspect during a challenge, reformulating the problem can unveil new approaches. For example, a developer faced with the task of clearing a significant amount of topsoil might shift their perspective. Instead of viewing it as an expense, they might discover that the soil quality is suitable for farming, presenting an opportunity to sell the soil. Occasionally, setting aside preconceptions and exploring alternative viewpoints is necessary,

as Einstein noted when asked about the most helpful event in developing his theory of relativity, "Figuring out how to think about the problem."

Group creativity

Numerous books and courses on creativity focus on enhancing individual creative abilities. However, in the contemporary workplace, collaborative efforts are often essential for solving intricate problems. Major companies structure projects around teams with specialized expertise, and research in science and technology is increasingly conducted by collaborative teams.

While many creative thinking techniques for groups exist, brainstorming stands out as one of the most well-known. Coined by advertising executive Alex Osborn (1979) in his book "Applied Imagination," **brainstorming** involves a group meeting to generate numerous new ideas. The key requirement is to foster idea production by refraining from criticisms or negative feedback.

Despite its popularity, the efficacy of brainstorming is sometimes overstated due to various challenges:

1. Unclear objectives or unstructured discussions can lead to diffuse and impractical ideas.
2. Reluctance to share ideas may arise from fear of judgment.
3. Group fixation on the initial perceived solution may hinder exploration of alternatives.
4. Time-consuming discussions may cause individuals to forget or abandon their ideas.
5. Dominance by vocal individuals can stifle diverse contributions.

To address these challenges, a more effective implementation of brainstorming involves giving individuals time to write down their ideas or forming smaller sub-groups for preliminary discussions. This allows for open and, if necessary, anonymous idea collection and discussion, focusing on how to implement ideas rather than critiquing them.

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Another potential pitfall in group creativity is **groupthink**, where a closely-knit group with a uniform culture becomes resistant to challenging its own ideas. This hinders innovative breakthroughs. Counteracting groupthink may require efforts to bring in new members or rotate group membership. Additionally, asking team members to adopt opposing roles for debates can foster a more dynamic and critical environment.

Pitfalls of creativity

Creativity is a highly prized quality, and education aims to foster students' creativity and problem-solving skills. Businesses are eager to invest in hiring creative individuals. However, is there a downside to creativity?

Empirical research suggests statistical correlations between creativity and personality traits such as introversion, emotional sensitivity, openness to new experiences, and impulsivity. In more extreme cases, creativity is often associated with emotional disorders, particularly in the realm of creative arts (Akinola and Mendes 2008). Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner (2011), in his renowned book "Creating Minds," examined the lives of creative figures like Einstein, Freud, and Picasso. He asserted

that a common thread among these individuals is a Faustian bargain, where they make significant sacrifices in other areas of life to pursue their creative endeavors. Gardner highlighted the creators' intense devotion to their work missions, often at the expense of a well-rounded personal existence.

Recent experiments by Professor Francesca Gino and behavioral economist Dan Ariely suggest a link between creativity and dishonesty. Creative individuals, according to their findings, are more prone to dishonesty and cheating. In fact, creativity was identified as a better predictor of unethical behavior than intelligence (Gino and Ariely 2012).

Successful creativity often results from focused, prolonged efforts, implying sacrifices in other aspects of life. It requires a certain personality type to sustain such intense dedication to a project. Traits like stubbornness and grit enable individuals to persist through failures and adhere to their goals. Moreover, the courage to break existing rules and embrace uniqueness underlies the exploration of new territories. While more research is needed on the connections between creativity, personality, and psychological factors, it's evident that becoming a creative person involves more than learning thinking rules; various psychological factors play a crucial role.

APPLYING A SOCIAL ANALYTIC MINDSET

Self-Reflection: Critical Thinking Strategies

1. Read and take notes on the book excerpt entitled *Critical Thinking in Everyday Life: 9 Strategies* by Richard Paul and Linda Elder (2001).
2. Read and take notes on the blog entitled *College Info Geek: 7 Ways to Improve Your Critical Thinking Skills* by Thomas Frank (2017).
3. Complete and record your answers to the *Approach to Learning: Self-Assessment* created by the University of British Columbia.
4. Finally, write a response discussing the strengths and barriers in your thinking patterns and behaviors as identified in the readings and self-assessment results. Address the following questions as you develop your response: a) In what areas or techniques is your critical thinking deficient and how might these deficiencies influence your learning? b) What good critical thinking habits do you practice that help or reinforce your ability to learn? c) How might you improve your critical thinking, cognitive learning skills, and decision-making?

SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL PROBLEMS

A profound comprehension of social problems hinges largely on embracing the sociological imagination. Before delving into different theoretical perspectives that deepen our grasp of social issues, we thoroughly explore this foundational concept.

Numerous individuals personally encounter one or more social problems during their lives. This includes aspects such as poverty, unemployment, poor health, family issues, excessive alcohol consumption, or involvement in criminal activities. When we come across stories of such individuals, it's simple to attribute their problems solely to them and believe that they, along with others facing similar issues, are solely responsible for their difficulties.

Sociology adopts a distinctive perspective by highlighting that individual challenges often have roots in societal factors. This fundamental insight, elucidated by C. Wright Mills in his classic work, *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), underscores the differentiation between personal troubles and public issues. Personal troubles denote individual problems that affect individuals and society commonly attribute to personal and moral shortcomings. Examples encompass diverse issues such as eating disorders, divorce, and unemployment.

On the other hand, public issues emanate from the social structure and culture of a society, impacting a broader population. Societal problems contribute significantly to the challenges individuals face. Mills argued that many problems traditionally viewed as private troubles are better understood as public issues. He coined the term **sociological imagination** to describe the capacity to recognize the structural foundations of individual problems.

To exemplify Mills's perspective, let's employ our sociological imaginations to comprehend some contemporary social issues. We'll commence with unemployment, a topic Mills himself explored. If only a small number of individuals were without employment, Mills argued, we could reasonably attribute their joblessness to factors like laziness or a lack of good work habits, making it their personal trouble. However, when millions of people are unemployed, Mills contended that unemployment is more appropriately viewed as a public issue. According to Mills (1959), "the very structure of opportunities has collapsed" (p. 9). To accurately articulate the problem and consider potential solutions, it is necessary to scrutinize the economic and political institutions of society, rather than focusing solely on the personal circumstances and character of isolated individuals.

The substantial increase in the unemployment rate in the United States, resulting from the profound economic downturn that commenced in 2008, serves as a compelling illustration of Mills's argument. Numerous individuals found themselves jobless through circumstances beyond their control. While it's true that some people may be unemployed due to factors like laziness or a deficiency in work habits, a more comprehensive explanation rooted in the structural constraints of limited opportunities is essential to understand the widespread unemployment. In this context, it is more accurate to perceive unemployment as a public issue rather than an individual's personal trouble.

Another societal challenge is eating disorders. Typically, we perceive an individual's eating disorder as a personal issue arising from factors like a lack of control or low self-esteem. While this explanation has some validity, it falls short in helping us comprehend why so many individuals encounter the personal problems that lead to eating disorders. More significantly, this perspective overlooks the broader social and cultural influences that contribute to such disorders. Notably, many Americans with eating disorders are women, prompting us to inquire about the aspects of being a woman in American society that make eating disorders more prevalent.

To address this query, we must examine the societal standard of beauty for women, which places emphasis on a slender body (Boyd et al. 2011). If this cultural norm were absent, significantly fewer American women would suffer from eating disorders than they currently do. However, if this standard persists, even if every girl and woman with an eating disorder were cured, others would take their places unless there were efforts to alter this norm. From this perspective, understanding eating disorders as a public issue, rather than solely a personal trouble, provides a more comprehensive viewpoint.

Building on Mills's observations, William Ryan (1976) highlighted that Americans commonly attribute social problems, such as poverty and unemployment, to the personal shortcomings of individuals facing

these challenges, rather than recognizing structural issues within the broader society. In alignment with Mills's terminology, Americans often perceive social problems as personal troubles rather than acknowledging them as public issues. In Ryan's words, there is a tendency to place blame on the victim rather than critically examining the systemic factors at play.

In examining the ideology of **blaming the victim**, let's explore the reasons why children from low-income backgrounds in urban areas often struggle academically. According to Ryan, an approach that blames the victim would attribute the children's learning challenges to their parents' perceived lack of concern for their education, failure to instill good study habits, and a lack of encouragement to take school seriously. While Ryan acknowledged that this explanation might be applicable to some parents, he emphasized a more crucial factor: the dismal condition of America's urban schools. These schools, he argued, are overcrowded, run-down structures with outdated textbooks and obsolete equipment. To enhance the educational experiences of children in urban areas, Ryan asserted that the focus should be on improving the schools themselves rather than solely attempting to "improve" the parents.

Image by Chris John on Pexels

As illustrated by this example, adopting a blaming the victim perspective leads to solutions for social issues such as poverty and illiteracy that diverge significantly from those proposed by a more structural approach that attributes responsibility to the system. If we subscribe to blaming the victim, our limited resources would be allocated to addressing the perceived personal shortcomings of individuals experiencing poverty, illiteracy, poor health, eating disorders, and similar challenges. Conversely, if we hold the system accountable, our focus shifts towards addressing various social conditions, such as run-down schools and cultural standards of female beauty, that contribute to these difficulties. A sociological understanding suggests that the latter approach is essential for effectively addressing the social problems confronting us today.

Theoretical Perspectives

A social analytic mindset or sociological thinking on social problems is guided by three theoretical perspectives: functionalist theory, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionist theory. While these perspectives examine the same social problems, they do so from distinct angles. Combining their insights provides a more comprehensive understanding of social problems than any single perspective can offer alone. Table 1, titled "Theory snapshot," provides a concise summary of these three perspectives.

Table 1. Theory snapshot

Theoretical Perspective	Major Assumptions	Views of Social Problems
Functionalism	Socialization and social integration are necessary for social stability. Social stability is necessary for a strong society. Society's social institutions perform important functions to help ensure social stability. Slow social change	Social problems weaken a society's stability but do not reflect faults in how the society is structured. Solutions to social problems should take the form of gradual social reform rather than sudden and far-reaching change.

Theoretical Perspective	Major Assumptions	Views of Social Problems
	is desirable, and rapid social change threatens social order.	Despite their negative effects, social problems often serve important functions for society.
Conflict theory	Society is characterized by pervasive inequality based on social factors (e.g., race, gender, social class, and others). Far-reaching social change is needed to reduce or eliminate social inequality and to create an egalitarian society.	Social problems arise from fundamental faults in the structure of a society and reflect and reinforce inequalities based on social dimensions. Successful solutions to social problems must involve far-reaching change in the structure of society.
Symbolic interactionism	People construct their roles as they interact; they do not merely learn the roles that society has set out for them. As this interaction occurs, individuals negotiate their definitions of the situations in which they find themselves and socially construct the reality of these situations. In doing so, they rely heavily on symbols such as words and gestures to reach a shared understanding of their interaction.	Social problems arise from the interaction of individuals. People who engage in socially problematic behaviors often learn these behaviors from other people. Individuals also learn and develop their perceptions of social problems from other people.

Source: University of Minnesota Libraries. 2016. *Social Problems: Continuity and Change*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing.

Functionalism, also called the functionalist theory or perspective, emerged after two significant revolutions during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The first was the French Revolution of 1789, marked by intense violence and bloody terror that sent shockwaves throughout Europe. Fearing the spread of revolution to their own territories, the European aristocracy and intellectuals worried about the potential collapse of social order.

These concerns were further accentuated by the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century, which began in Europe and later extended to the United States. The industrial shift led to urbanization as people moved from farms to live near factories. The resulting growth of cities brought about poor living conditions, overcrowding, and decrepit surroundings, accompanied by a surge in crime. For European intellectuals, this served as additional evidence of social order breaking down.

In response to these challenges, intellectuals began advocating for a robust society characterized by strong social bonds, rules, and effective socialization to prevent the disintegration of social order. They warned that without these elements, social order would break down, leading to violence and other manifestations of social disorder.

Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), a key figure in the development of the sociological perspective, played a pivotal role in refining this framework. Drawing from the conservative intellectuals' notion of the necessity for a strong society, Durkheim posited that human desires could lead to chaos unless society imposed limitations (Durkheim 1952). This control, he argued, was achieved through socialization and social integration. Socialization teaches individuals society's rules and the importance of cooperation, fostering general agreement on critical norms and values. Simultaneously, social integration, encompassing ties to other individuals and social institutions like religion and the family, facilitates the process of socialization and reinforces respect for societal rules.

The contemporary functionalist perspective, rooted in Durkheim's work and that of other conservative intellectuals from the nineteenth century, adopts the human body as a metaphor for understanding society. Similar to how the various organs and body parts serve crucial functions for the ongoing health and stability of the body, social institutions play analogous roles in maintaining the well-being and stability of society. Functionalism, therefore, underscores the significance of social institutions such as the family, religion, and education in establishing a stable society.

In line with the perspective of conservative intellectuals that influenced its development, functionalism exhibits skepticism toward rapid social change and significant social upheaval. The analogy to the human body aids in grasping this skepticism. Within our bodies, abrupt and rapid changes are viewed as indicators of potential health risks. For instance, if a leg bone is broken, walking becomes challenging; losing sight in both eyes results in a loss of vision. While gradual changes, like the growth of hair and nails, are considered normal, sudden changes, such as those described, are evidently problematic. In a parallel manner, the functionalist perspective deems sudden and rapid changes in society and its social institutions troublesome. Just as the human body evolved to its current form and functions in a way that made sense from an evolutionary standpoint, society evolved based on functional principles. Consequently, any abrupt change in society jeopardizes its stability and future.

As implied by these observations, functionalism perceives social problems as emerging from the natural evolution of society. While a social problem may pose a threat to a society's stability, it does not necessarily indicate fundamental flaws within society. Accordingly, functionalism suggests that gradual social reform should be sufficient to address social problems.

Furthermore, functionalism proposes that social problems must serve some functional purpose for society; otherwise, they would not persist. While this assertion is controversial, it holds true for many social problems. For instance, crime, despite being a significant social problem, contributes positively to the economy by generating jobs in law enforcement, the legal system, home security, and related sectors. The disappearance of crime would lead to unemployment for many individuals. Similarly, poverty, while a major social problem, serves a function by ensuring that certain essential jobs are performed, as individuals in poverty often undertake tasks that others may be unwilling to do. Poverty also sustains employment in social service agencies dedicated to assisting the economically disadvantaged (Gans 1972).

In many respects, **conflict theory** stands in opposition to functionalism, yet it ironically traces its roots back to the Industrial Revolution, chiefly through the contributions of Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895). While conservative intellectuals were apprehensive about the potential mass violence resulting from industrialization, Marx and Engels decried the conditions they believed were accountable for such violence, specifically the capitalist society they perceived as responsible for these conditions. Rather than fearing the breakdown of social order represented by mass violence, they argued that revolutionary violence was necessary to eradicate capitalism and the poverty and misery they considered its inevitable outcomes (Marx 1906; Marx and Engels 1962).

According to Marx and Engels, every society is divided into two classes based on ownership of the means of production (tools, factories, etc.). In a capitalist society, the bourgeoisie, or ruling class, owns these means, while the proletariat, or working class, lacks ownership and is oppressed by the bourgeoisie. This inherent difference sparks an inherent conflict of interests, with the bourgeoisie striving to maintain its top position, while the proletariat seeks to rise from the bottom and overthrow the bourgeoisie to establish an egalitarian society.

In a capitalist society, Marx and Engels contended, revolution is inevitable due to structural contradictions inherent in capitalism. Since profit is capitalism's primary goal, the bourgeoisie seeks to maximize profit by keeping wages low and spending as little as possible on working conditions. This focus on profit, Marx and Engels argued, eventually leads to the rise of **class consciousness** among workers, prompting them to revolt against the bourgeoisie to eliminate their oppression and exploitation.

Marx and Engels' perspective on conflict arising from societal inequality forms the foundation of contemporary conflict theory. This theory posits that various groups in society have different interests rooted in their distinct social positions, leading to divergent views on crucial social issues. While some versions of the theory attribute conflict to divisions based on race, ethnicity, gender, and other differences, others, following Marx and Engels, see conflict arising from different positions in the economic structure. Overall, conflict theory underscores that different components of society contribute to ongoing inequality, in contrast to functionalist theory, which emphasizes their contribution to societal stability. Thus, while functionalist theory highlights the benefits of societal components for maintaining social stability, conflict theory advocates for social change to reduce inequality.

Feminist theory, emerging in sociology and other disciplines since the 1970s, is considered a specific application of conflict theory for our purposes. In this context, the conflict centers on gender inequality rather than the class inequality emphasized by Marx and Engels. Though multiple variations of feminist theory exist, they all emphasize the prevalence of gender inequality, positioning women as the subordinate sex in various dimensions of social, political, and economic life (Lorber 2010). Liberal feminists attribute gender inequality to differences in socialization, while Marxist feminists link it to the rise of capitalism, making women economically dependent on men. On the other hand, radical feminists view gender inequality as pervasive across all societies, not just capitalist ones.

Conflict theory, in its diverse forms, perceives social problems as originating from society's inherent inequality. Depending on the version of conflict theory considered, the inequality contributing to social problems may be based on social class, race and ethnicity, gender, or some other dimension of society's hierarchy. As any of these inequalities represents a fundamental flaw in society, conflict theory contends that significant social change is necessary to address the multitude of social problems.

Symbolic interactionism directs attention to the interaction of individuals and how they interpret these interactions. Rooted in the works of early 1900s American sociologists, social psychologists, and philosophers exploring human consciousness and action, Herbert Blumer (1969), a sociologist at the University of Chicago, further developed symbolic interactionism. The term itself was coined by Blumer. Symbolic interactionists, drawing on Blumer's insights, argue that people do not merely conform to predefined societal roles; instead, they actively construct these roles during interaction. Through negotiation and the social construction of reality, individuals rely heavily on symbols, such as words and gestures, to establish a shared understanding of their interactions.

An illustrative symbol is the act of shaking hands, widely recognized in the United States and many other societies as a symbol of greeting and friendship. This simple gesture conveys traits of niceness and politeness. Refusing to shake hands in such a context is often interpreted as a sign of dislike or insult, altering the dynamics of the interaction. Symbolic interactionists contend that people's understanding of encounters is shaped by their actions during interaction and their use and interpretation of symbols. In essence, social order is made possible because individuals learn the meanings of various symbols (e.g., shaking hands) and apply these meanings to different situations. The importance of common

understandings of symbols becomes evident in diverse cultural contexts, where symbols may carry distinct meanings.

Symbolic interactionism perceives social problems as emerging from the interactions of individuals, holding significance in two key aspects. Firstly, socially problematic behaviors like crime and drug use are often acquired through interactions with individuals engaged in these behaviors. People adopt the attitudes justifying these behaviors and learn any necessary techniques from these interactions. Secondly, perceptions of social problems are also acquired through interactions with others, as their beliefs and perspectives influence one's own views.

Aligned closely with the social constructionist view discussed earlier, symbolic interactionism underscores the subjective nature of social problems. Both perspectives highlight the importance of perceptions, emphasizing that these perceptions often matter as much as objective reality in determining whether a given condition or behavior qualifies as a social problem. Additionally, they influence the types of solutions various parties might advocate for a particular social problem.

Theoretical application

To provide you with a more nuanced understanding of the perspectives offered by these three theoretical frameworks, let's consider how they might approach armed robbery, a highly serious form of crime. It's important to recognize that combining the insights of all three perspectives offers a more comprehensive understanding of armed robbery than any single perspective can provide on its own.

From a functionalist standpoint, armed robbery might be seen as serving positive functions for society, such as the job-creating role mentioned earlier for crime in general. While acknowledging the need to reduce armed robbery, a functionalist approach would likely assume that extensive societal changes may neither be wise nor necessary as part of the effort to curb crime.

In contrast, conflict theory would adopt a markedly different approach to understanding armed robbery. It might highlight that a significant portion of street criminals comes from impoverished backgrounds, emphasizing that armed robbery is a consequence of the despair and frustration resulting from poverty, along with a lack of job opportunities and other avenues for economic and social success. According to conflict theory, the roots of street crime lie in society as much as, if not more than, in the individuals committing these crimes. To address armed robbery and street crime, conflict theory would advocate substantial changes in the economic structure of society.

Symbolic interactionism, on the other hand, would concentrate on how armed robbers make decisions regarding when and where to commit their acts and how their interactions with other criminals reinforce their criminal tendencies. It would also examine the behavior of victims when confronted by a robber. To mitigate armed robbery, symbolic interactionism might suggest programs aimed at reducing opportunities for interaction among potential criminal offenders. For instance, after-school programs could be promoted to keep at-risk youths engaged in conventional activities, reducing the time they spend with peers who might lead them into trouble.

APPLYING A SOCIAL ANALYTIC MINDSET

Perceptions of Reality

The time period we live (history) and our personal life experiences (biography) influence our perspectives and understanding about others and the world. Our history and biography guide our perceptions of reality reinforcing our personal bias and subjectivity. Relying on subjective viewpoints and perspectives leads to diffusion of misinformation and fake news that can be detrimental to our physical and socio-cultural environment and negatively impact our interactions with others. We must seek out facts and develop knowledge to enhance our objective eye. By using valid, reliable, proven facts, data, and information, we establish credibility and make better decisions for the world and ourselves.

1. Describe a socio-cultural issue you are passionate about and want to change or improve.
2. What is your position on the issue? What ideological or value-laden reasons or beliefs support your position? What facts or empirical data support your position?
3. What portion of your viewpoint or perspective on the issue relies on personal values, opinions, or beliefs in comparison to facts?
4. Why is it important to identity and use empirical data or facts in our lives rather than relying on ideological reasoning and false or fake information?

CORE INSIGHTS

Critical thinking, essential for comprehending social issues, involves analyzing information objectively and evaluating evidence to form reasoned judgments. It enables individuals to discern underlying complexities and biases inherent in societal structures. A social analytic mindset, comprising key components such as empathy, cultural competence, and diverse perspectives, enhances one's ability to dissect multifaceted social phenomena.

The value of critical thinking in addressing social problems lies in its capacity to question assumptions, challenge dominant narratives, and propose innovative solutions. By fostering skepticism and intellectual humility, critical thinking encourages individuals to examine systemic injustices and power dynamics embedded within social institutions.

Moreover, a social analytic mindset serves as a guiding framework for decision-making and problem-solving in complex social environments. By emphasizing data-driven analysis and contextual understanding, it facilitates the identification of root causes and the formulation of interventions.

Collaborative creativity, while advantageous for generating diverse perspectives and fostering collective ownership, also presents challenges in social contexts. Negotiating competing viewpoints and managing group dynamics requires effective communication and conflict resolution skills to harness the full potential of collaborative endeavors.

Applying sociological theories enriches the critical analysis and interpretation of social problems by contextualizing issues within broader historical, cultural, and structural frameworks. It enables scholars

and practitioners to elucidate patterns of inequality, social stratification, and marginalization, thereby informing more nuanced approaches to social change.

In summary, integrating critical thinking, a social analytic mindset, collaborative creativity, and sociological theories offers a comprehensive toolkit for comprehending and addressing complex social problems in contemporary society.

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MODULE 2: CAUSES & CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

At the end of the module, students will be able to:

1. Understand the developmental stages of social problems and their transformation over time.
2. Analyze the meaning of social problems through various definitions.
3. Recognize and analyze distortions in the understanding of social problems.
4. Evaluate arguments and identify fallacies in reasoning related to social issues.
5. Apply rational thinking and scientific methodologies to investigate social problems.
6. Recognize and mitigate cognitive biases in analyzing social phenomena.

KEY TERMS & CONCEPTS

Define and offer real-world illustrations of the fundamental terms and concepts as you read the module to encourage active participation and learning.

- Abstract issues
- Analogical arguments
- Ambiguity
- Argument
- Category mistake
- Circular reasoning
- Claims-making process
- Clustering illusion
- Cognitive biases
- Communication skills
- Conclusion
- Confirmation bias
- Control group
- Declarative sentences
- Deductively valid argument
- Definiendum
- Definien
- Distortion
- Empty statement
- Experimental group
- Experiments
- Fallacies
- Fallacies of inappropriate presumption
- Fallacies of inconsistency
- Fallacies of insufficiency
- Fallacies of relevance
- Fallacy of appeal to ignorance
- Framing bias
- Formal logic
- Gambler's fallacy
- Hidden assumptions
- Imperative sentences
- Implicit assumption
- Inappropriate appeals
- Incomplete meaning
- Inductively strong arguments
- Informal logic
- Interrogative sentences
- Lexical ambiguity
- Lexical definition
- Literal meaning
- Logic
- Meaning
- Modus ponens
- Naturalistic fallacy
- Necessary condition
- Neglecting relevant considerations
- Nomologically impossible
- Non-contingency

- Non-participant observation
- Objectivity
- Obscurity
- Overconfidence effect
- Participant observation
- Persuasive definition
- Plausibility
- Precising definition
- Premises
- Random sampling
- Referential ambiguity
- Reification
- Reportive definition
- Rhetorical question
- Sampling limitations
- Scientific development
- Secondary data analysis
- Self-defeating statement
- Societal norms
- Sound argument
- Stipulative definitions
- Sufficient condition
- Surveys
- Syntactic ambiguity
- Tautology
- Topic-neutrality
- Vague
- Validity
- Verbal disputes
- Weasel words

INTRODUCTION

When studying the origins and repercussions of social problems, individuals investigate the foundational elements contributing to the emergence and persistence of these issues. This exploration entails an examination of power dynamics, inequalities, and discriminatory patterns ingrained within societal frameworks. It involves a thorough study of human behavior, social interactions, norms, and values that shape the prevalence and impact of the issue. Additionally, individuals assess the ramifications of social problems on individuals, families, communities, and society at large. Recognizing the interconnected nature of social problems, people scrutinize the overlaps in their causes and consequences, aiming for a comprehensive understanding of the broader social context and implications. To address social problems, it is crucial to explore potential solutions and interventions, involving the evaluation of existing policies, programs, and initiatives. This process includes advocating for structural changes that advance social justice and equity. The study and resolution of social problems demand a diverse set of skills, including critical thinking, empathy, analytical prowess, effective communication, and a steadfast commitment to social justice. By cultivating these skills and competencies, individuals, like you, can effectively engage with complex social issues, advocate for positive change, and contribute to building more equitable and inclusive societies. In this module, we will review the development and transformation of social problems, as well as the skills and competencies necessary for understanding and addressing them effectively.

THE DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF A SOCIAL PROBLEM

In Module 1, we discussed some of the difficulties in defining a social problem and the fact that various parties often try to influence public perceptions of social problems. These issues aside, most social problems go through a natural history consisting of several stages of their development (Spector and Kitsuse 2001).

Stage 1. Claims Making

A social issue arises when a group advocating for social change, the news media, or influential politicians draw attention to a situation or behavior they consider undesirable and in need of a solution. In this initial stage, known as the **claims-making process**, the entity works to shape public perceptions regarding the problem, its causes, and potential solutions. Success in turning a condition or behavior into a recognized social problem depends on the resources of the involved entities. While individual efforts may have limited impact, collective actions, such as protests or political engagement, wield greater influence in bringing about a social problem. Politicians, with their access to the media and other influential channels, play a significant role in shaping public opinion on social issues. Studies often focus on the grassroots efforts of social change groups and larger movements, as these endeavors frequently initiate the recognition of social problems.

Stage 2. Legitimacy

After successfully framing a condition or behavior as a social problem, a group typically endeavors to influence the government at various levels (local, state, and/or federal) to take action, both in terms of expenditure and policymaking, to address the identified problem. In this endeavor, the group seeks to persuade the government that its assertions regarding the problem are valid, making logical sense, and being substantiated by empirical (research-based) evidence. The degree of success in convincing the government of the legitimacy of these claims directly correlates with the likelihood of government intervention.

Stage 3. Renewed Claims Making

For instance, where government action takes place, social change groups frequently find the undertaken measures to be insufficient in terms of goals or scope to effectively tackle the identified social problem. Upon reaching this realization, these groups often opt to renew their advocacy efforts. This involves restating their claims and offering critiques of the official response received from the government or other entrenched interests, such as major corporations. This stage may entail considerable tension between the social change groups and the entities targeted by their claims.

Image by Brett Sayles on Pexels

Stage 4. Alternative Strategies

Even with the renewed efforts in claims-making, social change groups often conclude that the government and established interests are not providing a sufficient response to their assertions. While these groups may persist in pressing their claims, they recognize the possibility of inadequate responses from established interests. This recognition prompts them to formulate their own strategies for addressing social problems.

VITALITY & TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Social problems, primarily characterized by their persistence, have endured for decades and even centuries without showing any indication of resolution. Given their long history, the certainty of ongoing

existence, and the severe consequences they entail, it is common to feel overwhelmed when learning about them. The perception that little can be done and a tendency towards a somewhat depressed outlook may easily arise. Consequently, students taking social problems courses often depart with a somewhat pessimistic and "doom and gloom" perspective (Johnson 2005).

While it is undeniable that social problems persist, it is equally true that certain issues are less severe now than in the past, indicating the possibility of change. To illustrate, consider the working conditions in the United States, many contemporary workers face unemployment, low wages, or work in substandard and hazardous environments. However, when compared to a century ago, these workers are significantly better off, thanks to the U.S. labor movement initiated in the 1870s. Presently, workers enjoy benefits such as the eight-hour workday, the minimum wage (even though some argue it is too low), the right to strike, and workplaces that are considerably safer than during the early days of the labor movement. Similarly, people of color and women have experienced remarkable progress since the 1960s, even though racial and gender inequality persist.

What leads to change? Social science theory and research constitute one source of change in addressing social problems. Throughout the years, theories and research in sociology and other social sciences have identified the causes of social problems, potential effective approaches to tackle them, and actual policies that have succeeded in addressing certain facets of social problems. Consequently, the content of this book is rooted in robust social science theory and research. Each module showcases instances where findings from sociological and other social science research have either played a role in shaping public policies related to the social problem discussed or have the potential to do so.

Image by Julia M Cameron on Pexels

The efforts of individuals and groups can also have a significant impact. Numerous individuals engage in public-service roles or volunteer in various activities related to social problems, such as assisting at a food pantry or participating in riverbank cleanup initiatives. Some adopt a more activist stance by joining small social change groups or larger social movements. The positive transformation of our nation is attributed to movements like the labor movement, the Southern civil rights movement, the women's movement, the gay rights movement, the environmental movement, and countless other endeavors that have contributed to societal betterment.

As stated by Frances Fox Piven (2006), a former president of the American Sociological Association, it is through these endeavors that "ordinary people change America," as indicated by the subtitle of her book on this topic. Expressing a similar perspective, anthropologist Margaret Mead once expressed, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has" (National Museum of American History 2024). Change, therefore, is a challenging process, yet it is achievable and does take place. Eleanor Roosevelt (1960) acknowledged this insight when she penned, “Surely, in the light of history, it is more intelligent to hope rather than to fear, to try rather than not to try. For one thing, we know beyond all doubt: Nothing has ever been achieved by the person who says, ‘It can’t be done (p. 168).’” In alignment with the optimistic sentiments of these two renowned women, this book will illustrate instances of individuals making a positive impact through their work, volunteer engagements, and participation in social change initiatives.

Change in social problems is also brought about when policymakers—whether elected, appointed officials, or other individuals—pass laws or implement policies that effectively address a social issue. This often happens in response to a social movement's influence, but occasionally, policymakers show the foresight to act without external pressure. It's important to acknowledge that despite the pressure from a social movement, many officials fail to take action, making those who do worthy of commendation. A recent illustration is the case of New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, who prioritized the legalization of same-sex marriage for his state upon taking office in January 2011. Six months later, following a narrow approval by the New York state legislature, Cuomo's advocacy was widely acknowledged for facilitating this landmark development (Barbaro 2011).

Another catalyst for change lies in the insights drawn from the experiences of other nations in dealing with social problems. Occasionally, these lessons for the United States are positive, such as when another nation effectively addresses a social issue in a way that surpasses the U.S. approach. Conversely, these lessons can also be negative, arising when another nation faces a more severe problem than the United States and/or makes errors in addressing it. The United States can learn from both successful and unsuccessful examples of other nations. Consequently, each module in this book examines such instances. In this context, the United States can gain valuable insights from the experiences of other established democracies like Canada, Western European nations, Australia, and New Zealand. Despite its considerable wealth, the United States often ranks below many democratic counterparts on various social indicators, including poverty and health (Henderson 2019; Russell 2010). One significant factor contributing to this contrast is the greater proactivity, both in attention and expenditure, exhibited by other democratic governments compared to the U.S. federal and state governments in supporting their citizens. Given that the United States has valuable lessons to glean from their positive practices, this book explores policies that have enabled other democracies to address specific social problems much more effectively than the United States has managed to do.

INVESTIGATING SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Comprehensive research serves as a crucial instrument for comprehending the origins, dynamics, and repercussions of social problems, along with potential solutions. This section provides a concise overview of the critical thinking skills and research methods employed by sociologists to collect information about social problems.

Meaning Analysis

The core element of critical thinking is the ability to think clearly. To address a social problem or assess a claim effectively, it's imperative to grasp the intended **meaning** behind the issue or claim (Lau and Chan 2004-2024). Precise communication and prevention of misunderstandings necessitate vigilance against vagueness or ambiguity, although there are contexts, like jokes or poems, where clarity and precision may be unnecessary or even undesirable. While vague promises might be made for flexibility in certain situations, there are many instances where clear thinking and meaning analysis are particularly crucial:

1. **Abstract issues** - When dealing with abstract issues, the initial task often involves clarifying the key terms or concepts relevant to the discussion. For instance, determining the compatibility of "religious values" with human rights requires a clear explanation of what is precisely meant by both terms.

2. **Scientific development** - The progress of science entails introducing new theories and concepts. Providing adequate definitions for these concepts is essential to understand how they can be employed in scientific explanations and predictions.

3. **Societal norms** - In the context of societal organization, rules and regulations are vital for coordinating behavior. Well-formulated rules should be expressed clearly to prevent and resolve disputes, ensuring that people understand what is expected of them.

4. **Communication skills** - Effective communication skills encompass the ability to convey messages with accurate meaning and understand the meaning behind what has been said or left unsaid.

Literal meaning is a characteristic of linguistic expressions. In broad terms, the **literal meaning** of a complex sequence of words is established by its grammatical properties and the meanings conventionally assigned to those words (Lau and Chan 2004-2024). It's important to differentiate the literal meaning of a statement from its conversational implicature — the information implicitly conveyed in a specific conversational context, separate from the literal meaning of the statement.

For instance, let's say we inquire if Liliana wants to go to the movies, and she responds with, "I am very tired." Naturally, we would deduce that Liliana does not wish to go to the movies. However, this inference is not part of the literal meaning of her statement; instead, the information that she does not want to go is implicitly conveyed. Similarly, consider if we hear Marissa say, "Tyrone likes cars." We might assume Marissa is indicating that Tyrone enjoys driving. However, this is solely a conversational implicature and not inherent in the literal meaning of the statement. It could be the case that Tyrone dislikes driving and appreciates cars only as an aesthetic and sound investment. Nevertheless, even if this is true, Marissa's assertion remains accurate.

Definitions

This example highlights a crucial point -- when determining the truth of a statement, claim, or social problem, it is the literal meaning that should be considered, not its conversational implicature. This distinction is particularly vital in legal contexts. The substance of a contract is typically defined by the literal meaning of its terms. In case of a dispute, the resolution often involves examining the literal meaning of the terms, not relying on implicit implications perceived by either party.

Ambiguity in meaning can impede sound reasoning and impede effective communication. Employing definitions is one method to enhance clarity in meaning. A definition consists of two components: a definiendum and a definien. The **definiendum** is the term being defined, while the **definien** comprises the group of words or concepts in the definition intended to convey the same meaning as the definiendum. For instance, in defining "bachelor" as "an unmarried man," "bachelor" serves as the definiendum, and "an unmarried man" serves as the definien.

Reportive definition

A **reportive definition**, sometimes referred to as a **lexical definition**, reports the existing meaning of a term. This encompasses examples like the "bachelor" definition mentioned earlier or the definition of a "prime number" as any integer divisible only by 1 and itself. A reportive definition aims to accurately represent the usage of the term being defined.

Determining the correct meaning of a term raises the question of relying on a dictionary as an authoritative guide for reportive definitions. However, this notion is a misconception for various reasons.

Firstly, certain words in the language are challenging, if not impossible, to define. This includes color words acquired through examples, where a dictionary might describe "red" as the color of ripe tomatoes. Yet, this description fails to capture the essence of what "red" truly means. Additionally, many words, especially color terms, are learned through examples rather than precise definitions. Explaining 'red' as 'a certain shade of color' falls short in distinguishing red from other colors.

Image by Anna Kester on Pexels

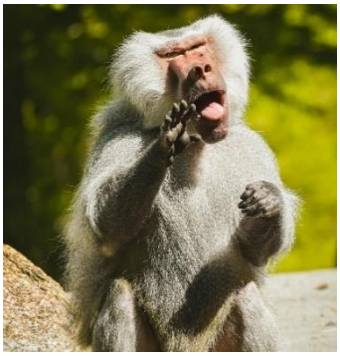
Secondly, general dictionaries often aim to provide enough guidance on a word's main usage for practical everyday application. Due to space limitations, these definitions may not fully capture the nuanced meanings of words. For instance, the Oxford Dictionary defines "religion" as "belief in a superhuman controlling power." However, this definition might not encompass cases where belief in such a power does not involve worship or submission, as illustrated by a scientist discovering superhuman aliens on Mars.

Lastly, technical terms like "microwave," "hyper-inflation," and "a priori" have specialized meanings and are used in specific contexts. General language dictionaries may not provide accurate definitions for such terms, making it necessary to consult specialized dictionaries within the relevant discipline.

Stipulative definition

A **stipulative definition** diverges from explaining the current meaning of a term; instead, it serves to assign a new meaning to a term, regardless of its existing connotations. Upon acceptance of the stipulative definition, the term is employed according to the newly prescribed meaning. For instance, consider a stipulative definition suggesting that "MBA" should denote "married but available." Upon adopting this definition, we can then use the term to characterize individuals as MBAs.

Precising definition



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A **precising definition** can be seen as a blend of both reportive and stipulative definitions. Its purpose is to render the meaning of a term more specific for a particular objective. For instance, consider a scenario where a bus company aims to provide discounts to elderly individuals. Merely stating that old people qualify for discounts could lead to disputes due to the lack of clarity on what constitutes being "old." To address this, one might define "old person" as any individual aged 65 or above, offering a precise criterion among various possibilities.

Another example involves a disagreement over whether animals like birds or apes possess language. To resolve this dispute, precision is needed in defining what is meant by "language." If "language" refers to any communication system, then birds and other animals certainly use

languages. However, if "language" implies a system with combinatorial syntax and semantics enabling communication about nonexistent objects or situations distant in time and space, some animal communication systems may not qualify as languages. This highlights the use of precising definitions to settle disputes related to key concepts with unclear meanings.

Persuasive definition

A **persuasive definition** is one that imparts an emotional, favorable, or derogatory meaning to a term, even if it lacks such connotations. For instance, an individual opposed to abortion might present the definition of "abortion" as the murder of an innocent person during pregnancy. This definition carries a negative tone, as the term "murder" implies wrongful killing, and it presupposes that the aborted fetus is already considered a person. While such a definition may serve as a rhetorical tool, it is not suitable for a fair debate on the moral legitimacy of abortion.

Evaluating Definitions

The criteria for assessing definitions depend on the type of definition under consideration. In the case of a reportive definition, it is crucial that the provided definition accurately reflects the usage of the term being defined. Specifically, the definition should strike a balance, avoiding both excessive breadth and undue narrowness.

A definition is deemed too wide if the definien encompasses things to which the definiendum does not apply. In simpler terms, the definition includes entities it should not cover. For instance, defining a chair as a piece of furniture for sitting is too wide because a bench, although a piece of furniture for sitting, is not a chair.

Conversely, a definition is considered too narrow if the definien fails to include entities to which the definiendum legitimately applies. For example, defining religion as any belief system that involves worshiping a god who created the universe is too narrow, excluding religions like Jainism and certain versions of Buddhism and Daoism that do not postulate a creator.

It's noteworthy that a definition can be both too wide and too narrow, as exemplified by the definition chair -- a piece of furniture for sitting which has four legs.

In the context of stipulative definitions, as they introduce a new meaning, concerns about being too broad or too narrow do not arise. However, it remains important that the definien avoids circularity, inconsistency, and obscurity.

An instance of a circular definition is exemplified by stating that temperature is the physical quantity measured by a thermometer. While this definition aids in understanding the term "temperature" in English, it is circular because explaining what a thermometer is inherently involves the concept of temperature.

Below are some examples demonstrating the significance of critical thinking to understand meaning and evaluate definitions.

1. On January 11, 2006, in Phoenix, a judge ruled that fetuses do not qualify as passengers for determining eligibility to use the carpool lane. Candace Dickinson, fined $367 for improper carpool lane use, argued that the fetus in her womb allowed her to use the lane. The usual requirement for carpool lane uses during weekday rush hours is to have at least one passenger. Municipal Judge Dennis Freeman dismissed Dickinson's argument, applying a "common sense" definition that considers an individual as someone occupying a "separate and distinct" space in a vehicle. Freeman clarified that the law is intended to fill empty space in a vehicle. Sgt. Dave Norton had pulled over Dickinson's car on November 8, and when asked about the number of people in the car, Dickinson, pointing to her obvious pregnancy, claimed two individuals. - ©The Associated Press

2. During Bill Clinton's tenure as U.S. President, he faced accusations of lying under oath regarding his involvement with Monica Lewinsky. Specifically, he was accused of falsehoods related to engaging in sexual relations with Monica, particularly when receiving oral sex in the White House office. Clinton justified his denial by referencing a specific court case's definition of "sexual relations," which states: "A person engages in 'sexual relations' when the person knowingly engages in or ca.es contact with the genitalia, anus, groin, breast, inner thigh, or buttocks of any person with an intent to arouse or gratify the sexual desire of any person." Clinton's argument rested on the assertion that, as the recipient of oral sex, the contact involved only the lips of another person, not meeting the criteria specified in the definition.

Verbal Disputes

Verbal disputes are often distinguished from factual disputes, where disagreements revolve around differing opinions on facts rather than meanings. For instance, if someone asserts that Sydney is the capital of Australia and others hold a contrary view, the disagreement is factual.

Image by Antoni Shkraba on Pexels

There are two primary methods to resolve a purely verbal dispute once the divergent meanings of a key term are identified. Firstly, the parties involved may opt to agree to disagree regarding the usage of the term. The second method to resolve a verbal dispute involving two definitions is by opting to adopt a specific definition, carefully considering the intended function it is supposed to serve.

The concepts of necessary and sufficient conditions aid in comprehending and elucidating various types of connections between concepts, as well as how different states of affairs are interconnected.

Necessary & Sufficient Conditions

Stating that X is a necessary condition for Y implies that it is impossible to have Y without X, meaning the absence of X ensures the absence of Y. Another term for a necessary condition is "a **necessary condition**." Examples include:

- Having four sides is necessary for being a square.
- Being brave is a necessary condition for being a good soldier.

- Not being divisible by four is essential for being a prime number.

To demonstrate that X is not a necessary condition for Y, one can identify a situation where Y is present without X. Examples include:

- Being rich is not necessary for being happy, as a poor person can also be happy.
- Being Chinese is not necessary for being a Hong Kong permanent resident, as a non-Chinese individual can become a permanent resident after residing in Hong Kong for seven years.

The notion of a necessary condition is commonly employed in daily life, even if different terms are used. For instance, stating "life requires oxygen" is equivalent to asserting that the presence of oxygen is a necessary condition for life.

A specific situation may have more than one necessary condition. For instance, to be a proficient concert pianist, having good finger techniques is a necessary condition, but it is not sufficient. Another necessary condition is being skilled at interpreting piano pieces.

Stating that X is a **sufficient condition** for Y means that the presence of X guarantees the presence of Y, indicating it is impossible to have X without Y. If X is present, Y must also be present. Here are some examples:

- Being a square is sufficient for having four sides.
- Being divisible by four is sufficient for being an even number.

To illustrate that X is not sufficient for Y, one can present cases where X is present, but Y is not. Examples include:

- Loving someone is not sufficient for being loved. A person who loves someone might not be loved, possibly because of being a very unpleasant person.
- Loyalty is not sufficient for honesty, as one might need to lie to protect the person to whom they are loyal.

Phrases like "If X then Y" or "X is enough for Y" can also convey the idea that X is a sufficient condition for Y. Some states of affairs can have more than one sufficient condition. Being blue is sufficient for being colored, and being green or red is also sufficient for being colored.

Four possibilities

When considering two conditions, X and Y, there are four possible ways in which they may be interrelated:

1. X is necessary but not sufficient for Y.
2. X is sufficient but not necessary for Y.
3. X is both necessary and sufficient for Y (or "jointly necessary and sufficient").
4. X is neither necessary nor sufficient for Y.

This classification proves valuable when seeking to clarify the relationship between two concepts. Here are some examples:

1. Having four sides is necessary but not sufficient for being a square (as a rectangle also has four sides but is not a square).
2. Having a son is sufficient but not necessary for being a parent (since a parent can have only one daughter).
3. Being an unmarried man is both necessary and sufficient for being a bachelor.
4. Being a tall person is neither necessary nor sufficient for being a successful person.

Types of possibility

The concepts of necessary and sufficient conditions are linked to the notion of possibility. Stating that X is necessary for Y implies that it is not possible for Y to occur without X. Conversely, stating that X is sufficient for Y implies that it is not possible for X to occur without Y. However, various meanings of "possibility" exist, and corresponding to these meanings, different types of necessary and sufficient conditions emerge.

Consider the following statements:

1. It is impossible to be a tall man without being tall.
2. It is impossible to dissolve gold in pure water.
3. It is impossible to travel from Hong Kong to New York in less than ten minutes.
4. It is impossible to visit the army barracks without a permit.

The term "impossible" carries different meanings in each statement. In the first statement, logical impossibility is referred to, signifying something contradictory or against the laws of logic. For example, a round square is a logical impossibility, and it is logically impossible to be a tall man without being tall.

In the second statement, the impossibility of dissolving gold in water is not due to logical constraints but stems from the laws of physics and chemistry in our universe. This type of impossibility is termed empirically or **nomologically impossible**.

The truth of the third statement lies in technological impossibility. Although the laws of physics might not prevent traveling from Hong Kong to New York in under ten minutes, current technology does not provide the means to achieve this. Overcoming technological obstacles could make such a trip possible in the future.

Lastly, visiting the army barracks without a permit is logically, empirically, and technologically possible. The impossibility in this case is legal, signifying that it is against relevant regulations or illegal to enter the barracks without a permit. This is referred to as legal impossibility.

Different types of necessity and sufficiency

In alignment with various understandings of possibility, different concepts of necessary and sufficient conditions arise. Examples include:

1. Having four sides is logically necessary for being a square.
2. Being a father is logically sufficient for being a parent.
3. The presence of oxygen is causally necessary for the proper functioning of the brain.
4. Passing current through a resistor is causally sufficient for the generation of heat.
5. Being an adult of over 18 years old is legally sufficient for having the right to vote.
6. The presence of a witness is legally necessary for a valid marriage.

It's important to note that there may be other forms of necessity and possibility. For instance, a father advising his son to treat his sister well involves a sense of "must" that is not based on legal necessity, as the law does not mandate treating siblings well. Instead, this necessity pertains to moral conduct. Conversely, if the son is instructed to treat his boss well, the "must" may signify a requirement guided more by prudential rules than moral considerations.

Obscurity

Language can be employed to mislead and create confusion or to portray ideas as more profound than they truly are. A crucial aspect of critical thinking involves recognizing and addressing these linguistic pitfalls. Let's begin by examining the first major pitfall – obscurity.

In this context, **obscurity** refers to unclear meaning, which can arise for various reasons. One reason is ambiguity, where a concept or linguistic expression has more than one meaning. Another reason is vagueness, where a term lacks a precise boundary, making it indeterminate in certain cases. Additionally, a term might have an unclear meaning due to incompleteness. Let's explore these cases individually.

Ambiguity

Ambiguity refers to a situation where a word, phrase, statement, or concept has multiple meanings or interpretations, leading to uncertainty or confusion about its intended significance. Ambiguous language can arise due to lexical ambiguity (multiple meanings of a single word), referential ambiguity (uncertainty about what a pronoun or quantifier refers to), or syntactic ambiguity (more than one way to interpret the grammatical structure of a sentence). Ambiguity can create difficulties in communication and understanding, as it may lead to misinterpretation or confusion about the intended message.

Image by Lee chinyama on Pexels

1. **Lexical ambiguity** - A single word or term has multiple meanings in the language. For instance, "deep" can denote profundity or physical depth.
2. **Referential ambiguity** - It is unclear which thing or group is being referred to. This often occurs with pronouns or quantifiers, leading to confusion about the subject.
3. **Syntactic ambiguity** - More than one meaning arises due to multiple interpretations of the grammatical structure.

The remedy for dealing with ambiguous language is to clarify its meaning, often achieved through disambiguation, where all possible interpretations are laid out.

Vagueness

A term is **vague** if it possesses an imprecise boundary, making it indeterminate in certain cases. Examples include terms like "dark," "bright," "heavy," "mountain," "clever," and "cheap." Vagueness should be distinguished from ambiguity, as a term can be vague even without multiple meanings. While vague terms have utility in everyday language, precision becomes essential in contexts requiring clarity.

Incomplete meaning

A term has an **incomplete meaning** if the property or relation it expresses depends on some unspecified parameter in the context. Terms like "useful," "important," "similar," and "better" fall into this category. Clarity is crucial for evaluating the truth of such statements.

The avoidance of vagueness is recommended when aiming for precision, as it enhances the informational content of a claim. Expressions that rely on vagueness can make a statement impossible to confirm or disprove. However, individuals might exploit vagueness strategically to remain non-committal or imprecise.

Distortion

In a general sense, **distortion** involves using words in a way that deviates from their standard meaning inappropriately. Instances of distortion occurs when inappropriate emotive connotations are applied. Many expressions in language carry positive or negative connotations, and it is crucial to assess the appropriateness of these connotations. Examples include:

- Defining "religion" as a superstitious belief in the existence of God.
- Labeling abortion as "murder" in a debate about its morality.
- Describing an event as a "valuable learning opportunity" when the term "mistake" would be more accurate.

In scientific discourse, an effort is made to use factual, value-neutral language. Terms like "black hole," "ethanol," and "DNA" lack positive or negative connotations. In contexts like news reporting, it is essential to differentiate between factual descriptions and personal value judgments. While completely avoiding terms with connotations can be challenging, maintaining awareness of the connotations in one's language is crucial.

The use of **weasel words** is another form of distortion. These words involve changing the ordinary meaning of a term inappropriately during a discussion, often in response to counterexamples or objections. Consider the following exchange:

> Teacher: You did not get an “A” in the course because you were not hardworking.
> Student: But I was studying all the time and slept for only 5 hours a day!
> Teacher: No. If you were hardworking, you would have an "A."

Here, “hardworking” is the weasel word. The teacher implies that being hardworking necessitates receiving an “A,” distorting the term's ordinary meaning and rendering the initial statement empty. Essentially, the teacher equates “hardworking” with “a person who could get an A,” making the first statement equivalent to: "You did not get an ‘A’ because you were not a person who could get an ‘A’."

Reification

The term “reify” originates from the Latin word “res,” meaning thing. **Reification** involves treating an abstract idea or property as if it were a tangible, physical object.

Image by Markus Distelrath on Pexels

For instance, a slogan from a popular TV program declares, “The truth is out there.” This treats truth as if it were a physical object with a location either “in here” or “out there.” However, truth is an abstract property of claims and theories and doesn't have a specific location. This serves as an example of reification. Although we can infer the intended meaning – something along the lines of “the truth about a certain issue is discoverable with sufficient effort” – it demonstrates the use of reification. Another example is the claim that “History is just.” While a person or set of rules can be just or unjust, justice is not inherently a property of history. Yet, the speaker likely intends to convey a message like “over time, people will form a correct and fair opinion on the matter under discussion.”

These examples illustrate that reification itself is not necessarily objectionable; it often enhances dramatic impact and is common in poetry and metaphors. However, when the goal is to convey information clearly and simply, it might be prudent to avoid reification. If a statement involving reification holds a meaningful and informative claim, expressing it in simpler language without reification is usually possible. Difficulty or impossibility in translating the statement without losing clarity is an indication that the original statement lacks a clear meaning. Therefore, unless aiming for dramatic impact, it is advisable to minimize the use of reification. If necessary, ensure a clear understanding of the intended message.

Category mistakes

Inappropriate applications of reification serve as instances of category mistakes. A **category mistake** involves erroneously attributing a characteristic to something in one category that only applies to another, or more broadly, misrepresenting the category to which something pertains. Take the well-known sentence "colorless green ideas sleep furiously." While grammatically correct, this sentence encompasses several category mistakes, as green ideas cannot be deemed colorless, and ideas are not entities capable of sleep.

Philosophical arguments and distortion of meaning

Distortion often contributes to the seeming plausibility of many flawed philosophical arguments. For instance, a not uncommon argument goes as follows: "Everyone is selfish, including people who help others. This is because everyone does what he or she wants to do." Implicitly, the argument assumes

that a selfish person is defined as someone who does what he or she wants. However, this distorts the typical meaning of “a selfish person,” which is more accurately described as "someone who wants to do only those things that are to his or her advantage." A person might desire to do something to assist others, not solely for personal advantage.

Empty Content

An **empty statement** is one that claims to convey information, but, in the given conversational context, imparts no meaningful information whatsoever.

In typical scenarios, tautologies or tautological statements fall into the category of emptiness. A **tautology** is a statement that holds true by the very definition of the logical connectives used within it, such as "not," "and" "or" "if... then...," "there is," "every," "none," and similar terms.

For instance, if Monica inquires whether Jose will attend the party, and Jose responds, "If I come, I will come," this constitutes a tautology because it is inherently true based on the meaning of "if then." However, the statement fails to provide any information regarding Jose's actual attendance at the party, rendering it an empty statement.

Similarly, the statement "either it will rain tomorrow, or it will not" is also a tautology. While tautologies have their place in logic and can serve as reminders of potential courses of action (e.g., "Either we get married, or we don't"), they are unsuitable for conveying meaningful information about the world. Although not entirely devoid of utility, tautologies should be used judiciously in contexts where clear and informative communication is desired. It's worth noting that tautologies are a subset of analytic statements—those true solely by virtue of their meaning. While all tautologies are analytic truths, the reverse is not always true. Analytic truths, including tautologies, hold their validity based on meaning, independent of empirical facts.

Argument Analysis

Critical thinking involves recognizing, formulating, and assessing arguments. While in everyday language, the term **argument** may refer to a dispute, in the context of logic and critical thinking, it denotes a series of statements where one is the conclusion and the rest serve as premises or assumptions.

Presenting an argument involves providing a set of premises to justify the acceptance of a conclusion. It doesn't necessarily entail attacking or criticizing someone; arguments can also be used to bolster others' perspectives.

Consider the following example: "If you want to secure a good job, you should work hard. You do want to find a good job. So, you should work hard." In this case, the initial two sentences serve as the premises, while the last sentence forms the conclusion. Offering this argument entails presenting the premises as reasons to support the conclusion.

Several key points to highlight:

- Dogmatic individuals often assert opinions without providing reasons. When criticized, they frequently struggle to offer arguments in defense of their viewpoints.

- Enhancing our critical thinking skills involves cultivating the habit of furnishing compelling arguments to substantiate our opinions.
- When defending an opinion, consider whether you can provide multiple arguments to reinforce it. Additionally, contemplate potential objections or counterarguments. A proficient thinker evaluates arguments from both sides of an issue.

Identifying arguments

How can we discern arguments in real-life situations? Identifying them often relies on contextual cues, as there are no straightforward mechanical rules. However, certain indicators, such as premise or conclusion indicators, can facilitate this task. For instance, when someone makes a statement followed by "this is because ...," it is likely that the initial statement serves as a conclusion supported by subsequent statements. Various words in English, like "since," "firstly," "for," "assuming that," "follows from," and others, may signal the introduction of premises. Nevertheless, the interpretation of these words as premises depends on the context. For instance, the word "since" functions differently in "I have been here since noon" compared to "X is an even number since X is divisible by 4."

Conversely, conclusions are often heralded by words like "therefore," "so," "hence," "consequently," and expressions like "suggests," "proves," "demonstrates," "entails," or "implies."

Here are examples of passages that lack arguments:

- "When people sweat a lot, they tend to drink more water." (A single statement without sufficient elements to form an argument.)
- "Once upon a time, there was a prince and a princess. They lived happily together and one day decided to have a baby. However, the baby grew up to be a nasty and cruel person, and they regret it very much." (A chronological description lacking premises or conclusions.)
- "Can you come to the meeting tomorrow?" (A question devoid of an argumentative structure.)

Presenting arguments

When analyzing and evaluating an argument, it proves beneficial to label the **premises** and **conclusion**, arranging them on separate lines with the conclusion positioned at the bottom. This format, termed a presentation in the standard format, aids in clarity. Here are two additional arguments presented in this format:

Argument 1: "We should not inflict unnecessary pain on cows and pigs. After all, we should not inflict unnecessary pain on any animal with consciousness, and cows and pigs are animals with consciousness."

(Premise 1) We should not inflict unnecessary pain on any animal with consciousness.
(Premise 2) Cows and pigs are animals with consciousness.
(Conclusion) We should not inflict unnecessary pain on cows and pigs.

Argument 2: "If this liquid is acidic, the litmus paper would have turned red. But it hasn't, so the liquid is not acidic."

(Premise 1) If the liquid is acidic, the litmus paper will turn red.

(Premise 2) The litmus paper has not turned red.
(Conclusion) The liquid is not acidic.

In the standard format, premises and conclusions are distinctly identified. Sometimes, sentences are rephrased for clarity, as seen in the second premise of the second example. It's noteworthy that a conclusion may not always appear at the end of an argumentative passage, as demonstrated in the first example. Occasionally, the conclusion might be implied, as in the case of a **rhetorical question**:

Original: "How can you believe that corruption is acceptable? It is neither fair nor legal!"

Reconstructed in the standard format:

(Premise) Corruption is not fair and it is not legal.
(Conclusion) Corruption is not acceptable.

Engaging in the practice of reconstructing arguments in the standard format enhances reading and comprehension skills. The skill of presenting arguments serves not only as a means of defending one's opinion but also contributes to a deeper understanding of others.

Definition of validity

A desirable characteristic of arguments is that the conclusion should logically follow from the premises. To illustrate this concept, let's examine two arguments:

Argument #1: Jessica is over 90 years old. So, Jessica is over 20 years old.
Argument #2: Jessica is over 20 years old. So, Jessica is over 90 years old.

Intuitively, the conclusion of the first argument logically stems from the premise, whereas the conclusion of the second argument does not inherently derive from its premise. To explain this difference more precisely, consider the following thought: in the first argument, if the premise is true, then the conclusion cannot be false. However, in the second argument, even if the premise is true, there is no assurance that the conclusion must also be true. For instance, Jessica could be 30 years old.

To define the notion of a **deductively valid argument**, or valid argument, we can use this idea:

> “An argument is valid only if there is no logically possible situation where all the premises are true, and the conclusion is false simultaneously.”

This concept of validity provides a more precise explanation of what it means for a conclusion to follow from the premises. Applying this definition, we can determine that the first argument is valid because there is no possible situation where Jessica can be over 90 but not over 20. Conversely, the second argument is not valid because numerous possible situations exist where the premise is true, but the conclusion is false. For example, envision a situation where Jessica is 25 or one where she is 85. The existence of these possible situations demonstrates the invalidity of the argument.

Validity and truth

Consider an argument with more than one premise. Take the following example:

> "All pigs can fly. Anything that can fly can swim. So, all pigs can swim."

Despite both premises of this argument being false, it is, in fact, a valid argument. To assess its validity, consider whether it is possible to conceive of a situation where all the premises are true, yet the conclusion is false (not questioning whether there is a situation where all statements are true). The answer to this question is 'no.' If pigs can fly, and anything that can fly can also swim, then it logically follows that all pigs can swim. This example highlights an important point: the premises and the conclusion of a valid argument can all be false.

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It's crucial to realize validity is not contingent on the truth or falsity of the premises or the conclusion. **Validity** pertains to the logical connection between the premises and the conclusion. A valid argument is one in which the truth of the premises guarantees the truth of the conclusion. However, validity does not assert that the premises are, in fact, true. Validity simply indicates that if the premises are true, the conclusion must also be true.

Invalid arguments

Now, consider this argument:

> Raul loves Taylor. Taylor loves Sydney. So, Raul loves Sydney.

This argument is not valid because it is possible for the premises to be true while the conclusion is false. For instance, Raul might love Taylor but not want her to love anyone else, resulting in Raul actually hating Sydney. The mere possibility of such a situation demonstrates the argument's lack of validity. We refer to these situations as invalidating counterexamples to the argument. Essentially, a valid argument is defined as one without possible invalidating counterexamples. To enhance your ability to evaluate arguments, it is crucial to discover and construct such examples.

It's important to note that a counterexample doesn't have to be real in the sense of representing an actual situation. Even if Raul, Taylor, and Sydney are family members who love each other, the argument remains invalid because the constructed counterexample is a possible situation, even if not actual. What matters for a counterexample is that the situation is coherent, where all premises are true, and the conclusion is false. Therefore, keep in mind:

An argument can be invalid even if the conclusion and premises are all true.

Consider another invalid argument with a true premise and a true conclusion:

> "Paris is the capital of France. So, Rome is the capital of Italy." It is invalid because Italy could change its capital (e.g., to Milan) while Paris remains the capital of France.

Another important point is that a valid argument can have a true conclusion even when all its premises are false. Here's an example:

> "All pigs are purple in color. Anything that is purple is an animal. So, all pigs are animals."

Before proceeding, ensure you understand why these claims are true and can provide examples of such cases:

1. The premises and the conclusion of an invalid argument can all be true.
2. A valid argument should not be defined solely as an argument with true premises and a true conclusion.
3. The premises and the conclusion of a valid argument can all be false.
4. A valid argument with false premises can still yield a true conclusion.

The concept of validity offers a more precise explanation of how a conclusion logically derives from the premises. As this stands out as one of the most crucial concepts in this course, it is imperative to ensure a thorough understanding of the definition. In providing our definition, a clear distinction is made between truth and validity. In everyday language, "valid" is often used interchangeably with "true" (likewise with "false" and "not valid"). However, in this context, validity is specifically reserved for arguments and not statements, while truth is a characteristic of statements and not arguments. Therefore, refrain from making statements such as "this statement is valid" or "that argument is true" in this context.

Soundness

By now, it should be evident that validity pertains to the logical connection between the premises and the conclusion. Being informed that an argument is valid does not provide insight into the truth or falsity of the premises or the conclusion. The only assurance is the existence of a logical connection, where the premises entail the conclusion.

Even when presented with a valid argument, caution is necessary before accepting the conclusion since a valid argument could still harbor a false conclusion. Further scrutiny is required to verify the truth of the premises. If an argument is valid, and all the premises are true, it earns the designation of a sound argument. According to this definition, a sound argument must also be true. In a valid argument, if the premises are true, the conclusion cannot be false, as it cannot have true premises and a false conclusion. Therefore, if a **sound argument** is determined to be valid with true premises, its conclusion must also be true. Consequently, if you establish that an argument is sound, you can confidently accept the conclusion.

Conversely, an argument lacking soundness is termed an unsound argument. An unsound argument may be invalid, possess at least one false premise, or exhibit a combination of both shortcomings.

Hidden assumptions

When individuals present arguments, certain assumptions are at times left implicit. Take, for instance:

> "Cloning human beings is wrong because it is unnatural."

As it stands, this argument is not valid. Presumably, the person making this argument implicitly assumes that whatever is unnatural is wrong. Once this assumption is articulated, the argument becomes valid.

Upon recognizing this **implicit assumption**, we can consider its meaning and assess its justification. Numerous things are considered "unnatural" but are not commonly regarded as wrong, such as wearing sunglasses or undergoing surgery. Consequently, those who accept the initial argument must either abandon it or introduce a different hidden premise. Identifying hidden assumptions in an argument facilitates deeper thinking.

In everyday life, the arguments we encounter often feature implicit assumptions. A crucial aspect of critical thinking involves the ability to identify such hidden or implicit assumptions.

How do we go about identifying **hidden assumptions**? The process involves two main steps. Firstly, determine the validity of the argument. If the argument is valid, the conclusion logically follows from the premises, and the assumptions needed to derive the conclusion are explicitly stated. In such cases, no hidden assumptions are involved. However, if the argument is not valid, carefully examine what additional premises should be added to render it valid. These additional premises are the hidden assumptions. Subsequent questions may include: (a) What do these assumptions mean? (b) Why would the proponent of the argument accept such assumptions? (c) Should these assumptions be accepted?

This technique of uncovering hidden assumptions is also valuable for identifying overlooked factors in causal explanations of empirical phenomena. For instance, if someone lights a match and an explosion occurs, the lighting of the match is essential in explaining the explosion but is not a causally sufficient condition since situations exist where lighting a match does not result in an explosion. To offer a more comprehensive explanation, it is necessary to identify factors that, together, are sufficient for the occurrence of the explosion or at least demonstrate a high probability of its happening. This may involve factors like the presence of a high level of oxygen in the environment.

Inductive arguments

Inductively strong arguments suggest that the conclusion is highly likely to be true if the premises are true. While the premises of an inductively strong argument don't logically necessitate the conclusion, they offer substantial inductive support for it.

There exist at least three primary distinctions between an inductively strong argument and a valid argument. First, in a valid argument, the conclusion logically follows from the premises, which is not necessarily the case in an inductively strong argument. It remains logically possible for the premises to be true while the conclusion is false. Second, deductive validity is binary—it's either present or absent in an argument. However, the degree of inductive support varies depending on the likelihood of the conclusion being true given the premises. The last important point to consider is that inductive strength can be undermined, unlike validity. When we say validity is not defeasible, we mean that adding new premises to a valid argument will not render it invalid.

Inductive reasoning plays a significant role in everyday life and scientific endeavors. Many of our beliefs are formed based on limited evidence. Although this evidence doesn't logically ensure the accuracy of our beliefs, they can still be considered reasonable.

Analogical arguments

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Analogies are frequently employed in arguments. To argue by analogy is to assert that because two things share similarities, what is true of one is also true of the other. Such arguments are termed "analogical arguments" or "arguments by analogy." **Analogical arguments** hinge on analogies, and a crucial point to acknowledge about analogies is that any two objects are inevitably similar in some aspects while differing in others. For instance, a sparrow is vastly dissimilar from a car, yet they share the commonality of being able to move. Similarly, a washing machine differs significantly from society, but both entail components and generate waste. Therefore, when employing analogical arguments, it is imperative to explicitly specify the ways in which two things are presumed to be similar. This clarification allows for an assessment of whether the two entities are indeed similar in the relevant respects and whether these aspects of similarity substantiate the conclusion.
So, how do we assess the strength of an analogical argument that lacks deductive validity? Consider the following relevant factors presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Assessing analogical arguments

Factor	Assessment Guidelines
Truth	First and foremost, we must verify that the two objects being compared are indeed similar in the assumed way. For instance, in the argument examined earlier, if the two novels actually have completely different plots—one being an office romance and the other a horror story—the argument is evidently unacceptable.
Relevance	Even when two objects share similarities, it is essential to ensure that those shared aspects are relevant to the conclusion. For instance, if two books share the similarity of having green covers, this does not imply that one being boring means the other is also boring, as the color of a book's cover is irrelevant to its contents. In the explicit form of the analogical argument, we need to confirm that having properties Q1, ... Qn increases the probability of an object having property P.
Number	An analogical argument's strength increases when many relevant shared properties are identified. If multiple shared properties, all relevant to the conclusion, are discovered between two objects, the argument becomes stronger. For example, if novel X not only shares similarities with another boring novel Y in terms of plot but also shares the same author and low sales figures, the confidence in concluding that X is likely to be a boring novel is justified.
Diversity	Consider whether the shared properties are of the same kind or different types. If various aspects of similarity are identified, each contributing to the conclusion, the analogical argument gains strength. For instance, discovering that two Italian restaurants A and B both use the same olive oil and purchase high-quality ingredients increases the probability that B serves good food. However, if additional information reveals that both restaurants have lots of customers and Michelin star awards, these diverse aspects of similarity significantly boost confidence in the conclusion.
Disanalogy	Even if two objects, X and Y, share many relevant similarities, it is crucial to consider whether there are dissimilarities that could cast doubt on the conclusion. For example, in the restaurant scenario, finding out that restaurant B has a new owner who hired a team of subpar cooks suggests that the food may not be good anymore, despite sharing many other similarities with restaurant A.

Source: Lau, Joe and Jonathan Chan. 2004-2024. *Critical Thinking Web*. Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong.

Analogical arguments are pervasive in discussions within the realms of law, ethics, and politics. In a renowned article titled "A Defense of Abortion," penned in 1971, philosopher Judith Thomson advocates for a woman's right to undergo an abortion in the context of an unwanted pregnancy. Thomson constructs an analogy wherein someone wakes up to discover an unconscious violinist attached to her body to sustain the violinist's life. She contends that the individual has the right to detach the violinist, even if it results in the violinist's demise. Drawing parallels, Thomson asserts that a woman similarly possesses the right to terminate an unwanted pregnancy in specific situations.

Persuasive arguments

One motivation for delving into the study of arguments is undoubtedly the ability to persuade others, pinpoint their errors, and potentially alter their perspectives.

Therefore, when faced with disagreements, it becomes crucial to articulate your reasons with utmost clarity. Are there objections to the provided definitions? Do certain assumptions appear to be inaccurate? Or, is the reasoning itself being rejected?

It's essential to recognize that disagreements can escalate into emotional and confrontational situations. Maintaining composure is key to discerning the validity of different viewpoints. Moreover, the possibility of discovering one's own mistakes should always be acknowledged. Engaging in a constructive dialogue is an art that necessitates not only a comprehension of logic but also empathy, self-control, and a profound understanding of human psychology.

Philosopher Daniel Dennett (2006) offers valuable advice in this regard, serious argumentation relies on mutual respect, which can be challenging to foster in the face of vehement disagreements:

> Anatol Rapoport, a social psychologist and game theorist, once outlined rules for writing a successful critical commentary on an opponent's work. According to Rapoport,
>
> 1. Attempt to re-express your opponent's position so clearly, vividly, and fairly that your opponent says, "Thanks, I wish I'd thought of putting it that way."
> 2. List any points of agreement, especially if they are not matters of general consensus.
> 3. Mention anything you have learned from your opponent.
>
> Only after adhering to these steps are you permitted to present rebuttals or criticisms.

Criteria for a good argument

Criterion #1: A good argument must have true premises.

This implies that an argument with one or more false premises is not considered a good argument. The rationale behind this condition is the desire for a compelling argument that can convince us to accept the conclusion. Without all true premises, there would be no justification for accepting the conclusion.

Criterion #2: A good argument must be either valid or strong.

While many good arguments are valid, it is not a strict requirement. For example, an argument can be strong even if it is not valid. Validity is not necessary for a good argument, but inductive strength is presumed. If an argument is inductively weak, it cannot be considered a good argument as the premises fail to provide sufficient reasons for accepting the conclusion.

Criterion #3: The premises of a good argument must not beg the question.

Avoiding **circular reasoning** is essential for a good argument. Even if an argument is sound, circular arguments, where the conclusion appears as a premise, are not considered good arguments. Independence and providing independent reasons for supporting the conclusion are crucial aspects.

Criterion #4: The premises of a good argument must be plausible and relevant to the conclusion. **Plausibility** involves having good reasons to believe that the premises are true, while relevance ensures that the subject matter of the premises is related to that of the conclusion. This additional criterion is necessary because claims or theories can be true without sufficient evidence. A good argument, being one that a rational person should accept, must meet this criterion to be persuasive and convince others of the correctness of the conclusion.

APPLYING A SOCIAL ANALYTIC MINDSET

Argument Analysis: What Do You Think?

In this module, you have learned what constitutes a good argument and how to present one. Now, it is your turn to see if you can give arguments to support some of your beliefs. Consider one of the following topics, and provide a sound argument in support of your beliefs. Be sure to consider what conclusion the reader will come to and if those conclusions are supported by valid arguments or underlying assumptions.

Part 1: Formulate a sound argument

Choose one:

1. Do you think racism still exists in our society? Why or why not? What arguments can you give to support your position?
2. Should the government provide post-secondary education for free? What impact would this have on our society?

Again, what arguments and evidence can you give to support your viewpoint? Make sure that your arguments are composed of statements.

Part 2: Peer review

Next, you will be paired with a classmate to review their argument and provide a counter response. After providing an argument to counter existing claims (even if you agree with your peer), evaluate the following:

1. What hidden assumptions or biases may be present in the argument?
2. Are the conclusions supported by credible and reliable research?
3. Can your counter response be equally compelling and supported by evidence?

Rationality & Logic

The term "logic" originates from the Greek word "logos," which is translated variously as "sentence," "discourse," "reason," "rule," and "ratio." However, these translations do not fully encapsulate the specialized meaning of "logic" as used in contemporary contexts.

In essence, **logic** can be defined as the study of the principles governing correct reasoning. This definition, though somewhat broad, serves as a foundational understanding for the subject matter to be explored in this tour. It is important to note that logic is distinct from the psychology of reasoning. While logic concerns itself with the principles of correct reasoning, the psychology of reasoning looks into the empirical study of actual reasoning habits, including errors, without dictating how individuals should reason.

The main focus of logic revolves around principles governing the validity of arguments, determining whether specific conclusions logically follow from given assumptions. For instance, the argument forms known as "**modus ponens**" exemplify this concept:

1. If P, then Q.
2. P.
3. Therefore, Q.

Logic, however, extends beyond the realm of argument validity. It encompasses the study of consistency, logical truths, and properties of logical systems like completeness and soundness. Despite this breadth, these concepts remain closely intertwined with the core concept of validity.

An additional characteristic of logic is its **topic-neutrality**, as illustrated by "modus ponens." This principle can be applied across diverse topics, showcasing the universal nature of logical principles that transcend specific domains like biology or economics.

Another attribute of the principles of logic is their **non-contingency**, indicating that they are not reliant on specific, accidental features of the world. Empirical sciences like physics explore the actual state of the world, and their theories might be contingent – subject to change if certain features had been different. For instance, the speed of light limitation is a result of the current laws of physics; however, had these laws been different, this limitation might not have held true. Similarly, the study of dolphin communication is contingent on the existence of dolphins, and a different evolutionary course might have led to their non-existence.

Image by cottonbro studio on Pexels

In contrast, the principles of logic are derived through reasoning alone, and their validity is independent of any contingent features of the world. For instance, logic dictates that any statement in the form "If P then P." is necessarily true, representing a principle studied by logicians. This principle asserts that a statement like "if it is raining, then it is raining" must be true, regardless of the current weather conditions. Importantly, even if the laws of physics or weather patterns were to change, the truth of this statement would persist. This distinction emphasizes that logical truths are necessary, while scientific truths (excluding mathematics) are contingent. Once again, this underscores the divergence between logic and empirical sciences such as physics, chemistry, or biology.

At times, a distinction is drawn between informal logic and formal logic. The term **informal logic** is frequently synonymous with critical thinking or refers to the examination of reasoning and fallacies within the context of everyday life. On the other hand, **formal logic** primarily deals with structured logical systems. These systems are specially designed for conducting proofs, featuring precisely defined languages and rules of reasoning.

The study of formal logic serves various purposes. One notable reason is that it aids in recognizing patterns of sound reasoning and identifying patterns indicative of poor reasoning, guiding individuals on which patterns to adhere to and which to avoid. Consequently, delving into basic formal logic can enhance critical thinking skills. Linguists leverage formal systems of logic to analyze natural languages, while computer scientists utilize these systems in research related to Artificial Intelligence. Additionally, many philosophers prefer employing formal logic when addressing complex philosophical issues to render their reasoning more explicit and precise.

Statements

In logic, discussions often revolve around the logical properties of statements and their interrelations. So, what exactly constitutes a statement?

In English, there are three primary sentence types:

1. **Declarative sentences**, used for assertions, e.g., "He is here."
2. **Interrogative sentences**, used to pose questions, e.g., "Is he here?"
3. **Imperative sentences**, employed for making requests or issuing commands, e.g., "Come here!"

For our discussion, we will consider any declarative sentence as a statement. A declarative sentence is a complete and grammatical expression that makes a claim. Here are some examples of statements in English:

- Snow is white.
- The moon is made of green cheese.
- Everyone is here.
- Whatever will be, will be.

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As evident, statements can be either true or false, and they can vary in complexity. However, they must always be grammatical and complete sentences. The following are not considered statements:

- The United Nations (a proper name but not a sentence)
- Bridge over troubled waters (not a complete sentence)
- Come here right now! (a command that is not a complete sentence making a claim)
- Will you be available on Tuesday or Wednesday? (a question)
- HJGAS&*^@#JHGKJAS*&^*!@GJHGAA*&S (ungrammatical)

A straightforward test to determine whether something is a statement in English is to add "it is true that" to the front of a sentence (ϕ). If the resulting expression is grammatical, then ϕ is a statement; otherwise, it is not.

For example, consider ϕ as "bridge over troubled waters." Adding "it is true that" results in "it is true that bridge over troubled waters," which is not grammatical. Hence, "bridge over troubled waters" is not a statement. Conversely, "I am like a bridge over troubled waters" is a statement because "it is true that I am like a bridge over troubled waters" is grammatical.

Fallacies

Fallacies refer to errors in reasoning rather than factual inaccuracies. If I miscounted the number of people in the room, that would be a factual mistake. However, believing in the existence of round squares indicates an inconsistency in reasoning, constituting a fallacy. Such errors arise when one accepts something inconsistent, contrary to sound reasoning.

In discussions, a fallacy is often considered an undesirable form of argument or inference. Some define it as an "unreliable inference," but this definition is seen as narrow. Mistakes of reasoning, even if not explicitly presented as arguments, can be regarded as fallacious. For instance, making a contradictory claim or posing a question with an inappropriate presupposition may be considered fallacies, despite not being arguments. In both cases, individuals err in their reasoning by violating principles of correct thinking.

The study of fallacies applies the principles of critical thinking, helping individuals recognize and avoid them. Familiarity with common fallacies enables one to identify and explain mistakes made by others. Fallacies can be broadly classified into four types:

1. **Fallacies of inconsistency**, involving proposals or acceptances of something inconsistent or self-defeating.
2. **Fallacies of inappropriate presumption**, where assumptions or questions presuppose something unreasonable in the conversational context.
3. **Fallacies of relevance**, involving the invocation of irrelevant reasons or the disregard of relevant ones.

4. **Fallacies of insufficiency**, where the evidence supporting a conclusion is insufficient or weak.

The subsequent section will assess these categories of fallacies.

Inappropriate presumption

Fallacies of inappropriate presumption occur when we explicitly or implicitly make assumptions that are unreasonable in the relevant context. Here are some examples:

- The common inquiry about whether human nature is inherently good or evil presupposes the existence of a fixed human nature and insists on it being exclusively good or bad. However, questioning these assumptions is crucial. What if human nature is neither inherently good nor bad? Or, what if the concept of good or bad nature applies only to individual human beings?

- Consider the question, "Have you stopped being an idiot?" Regardless of whether you answer "yes" or "no," it implies an admission of being, or having been, an idiot. This question contains a false assumption, as most individuals would likely prefer not to make such an admission.

- The argument against same-sex marriage, stating that it should not be allowed because, by definition, marriage should be between a man and a woman, assumes that only a heterosexual conception of marriage is valid. This assumption begs the question against those supporting same-sex marriages and is inappropriate when debating this issue.

Fallacies of inconsistency

Fallacies of inconsistency occur when something inconsistent, self-contradictory, or self-defeating is put forth. Here are some instances:

- "One thing that we know for certain is that nothing is ever true or false." - If there is something we know for certain, then there is at least one truth that we know. Therefore, the assertion that nothing is true or false is untenable.

- "Morality is relative and it is just a matter of opinion, and so it is always wrong to impose our opinions on other people." - However, if morality is relative, the question of whether we should impose our opinions becomes a relative matter as well. If refraining from imposition is deemed right, it contradicts the initial claim that morality is purely a matter of opinion.

- "All general claims have exceptions." - This statement itself is a general claim. If it holds true, it must have an exception, implying that not all general claims have exceptions. Therefore, the claim exhibits inconsistency.

A **self-defeating statement** is one that, strictly speaking, is not logically inconsistent but is close enough to being so that it becomes obviously false when asserted. Consider the following examples:

- Very young children often say, "I am not here" while playing hide-and-seek. The statement is not logically inconsistent, as it is possible for the child not to be where they claim. However, it

becomes impossible for the statement to be true when uttered (unless used, for example, in a telephone recorded message).

- Someone stating, "I cannot speak any English."

- An actual example involves a TV program in Hong Kong that criticized the Government. When asked about it, the Hong Kong Chief Executive, Mr. Tung, responded, "I shall not comment on such distasteful programs." While Mr. Tung's remark is not logically inconsistent, as it describes a possible situation, it is self-defeating because labeling the program as "distasteful" constitutes passing a comment.

Fallacies of irrelevance

Considering irrelevant factors involves supporting a conclusion by relying on reasons that are unrelated, such as **inappropriate appeals** to pity, popular opinion, tradition, authority, etc. For instance, if a student fails a course and requests a passing grade, citing that "his parents will be upset," it is an irrelevant appeal. Grades should be based on performance, and the reason provided is not pertinent.

Similarly, criticizing the Democratic Party's call for direct elections in Hong Kong by asserting, "These arguments supporting direct elections have no merit because they are advanced by Democrats who naturally stand to gain from it," is fallacious. The issue of whether the person advocating for direct elections stands to gain is distinct from the question of whether direct elections should be implemented.

Neglecting relevant considerations is a common occurrence, such as ignoring or minimizing justified criticisms simply because we dislike them. There are instances when hasty decisions are made under the assumption that they are the best, without thorough investigation or proper research into the situation.

It's important to note that if we overlook a relevant fact due to ignorance, this lack of knowledge does not amount to a fallacy.

Fallacies of insufficiency

Fallacies of insufficiency occur when there is inadequate evidence presented to support a claim. This category includes most common fallacies.

Sampling limitations are evident in these instances:

- Momofuku Ando, the creator of instant noodles, passed away at 96, claiming to eat them daily. The conclusion drawn is that instant noodles cannot be detrimental to health. However, additional data, such as studies showing the longevity of many other instant noodle consumers, is necessary to adequately support this conclusion.

- Encountering a black cat in the morning and experiencing a traffic accident in the afternoon leads to the belief that black cats are unlucky. While these observations are relevant, a more comprehensive dataset, like studies indicating a higher likelihood of accidents for those encountering black cats, is needed to substantiate the conclusion.

The **fallacy of appeal to ignorance** is evident in the following example:

- "We lack evidence proving his innocence, so he must be guilty." While it may be challenging to find evidence of innocence if someone is guilty, the absence of evidence in either direction does not serve as sufficient proof of guilt.

The **naturalistic fallacy** is illustrated in the following example:

- "Many children find enjoyment in playing video games, so we shouldn't prevent them from playing." This type of fallacy often involves insufficient reasoning. Empirical facts alone are not adequate to support normative conclusions, even when they are pertinent.

Various other instances of the fallacy of insufficiency exist. Table 3 provides examples of common fallacies.

Table 3. Common fallacies

Fallacy	Description
Ad Hominem	Dismissing a theory not based on evidence but on the person presenting it. Example: "You argue for minimum-wage legislation because you can't find a good job."
Ad Ignorantiam (Appeal to Ignorance)	Establishing the truth of a claim solely due to a lack of evidence against it. Example: "Unicorns exist because there is no evidence against them."
Ad Misericordiam (Appeal to Pity)	Using pity in an argument, often for special treatment based on need. Example: "Let me pass the exam because I need it to graduate."
Ad Populum (Appeal to Popularity)	Relying on the popularity or familiarity of a claim to establish its truth. Example: "Buy this product; it's the city's favorite."
Affirming the Consequent	Inferring that P is true because Q is true, ignoring other possible conditions leading to Q.
Begging the Question (Petito Principii)	Assuming the claim being argued on the premise. Example: "God exists because the Bible says so, and the Bible is reliable because it is the word of God."
Complex Question or Loaded Question	Posing a question that presupposes a claim not accepted in the context.
Composition (Opposite of Division)	Assuming the whole has the same properties as its parts. Example: "Each person is fun individually, so inviting them all will be great."
Denying the Antecedent	Inferring that Q is false because P is false, overlooking alternative explanations.
Division (Opposite of Composition)	Assuming the parts have the same properties as a whole.
Equivocation	Using a word with different meanings without clarification. Example: "All acts are selfish; helping others is selfish because it satisfies your desire."
False Dilemma	Presenting a limited set of alternatives when others are worth considering. Example: "Every person is either my enemy or my friend."

Fallacy	Description
Gambler's Fallacy	Assuming independent statistics as dependent. Example: "Five heads in a row; the next toss will be tails."
Genetic Fallacy	If X derives from Y and Y has a property, X must have the same property. Example: "His father is a criminal, so he must be up to no good."
Non Sequitur	Drawing a conclusion that does not follow from the premise.
Petito Principii	Begging the question.
Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc	Inferring that X is the cause of Y just because X is followed by Y.
Red Herring	Introducing an irrelevant issue to divert attention from the main subject.
Slippery Slope	Arguing that accepting one claim leads to accepting absurd or unacceptable claims.
Straw Man	Attacking an opponent by misrepresenting their position.
Suppressed Evidence	Presenting only confirming evidence while ignoring contradicting evidence.

Source: Lau, Joe and Jonathan Chan. 2004-2024. *Critical Thinking Web*. Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong.

Cognitive Biases

Cognitive biases refer to specific prevalent patterns of thinking that can jeopardize objectivity and result in errors in reasoning. Despite their common occurrence, these biases are often challenging to eliminate. Psychologists find cognitive biases intriguing as they provide insights into human nature and the organization of the brain. Moreover, cognitive biases have implications in various fields, including economics, management, advertising, education, and politics.

Cognitive bias doesn't necessarily equate to a fallacy. Here are some examples of cognitive biases:

- **Confirmation Bias** which is the inclination to seek information that supports existing preconceptions, leading to a higher likelihood of disregarding data that contradicts one's beliefs. For instance, when comparing ourselves to others, we are more likely to recall their mistakes and less likely to consider our own.

- **Framing Bias** or the tendency to be swayed by how a problem is presented, even when it should not impact the solution. For example, a patient's decision to undergo surgery can be influenced by whether the procedure is described in terms of success rate or failure rate, despite both providing the same information.

- **Overconfidence Effect (Above-Average Effect)** occurs when many individuals tend to overestimate their abilities. Surveys across various domains reveal that more than half of people believe they are better than the other half in each expertise. For instance, over 50% of the population may think they have above-average intelligence, but not all can be correct. This reflects a tendency to overestimate abilities and lack insight into actual performance.

Numerous cognitive biases are associated with judgments and reasoning concerning probability and statistics. Consider the following examples:

- **Clustering Illusion** or the inclination to attribute patterns and underlying causes to random events, even in their absence.

- **Gambler's Fallacy** is the mistake of believing that a random event can be influenced by past random events. For instance, thinking that because a specific number recently appeared in a lottery, it is less likely (or more likely) to appear in the next round.

Being aware of cognitive biases empowers individuals to navigate decision-making complexities, enhancing judgment, communication, and problem-solving skills. This awareness enables critical evaluation of information and perspectives, leading to improved choices and the promotion of accuracy in thought processes. Recognizing biases aids in navigating potential misunderstandings, fostering clearer communication. It also encourages an open and objective approach to problem-solving. Understanding biases facilitates conflict resolution through empathy and finding common ground. Moreover, it prompts individuals to question their assumptions, fostering intellectual growth, and adaptability. Overall, this understanding contributes to ethical decision-making, promoting responsible and moral behavior.

Scientific Methodology

Upon assessing the critical thinking skills required for comprehending and analyzing social problems, it becomes crucial to acquire the tools and methods for gathering information, data, and facts related to the societal issues at hand.

Thorough research serves as a crucial instrument in comprehending the origins, dynamics, and repercussions of social problems, along with exploring potential solutions. This segment provides a concise overview of the primary methods sociologists employ to gather information about social issues. Table 4. "Major sociological research methods," outlines the advantages and disadvantages associated with each method.

Table 4. Major sociological research methods

Method	Advantages	Disadvantages
Survey	Many people can be included. If given to a random sample of the population, a survey's results can be generalized to the population.	Large surveys are expensive and time consuming. Although much information is gathered, this information is relatively superficial.
Experiments	If random assignment is used, experiments provide convincing data on cause and effect.	Because experiments do not involve random samples of the population and most often involve college students, their results cannot readily be generalized to the population.
Observation (field research)	Observational studies may provide rich, detailed information about the people who are observed.	Because observation studies do not involve random samples of the population, their results cannot readily be generalized to the population.

Method	Advantages	Disadvantages
Existing data	Because existing data have already been gathered, the researcher does not have to spend the time and money to gather data.	The data set being analyzed may not contain data on all the variables in which a sociologist is interested or on variables not measured in ways the sociologist prefers.

Source: University of Minnesota Libraries. 2016. *Social Problems: Continuity and Change*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing.

Surveys

Surveys are the primary tool sociologists use to collect data. The Gallup poll is a famous example, using questionnaires to gather information from participants. While Gallup is a private organization, sociologists, the government, and various groups conduct their own surveys. Many surveys employ **random sampling**, where participants are selected randomly, ensuring a representative sample. With random sampling, everyone in a population, whether it's the entire U.S. population, a state or city, or students in a college, has an equal chance of being included. The advantage of random sampling is that it allows us to generalize findings from the sample to the larger population. Thus, understanding the behavior and attitudes of just four hundred randomly chosen individuals can provide insights into the entire U.S. population.

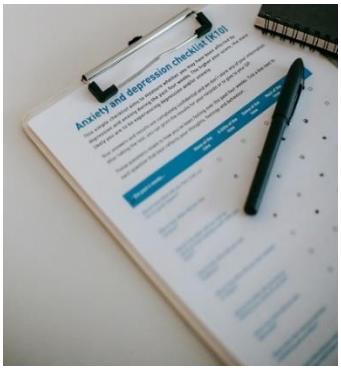

Image by Alex Green on Pexels

Certain surveys involve face-to-face interactions, where interviewers meet respondents to ask questions. This approach can gather substantial information as interviewers usually spend around an hour posing questions, resulting in a high response rate. A high response rate is crucial for generalizing the survey's findings to the whole population. However, this method can be expensive and time-consuming to execute.

Due to these challenges, sociologists and researchers are increasingly utilizing telephone surveys with many Gallup polls conducted over the phone. Computer systems employ random digit dialing to select a random sample of telephone numbers. While telephone surveys may have lower response rates and fewer questions compared to face-to-face surveys since individuals can easily hang up or let their answering machine take the call, their convenience and affordability are making them more popular.

Additionally, internet surveys are gaining traction due to their ability to reach a wide audience at minimal cost. However, a significant limitation of web surveys is that their results may not be applicable to the entire population since not everyone has internet access.

Surveys play a crucial role in studying social issues by gathering data on people's behaviors and attitudes toward various problems. For instance, surveys often inquire about alcohol, tobacco, and drug usage, as well as experiences with unemployment or poor health. Throughout this book, you'll encounter evidence collected from surveys conducted by sociologists, governmental agencies, private research firms, and organizations concerned with public interests.

Experiments

In the natural and physical sciences, experiments reign as the primary research method, but within the social sciences, they are primarily prominent in psychology. Nonetheless, some sociologists still utilize experiments, recognizing them as a potent tool for social research.

The principal advantage of **experiments**, whether in the natural and physical sciences or the social sciences, lies in establishing a cause-and-effect relationship due to the experiment's structured setup. Although various experimental designs exist, a typical experiment comprises an **experimental group** and a **control group**, with subjects randomly assigned to each. The researcher manipulates a variable for the experimental group while keeping the control group unchanged. If the two groups display differences in a specific variable later, it suggests the condition applied to the experimental group caused the resulting difference.

While most experiments occur in laboratory settings—often featuring one-way mirrors for psychologists—some take place in the field or natural environments (field experiments). In the early 1980s, sociologists in Minneapolis, Minnesota, engaged in a widely discussed field experiment sponsored by the federal government. Their objective was to assess whether arresting individuals for domestic violence reduced the likelihood of repeat offenses. The researchers implemented various interventions upon police arrival at domestic dispute scenes, including arrest, separation, or warnings without arrest or separation. Subsequent analysis revealed that those arrested exhibited the lowest rate of recidivism (Sherman and Berk 1984). This seminal finding prompted many jurisdictions in the United States to adopt mandatory arrest policies for domestic violence suspects. However, replications of the Minneapolis experiment in other cities yielded varying results, indicating that arrest sometimes decreased recidivism but in certain cases, increased it (Sherman, Schmidt, and Rogan 1992).

As demonstrated by the Minneapolis study, a key limitation of experiments is the limited generalizability of their results beyond the specific subjects studied. Most participants in psychology experiments, for instance, are college students, who diverge from the average American populace in age, education level, and socioeconomic status. Despite this constraint, experiments across psychology and other social sciences have provided valuable insights into the origins of attitudes and behaviors. Scholars investigating social issues are increasingly employing field experiments to evaluate the efficacy of diverse policies and programs aimed at addressing societal challenges. Subsequent modules will probe the findings of several such experiments.

Observational studies

Observational research, known as field research in sociology, holds a prominent place in the discipline. Sociologists have a longstanding tradition of immersing themselves in various social settings to observe people, resulting in numerous detailed descriptions and analyses of behavior within environments such as juvenile gangs, bars, urban street corners, and entire communities.

Observational studies encompass both **participant observation** and **nonparticipant observation**, distinguished by their level of researcher involvement. Participant observation involves the researcher becoming part of the group under study, spending time with its members, and sometimes even residing with them. Many classic studies on social issues adopt this approach, often focusing on urban neighborhoods (Liebow 1967; Liebow 1993; Whyte 1943). Nonparticipant observation, however, entails

the researcher observing a group without actively engaging with its members. For instance, observing whether individuals walking with children appear happier than those without children at a local shopping mall constitutes nonparticipant observation.

While observational studies, like experiments, cannot be directly extrapolated to different contexts or populations, they offer a deeper understanding of people's lives compared to surveys. Consequently, they remain a valuable research method for studying social problems.

Existing data

At times, sociologists opt not to collect their own data but rather analyze existing data collected by others. For instance, the U.S. Census Bureau collects comprehensive data relevant to various aspects of American life, and many sociologists examine census data concerning social issues like poverty, unemployment, and illness. Sociologists focusing on crime and the criminal justice system might scrutinize data obtained from court records, while medical sociologists frequently analyze patient records from hospitals. This type of analysis, known as **secondary data analysis**, offers sociologists the advantage of utilizing data that has already been compiled without the need for additional time and resources. However, a drawback is that the dataset under analysis may lack information on certain topics of sociological interest or may measure certain topics in ways that may not align with the sociologist's preferences.

Objectivity and the Scientific Method

This section underscores the importance of conducting thorough research in the examination of social problems. But what exactly constitutes sound research? At its core, sound research adheres to the principles of the scientific method. As you likely learned in high school or college science courses, these principles—including formulating hypotheses, collecting and analyzing data, and drawing conclusions—are designed to ensure that research produces the most accurate and dependable findings possible.

A fundamental tenet of the scientific method is the imperative for researchers to maintain **objectivity** throughout their work. While researchers may possess a deep passion for their subjects, it is crucial for them to guard against allowing their preconceived expectations or desires to influence their research process. This means avoiding any actions or biases that could potentially skew the results in favor of expected outcomes. Unconscious biases can inadvertently seep into research, and the scientific method serves to mitigate this risk to the greatest extent possible.

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This risk is arguably more pronounced in the social sciences compared to the natural and physical sciences. The political or ideological perspectives of chemists and physicists typically have minimal impact on how experiments are conducted or the interpretation of their outcomes. Conversely, researchers in the social sciences, particularly within sociology, often hold strong convictions about the subjects they investigate. Consequently, their personal beliefs may inadvertently shape the execution

and interpretation of their research. Adhering to the scientific method helps mitigate the influence of such biases in social science research.

CORE INSIGHTS

Understanding the developmental stages of social problems entails tracing their evolution and manifestations across time and contexts. By examining historical precedents and sociocultural shifts, scholars can discern patterns of emergence, escalation, and resolution in response to changing social, economic, and political dynamics.

Analyzing the meaning of social problems involves exploring diverse definitions and conceptual frameworks that shape perceptions and interpretations. Different theoretical perspectives offer nuanced insights into the structural, symbolic, and subjective dimensions of social issues, illuminating underlying power relations and value judgments embedded within discourses.

Recognizing and analyzing distortions in the understanding of social problems requires critical scrutiny of media representations, ideological biases, and institutional agendas. By interrogating dominant narratives and challenging taken-for-granted assumptions, researchers can unveil hidden agendas and amplifications that perpetuate social inequalities and stigmatization.

Evaluating arguments and identifying fallacies in reasoning related to social issues necessitates rigorous scrutiny of evidence, logical coherence, and rhetorical strategies. By dissecting faulty premises, ad hominem attacks, and strawman arguments, analysts can uncover underlying assumptions and ideological biases that undermine rational discourse and constructive dialogue.

Applying rational thinking and scientific methodologies to investigate social problems entails systematic inquiry, empirical observation, and hypothesis testing. By employing quantitative and qualitative research methods, scholars can generate reliable data, test hypotheses, and draw evidence-based conclusions to inform policy interventions and social change efforts.

Recognizing and mitigating cognitive biases in analyzing social phenomena involves self-reflection, reflexivity, and methodological triangulation. By acknowledging the influence of cognitive heuristics, confirmation bias, and groupthink, researchers can adopt strategies such as peer review, interdisciplinary collaboration, and methodological pluralism to enhance the validity and reliability of their findings.

In summary, a comprehensive understanding of social problems requires critical reflexivity and methodological rigor. By navigating the complexities of evaluation, interpretation, and analysis, scholars can contribute to more informed and equitable approaches to addressing pressing challenges in contemporary society.

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MODULE 3: SOCIAL INEQUALITY

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

At the end of the module, students will be able to:

1. Analyze race and ethnicity as social constructs and understand the manifestations of prejudice and discrimination.
2. Examine dimensions of racial and ethnic inequality, including the wealth gap and white privilege.
3. Explore sociological explanations for racial and ethnic inequality and factors associated with prejudice.
4. Understand sex and gender, including biological, cultural, and social influences on gender inequality.
5. Discuss feminism, sexism, and the impacts of gender inequality, both globally and in the United States.
6. Analyze inequalities related to sexualities, including discrimination, marriage legality, and impacts on physical and mental health.

KEY TERMS & CONCEPTS

Define and offer real-world illustrations of the fundamental terms and concepts as you read the module to encourage active participation and learning.

- Androgynous
- Authoritarian personality
- Biologically inferior
- Cultural deficiencies
- Discrimination
- Employment discrimination
- Ethnic competition theory
- Ethnicity
- Feminism
- Femininity
- Gay
- Gays
- Gay gene
- Gay men
- Gender
- Gender-based discrimination and violence
- Gender gap
- Gender identity
- Gender roles
- Gender socialization
- Glass ceiling
- Glass escalator
- Global poverty
- Group threat theory
- Heterosexism
- Heterosexual privilege
- HIV/AIDS epidemic
- Hidden toll
- Homosexual
- Implications of childbearing
- Individual discrimination
- Institutional discrimination
- Jim Crow racism
- Kaleidoscope of horrors
- LGBT
- Lesbian
- Liberal feminism
- Masculinity
- Me Too movement
- Module minority

- Multicultural feminism
- One-drop rule
- Oppositional culture
- Optimal medical treatment
- Otherness
- Patriarchal system
- Race
- Racial and ethnic prejudice
- Racial and ethnic stereotypes
- Racism
- Radical feminism
- Rape and sexual assault
- Rape myths
- Redlining
- Residential segregation
- Routine of terror
- Same-sex marriage
- Scapegoat theory
- Second shift
- Sex
- Sex discrimination
- Sex trafficking
- Sexism
- Sexual harassment
- Sexual orientation
- Social construction of race
- Social inequality
- Social learning theory
- Socialist feminism
- Street culture
- Structural issues
- Symbolic racism
- Transgender
- Transsexuals
- Victim-blaming
- Wage disparity
- Wealth
- White privilege

INTRODUCTION

Social inequality refers to the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and privileges within a society among its members. It can manifest in various forms, including inequality in income and wealth, education, health, social mobility, politics, and culture. Social inequality is often interconnected and perpetuated by structural factors such as systemic discrimination, institutionalized racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. Addressing social inequality requires comprehensive efforts to dismantle discriminatory systems, promote equal opportunities, and ensure social justice for all members of society. This module will examine social disparities concerning race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, age and aging, as well as crime and deviant behavior.

RACE & ETHNICITY

The headline read, "Anger, Shock over Cross Burning in Calif. Community." This incident occurred near the residence of a black woman in Arroyo Grande, California, a small affluent town located approximately 170 miles northwest of Los Angeles. The eleven-foot cross had recently been stolen from a nearby church.

The hate crime deeply disturbed the community, prompting a collective response from local ministers who issued a public statement condemning the act. They emphasized that burning crosses, defacing synagogue walls with swastikas, and writing hateful words on mosque doors are not mere pranks but are hate crimes intended to instill fear and intimidation. The group stressed the importance of every individual feeling safe in their daily lives and within the community.

Four individuals were apprehended four months later in connection with the cross burning and were charged with arson, hate crimes, terrorism, and conspiracy. The mayor of Arroyo Grande commended the arrests, noting that despite the city being shaken by the crime, it provided an opportunity for increased awareness and education on matters concerning diversity.

Incidents like the cross burning in this story recall the period of the Ku Klux Klan, which spanned from the 1880s to the 1960s. During this time, white men, often clad in white robes and hoods, instilled fear among African Americans in the South and elsewhere, resulting in the lynching of over 3,000 black individuals. While that era has passed, racial tensions persist in the United States, as demonstrated by this news report.

Following the urban riots of the 1960s, the Kerner Commission, appointed by President Lyndon Johnson, warned of a nation divided into two unequal societies—one black and one white. The commission attributed the riots to white racism and urged the government to address issues of employment, housing, and racial segregation.

Today, more than four decades later, racial disparities persist and, in many aspects, have worsened. Despite significant progress by African Americans, Latinx/e Americans, and other people of color, disparities in education, income, health, and other social indicators persist, exacerbated by the economic downturn since 2008. The wealth gap between racial groups has also deepened over the past two decades.

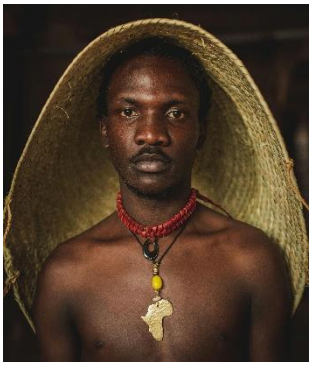


Image by nashon Otieno on Pexels

Why does racial and ethnic inequality persist? What are its various manifestations? And what can be done to address it? This module explores these questions. While racial and ethnic inequality have marred the United States since its inception, there remains hope for the future if the nation acknowledges the systemic roots of this inequality and takes concerted action to diminish it. Subsequent modules in this book will further explore the different aspects of racial and ethnic inequality. Immigration, a pressing issue today for Latinx/e and Asians and a subject of much political debate, is given special attention in our discussion on population concerns.

Race and ethnicity have deeply affected American society since the time of Christopher Columbus, when an estimated 1 million Native Americans inhabited what would become the United States. By 1900, their numbers had drastically declined to about 240,000 due to the violence inflicted by white settlers and U.S. troops, as well as diseases introduced by Europeans. Scholars assert that this widespread killing of Native Americans constituted genocide (Brown 2009).

African Americans also endured a history of mistreatment that traces back to the colonial era when Africans were forcibly brought to the Americas as slaves. Slavery persisted in the United States until it was abolished following the Civil War. Even African Americans outside the South faced racial prejudice. During the 1830s, white mobs attacked free African Americans in cities across the nation, driven by a pervasive racial bias that viewed blacks as inferior (Brown 1975). This violence persisted into the twentieth century, marked by numerous antiblack riots in 1919 that resulted in numerous fatalities. Concurrently, the Jim Crow era in the South saw the lynching of thousands of African Americans, segregation in all aspects of life, and other forms of discrimination (Litwack 2009).

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, immigrants from Ireland, Italy, Eastern Europe, Mexico, and Asia encountered hostility from native-born white mobs in the United States (Dinnerstein and Reimers 2009). As they arrived in large numbers, they faced physical assaults, job discrimination, and other forms of mistreatment. In the 1850s, Catholics in cities like Baltimore and New Orleans were beaten and sometimes killed by mobs. In the 1870s, riots erupted against Chinese immigrants in California and other states, resulting in violence and persecution. Hundreds of Mexicans in California and Texas were also targeted and subjected to lynching during this period.

The rise of Nazi racism in the 1930s and 1940s served as a stark reminder to Americans of the dangers of prejudice within their own country. Against this backdrop, Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal's monumental two-volume work, "An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy" (1944), garnered significant attention upon its publication. Myrdal meticulously documented the various forms of discrimination faced by African Americans at the time. The "dilemma" referred to in the book's title encapsulated the conflict between America's democratic ideals of equality and justice for all and the stark reality of prejudice, discrimination, and unequal opportunities.

The Kerner Commission, established in 1967, was formed to investigate the causes of the urban riots that had erupted across the United States and to provide recommendations for preventing future racial violence and fostering better economic and social opportunities for African Americans. The Kerner Commission's 1968 report highlighted the nation's failure to address this conflict since Myrdal's book. Sociologists and other social scientists have cautioned that the situation for people of color has, in many respects, deteriorated since the release of the report (Massey 2007; Wilson 2009). This module provides further evidence of this situation.

The Meaning of Race & Ethnicity

In order to initiate our comprehension of racial and ethnic disparity, it is imperative to grasp the meanings of the terms. While these social labels may appear straightforward, their intricacies extend beyond initial perceptions.

Let's begin with the concept of **race**, which pertains to a group of individuals who share certain inherited physical attributes such as skin color, facial features, and height. A central question regarding race revolves around whether it primarily constitutes a biological classification or a social construct. Traditionally, race has been viewed through a biological lens, a perspective that has prevailed for over three centuries, particularly since the colonization efforts of white Europeans in regions inhabited by people of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Consequently, individuals have been categorized into distinct racial groups based on observable physical traits.

Image by Thiago Miranda on Pexels

It is evident that individuals in the United States and across the globe exhibit noticeable physical variations. The most prominent of these disparities is skin color, with some populations having dark skin tones while others have lighter shades. Additionally, variations exist in hair texture, lip size, and stature. Historically, scientists identified up to nine racial categories, including African, American Indian or Native American, Asian,

Australian Aborigine, European (commonly referred to as "White"), Indian, Melanesian, Micronesian, and Polynesian (Smedley 2007), based on such physical distinctions.

While individuals exhibit variations in physical traits, anthropologists, sociologists, and many biologists cast doubt on the significance of these categories and challenge the biological notion of race (Smedley 2007). One reason for this skepticism is the observation that within any given racial group, there are often more physical dissimilarities than similarities between different racial groups. For instance, individuals categorized as "White" or of European descent encompass a spectrum of skin tones, ranging from very pale, as seen in individuals of Scandinavian heritage, to much darker, as observed in some Eastern European populations. Surprisingly, there are instances where individuals identified as "White" possess darker skin tones than individuals labeled as "Black" or African American. Furthermore, within the "White" category, there exists a diverse array of hair textures and eye colors, including straight or curly hair, and variations between blonde and dark hair with blue or brown eyes.

The complexities of racial classification are further compounded by historical interracial mixing, particularly evident during periods such as slavery. Consequently, African Americans exhibit a range of skin tones and other physical attributes. It is estimated that at least 30 percent of African Americans have European ancestry, while approximately 20 percent of individuals classified as "White" have African or Native American ancestry. The notion of distinct racial differences, if they ever existed centuries or millennia ago (a notion disputed by many scientists), has become increasingly blurred in contemporary society.

Another reason to challenge the biological concept of race is the arbitrary assignment of individuals or groups to racial categories. A century ago, for instance, immigrants from Ireland, Italy, and Eastern European Jewish backgrounds were not initially regarded as "White" upon arriving in the United States. Instead, they were often perceived as belonging to a separate, inferior (though unspecified) racial group (Painter 2011). This belief in their inferiority served to rationalize the discriminatory treatment they faced in their new homeland. Today, however, individuals from these backgrounds are commonly categorized as "White" or of European descent.

Consider the case of an individual in the United States with one White parent and one Black parent. Typically, American society identifies this person as Black or African American, a racial identity that the individual may adopt (like President Barack Obama, who had a White mother and African father). Yet, the logic behind this classification is questionable. Such an individual, including President Obama, possesses equal ancestral ties to both White and Black heritage through parental lineage. Similarly, contemplate someone with one White parent and another parent who is Biracial, with one Black parent and one White parent. Despite having three White grandparents and one Black grandparent, this person is often perceived as Black in the United States and may adopt this racial identity. This practice reflects the traditional "**one-drop rule**" in the United States, which defines individuals as Black if they possess any trace of Black ancestry, a rule historically employed in the antebellum South to maintain a large slave population (Staples 2005). However, in many Latin American countries, such an individual would be classified as White. These examples underscore the arbitrary nature of racial designations, highlighting race as more of a social construct than a biological one.

A third rationale for questioning the biological notion of race arises from the field of biology itself, particularly through investigations in genetics and human evolution. Regarding genetics, individuals from diverse racial backgrounds share over 99.9 percent of their DNA (Begley 2008). Conversely, less than 0.1 percent of our DNA contributes to the physical distinctions associated with racial diversity. Therefore, in

terms of genetic makeup, individuals from varying racial backgrounds exhibit significantly more similarities than differences.

Furthermore, contemporary evolutionary insights emphasize the unity of humans. According to evolutionary theory, humanity originated in sub-Saharan Africa thousands of years ago. As populations dispersed worldwide over millennia, natural selection played a significant role. It favored dark skin among individuals residing in hot, sunny regions near the equator, as the presence of melanin in dark skin provides protection against sunburn, cancer, and related ailments. Conversely, in cooler, less sunny climates farther from the equator, natural selection favored lighter skin tones to facilitate the production of vitamin D, as darker skin would impede this process (Stone et al. 2007). Thus, evolutionary evidence underscores the shared humanity of individuals despite superficial variations in appearance. In essence, we are all members of one human species, notwithstanding our outward differences.

Race as a Social Construct

The arguments against the biological foundation of racial classifications indicate that race is primarily a social construct rather than a biological reality. Put differently, race is a concept shaped by society, lacking objective existence but rather defined by people's perceptions and decisions (Berger and Luckmann 1963). In this perspective, race holds no inherent truth beyond individuals' interpretations and societal norms. This understanding of race is evident in the challenges of categorizing individuals with multiracial backgrounds into single racial groups, as previously discussed with President Obama. Another example is golfer Tiger Woods, who, despite being predominantly of Asian descent, was often labeled as African American by the media when he rose to prominence in the late 1990s (Leland 1997).

Historical instances of racial categorization further underscore the **social construction of race**. In the antebellum South, for instance, the complexion of slaves often lightened over generations due to unions, often coerced, between slave owners and other White individuals. This led to court battles over individuals' racial identities, as determining who was considered "Black" became increasingly challenging. People accused of having Black ancestry would frequently seek legal recourse to establish their White identity, aiming to evade enslavement or other adversities (Staples 1998).

Image by Kelly on Pexels

Although race is socially constructed, it undeniably has real-world consequences because it is perceived as tangible by individuals. Despite the minimal genetic variance accounting for physical differences associated with race, this classification leads not only to the categorization of individuals but also to differential treatment, often resulting in inequality. However, contemporary evidence suggests little, if any, scientific justification for the racial classifications that underpin many societal inequalities.

Due to the ambiguity surrounding the concept of race, many social scientists prefer to use the term **ethnicity** when referring to individuals of diverse cultural backgrounds, including people of color. In this context, ethnicity denotes the shared social, cultural, and historical experiences rooted in common national or regional origins, which differentiate subgroups within a population. Similarly, an ethnic group refers to a subset of a population characterized by shared social, cultural, and

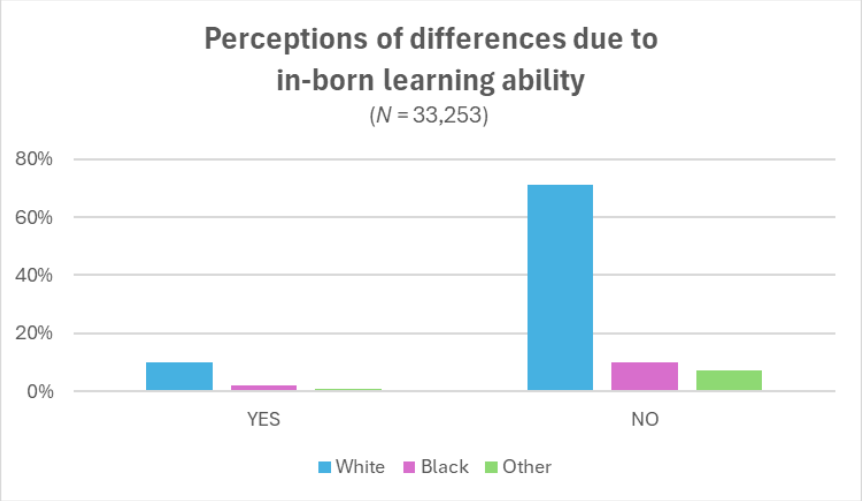
historical experiences, distinct beliefs, values, and behaviors, and a sense of belonging to the subgroup. By conceptualizing ethnicity and ethnic groups in this manner, these terms sidestep the biological implications associated with race and racial groups.

However, the significance attributed to ethnicity also underscores its nature as a social construct, indicating that our ethnic identity carries significant ramifications for how we are treated. Notably, history and contemporary practices demonstrate the ease with which prejudice can arise against individuals from different ethnic backgrounds. Much of the ensuing discussion in this module focuses on the prejudice and discrimination faced by non-White and non-European ethnic groups in the United States today. Moreover, ethnic conflicts persist globally, as evidenced by the ethnic cleansing and conflicts among ethnic groups in Eastern Europe, Africa, and other regions during the 1990s and 2000s. While our ethnic heritage may instill a sense of pride in many individuals, it also serves as a catalyst for conflict, prejudice, and even hatred, as exemplified by the tragic hate crime recounted at the beginning of this module.

Racial & Ethnic Prejudice

Prejudice and discrimination, topics explored in the subsequent section, are often conflated, yet they differ fundamentally. Prejudice pertains to attitudes, whereas discrimination involves behaviors. Specifically, **racial and ethnic prejudice** encompasses negative attitudes, beliefs, and judgments directed towards entire groups of people, as well as individual members of those groups, based on their perceived race and ethnicity. A closely related concept is **racism**, characterized by the conviction that certain racial or ethnic groups are inferior to one's own. Prejudice and racism frequently stem from **racial and ethnic stereotypes**, which are oversimplified and erroneous generalizations about individuals due to their race and ethnicity. While variations in culture and other aspects do exist among different racial and ethnic groups in America, many of the perceptions held about these groups lack substantiation and thus qualify as stereotypes.

Figure 1. Perceptions of differences due to in-born learning ability



Source: Davern, Michael; Bautista, Rene; Freese, Jeremy; Herd,Pamela; and Morgan, Stephen L.; General Social Survey 1972-2024. Principal Investigator, Michael Davern; Co-Principal Investigators, Rene Bautista, Jeremy Freese, Pamela Herd, and Stephen L. Morgan. Sponsored by National Science Foundation. NORC ed. Chicago: NORC, 2024: NORC at the University of Chicago. Data accessed from the GSS Data Explorer website at gssdataexplorer.norc.org. This GSS Data Explorer output was created by Vera Kennedy on 03/05/2024.

An illustrative instance of such stereotypes is depicted in Figure 1. "Perceptions of differences due to in-born learning ability" from the General Social Survey (GSS). In this recurring survey of a randomly selected sample of the U.S. population, approximately 10 % of White respondents demonstrate a tendency to African American having worse jobs, income, and housing than Whites because of their in-born ability to learn.

Understanding Prejudice

What are the origins of racial and ethnic prejudice? And why do certain individuals exhibit more prejudice than others? These inquiries have engaged scholars since at least the 1940s, a time when the atrocities of Nazism were still vivid in collective memory. Theoretical explanations for prejudice can be categorized into two main approaches: social-psychological and sociological. Initially, we will explore social-psychological perspectives before delving into sociological explanations. Additionally, we will examine how various racial and ethnic groups are misrepresented in the mass media.

Social-psychological Explanations

One of the initial social-psychological theories explaining prejudice focused on the concept of the **authoritarian personality** (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, and Sanford 1950). According to this perspective, authoritarian personalities develop during childhood in response to strict parenting practices. Individuals with authoritarian personalities prioritize obedience to authority, adhere rigidly to rules, and exhibit low acceptance of people from different backgrounds (out-groups). Numerous studies have identified high levels of racial and ethnic prejudice among individuals with authoritarian personalities (Sibley and Duckitt 2008). However, whether their prejudice arises directly from their authoritarian personalities or stems from the fact that their parents likely held prejudiced views themselves remains a significant question.

Another early and enduring social-psychological explanation is known as frustration theory, also referred to as **scapegoat theory** (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, and Sears 1939). According to this theory, individuals experiencing various challenges become frustrated and often attribute their difficulties to groups that are commonly marginalized in society, such as racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. These minority groups serve as scapegoats for the underlying sources of people's problems. Several psychological experiments support this theory by demonstrating that individuals tend to exhibit increased prejudice when they experience frustration.

Sociological explanations

One prevalent sociological explanation focuses on conformity and socialization, known as **social learning theory**. According to this theory, individuals who harbor prejudices are essentially conforming to the cultural norms prevalent in their upbringing. Prejudice is viewed as a byproduct of socialization processes influenced by parents, peers, the media, and various cultural elements. Studies supporting this perspective have shown that individuals tend to adopt more prejudiced attitudes when they reside in communities with high levels of prejudice, and conversely, they display reduced prejudice when they relocate to areas with lower levels of prejudice (Aronson 2008). For instance, if individuals in the South exhibit higher levels of prejudice compared to those in other regions, despite the abolishment of legal segregation over four decades ago, the influence of Southern culture on their socialization may help elucidate these beliefs.

FARMWORKER CHILDREN

In the vast agricultural fields of California, thousands of farmworkers and their families endure harsh living and working conditions. Both adults and children labor tirelessly under the scorching sun day after day, residing in impoverished, overcrowded dwellings.

Due to their parents' status as migrant workers, many children attend school for only brief periods, as their families frequently relocate to different fields, towns, or even states. At Sherwood Elementary School in Salinas, California, located in the heart of the state's agricultural region, 97 percent of students live in or near poverty. The majority, hailing from Latinx/e backgrounds, struggle with limited English proficiency, and many of their parents lack literacy skills in Spanish.

Reports indicate that numerous students at Sherwood endure living conditions where they sleep beneath carports and lack adequate space, often relying on local truck stops for basic hygiene before school. A local high school teacher lamented that many of his students rarely see their parents, who spend most of their waking hours toiling in the fields. Despite familial responsibilities and challenging circumstances, these students are expected to meet academic demands that often seem unattainable.

The plight of migrant farmworker children in California reflects broader challenges faced by Latinx/e children nationwide. The Latinx/e child population has surged in recent decades due to both reproduction and immigration, with Latinx/e kindergarteners comprising 23 percent of the total in 2009, compared to just 10 percent in 1989. This demographic shift underscores the urgent need to address the health and well-being of Latinx/e children.

However, the reality for many Latinx/e children is bleak. Approximately one-third of Latinx/e children live in poverty, often residing in disadvantaged neighborhoods where English fluency is limited, schools are inadequate, and dropout rates and teen unemployment are high. Ethnicity, poverty, language barriers, and the immigrant status of their parents collectively impede Latinx/e children's access to essential healthcare and social services.

Amidst these challenges, the plight of farmworker children in California serves as a poignant reminder of the nation's failure to address the needs of vulnerable populations. In a country as prosperous as the United States, the image of children from Salinas resorting to truck stops for basic hygiene before school is a glaring national disgrace. As efforts to combat racial and ethnic inequality persist, it is imperative not to overlook the plight of these marginalized children.

Brown, Patricia L. 2011. “Itinerant Life Weighs on Farmworkers’ Children.” *New York Times*, p. A18.

Landale, Nancy S. 2010. *Growing up Hispanic: Health and Development of Children of Immigrants*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.

Tavernise, Sabrina. 2011. “Among Nation’s Youngest, Analysis Finds Fewer Whites.” *New York Times*, p. A14.

The mass media play a pivotal role in the dissemination of prejudiced attitudes. Media exposure often portrays people of color in a negative light, inadvertently reinforcing existing prejudices or even exacerbating them (Larson 2006). Examples of biased media coverage abound. Despite many poor individuals being White, news media disproportionately depict African Americans in poverty-related stories. National news magazines and television news shows, for instance, feature African Americans in nearly two-thirds of poverty-related stories, despite African Americans comprising only about one-fourth of the impoverished population. Moreover, these portrayals often misrepresent the employment status of African Americans, with only a fraction depicted as employed, contrary to reality where a significant portion of poor African Americans are employed (Gilens 1996).

Similarly, studies conducted in cities like Chicago reveal a significant overrepresentation of Whites as "good Samaritans" in television news stories, despite whites and African Americans residing in the city in roughly equal proportions (Entman and Rojecki 2001). Numerous other studies indicate that media coverage of crime and drug-related incidents disproportionately features African Americans as offenders compared to arrest statistics (Surette 2011). Collectively, these studies highlight how the media perpetuate negative stereotypes, conveying the message that black individuals are violent, lazy, and less civic-minded (Jackson 1997).

A second sociological explanation, known as **group threat theory** (Quillian 2006), underscores economic and political competition as key factors contributing to prejudice. In this perspective, prejudice emerges from conflicts over employment opportunities, resources, and divergent political viewpoints. When groups compete for these resources, tensions often escalate, leading to hostility between them. Within this context, individuals may develop prejudiced attitudes towards groups perceived as posing a threat to their economic or political interests. Susan Olzak's (1994) **ethnic competition theory** provides a popular variation of this explanation, positing that ethnic prejudice and conflict intensify when multiple ethnic groups compete for jobs, housing, and other objectives. This competition theory aligns with the macro-level framework of the frustration/scapegoat theory previously discussed.

Much of the mob violence perpetrated by White individuals, as mentioned earlier, stemmed from concerns that the targeted groups posed a threat to their livelihoods. For example, the frequency of lynchings targeting African Americans in the South increased during periods of economic downturn and decreased during economic upswings (Tolnay and Beck 1995). Similarly, violence against Chinese immigrants by white mobs in the 1870s ensued when the pace of railroad construction, a sector that employed numerous Chinese immigrants, slowed down, prompting the Chinese to seek employment in other industries. Whites feared that this competition for jobs would adversely impact White workers and depress wages. These attacks on the Chinese community resulted in casualties and ultimately led to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act by Congress in 1882, which prohibited Chinese immigration (Dinnerstein and Reimers 2009).

Factors associated with prejudice

Since the 1940s, social scientists have explored the personal factors associated with racial and ethnic prejudice (Stangor 2009). These factors serve as indicators to test the presented theories of prejudice. For instance, if authoritarian personalities indeed lead to prejudice, individuals with such personalities should exhibit higher levels of prejudice. Similarly, if frustration contributes to prejudice, individuals experiencing frustration in their lives should also demonstrate higher levels of prejudice. Other factors studied as correlates include age, education, gender, region of residence, race, living in integrated neighborhoods, and religiosity. Here, we will focus on gender, education, and region of residence, particularly in the context of racial attitudes among white individuals, as most studies primarily examine white respondents due to the historical predominance of Whites in the United States.

The findings regarding gender are somewhat unexpected. Despite the common belief that women tend to be more empathetic and less racially prejudiced than men, recent research suggests that the racial attitudes of White women and men are remarkably similar, with both genders exhibiting comparable levels of prejudice (Hughes and Tuch 2003). This parallelism lends support to the earlier outlined group threat theory, suggesting that White individuals formulate their racial views more in alignment with their racial identity than with their gender identity.

Figure 2a. Education and feeling if a relative married other race by Whites

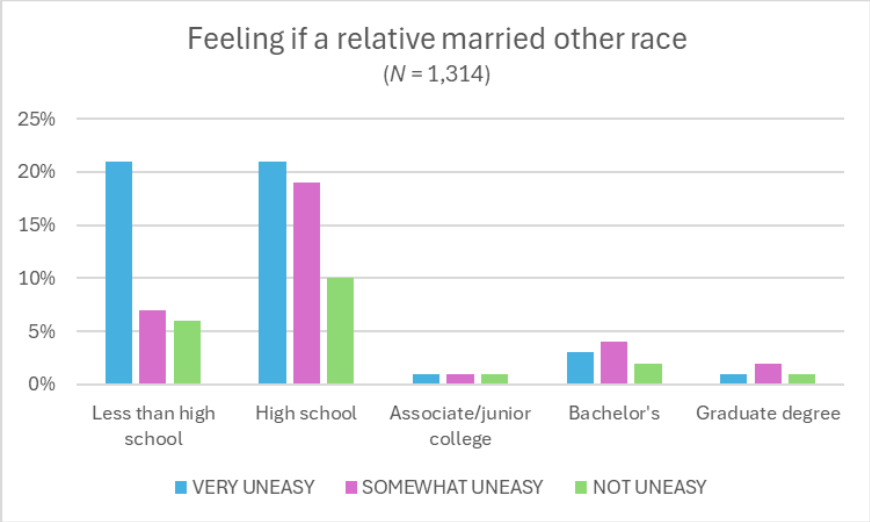
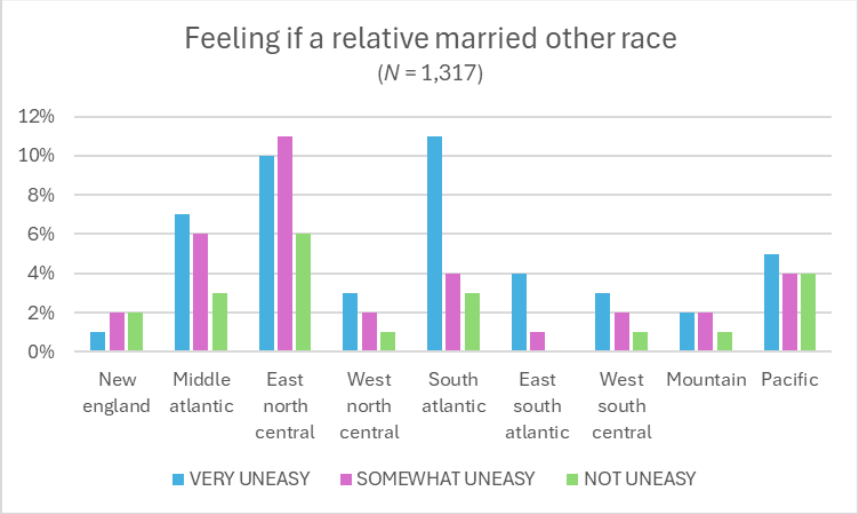


Figure 2b. Region and feeling if a relative married other race by Whites



Source: Davern, Michael; Bautista, Rene; Freese, Jeremy; Herd,Pamela; and Morgan, Stephen L.; General Social Survey 1972-2024. Principal Investigator, Michael Davern; Co-Principal Investigators, Rene Bautista, Jeremy Freese, Pamela Herd, and Stephen L. Morgan. Sponsored by National Science Foundation. NORC ed. Chicago: NORC, 2024: NORC at the University of Chicago. Data accessed from the GSS Data Explorer website at gssdataexplorer.norc.org. This GSS Data Explorer output was created by Vera Kennedy on 03/06/2024.

On the other hand, the findings regarding education and region of residence align with expectations. Among White individuals, those with lower levels of education typically display higher levels of racial prejudice compared to their more educated counterparts, while Southerners tend to exhibit higher levels of prejudice than those residing in other regions (Krysan 2000). These differences are evident in Figure 2a. "Education and feeling if a relative married other race by Whites" and Figures 2b. Region, and feeling if a relative married other race by Whites," which illustrates educational and regional disparities in a form of racial prejudice known as social distance, reflecting individuals' sentiments toward interacting with individuals of different races and ethnicities. The General Social Survey gauges

respondents' attitudes toward a "close relative" marrying outside of their race. As depicted in Figure 2, Whites without a high school diploma are more likely to oppose such marriages compared to those with higher levels of education, and South Atlantic (Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia) and East North Central (Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota) Whites are more likely to oppose them than their counterparts. These findings reaffirm the sociological perspective highlighted in Module 1, emphasizing the influence of social backgrounds on shaping attitudes.

The evolving face of prejudice

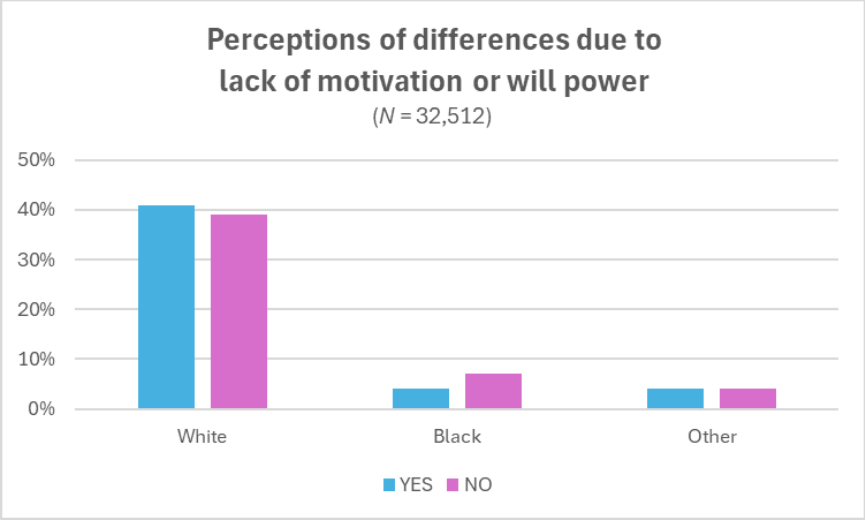
Although racial and ethnic prejudice persists in the United States, its characteristics have evolved over the past fifty years. Research examining these shifts primarily focuses on how White individuals perceive African Americans. In the 1940s and earlier, a period marked by overt **Jim Crow racism**, also known as traditional or old-fashioned racism, prevailed not only in the South but across the entire nation. This form of racism was characterized by explicit prejudice, staunch advocacy for segregation, and the belief in the inherent biological inferiority of Blacks compared to Whites. For instance, in the early 1940s, over half of all White individuals believed that Blacks were less intelligent than Whites, more than half supported segregation in public transportation, over two-thirds endorsed segregated schools, and more than half supported preferential treatment for Whites over Blacks in employment hiring (Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, and Krysan 1997).

The experience of the Nazi regime and subsequent civil rights movement prompted White individuals to reevaluate their perspectives, leading to a gradual decline in Jim Crow racism. Presently, few Whites subscribe to the belief that African Americans are inherently inferior biologically, and support for segregation has significantly diminished. Consequently, contemporary national surveys no longer include many of the questions posed fifty years ago regarding segregation and other Jim Crow ideologies.

However, the diminishing prevalence of overt racism does not signify the eradication of prejudice altogether. Many scholars argue that Jim Crow racism has been supplanted by a subtler form of racial bias known as laissez-faire, symbolic, or modern racism, characterized by a "kinder, gentler, antiblack ideology" devoid of biological inferiority connotations (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997, p. 15; Quillian 2006; Sears 1988). This modern prejudice entails perpetuating stereotypes about African Americans, attributing their poverty to cultural deficiencies, and opposing government assistance programs. Similar attitudes extend to Latinx/e American communities, with this new prejudice attributing their socioeconomic status to perceived laziness and lack of ambition.

Support for this contemporary form of bias is evident in data presented in Figure 3; the question inquires whether African Americans' socioeconomic status stems from a lack of motivation or will power to uplift themselves out of poverty. While only a small percentage of Whites attribute African Americans' status to lower innate intelligence (see Figure 3), a significant portion attribute it to their purported lack of motivation and will power. Although this rationale may seem less overt than beliefs in biological inferiority, it still perpetuates the notion of blaming African Americans for their socioeconomic challenges.

Figure 3. Perceptions of differences due to a lack of motivation or will power



Source: Davern, Michael; Bautista, Rene; Freese, Jeremy; Herd,Pamela; and Morgan, Stephen L.; General Social Survey 1972-2024. Principal Investigator, Michael Davern; Co-Principal Investigators, Rene Bautista, Jeremy Freese, Pamela Herd, and Stephen L. Morgan. Sponsored by National Science Foundation. NORC ed. Chicago: NORC, 2024: NORC at the University of Chicago. Data accessed from the GSS Data Explorer website at gssdataexplorer.norc.org. This GSS Data Explorer output was created by Vera Kennedy on 03/06/2024.

Racial & Ethnic Discrimination

Often, racial and ethnic prejudice can result in unfair treatment towards certain groups within a society. This unfair treatment, known as **discrimination**, involves denying rights, privileges, and opportunities to members of these groups simply because of their race or ethnicity. It's important to note that discrimination is arbitrary, meaning it's not based on any valid reason but solely on factors like race or ethnicity.

While prejudice and discrimination typically go together, Robert Merton (1949) highlighted that they don't always occur simultaneously. Sometimes, individuals may hold prejudiced beliefs without acting on them, and conversely, individuals might discriminate without harboring prejudiced attitudes. Merton's concept is illustrated in Table 5 "The relationship between prejudice and discrimination." In the table, the top-left cell represents "active bigots," who both hold prejudiced beliefs and act on them. An example would be a white apartment owner who refuses to rent to people of color due to their race. On the other hand, the bottom-right cell portrays "all-weather liberals," individuals who neither hold prejudiced beliefs nor discriminate against others based on race or ethnicity. An example could be someone who treats everyone equally, regardless of their racial or ethnic background.

The last two cells in Table 5 "The relationship between prejudice and discrimination" offer unexpected insights. In the bottom-left cell, we encounter individuals who hold prejudiced views but don't act on them; Merton termed them "timid bigots." For instance, consider white restaurant owners who harbor negative feelings towards people of color but still serve them because they value their business or fear legal consequences if they refuse service.

Table 5. The relationship between prejudice and discrimination

	Prejudiced?	
Discriminates?	*Yes*	*No*
Yes	Active bigots	Fair-weather liberals
No	Timid bigots	All-weather liberals

Adapted from Merton, R. K. 1949. Discrimination and the American creed. In R. M. MacIver (Ed.), *Discrimination and national welfare* (pp. 99–126). New York, NY: Institute for Religious Studies.

Source: University of Minnesota Libraries. 2016. *Social Problems: Continuity and Change*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing.

Conversely, the top-right cell depicts "fair-weather liberals," individuals who lack prejudiced beliefs yet engage in discriminatory behavior. An example is white store owners in the Southern United States during segregation who, despite acknowledging the injustice of treating blacks unfairly, still refused to sell to them out of fear of losing White customers.

Individual discrimination

Our discussion thus far has focused on **individual discrimination**, wherein individuals engage in discriminatory actions in their daily lives, often driven by prejudice but sometimes even in its absence. Joe Feagin (1991), a former president of the American Sociological Association, highlighted the prevalence of individual discrimination through his interviews with middle-class African Americans. Many reported being denied service or receiving subpar treatment in stores and restaurants. Some recounted experiences of police harassment, instilling fear merely because of their race. Feagin concluded that these incidents aren't isolated but reflect broader racial biases ingrained in U.S. society.

Image by Mathias P.R. Reding on Pexels

The fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin in February 2012 serves as a tragic instance of individual discrimination to many observers. Trayvon, a 17-year-old African American, was walking through a gated community in Sanford, Florida, after a trip to 7-Eleven for Skittles and iced tea. George Zimmerman, an armed neighborhood watch volunteer, called 911, expressing suspicion about Martin. Despite being advised by the 911 operator not to approach: Martin Zimmerman confronted him anyway. Within minutes, Zimmerman fatally shot the unarmed Martin, later claiming self-defense. Critics of the incident argue that Martin's sole "crime" was "walking while Black." As an African American newspaper columnist reflected, "For every Black man in America, from the millionaire in the corner office to the mechanic in the local garage, the Trayvon Martin tragedy is personal. It could have been me or one of my sons. It could have been any of us" (Robinson 2012: A19).

In the workplace, individual discrimination is a significant issue, as highlighted by sociologist Denise Segura (1992). Segura conducted interviews with 152 Mexican American women who held white-collar positions at a public university in California. Her research revealed that over 40 percent of these women

experienced discrimination at work due to their ethnicity and gender. They believed that their treatment stemmed from stereotypes perpetuated by their employers and coworkers. Additionally, they were subjected to derogatory remarks, such as "I didn't know that there were any educated people in Mexico that have a graduate degree."

Institutional discrimination

Addressing individual discrimination is crucial, but in today's world, institutional discrimination holds equal if not greater significance. **Institutional discrimination** permeates the practices of entire institutions, including housing, medical care, law enforcement, employment, and education. Unlike individual discrimination, which may target isolated individuals, institutional discrimination impacts large numbers of individuals solely based on their race or ethnicity, and sometimes other characteristics like gender or disability.

In the realm of race and ethnicity, institutional discrimination often arises from prejudice, as seen during segregation in the South. However, institutions can also inadvertently discriminate through seemingly race-neutral practices. Individuals within institutions may unknowingly make decisions that, upon examination, disproportionately disadvantage people of color.

Institutions can discriminate even without intent. For instance, consider height requirements for police officers. Prior to the 1970s, many police forces across the United States imposed height requirements, such as five feet ten inches. As women and individuals from certain racial/ethnic backgrounds sought to join the police force, many found themselves excluded due to their height. While height requirements are considered bona fide job qualifications, the courts ruled that the height restrictions for police work lacked a logical basis. Consequently, police forces lowered their height requirements following successful legal challenges, enabling more women, Latino men, and others to join (Appier 1998).

Institutional discrimination profoundly affects the opportunities of people of color across various aspects of life today. To illustrate, we will briefly explore examples of institutional discrimination that have undergone government investigation and scholarly scrutiny.

Several research studies examine hospital records to explore whether individuals from minority racial groups receive **optimal medical treatment**, including procedures like coronary bypass surgery, angioplasty, and catheterization. These studies consider the medical symptoms and requirements of patients and consistently find that African Americans are significantly less likely than White individuals to undergo the procedures. This trend persists even when comparing poor African Americans to poor Whites, as well as middle-class African Americans to middle-class Whites (Smedley, Stith, and Nelson 2003).

In a unique approach to investigating racial disparities in cardiac care, a study conducted an experiment where hundreds of doctors watched videos featuring African American and White patients, all portrayed by actors. The patients in the videos presented identical complaints of chest pain and other symptoms. Doctors were then asked to determine whether they believed the patient required cardiac catheterization. The findings revealed that African American patients were less likely to be recommended for this procedure compared to white patients (Schulman et al. 1999).

Discrimination like this occurs due to various factors. While it's conceivable that some doctors may hold explicit racist beliefs and perceive the lives of African Americans as less valuable, it's more plausible that unconscious racial biases influence their medical judgments. Regardless of the underlying reasons, the outcome remains consistent: African Americans are less likely to undergo potentially life-saving cardiac procedures solely because of their race. Therefore, institutional discrimination in healthcare becomes a critical issue directly impacting life and death outcomes.

When loan officers assess mortgage applications, they consider various aspects such as income, employment status, and credit history. According to the law, they are prohibited from factoring in race and ethnicity during this process. However, despite these legal mandates, African Americans and Latinx/e Americans face a higher likelihood of having their mortgage applications rejected compared to Whites (Blank et al. 2005). This discrepancy persists even though individuals from these groups often have lower income levels, less favorable employment situations, and poorer credit histories than their white counterparts. While the higher rate of mortgage rejections may appear to align with these disparities, it remains a concerning issue, albeit one that reflects broader socioeconomic inequities.

To address this concern, researchers account for these factors by comparing individuals of different racial backgrounds—Whites, African Americans, and Latinx/e Americans—who have similar incomes, employment statuses, and credit histories. Some studies rely on statistical analyses, while others involve actual visits by individuals of these racial groups to the same mortgage-lending institutions. Both types of studies consistently reveal that African Americans and Latinx/e Americans are more likely than similarly qualified Whites to experience mortgage application rejections (Turner et al. 2002).

While it remains challenging to definitively ascertain whether loan officers consciously base their decisions on racial prejudice, their practices still result in racial and ethnic discrimination, regardless of their conscious intentions. This discrimination persists even when controlling for socioeconomic factors, highlighting systemic disparities within the mortgage lending process.

Evidence indicates that banks reject mortgage applications for individuals seeking homes in specific urban areas deemed high-risk, and insurance companies either deny homeowner's insurance or impose higher premiums for properties in these neighborhoods. Such discriminatory practices against houses in certain neighborhoods are referred to as **redlining**, and they contravene the law (Ezeala-Harrison, Glover and Shaw-Jackson 2008). Given that those affected by redlining are often people of color, it exemplifies institutional discrimination.

Mortgage rejections and redlining contribute to a significant issue faced by people of color: residential segregation. Despite being illegal, housing segregation persists due to mortgage rejections and other factors that hinder people of color from relocating out of segregated neighborhoods and into integrated areas. African Americans, in particular, experience high levels of residential segregation in many cities, surpassing other racial groups in this regard. The extensive **residential segregation** of African Americans is so pronounced that it has been termed hypersegregation and more broadly labeled as American apartheid (Massey and Denton 1993).

In addition to mortgage rejections, African Americans encounter subtle discrimination from realtors and homeowners, which complicates their ability to access information about homes in predominantly White neighborhoods and purchase them (Pager 2008). For instance, realtors may inform African American clients that no homes are available in a specific White neighborhood while simultaneously alerting White clients of available properties. Although the widespread posting of housing listings on the Internet may

mitigate this form of housing discrimination to some extent, not all homes and apartments are listed online, and some are sold through informal networks to prevent certain individuals from learning about them.

The hypersegregation experienced by African Americans isolates them from broader society, as many seldom venture beyond their immediate neighborhoods. This segregation results in concentrated poverty, characterized by high rates of joblessness, crime, and other social problems. For multiple reasons, residential segregation is believed to significantly contribute to the severity and persistence of African American poverty (Rothstein 2012; Stoll 2008).

Title VII of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited racial discrimination in employment, encompassing aspects like hiring, wages, and termination. Despite this legal framework, African Americans, Latinx/e Americans, and Native Americans still earn substantially less than their White counterparts. Various structural barriers contribute to this **wage disparity**, and in addition to these factors, people of color encounter ongoing discrimination in hiring and advancement opportunities (Hirsh and Cha 2008).

Determining whether such discrimination arises from conscious or unconscious bias among potential employers is challenging, yet it constitutes racial discrimination regardless of its origin. A seminal field experiment conducted by sociologist Devah Pager (2003) documented such discrimination. In the experiment, young White and African American men independently applied for entry-level jobs in person. They presented themselves similarly in terms of attire and reported comparable levels of education and qualifications. Some applicants disclosed having a criminal record, while others did not. While it was expected that applicants with a criminal record would be hired at lower rates than those without, the striking evidence of racial discrimination emerged when African American applicants without criminal records were hired at the same low rate as White applicants with criminal records.

Dimensions of Racial & Ethnic Inequality

Racial and ethnic inequality permeates every aspect of society. The discrimination, both individual and institutional, discussed earlier, exemplifies one facet of this inequality. Moreover, stark evidence of racial and ethnic disparities is evident in various government statistics. While statistics can sometimes be misleading, in the case of racial and ethnic inequality, they often paint a distressingly accurate picture.

By studying the structure of social institutions, we understand how race, ethnicity, and other social categories work as systems of power. The social world we live in is supported by ideological beliefs that make existing power structures and discrimination appear normal (Andersen and Collins 2010). However, the social categories we use to label or identify people are socially constructed and developed through historical processes and intergroup relations. Additionally, these constructs are defined in binary terms of “either/or” (e.g., Black/White, female/male, poor/rich, gay/straight, alien/citizen, etc.) which create “**otherness**” stigmatizing minority or subordinate groups as out-groups by the majority or powerful (Andersen and Collins 2010). Otherness directly relates to the advantages and disadvantages of individuals and groups based on their status or location in the stratified society. Because racial formation and racism shape everyday life, we find significant indicators of inequity for Americans of color in family income, poverty, home ownership, education level, and employment.

Table 6a. Indicators of racial-ethnic inequity in the United States [1]

	Population	Income	Poverty	Home Ownership [2]
Racial-Ethnic Group	**% of U.S. Population**	**Median Family Income ($)**	**% Below 100% of Poverty**	**% Home Ownership (2020)**
African American	13.4	58,518	18.8	45.3
Asian American	5.9	112,226	7.3	60.3
Latina/o/x	18.5	60,927	15.7	50.1
Native American	1.3	54,920 [3]	23.0 [3]	54.0
White	76.3	89,663	7.3	71.3

[1] Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2020 Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC).
[2] Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey/Housing Vacancy Survey, March 9, 2021.
[3] Source: 2019 American Community Survey 2019: 1-Year Estimates Selected Population Profile in the U.S.

Table 6b. Indicators of racial-ethnic inequity in the United States [1]

	Years of School Completed			Employment [3]	
Racial-Ethnic Group	**% High School Diploma**	**% Bachelor's Degree**	**% Graduate Degree**	**Employed**	**Unemployment Rate**
African American	30.5	18	9.9	57.0	7.7
Asian American	15.8	34.2	26.9	63.6	3.5
Latina/o/x	28.1	14.4	6. 5	64.3	5.1
Native American	31.5 [2]	10.4 [2]	5.7 [2]	53.5	8.0
White	24.3	25.6	15.7	60.0	3.9

[1] Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2020 Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC).
[2] Source: 2019 American Community Survey 2019: 1-Year Estimates Selected Population Profile in the U.S.
[3] Source: 2019 American Community Survey 2019: 1-Year Estimates Selected Population Profile in the U.S.

In the United States, under tribal sovereignty, indigenous tribes have the inherent authority to govern themselves within the nation's borders. The U.S. recognizes tribal nations as domestic dependent nations and reaffirms adherence to the principles of government-to-government relations (The United States Department of Justice 2020). As a result, the U.S. Census Bureau has challenges in conducting and collecting accurate data in American Indian and Alaska Native areas as available data for Native Americans is presented in Tables 6a and 6b. Estimates conducted by the American Community Survey administered by the U.S. Census Bureau (https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/about/acs-and-census.html) are shown for indicators where current data is not available.

Image by Michael Anthony on Pexels

To help us understand the impact of systemic racism of Americans of color, let's explore the data collected and published by the U.S. Census Bureau.

1. According to Table 6a, which racial-ethnic groups have the lowest median family incomes?
2. In the same table, which groups have the highest poverty rates?
3. Which groups have the lowest homeownership rates?

4. According to Table 6b, which groups complete the highest levels of education? Which groups achieve the lowest levels?
5. In the same table, which groups obtain graduate (i.e., Master's, professional, or doctorate) degrees?
6. Which groups have the highest unemployment numbers? How does unemployment correspond to population size by racial-ethnic group?
7. Review your analysis of the data presented in Table 6a and 6b. What racial-ethnic group patterns do you find?

Data and factual information provide relevant context to understanding racial-ethnic relations and inequality in our social world. We cannot develop the capacity to recognize, appreciate, and empathize with each other if we do not know all the facts of our country's history and experiences of all people living in it. Current psychological research has found that knowledge of historical racism is related to own's ability to understand contemporary racism (Feagin 2014). Data and factual information are critically important to helping us make connections that lead to insights and improvements in the quality of life for all Americans and all of humanity. Everyone has an important role to play in the future of our country and our lives together.

The data presented in Tables 6a and 6b paint a clear picture that there are significant disparities in life opportunities among racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. When compared to Whites, African Americans, Latinx/e Americans, and Native Americans experience notably lower family incomes and higher poverty rates. Additionally, they are far less likely to attain college degrees.

While Table 6a and 6b highlights the significant disparities faced by African Americans, Latinx/e Americans, and Native Americans compared to Whites, it reveals a more intricate pattern for Asian Americans. While many Asian Americans enjoy relative economic prosperity, others face greater challenges. Despite the perception of Asian Americans as a "**model minority**," signifying their achievement of economic success despite not being White, disparities persist within this community. Some Asian Americans encounter barriers hindering their upward mobility, and stereotypes and discrimination against them remain prevalent issues (Chou and Feagin 2008). Moreover, the overall success rate of Asian Americans can mask the reality that their occupations and incomes often fall below expectations based on their educational attainment. Consequently, they may need to exert more effort to achieve success compared to their White counterparts (Hurh and Kim 1989).

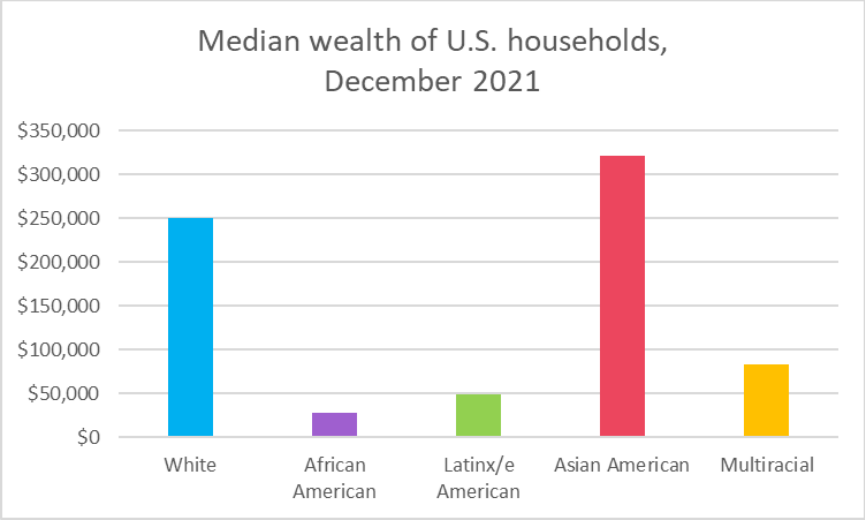
The increasing wealth gap

At the outset of this module, we acknowledged the longstanding presence of racial and ethnic inequality in the United States, a phenomenon that scholars have cautioned may have worsened since the 1960s (Hacker 2003; Massey and Sampson 2009). Recent evidence highlighting this deterioration emerged in a report by the Pew Research Center (2011), which focused on racial disparities in wealth. **Wealth** encompasses a family's total assets (such as income, savings, investments, home equity) and debts (including mortgages, credit cards, etc.).

The report revealed that the wealth gap between White households and African American and Latinx/e American households had significantly widened in just a few years, largely due to the economic downturn in the U.S. since 2008, which disproportionately affected black households compared to White ones. By 2021, the median wealth of White households had surged to nine times greater than that of

black households and five times greater than that of Latinx/e American households. The median wealth of Asian households risen to nearly 12 times greater than African American households and 6.5 times greater than Latinx/e American households. White households boasted a median net worth of approximately $250,400 and Asians $320,900, while Black and Latinx/e American households had median net worths of only $27,100 and $48,700, respectively (refer to Figure 4, "Median wealth of U.S. households, December 2021").

Figure 4. Median wealth of U.S. households, December 2021



Source: Pew Research Center. 2023. “Wealth Gaps Racial And Ethnic Groups.” Retrieved March 6, 2024 (https://www.pewresearch.org/about/terms-and-conditions/).

Furthermore, a significant racial/ethnic discrepancy was evident in the percentage of families with negative net worth—those whose debts surpass their assets. One-third of Black and Latinx/e American households reported negative net worth, compared to only 15 percent of White households. Consequently, Black and Latinx/e American households were more than twice as likely as White households to be in debt.

The hidden toll of inequality

A growing body of evidence suggests that navigating a society rife with racial prejudice, discrimination, and inequality exacts a "**hidden toll**" on the lives of African Americans (Blitstein 2009). As subsequent modules will elaborate, African Americans, on average, exhibit poorer health outcomes than Whites and have shorter lifespans. Shockingly, every year witnesses approximately 100,000 additional deaths among African Americans compared to what would be expected if they lived as long as Whites. While multiple factors likely contribute to these disparities, scholars increasingly point to the stress of being Black as a significant factor (Geronimus et al. 2010).

In this line of thought, African Americans are disproportionately more likely than Whites to contend with poverty, reside in high-crime neighborhoods, and live in cramped conditions, among numerous other challenges. As discussed earlier in this module, they also encounter racial slights, job interview refusals, and other forms of discrimination in their daily lives, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

Consequently, African Americans experience elevated levels of stress from an early age, surpassing the levels experienced by most Whites. This chronic stress triggers neural and physiological effects, including hypertension (high blood pressure), which undermine African Americans' short-term and long-term health, ultimately shortening their lifespans. These effects accrue over time: while hypertension rates are equivalent between Black and White individuals in their twenties, the Black rate escalates significantly by the time individuals reach their forties and fifties. As a recent news article succinctly summarized this phenomenon, "The long-term stress of living in a White-dominated society 'weathers' Blacks, making them age faster than their White counterparts" (Blitstein 2009:48).

Although research on other people of color is less extensive, many Latinx/e Americans and Native Americans also grapple with the various stressors experienced by African Americans. Consequently, racial and ethnic inequality exacts a hidden toll on members of these two groups as well. They, too, confront racial slights, endure disadvantaged living conditions, and confront other challenges that generate high levels of stress, ultimately shortening their lifespans.

White privilege

Before concluding this section, it's important to address the advantages that White individuals enjoy in their daily lives simply because of their race. Social scientists refer to these advantages as **white privilege** and assert that Whites benefit from their race whether or not they are conscious of these advantages (McIntosh 2001). The discussion in this module regarding the challenges faced by people of color sheds light on some of these privileges. For instance, Whites can typically drive or walk in public spaces without fearing that law enforcement will target them solely because of their race. Reflecting on incidents like the Trayvon Martin tragedy, they can navigate streets without the fear of being confronted or harmed by a neighborhood watch volunteer. Moreover, Whites can generally move into any neighborhood they desire if they can afford it and can anticipate fair treatment in various settings such as workplaces, college dorms, restaurants, and hotels.

Image by Nick Gosset on Pexels

White individuals typically do not experience racial slurs, hate crimes, or discriminatory treatment based on their race in these spaces. Social scientist Robert W. Terry (1981) succinctly summarized white privilege as the ability to live without having to consciously consider one's whiteness, except for those who uphold racial supremacy ideologies. For people of color in the United States, race and ethnicity are daily realities, whereas Whites often do not have to consider their racial identity in their everyday lives. This fundamental difference underscores one of the most significant manifestations of racial and ethnic inequality in the United States.

Interestingly, many studies suggest that Whites tend to underestimate the extent of racial inequality in the United States. They may assume that African Americans and Latinx/e Americans fare better than they actually do. According to one report, Whites are more than twice as likely as Blacks to believe that the position of African Americans has improved considerably (Vedantam 2008). This misperception likely diminishes Whites' support for initiatives aimed at reducing racial and ethnic inequality.

APPLYING A SOCIAL ANALYTIC MINDSET

List of Privileges

Peggy McIntosh's concept of the "invisible backpack" refers to the unacknowledged and unearned advantages that individuals from dominant groups, particularly white people, carry with them in society. This metaphorical backpack contains various privileges, such as the ability to find representation in media, ease in finding housing, or the benefit of the doubt in social interactions, which facilitate navigating the world more easily compared to those from marginalized groups. McIntosh's work highlights how these privileges are often invisible to those who possess them, leading to a lack of awareness about systemic inequality and the ways in which societal structures favor certain groups over others. Here are some examples from her list:

1. Representation in Media: I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
2. Shopping Without Harassment: I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
3. Voice in Government: I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
4. Local Acceptance: I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
5. Access to Institutions: I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can cut my hair.
6. Freedom from Stereotyping: I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
7. Job Security: If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
8. Presumption of Innocence: I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to the "person in charge," I will be facing a person of my race.
9. Credit and Loans: I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
10. Educational Expectations: I can be reasonably sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
11. Fair Treatment in Stores: Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
12. Unquestioned Citizenship: I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
13. Cultural Assumptions: I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
14. Legal Impartiality: I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
15. Public Safety: I can worry about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking.
16. Employment Confidence: If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.

What are your unearned privileges that you carry in your invisible backpack? Consider privileges from the list provided and also think beyond the provided list including other aspects of your identity (e.g., gender, social class, education, etc.).

Explaining Racial & Ethnic Inequality

The reasons behind racial and ethnic inequality are complex and have sparked various viewpoints. People hold strong opinions when discussing why African Americans, Latinx Americans, Native Americans, and certain Asian Americans experience disparities compared to Whites.

One enduring explanation for racial and ethnic inequality suggests that Black and other marginalized communities are **biologically inferior**. This notion asserts that they possess inherent deficiencies, such as lower intelligence, which hinder their ability to obtain a quality education and pursue the American Dream. While this racist perspective was once prevalent, it is now largely discredited. Historically, Whites used this belief to justify atrocities like slavery, lynchings, and the mistreatment of Native Americans during the 1800s. In 1994, Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray reignited this perspective in their controversial book, "The Bell Curve" (Herrnstein and Murray 1994). They argued that the low IQ scores of African Americans and impoverished individuals reflect genetic inferiority in intelligence, attributing African Americans' poverty and other challenges to their purportedly low innate intelligence. Despite garnering significant media attention, few scholars endorsed their views, with many condemning their arguments as a racist attempt to "blame the victim" (Gould 1994).

Another explanation for racial and ethnic inequality centers on perceived **cultural deficiencies** within African American and other communities of color (Murray 1984). These supposed deficiencies include a perceived devaluation of hard work and, specifically for African Americans, a lack of strong familial bonds, which are purported to underlie the poverty and other challenges faced by these minority groups. This viewpoint mirrors the culture-of-poverty argument and remains prevalent today. As previously noted, more than half of Whites attribute Black poverty to a perceived lack of motivation and determination. Ironically, some scholars find validation for this cultural deficiency perspective in the success of many Asian Americans, often attributed to their cultural emphasis on diligence, educational attainment, and familial support (Min 2005). Proponents of this view argue that the relative lack of success among other communities of color stems from their cultures' failure to prioritize these attributes. However, the accuracy of the cultural deficiency argument is fiercely debated (Bonilla-Silva 2009). Many social scientists find scant evidence of cultural deficiencies in minority communities and view the belief in such deficiencies as an example of **symbolic racism** that shifts blame onto the victim. Drawing on survey data, they assert that people of color, particularly those in poverty, value work and education for themselves and their children as much as or more than wealthier White individuals do (Holland 2011). Nonetheless, some social scientists, even those sympathetic to the structural challenges facing people of color, acknowledge the existence of certain cultural issues but stress that these stem from structural inequities. For instance, Elijah Anderson (1999) describes a "**street culture**" or "**oppositional culture**" among urban African Americans that contributes to high levels of violence. However, Anderson emphasizes that this culture emerges from the segregation, extreme poverty, and other adversities these individuals encounter daily, serving as a coping mechanism. Thus, while cultural challenges may exist, they should not overshadow the recognition that structural issues primarily drive these cultural dynamics.

RACIAL SEGREGATION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

In a society that promotes equal opportunity, scholars have uncovered a troubling trend: African American children from middle-class backgrounds are significantly more prone than their White counterparts from similar economic backgrounds to experience downward mobility as adults. Surprisingly, almost half of African American children born to middle-class parents during the 1950s and 1960s ended up with lower incomes than their parents by adulthood, despite being raised with the values, skills, and aspirations conducive to maintaining or surpassing their socioeconomic status.

A recent study conducted by sociologist Patrick Sharkey for the Pew Charitable Trusts sheds light on a critical factor contributing to this disparity: the neighborhoods in which these children are raised. Ongoing racial segregation often compels many middle-class African American families to reside in impoverished urban areas. Sharkey's statistical analysis revealed that neighborhood poverty significantly outweighed variables like parental education and marital status in explaining the substantial racial gap in the eventual socioeconomic outcomes of middle-class children. Additionally, the study highlighted that African American children raised in impoverished neighborhoods where the poverty rate declined ultimately achieved higher adult incomes compared to those raised in areas where poverty rates remained stagnant.

The detrimental impact of poor neighborhoods stems from various probable factors. Middle-class African American children in these areas often receive substandard education in dilapidated schools and may be influenced by peers less invested in academic pursuits, potentially leading to behavioral issues. Furthermore, the myriad challenges associated with impoverished neighborhoods likely induce considerable stress, which, as discussed elsewhere, can contribute to health problems and hinder learning abilities.

Despite some ambiguity regarding the exact causes, the study underscores the profound influence of poor neighborhoods. As summarized by a Pew official, neighborhoods emerge as significant impediments not only for the economically disadvantaged but also for those who would otherwise maintain stability. Sociologist Sharkey noted the striking racial disparities in the environments where children are raised, challenging the notion that post-civil rights era families have unrestricted access to any neighborhood. Surprisingly, the racial gap in neighborhoods has endured, as confirmed by data from the 2010 Census.

Research by sociologist John R. Logan for the Russell Sage Foundation further highlights the persistence of racial disparities in neighborhood quality. It reveals that African American and Latinx/e American families with incomes exceeding $75,000 are more likely to reside in impoverished neighborhoods compared to non-Latinx/e white families with incomes below $40,000. In essence, affluent African American and Hispanic households tend to inhabit poorer neighborhoods than lower-income white households.

The implications of this neighborhood research are clear: concerted efforts to enhance the quality and economic prospects of impoverished neighborhoods are imperative to mitigate African American poverty.

Logan, John R. 2011. *Separate and Unequal: The Neighborhood Gap for Blacks, Hispanics and Asians in Metropolitan America*. New York, NY: US201 Project.

MacGillis, Alec. 2009. “Neighborhoods Key to Future Income, Study Finds.” *The Washington Post*, p. A06.

Sharkey, Patrick. 2009. *Neighborhoods and the Black-White Mobility Gap*. Washington, DC: Pew Charitable Trusts.

A third explanation for racial and ethnic inequality in the United States aligns with conflict theory. This perspective attributes such inequality to **structural issues**, including institutional and individual discrimination, limited educational and occupational opportunities, and the dearth of adequately paying

jobs (Feagin 2006). For instance, racially segregated housing confines African Americans to inner-city areas, limiting their access to neighborhoods with better employment prospects. Persistent employment bias also suppresses the wages of people of color below their potential earnings. Moreover, many children from minority backgrounds attend overcrowded and underfunded schools, perpetuating educational disparities. These challenges persist across generations, impeding upward mobility for individuals already situated at the lower rungs of the socioeconomic hierarchy due to their race and ethnicity.

As we examine the factors influencing the poverty rates among people of color, it's insightful to analyze the economic experiences of African Americans and Latinx/e Americans since the 1990s. During that decade, the U.S. economy prospered, witnessing a decline in unemployment rates and poverty rates among African Americans and Latinx/e Americans. Conversely, since the early 2000s, particularly after 2008, the U.S. economy faced challenges, leading to an increase in unemployment and poverty rates for these groups. To interpret these trends, it's worth considering whether African Americans and Latinx/e Americans exhibited fewer cultural deficiencies in the 1990s and more since the early 2000s or if their economic outcomes were shaped by the opportunities provided by the economy.

Economic commentator Joshua Holland (2011) offers a compelling perspective by debunking the notion of cultural deficiencies: "That's obviously nonsense. It was exogenous economic factors and changes in public policies, not manifestations of 'Black culture' [or 'Latinx/e culture'], that resulted in those widely varied outcomes... While economic swings this significant can be explained by economic changes and different public policies, it's simply impossible to fit them into a cultural narrative."

APPLYING A SOCIAL ANALYTIC MINDSET

Current Events: Critical Thinking Summary

Throughout the first part of the book, we examined a variety of critical thinking skills and tools used to develop a social analytic mind. Now you will be putting these skills to work as we explore current events that are impacting your community, country, and world.

Find a recent news article related to racial and ethnic inequality on the Internet. Analyze your findings using the outline below, and organize your reflections into the following:

1. List the news article title, author, and publisher.
2. Evaluate the credibility of the source. Not all websites are created equally. Discuss possible bias, evaluate research methods, and if conclusions are supported by evidence or data. What did you find surprising about the article? Did it change or deepen your understanding of this issue?
3. Summarize the main points of the article, including what makes this information relevant to the topic of racial and ethnic inequality. Be careful in selecting your current event article – it should have enough substance to be able to complete a quality critical analysis.
4. Apply two theoretical paradigms to understand how a sociologist might frame the issue. Do a critique of the article and include your personal thoughts, what you learned, and how it relates to module content.

GENDER & SEXUALITY

The headline read, "$3.2M Awarded in Harassment Suit against Ex-Judge." A federal jury in Houston, Texas, granted $3.2 million to three women, all county employees, who had accused a former judge of sexual harassment. According to reports, their lawsuit detailed instances where the judge had "hugged, groped, kissed and fondled them and had emailed them sexually explicit photographs." Despite county officials' awareness of the judge's behavior, they allegedly disregarded it. The judge had resigned from his position three years prior, having pleaded no contest to several misdemeanor assault charges related to his interactions with multiple women. His sole criminal penalty was a fine of less than $3,000 (Tolson 2011).

Following the announcement of the verdict, the plaintiffs' attorney expressed pride in the outcome on, emphasizing the message it sends to public officials, "I am very proud of this verdict, and hope it sends a message to all public officials that they are not above the law and should think twice before abusing power." One of the plaintiffs recounted the experience of being harassed by the judge, expressing feelings of isolation, powerlessness, and fear, "I felt alone, I felt small, I felt like he was the most powerful man in Brazoria County. I felt like there was nothing I could do. I felt scared." Despite these sentiments, she found solace in the jury's decision and the solidarity of other women who spoke out against the judge's misconduct: "You don't have to go through it alone. You can stand up for yourself" (Tolson 2011).

The contemporary women's rights movement, originating in the late 1960s, has brought significant changes to American society over the past fifty years. However, as highlighted by this news story concerning sexual harassment, it underscores the ongoing need for further progress. Despite notable advancements for women since the 1960s, gender inequality remains pervasive and takes various forms. This module explores the primary manifestations of gender inequality and examines the underlying reasons for its persistence. Additionally, it outlines several steps that our society should undertake to promote gender equality. Our exploration commences with a critical examination of the concepts of sex and gender.

Understanding Sex & Gender

Although the terms sex and gender are often used interchangeably, they actually refer to distinct aspects of identity within any society. **Sex** denotes the anatomical and biological disparities between females and males, established at conception and continuing to develop throughout childhood and adolescence. Females typically possess two X chromosomes, while males have one X chromosome and one Y chromosome. This genetic contrast gives rise to other biological distinctions. Initially, the genitals that boys and girls develop in the womb, and subsequently identified at birth by medical professionals or parents, serve as primary sex characteristics. Secondary sex characteristics, emerging during puberty, arise from hormonal variations between the sexes. Boys commonly experience deepening voices, increased body hair, and muscle growth due to heightened testosterone levels. Conversely, girls undergo breast development, hip widening, and menstruation, as nature prepares them for potential pregnancy and childbirth. These fundamental biological differences, for better or worse, often influence societal perceptions of femininity and masculinity, a topic we explore next.

If sex is understood as a biological concept, then **gender** represents a social construct. It encompasses the social and cultural distinctions that a society assigns to individuals based on their biological sex. **Gender roles**, a related concept, delineate a society's anticipations regarding the behaviors and attitudes

of individuals according to their gender. In this context, akin to the discussion on race, gender is recognized as a social construction. How individuals perceive and behave as either females or males isn't predetermined by biology but rather influenced by societal expectations associated with their sex. Throughout our development, we internalize these expectations as we form our **gender identity**—the beliefs we hold about ourselves as females or males.

These societal expectations are encapsulated in the notions of femininity and masculinity. **Femininity** encompasses the cultural expectations placed upon girls and women, whereas **masculinity** pertains to the expectations applied to boys and men. A familiar nursery rhyme succinctly encapsulates these two sets of traits:

> What are little boys made of?
> Snips and snails,
> And puppy dog tails,
> That's what little boys are made of.
>
> What are little girls made of?
> Sugar and spice,
> And everything nice,
> That's what little girls are made of.

As suggested by this rhyme, traditional perceptions of femininity and masculinity underscore fundamental differences between females and males, essentially viewing them as distinct aspects of human existence. Traditionally, femininity encompasses a range of adjectives, both positive and negative, attributed to women: gentle, sensitive, nurturing, delicate, graceful, cooperative, decorative, dependent, emotional, passive, and weak. Similarly, traditional masculinity embodies a set of adjectives, again encompassing both positive and negative attributes, ascribed to men in society: strong, assertive, brave, active, independent, intelligent, competitive, insensitive, unemotional, and aggressive.

While these traits may sound like stereotypes of females and males in contemporary society, they do reflect real differences in attitudes and behaviors between women and men (Aulette and Wittner 2011). For instance, women tend to cry more frequently than men, while men exhibit higher levels of physical violence. Women often assume greater responsibility for childcare, smile more frequently, and are more inclined to discuss personal matters in conversations with each other. Men, on the other hand, are more prone to cursing and spitting.

The differences in behavior and attitudes between females and males prompt critical questions about their origins. Do these differences arise primarily from biological variances between the sexes, or do they stem from cultural expectations and the distinct socialization processes experienced by each gender? These questions are pivotal, as they inquire whether disparities between boys and girls, as well as women and men, are more influenced by biology or by society.

Biological explanations

Several biological explanations for gender roles are posited, with two prominent ones discussed here. One explanation stems from the field of evolutionary psychology (Buss 2012), proposing an evolutionary foundation for traditional gender roles. Scholars advocating this perspective argue in prehistoric

societies, two primary social roles existed - hunting or gathering food to alleviate hunger and bearing and nursing children (Thornhill and Gangestad 2008). As only women could fulfill the latter role, they naturally became the primary caretakers for children in the years following childbirth. Additionally, due to the frequent pregnancies and nursing demands, women's roles as mothers tethered them to the home. Conversely, men, being stronger and swifter, were better suited for hunting. Hence, in prehistoric societies, biology essentially dictated destiny: men predominantly worked outside the home (hunted), while women remained at home with their children.

Evolutionary reasons also underpin the observation that men tend to be more violent than women. In prehistoric times, men who exhibited a greater propensity for violence and even lethal aggression toward other men had a competitive edge in securing female mates. Consequently, they were more likely to pass on their genetic predisposition toward violence to their offspring. According to evolutionary psychologists, natural selection favored societies where men displayed traits such as strength, bravery, and aggression, while women exhibited traits like fertility and nurturing. Over time, these traits became ingrained, with men becoming inherently more assertive, daring, and violent, and women inherently more gentle, nurturing, and maternal. Proponents argue that traditional gender roles thus align with evolutionary principles, and efforts to alter them run counter to biological realities. This perspective implies that existing gender inequality is rooted in biology and must persist.

Critics, however, contest the evolutionary explanation on multiple grounds (Begley 2009a; Fine 2011). Firstly, they argue that prehistoric societies likely exhibited far greater gender variation in behavior and attitudes than assumed by the evolutionary explanation. Secondly, even if biological differences influenced gender roles in prehistoric times, such distinctions are largely irrelevant in modern societies where physical strength is not a prerequisite for survival. Thirdly, human environments over millennia have been too diverse to support the simplistic, linear biological development posited by the evolutionary argument. Lastly, critics assert that evolutionary arguments implicitly justify existing gender inequality by reinforcing the notion of confining women and men to traditional roles.

Recent anthropological evidence challenges the evolutionary argument suggesting that men's inclination towards violence was biologically inherited. Contrary to this viewpoint, the evidence indicates that violent men encounter difficulties in attracting female mates who desire them. Moreover, the female mates they do acquire and the children they father are often targeted and killed by rivals to these men (Begley 2009a).

A second biological explanation for traditional gender roles links males' higher levels of aggression to their elevated levels of testosterone (Mazur 2009). Numerous studies indicate that males with higher testosterone levels tend to exhibit higher levels of aggression. However, it's important to note that this correlation doesn't necessarily imply that testosterone directly increases violence. Similar to findings in various animal species, it's plausible that violence could also elevate testosterone levels. Since manipulating testosterone levels in human males is ethically and practically challenging, the precise implications of studies correlating testosterone with aggression remain ambiguous, as highlighted in a report by the National Academy of Sciences (Miczek 1993).

Image by cottonbro studio on Pexels

Another line of research explores the biological basis for sex differences in aggression among children, some as young as ages 1 or 2, in diverse situations (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, and Little 2008). These situations may involve children playing with each other, interacting with adults, or responding to hypothetical scenarios provided by researchers. In many studies, boys tend to exhibit more physical aggression in thought or action than girls, even at a very early age. Some studies adopt experimental methodologies where a toddler playing with a toy has it taken away by an adult. Typically, boys display signs of anger and attempt to retrieve the toy aggressively, while girls tend to display more passive reactions. Given that these gender differences in aggression emerge at a young age, researchers often suggest that they may have a biological foundation. However, critics of this research line argue that even young children have already been socialized along gender lines (Begley 2009b; Fine 2011), a point we revisit later in the module. Consequently, gender disparities in children's aggression may reflect socialization rather than biology.

In summary, while biological evidence for gender differences does exist, its interpretation remains highly contentious. This evidence must be considered alongside the evidence of cultural variations in the experience of gender and differences in socialization based on gender, which we will explore next. One thing is evident, embracing biological explanations for gender implies that existing gender differences and gender inequality will persist. As sociologist Linda L. Lindsey (2011) observes, "Biological arguments are consistently drawn upon to justify gender inequality and the continued oppression of women (p. 52)." In contrast, cultural and social explanations of gender differences and gender inequality offer some prospect for change. Let's inspect the evidence supporting these explanations.

Cultural explanations

Some of the most compelling evidence against a strict biological determination of gender roles comes from anthropological studies, which highlight significant gender variation across different cultures. This variation underscores the profound influence of culture on the behaviors and attitudes of females and males. Anthropologist George Murdock (1937) conducted extensive research on almost two hundred preindustrial societies, known as the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample, revealing notable patterns in gender roles.

Murdock's findings indicated that certain tasks, like hunting and trapping, were predominantly performed by men in most societies, while activities such as cooking and fetching water were mainly carried out by women. While these patterns align with the evolutionary argument based on biological differences between the sexes, Murdock also identified substantial gender variation in other tasks such as planting crops, milking, and starting fires. In some societies, men primarily undertook these tasks, while in others, women took the lead, and in some, both sexes shared the responsibilities equally. These findings illustrate how gender roles differ across cultures, suggesting that they are not solely determined by biology.

Anthropologists continue to explore cultural differences in gender, with some of the most intriguing findings pertaining to gender and sexuality (Brettell and Sargent, 2009). In certain societies, additional gender categories beyond traditional male and female exist. For instance, the Mohave Native Americans recognize four genders, including individuals who exhibit traits of both genders. Anthropologists refer to this intermediary category as the *berdache*, representing an **androgynous** gender that combines elements of femininity and masculinity within society.

Moreover, anthropologists have documented instances of androgynous genders among women warriors in various Native American groups. These women, referred to as "amazons" by Walter L. Williams (1997), often adopt masculine characteristics and, in some cases, marry women. Their presence challenges conventional gender norms and underscores the diversity of gender expressions across cultures.

The existence of androgynous genders in various societies serves as a reminder that gender is a social construct shaped by cultural beliefs and practices, rather than solely a biological phenomenon. Socialization, the process through which individuals internalize cultural norms and values, plays a crucial role in shaping gender roles and identities. Our experiences as girls and boys strongly influence our development as women and men in terms of behavior and attitudes. The evidence on socialization further emphasizes the intricate dimensions of gender and its relationship with culture.

Gender Socialization

Socialization, the process by which individuals learn the cultural norms and values of their society, plays a significant role in shaping gender roles and identities. Several agents of socialization, including the family, peers, schools, the mass media, and religion, contribute to the socialization process and help individuals develop their understanding of gender roles and identities (Andersen and Witham 2011).

Image by Akshay Bineesh on Pexels

The process of **gender socialization** begins in infancy, with parents unknowingly socializing their children as boys or girls from the moment of birth (Begley 2009b; Eliot 2011). Parents often describe their infant daughters and sons using gendered language and interact with them differently based on their perceived gender. From infancy onward, parents tend to engage in rougher play with their sons and provide different types of toys and activities based on traditional gender norms.

As children grow older and enter school, peer influences further reinforce gender socialization. Boys and girls tend to engage in different types of play activities and games based on their gender, with boys participating in more competitive and rule-based games, while girls engage in smaller, cooperative activities such as jump rope and hopscotch. Although there has been progress in encouraging girls to participate in sports, gender differences in play activities persist and contribute to the reinforcement of gender roles.

Schools also play a crucial role in gender socialization, as teachers may treat male and female students differently in subtle ways, such as calling on boys more often in class and providing them with more feedback on their assignments (Sadker and Sadker 1994). Textbooks and educational materials may also

contain gender-stereotyped portrayals of individuals, further influencing children's perceptions of gender roles.

The mass media, including television shows, movies, and advertisements, also contribute to gender socialization by portraying stereotypical gender roles and behaviors (Maier, Curran, and Renzetti 2012). Children's television programs often feature male characters in prominent roles, while female characters may be depicted in more stereotypical or limited roles. Prime-time television and commercials often reinforce traditional gender stereotypes, portraying women as focused on appearance and domestic tasks, while men are depicted as dominant and focused on leisure activities.

Magazines targeted at different genders also reinforce gender stereotypes, with magazines for women often featuring content related to appearance, relationships, and homemaking, while magazines for men focus on sports, careers, and lifestyle advice (Hesse-Biber 2007; Milillo 2008). These media representations contribute to the perpetuation of traditional gender roles and expectations in society.

Religion, another influential agent of socialization, plays a significant role in perpetuating traditional gender stereotypes. Many interpretations of religious texts, such as the Bible, convey the idea that women are inferior to men (Tanenbaum 2009). This notion begins with the creation story in Genesis, where Adam, the first human, is depicted as preceding Eve, who was made from one of his ribs. Throughout the Bible, prominent figures are predominantly male, while women are often portrayed as wives, mothers, temptresses, or prostitutes. They receive praise for fulfilling traditional roles as wives and mothers but are condemned for deviating from these roles. Moreover, women are frequently depicted as possessions of men. For instance, the Ten Commandments equate a neighbor's wife with other possessions not to be coveted, alongside his house and ox (Exodus 20:17). Additionally, numerous biblical passages explicitly state the subordination of women to men, such as Ephesians 5:22–24, which instructs wives to be submissive to their husbands, drawing parallels to Christ's authority over the Church. In the Old Testament, certain passages even appear to justify the rape and murder of women and girls. Similarly, the Quran, Islam's sacred text, contains passages asserting the subordinate status of women (Mayer 2009).

Overall, the agents of socialization play a significant role in shaping individuals' understanding of gender roles and identities, highlighting the impact of cultural norms and values on gender socialization processes.

Feminism & Sexism

Feminism and sexism are essentially two sides of the same coin. **Feminism** advocates for the belief that women and men should have equal opportunities in economic, political, and social spheres, while **sexism** perpetuates traditional gender role stereotypes and reinforces the belief in inherent inequality between men and women. Sexism, therefore, mirrors the concept of racial and ethnic prejudice. Both women and people of color are often deemed, due to biological and cultural reasons, to lack certain qualities necessary for success in today's world.

Two significant feminist movements in U.S. history have profoundly advanced the cause of women's equality and reshaped views about gender. The first movement emerged during the abolitionist era, when figures like Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton began to draw parallels between slavery and the oppression of women. This nascent women's movement addressed various

issues, with a particular emphasis on securing the right to vote, which women achieved in 1920. The second major feminist movement took root in the late 1960s, spurred by women who had been active in the Southern civil rights movement, redirecting their efforts toward women's rights. This movement remains active today and has had a profound impact on public perceptions and societal and economic structures. However, despite these advancements, significant gender inequality persists.

Image by Tobias Bjørkli on Pexels

Within the feminist movement, several ideological strands exist. While they all share the fundamental principle that women and men should have equal opportunities across all aspects of life, they diverge in their approaches (Hannam 2012). **Liberal feminism** contends that women's equality can be attained within the existing societal framework through legislative changes and reforms in social, economic, and political institutions. Conversely, **socialist feminism** attributes women's inequality to capitalism, advocating for substantial alterations in social structures and even a socialist revolution to achieve genuine gender equality. **Radical feminism** posits that patriarchy, characterized by male domination, underlies women's oppression, asserting that the elimination of patriarchy is essential for women to achieve parity with men, even in non-capitalist societies. **Multicultural feminism** highlights the intersectionality of gender, race, and class, emphasizing that women of color experience oppression on multiple fronts. By focusing attention on the experiences of women of color in the United States and globally, multicultural feminists underscore the divergent challenges faced by these women compared to the predominantly middle-class women who historically spearheaded U.S. feminist movements.

Dimensions of Gender Inequality

The main emphasis of this module centers on gender inequality within the United States. However, it's crucial to acknowledge and address gender inequality on a global scale as well. While women in the United States face disparities compared to men in various aspects, the situation for women in many parts of the world is notably dire. Therefore, it's imperative to initially explore the global disparities faced by women before delving into the specific context of the United States. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of gender inequality, considering both domestic and international perspectives.

Global inequality of women

The issue of **global poverty** disproportionately affects women. Even though more than 1.4 billion individuals worldwide live in extreme poverty, women constitute a disproportionate 70 percent of this population (World Bank 2012). This gender disparity in poverty exacerbates the challenges faced by women, who are more susceptible to the adverse effects of poverty, including malnutrition and disease. However, women also encounter additional obstacles, some of which stem from their biological role in childbearing, while others arise from gender-based discrimination.

Let's begin by examining the **implications of childbearing**. One of the most distressing consequences of global poverty for women is maternal mortality, which refers to the number of women who die during childbirth for every 100,000 live births. Annually, over 500,000 women worldwide lose their lives due to complications during pregnancy or childbirth. Maternal mortality often results from factors such as

inadequate prenatal nutrition, prevalent diseases and illnesses, and substandard obstetrical care, which are significantly more prevalent in impoverished nations compared to affluent ones. While wealthy nations typically report a maternal mortality rate of 14 per 100,000 births, the rate in poor nations is alarmingly high at 590 per 100,000 births, equivalent to nearly 6 deaths for every 1,000 births. Consequently, women in impoverished nations are forty-two times more likely than their counterparts in affluent nations to succumb to complications during pregnancy or childbirth (World Bank 2012). This disparity underscores the profound impact of poverty on maternal health and highlights the urgent need for improved healthcare infrastructure and resources in impoverished regions.

In addition to facing challenges related to poverty, women in poor nations experience compounded difficulties due to **gender-based discrimination and violence**. Manifestations of this reality include the prevalence of violence against women, which has been identified by the World Health Organization (2010) as a significant issue. Approximately one-third of women worldwide have experienced rape or physical abuse, leading Amnesty International (2004) to label violence against women as "the greatest human rights scandal of our times." While violence against women exists in wealthy nations, it is more prevalent and severe in impoverished and middle-income countries, particularly in regions characterized by high levels of gender inequality (Kaya and Cook 2010). For instance, over half of women in Uganda have been victims of physical or sexual abuse (Amnesty International 2010).

In countries like India and Pakistan, thousands of women are killed annually in dowry-related incidents, where newlywed brides are murdered by their husbands or relatives if they fail to provide dowry payments (Kethineni and Srinivasan 2009). Additionally, female genital mutilation, a practice affecting more than 100 million girls and women globally, continues to perpetuate suffering and has been condemned as an act of torture (Kristoff, 2011; Rogo, Subayi, Toubia, and Sharief 2007).

Sex trafficking poses another significant challenge, particularly in countries such as Cambodia, India, Nepal, and Thailand. Young girls are frequently abducted and forced into prostitution, effectively becoming victims of sexual slavery (Kristoff and WuDunn 2010). The scale of sex trafficking is staggering, with millions of girls, and sometimes boys, estimated to be involved, surpassing the number of African slaves during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Beyond violence, women in poor nations encounter barriers to education, employment, healthcare, and political representation. Girls are less likely than boys to receive primary education and adequate medical care, contributing to higher mortality rates among young girls compared to boys. Moreover, women are disproportionately excluded from higher education opportunities and decent-paying jobs, as well as from holding political office.

Conversely, women in wealthy democratic nations generally experience better conditions compared to their counterparts in poor nations. In many affluent democracies, women enjoy higher status relative to men, surpassing levels observed in the United States.

Gender inequality in the United States

We have mentioned the impact of the women's movement on American society, yet gender inequality remains prevalent in the United States. Let's explore examples of such inequality, often rooted in institutional discrimination. This discrimination can occur inadvertently. We will begin by examining gender disparities in income and the workplace before considering other areas of life.

In recent decades, more women have joined the workforce, driven by economic necessity and the desire for self-worth through work. In February 2012, 57.9 percent of U.S. women aged 16 or older were in the labor force, compared to only 43.3 percent in 1970; comparable figures for men were 70.3 percent in 2012 and 79.7 percent in 1970 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012). Thus, while women's labor force participation continues to lag behind men's, this gender gap has narrowed. When considering younger women, labor force participation is even higher. For example, 74.7 percent of women aged 35–44 were in the labor force in 2011, compared to only 46.8 percent in 1970.

Despite women's increased presence in the workplace, challenges persist, notably the **gender gap** in income. Women have consistently earned less money than men since record-keeping began (Padavic and Reskin 2002). In the early 1800s, full-time women workers in agriculture and manufacturing earned less than 38 percent of what men earned. By 1885, they were earning about 50 percent of men's earnings in manufacturing jobs. In the 1980s, full-time women workers' median weekly earnings were about 65 percent of men's. Although women have narrowed the gender gap in earnings, their weekly earnings in 2011 were 82.2 percent of men among full-time workers aged 16 and older (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012). Still, for every $10,000 men earn, women earn only about $8,220, while for every $10,000 women earn, men earn $12,156. This gap amounts to hundreds of thousands of dollars over a lifetime of working.

As shown in Table 7a "Median annual earnings and gender earning ratio for full-time year-round workers by race/ethnicity, 2022" and Table 7b "Median annual earning and gender earning ratio for all workers with earning by race/ethnicity, 2022," this gender gap exists for all racial-ethnic groups. On average, women earn $0.84 per dollar earned by their male counterparts.

Table 7a. Median annual earnings & gender earning ratio for full-time year-round workers, 2022

Race/Ethnicity	Women ($)	Men ($)	Gender gap (%)
All Races/Ethnicities	52,360	62,350	84.0
White American	57,250	71,590	80.0
African American	49,470	51,640	95.8
Latinx/e American	41,140	47,420	86.6
Asian American	70,580	87,410	80.7

Table 7b. Median annual earnings & gender earning ratio for all workers, 2022

Race/Ethnicity	Women ($)	Men ($)	Gender gap (%)
All Races/Ethnicities	41,320	52,770	78.3
White American	45,190	60,830	74.3
African American	40,450	45,480	88.9

Race/Ethnicity	Women ($)	Men ($)	Gender gap (%)
Latinx/e American	31,600	40,720	77.6
Asian American	54,120	72,020	75.1

Source: Institute for Women's Policy Research. 2023. *Gender and Racial Wage Gaps Marginally Improve in 2022 but Pay Equity Still Decades Away*. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research.

The gender gap in earnings can be attributed to several factors, with one major reason being the segregation of jobs by gender in the workplace. Research suggests that up to 45 percent of the gender gap in earnings can be accounted for by this phenomenon (UN Women 2024; Padavic and Reskin 2002). Despite the increasing participation of women in the labor force, workplaces still tend to be divided along gender lines. Nearly half of all women are employed in low-paying clerical and service positions, such as waitressing, while men have access to a wider range of job opportunities, including higher-paying ones. This segregation is influenced by socialization, which shapes the career choices of young men and women, as well as by the desire to avoid potential challenges associated with jobs traditionally held by the opposite sex. Additionally, sex-segregated jobs may discriminate against applicants based on their gender, either through conscious hiring biases or unintentional barriers like height requirements or night shifts. Despite legal measures against such practices, they persist, contributing to the ongoing gender gap in earnings.

Jobs predominantly held by women tend to offer lower wages and salaries, leading to disparities in earnings between men and women (Padavic and Reskin 2002). This raises the question, "Why are women's jobs valued less than men's?" Contrary to the notion that women's jobs are less important or require fewer skills, evidence suggests that women's work is undervalued precisely because it is associated with women. As a result, jobs primarily performed by women are paid less compared to those traditionally held by men (Magnusson 2009).

Research on comparable worth, as highlighted by Levanon, England, and Allison (2009), underscores the argument that certain jobs traditionally held by women are undervalued compared to similar jobs traditionally held by men. In these studies, researchers assess various job attributes such as importance, required skill level, level of responsibility, and independent judgment to determine the expected salary for each job. Despite variations in specific job attributes, some jobs held by women are found to have comparable worth to or even higher than similar jobs held by men, yet they still receive lower pay.

For instance, according to comparable worth calculations, a social worker might earn less than a probation officer, even though their job attributes would suggest similar salaries. This research reveals that women's jobs, even when comparable in worth to men's jobs, often pay less. If pay scales were based on comparable worth, families could potentially earn several thousand dollars more annually.

Even when women and men work in the same jobs, women often earn less than men, and men are more likely than women to hold leadership positions in these occupations. Government data provide ready evidence of the lower income women receive even in the same occupations. For example, among full-time employees, female marketing and sales managers earn only 66 percent of what their male counterparts earn; female human resource managers earn only 80 percent of what their male counterparts earn; female secretaries and clerical workers earn only 91 percent (U.S. Department of Labor 2011).

Caregiving responsibilities, as noted by Chang (2010), also contribute to women's lower earnings. Women are often primarily responsible for caring for children and elderly family members, which limits their work hours and can lead to interruptions in their careers. Returning to the workforce after a hiatus places women several years behind men who started working earlier in life. The economic consequences of time away from work, including lower pay and limited career advancement opportunities, are significant and lasting.

Moreover, economics writer David Leonhardt (2010) explains this dynamic, highlighting that women's higher likelihood of taking time off from work, working part-time, and facing difficulties in adjusting work hours result in a permanent hit to their earnings and career trajectories (p. B1). Even after considering factors like years of experience, weekly work hours, and company size, differences in earnings between genders decrease but don't vanish entirely. Much of the remaining gap in pay is likely due to sex discrimination, whether intentional or not, by employers.

Sex discrimination in the workplace can be understood through two concepts: the glass ceiling and the glass escalator. The **glass ceiling** refers to an unseen barrier that prevents women from advancing beyond a certain point in their careers. In major U.S. corporations, only about 16 percent of top executives are women, and they typically earn less than their male counterparts (Catalyst 2009). While part of these disparities stems from women entering corporate roles more recently than men, they also indicate a glass ceiling that hampers qualified women from reaching higher positions (Hymowitz 2009).

Conversely, men often experience what's called the **glass escalator**, allowing them to advance more easily, even in fields dominated by women. For instance, in elementary school teaching, where principals usually rise from teacher ranks, men comprise only around 16 percent of all public elementary school teachers but represent about 41 percent of all elementary school principals (Aud et al. 2011). This disparity illustrates how men can ascend to leadership positions more readily, even in predominantly female occupations.

Regardless of the reasons behind the income gap between genders, the stark reality is that women earn significantly less than men. This discrepancy means that families led by women are particularly susceptible to poverty. In 2010, nearly 32 percent of these households lived below the poverty line, contrasting sharply with the 6 percent of married-couple families facing similar circumstances (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Smith 2011). This gendered aspect of poverty is one of the most significant indicators of gender inequality in the United States.

Sexual harassment remains a significant issue in workplaces and educational institutions, including schools. According to federal guidelines and legal definitions, sexual harassment comprises unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or any sexual conduct that affects someone's job or promotion opportunities or creates a hostile work environment.

While both men and women can experience sexual harassment, women are more frequently targeted. This difference arises from cultural and structural factors. Culturally, women are often portrayed as objects of sexual desire, while men are encouraged to be assertive sexually. This cultural dynamic leads some men to believe they have the right to make unwanted advances in the workplace, which can constitute sexual harassment.

Structurally, the imbalance of power between men and women in workplaces and educational settings contributes to the prevalence of sexual harassment. Male supervisors may harass female employees, or

male professors may harass female students or staff. Subordinate women may feel powerless to resist these advances due to fears of negative consequences, such as being fired or receiving poor grades.

Determining the exact prevalence of sexual harassment is challenging due to underreporting by victims and the reluctance of perpetrators to admit their actions. However, anonymous surveys indicate alarming rates: between 40–65 percent of women in corporate settings report experiencing sexual harassment (Rospenda et al. 2009). Among women physicians, 36.9 percent report being sexually harassed during medical school or in their practice (Frank et al. 1998). In studies of college students, nearly one-third of undergraduate women and about 40 percent of graduate students' report experiencing sexual harassment from faculty members (Clodfelter et al. 2010). Research on individuals who have experienced sexual harassment indicates that they frequently encounter a range of psychological issues.

The **Me Too movement** is a social movement against sexual harassment and sexual assault, gained widespread attention and momentum in 2017. It originated from a phrase coined by activist Tarana Burke in 2006 to support survivors of sexual violence, particularly young women of color from low-income communities. The movement surged globally when actress Alyssa Milano encouraged women to tweet "Me Too" to demonstrate the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault, following high-profile accusations against film producer Harvey Weinstein. The hashtag #MeToo went viral, revealing the widespread nature of these issues and empowering countless individuals to share their stories and demand accountability from perpetrators. The movement has since led to increased public awareness, policy changes, and a broader cultural reckoning with the systemic nature of sexual misconduct in various sectors, including entertainment, politics, and the workplace. For more details on this topic, refer to "Consequences of Sexual Harassment" box.

CONSEQUENCES OF SEXUAL HARRASSMENT

Even though sexual harassment is prohibited by law, the majority of individuals, both women and men, who experience such harassment opt not to pursue legal action. Two primary reasons behind this decision are the fear of job loss and concerns about not being believed. However, another crucial factor is the mental and emotional toll of experiencing sexual harassment. This toll includes problems in relationships, a decline in self-esteem, fatigue, depression, anxiety, difficulties in sleeping, and a sense of powerlessness. These effects closely resemble those associated with posttraumatic stress disorder and are recognized as symptoms of what is termed sexual harassment trauma syndrome. This syndrome, particularly the feeling of powerlessness, helps explain why victims of sexual harassment often refrain from legal action and frequently remain silent about their experiences.

According to law professor Theresa Beiner, it is essential for the legal system to acknowledge these psychological consequences when assessing whether harassment occurred. If a woman chooses to stay quiet about the harassment, judges and juries may erroneously assume, much like in rape cases, that the woman initially did not find the behavior objectionable.

If the legal system were to incorporate more social science research on sexual harassment trauma syndrome, a recent study by sociologist Jason N. Houle and colleagues offers crucial evidence for legal officials to consider. The authors highlight two shortcomings in previous sexual harassment research. First, many studies focused on workers within a single occupation or organization, rather than across diverse occupations and settings. Second, most studies only examined workers at one point in time, neglecting the examination of the long-term psychological consequences of sexual harassment.

To address these limitations, Houle et al. analyzed data from a study of 1,010 ninth graders in St. Paul, Minnesota, spanning from 1988 to 2004, until they were 30 or 31 years old. The study measured respondents' experiences of sexual harassment across different age periods and assessed psychological depression, along with sociodemographic background. The findings revealed that while sexual harassment at ages 14–18 did not affect the likelihood of depression at ages 30–31, harassment during the other three age periods increased the chances of depression at ages 30–31. These results held true for both women and men who had experienced harassment. The authors concluded that the "effects of harassment are indeed lasting, as harassment experiences early in the career were associated with heightened depressive symptoms nearly 10 years later." Houle et al.'s study, by identifying long-term effects of sexual harassment across various occupations and organizational settings, significantly contributes to our understanding of the psychological consequences of such harassment. The findings underscore the urgency for workplaces and campuses to take proactive measures to eliminate this illegal and harmful behavior, and the study's insights may prove valuable in sexual harassment lawsuits.

Beiner, Theresa. 2005. *Gender Myths v. Working Realities: Using Social Science to Reformulate Sexual Harassment Law*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Houle, Jason N., J. Staff, J. T. Mortimer, C. Uggen, and A. Blackstone. 2011. "The Impact of Sexual Harassment on Depressive Symptoms During the Early Occupational Career." *Society and Mental Health 1*(2): 89–105.

Willness, Chelsea R., Piers Steel, P. and Kibeom Lee. 2007. "A Meta-Analysis of the Antecedents and Consequences of Workplace Sexual Harassment." *Personnel Psychology 60*(1): 127–162.

Earlier, we discussed multicultural feminism, which highlights the unique challenges faced by women of color due to their gender, race, and often their socioeconomic status, which tends to be lower on the economic scale. This triple burden presents itself in various aspects of their lives.

For instance, women of color experience increased income inequality. As we mentioned earlier, there's a gender gap in earnings, with women earning 84.0 percent of what men earn. However, women of color face both a gender gap and a racial/ethnic gap in earnings. Table 8 "Median annual earnings and gender earnings ratio for full-time year around workers by race and ethnicity as a percentage of White male earnings" illustrates this double gap for full-time workers. We observe a racial/ethnic gap among both women and men, with African Americans and Latinx/e Americans earning less than Whites regardless of gender. Additionally, there's a gender gap between men and women within any racial/ethnic group, where women earn less than men. These dual gaps lead to a particularly large disparity between African American and Latina women and White men. African American women earn approximately 69 percent of what White men earn, while Latina women earn only about 58 percent of what White men earn.

Table 8. Median annual earnings & gender earnings ratio for full-time year around workers by race and ethnicity as a percentage of White male earnings, 2022

Race/Ethnicity	Women ($)	Men ($)	Female Earnings as % of Male Earnings of Same Group	Female Earnings as % of White Male Earnings
All Races/Ethnicities	52,360	62,350	84.0	N/A
White American	57,250	71,590	80.0	80.0
African American	49,470	51,640	95.8	69.1
Latinx/e American	41,140	47,420	86.8	57.5

Race/Ethnicity	Women ($)	Men ($)	Female Earnings as % of Male Earnings of Same Group	Female Earnings as % of White Male Earnings
Asian American	70,580	87,410	80.7	98.6

Source: Institute for Women's Policy Research. 2023. *Gender and Racial Wage Gaps Marginally Improve in 2022 but Pay Equity Still Decades Away*. Washington, DC: Author.

The income disparities highlight the economic challenges faced by African American and Latina women compared to White women. As mentioned earlier, nearly 32 percent of families led by women are living in poverty. However, when we examine the breakdown by race and ethnicity, significant differences emerge, 24.8 percent of families headed by non-Latina White women live in poverty, whereas 41.0 percent of families led by African American women and 44.5 percent of families led by Latina women are below the poverty line (DeNavas-Walt et al. 2011). While White women experience financial struggles compared to White men, African American and Latina women face even greater economic hardship compared to White women.

Gender inequality extends into family dynamics and household responsibilities. Typically, it falls on women to manage household chores. Cleaning bathrooms, cooking meals, grocery shopping, vacuuming, and other household tasks require significant time and effort.

Research shows that women who are married to or living with men spend two to three times more hours per week on housework compared to men (Gupta and Ash 2008). This inequality persists even when women have jobs outside the home. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1989) aptly describes this phenomenon as the "**second shift**" - women engage in additional unpaid work when they return home from their paid employment.

The positive aspect is that gender gaps in housework time have decreased compared to a generation ago. However, there's still a considerable difference between men and women. According to one study that reviewed evidence on this matter, "Women dedicate notably more time to household chores than men, despite the reduction in gender gaps in recent times" (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, and Robinson 2000: 196). Thus, gender inequality remains prevalent in household duties.

Violence against women

Susan Griffin (1971) opened a seminal essay on rape by sharing a profound insight: "I have never been free of the fear of rape. From a very early age I, like most women, have thought of rape as a part of my natural environment—something to be feared and prayed against like fire or lightning. I never asked why men raped; I simply thought it one of the many mysteries of human nature (p. 26)." Despite considering various forms of interpersonal violence—homicide, assault, robbery, rape, and sexual assault—it's notable that men are more likely than women to be victims of violence. However, this fact often overshadows another reality, women face a significantly higher risk of experiencing **rape and sexual assault**. Furthermore, women are more frequently depicted as victims of pornographic violence in various media outlets like the Internet, videos, magazines, and others. Additionally, women bear a disproportionate burden of domestic violence, which involves violence between spouses or individuals in intimate relationships.

The gendered nature of violence against women sets it apart from violence against men. While violence towards men is typically driven by factors like anger, jealousy, and sociological dynamics, violence against women—such as rape, sexual assault, domestic violence, and pornographic violence—occurs precisely because of their gender. These acts serve as extreme manifestations of the gender inequality prevalent in various aspects of women's lives.

Our understanding of the extent and context of rape and the reasons behind it is sourced from three main avenues: the FBI Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), and surveys and interviews conducted by academic researchers with women and men. According to the UCR, compiled by the FBI from police reports, there were 88,767 reported rapes (including attempts) in the United States in 2010 (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2011). However, the NCVS, which involves survey interviews with thousands of individuals nationwide, likely provides a more accurate estimate of rape occurrences. The NCVS also encompasses sexual assaults in addition to rape. According to the NCVS, there were 188,380 reported rapes and sexual assaults in 2010 (Truman 2011). Additional research suggests that up to one-third of U.S. women will experience rape or sexual assault, including attempts, at least once in their lives (Barkan 2012). In a study involving intensive interviews with 420 Toronto women, researchers Melanie Randall and Lori Haskell (1995) found an even higher figure: Two-thirds of the women reported experiencing at least one rape or sexual assault, including attempts. The researchers concluded that “it is more common than not for a woman to have an experience of sexual assault during their lifetime (p. 22).”

Research conducted among college students also reveals a concerning prevalence of rape and sexual assault. Anonymous surveys conducted among college women indicate that approximately 20–30 percent report experiencing rape or sexual assault, including attempted assaults, often perpetrated by male students whom they knew beforehand (Fisher et al. 2000; Gross et al. 2006). To put this into perspective, consider a campus with 10,000 students, half of whom are women. Over a four-year period, it's estimated that approximately 1,000–1,500 women on such a campus will experience rape or sexual assault, averaging around 10 incidents per week throughout a typical four-year academic calendar.

The common perception of rape often involves a stranger assaulting a woman in a dark alley. However, research reveals that most rape cases occur between individuals who know each other. Extensive studies indicate that 60–80 percent of all rapes and sexual assaults are perpetrated by someone the victim knows, including partners, ex-partners, boyfriends, and ex-boyfriends, whereas only 20–35 percent are committed by strangers (Barkan 2012). This means that a woman is two to four times more likely to experience rape by someone she knows rather than a stranger.

In 2011, incidents of sexual assault involving hotel housekeepers gained widespread attention when the head of the International Monetary Fund was arrested for allegedly assaulting a hotel housekeeper in New York City. Although the charges were later dropped due to concerns about the housekeeper's credibility, forensic evidence supported her claim. Following this event, news reports shed light on instances where hotel housekeepers encountered male guests who engaged in sexual assault, made explicit remarks, or exposed themselves. According to a hotel security expert, these incidents occur with some frequency, although they are neither rare nor commonplace. Recounting her experience, one housekeeper described an unsettling encounter when a male guest approached her while she was vacuuming, attempting to kiss her and grabbing her forcefully. Although she managed to escape, she refrained from contacting the police out of fear of disbelief or potential job loss (Greenhouse 2011).

Sociological explanations for rape can be categorized into cultural and structural factors, like those discussed earlier for sexual harassment. Within our culture, several "**rape myths**" perpetuate the dangerous notion that women somehow enjoy or invite rape. For instance, in the iconic movie Gone with the Wind, a scene depicts Rhett Butler carrying a resisting Scarlett O'Hara up the stairs, only to show her waking up the next morning with a contented expression, implying she enjoyed being raped, or at least was playing hard to get (Franiuk et al. 2008).

Another prevalent myth suggests that women may provoke or deserve rape based on their appearance or behavior. If a woman dresses attractively or enters a bar alone, she may be seen as inviting sexual advances, leading to **victim-blaming** in cases of assault. The film "The Accused" portrays this narrative, depicting public scrutiny of a rape victim who was assaulted in a bar, with some questioning why she was there alone if she didn't want sex (Franiuk et al. 2008).

Additionally, there exists a cultural perception that men who engage in sexual activity with multiple partners are celebrated as "studs" among their peers. In contrast, women with multiple sexual partners are considered "slutty" illustrating the double standard of human sexuality as it relates to men and women. Despite the risks of sexually transmitted diseases like AIDS, this belief persists, contributing to a societal norm where men are expected to take the initiative in sexual encounters, blurring the line between assertiveness and aggression (Kassing et al. 2005).

These cultural beliefs—that women might enjoy forced sex, deserve rape based on their behavior, and that men should be sexually assertive—create an environment conducive to rape. While it's important to note that most men do not commit rape, these cultural myths contribute to the occurrence of rape in society. Since the 1970s, the women's movement has actively challenged these myths, leading to increased awareness about the realities of rape. However, many people still hold onto these beliefs, making it challenging for prosecutors to secure convictions in rape cases unless the victim shows visible injuries, did not know the perpetrator, or was not dressed in a certain way (Levine 2006).

Structural explanations for rape highlight the power imbalances between men and women, like what we discussed earlier regarding sexual harassment. In male-dominated societies, rape and other forms of violence against women are more likely, as they reinforce men's dominance over women. Research supports this idea, showing that rape is more prevalent in societies where women have less economic and political power (Baron and Straus 1989; Sanday 1981). Poverty also plays a role in predicting rape rates; although rape occurs across social classes, it is more common among poorer communities, possibly because economically disadvantaged men may try to assert their masculinity through violence against women (Martin, Vieraitis, and Britto 2006).

Male privilege

In our society, which is biased toward men, women occupy a subordinate position. However, gender encompasses more than just being female, and it's important to make a few remarks about men as well. We've already talked about how men tend to have better job opportunities and higher incomes compared to women due to the prevailing **patriarchal system**.

Men also benefit in various ways. As we discussed racial and ethnic inequality, White people have inherent advantages in a racist society, a concept termed white privilege (McIntosh 2001). Similarly, scholars discuss male privilege, which refers to the advantages men enjoy in a patriarchal society, often

without realizing it. Susan Griffin was able to write “I have never been free of the fear of rape” because she was a woman; it is no exaggeration to say that few men could write the same thing and mean it. While some men do face harassment, it's less common compared to women. Men can pursue most careers without worrying about gender-based rejection or promotion concerns. They can navigate public spaces without facing unwelcome comments or physical harassment.

However, it's important to note that living in a patriarchal society also comes with challenges for men. Scholars increasingly highlight the issues men face due to societal expectations of masculinity, which emphasize traits like assertiveness and toughness (Kimmel and Messner 2010). This socialization into masculinity contributes to emotional difficulties among men, who may struggle to express emotions or seek help for personal problems (Wong and Rochlen 2005). These challenges sometimes manifest in extreme ways, such as in mass shootings. Boys also encounter problems, including higher rates of emotional disorders and learning disabilities compared to girls, and increased likelihood of suicide and high school dropout.

Men also experience other disadvantages compared to women. They perpetrate more violence and are more frequently victims of violence other than sexual assault. They have shorter life expectancies and experience more injuries. Additionally, men's lesser involvement in child-rearing means they miss out on the joys of parenting that women often experience.

The growing awareness of the challenges men face due to societal expectations has led to increased concern about the well-being of boys in America. Some authors advocate for different approaches to raising boys to address the link between masculinity and violence (Corbett 2011). In various ways, boys, men, and society as a whole bear the consequences of male identity within a patriarchal framework.

APPLYING A SOCIAL ANALYTIC MINDSET

Jobs & Gender

After watching the video “Are Some Jobs Only For Women" explain how gender and gender identity are constructed in American culture. To what extent do you think males and females choose gender-specific fields of study in college? How might gender-specific jobs and careers effect non-binary people? What are the long-term issues and consequences associated with gender stereotypes in career and work?

Understanding Sexualities

"Miami Beach to Fire Two Officers in Gay Beating at Park" the headline read. Officials in Miami Beach, Florida, declared that the city would terminate two police officers allegedly involved in assaulting a gay man two years prior, as well as mistreating and apprehending a gay tourist who intervened to help the man. The tourist recounted dialing 911 upon witnessing two undercover officers assaulting the man and kicking his head. He said the officers used antigay slurs, kicked him, and unlawfully arrested him. The president of Miami Beach Gay Pride expressed satisfaction at the news of the imminent terminations. He remarked, "It sets a precedent that you can't discriminate against anyone and get away with it. [The two

officers] tried to cover it up and arrested the guy. It's an abuse of power. Kudos to the city. They've taken it seriously" (Smiley and Rothaus 2011).

From 1933 to 1945, Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime systematically murdered 6 million Jews in the Holocaust, while also targeting millions of other individuals, including gay men. Nazi authorities labeled these men as "degenerate," believing their existence threatened Germany's notion of "disciplined masculinity." Gay men were branded as "antisocial parasites" and "enemies of the state," leading to the arrest of over 100,000 men under laws against homosexuality. Lesbians were not targeted as severely because the regime valued their potential for bearing children. Approximately 5,000 gay men were imprisoned, with many more confined to mental institutions. Hundreds were subjected to castration, and up to 15,000 were incarcerated in concentration camps, where most perished due to disease, starvation, or outright murder.

As noted by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (2011), "Nazi Germany did not seek to kill all homosexuals. Nevertheless, the Nazi state, through active persecution, attempted to terrorize German homosexuals into sexual and social conformity, leaving thousands dead and shattering the lives of many more." This dark chapter in history serves as a stark reminder of the various forms of inequality faced by individuals based on sexual orientation, culminating in atrocities such as castration, imprisonment, and death. The incident highlighted at the beginning of this module underscores that violence stemming from sexual orientation persists, albeit not at the magnitude witnessed during the Nazi era.

Despite significant progress made by the gay rights movement, sexual orientation continues to be a basis for various forms of inequality. This module explores contemporary manifestations of inequality linked to sexual orientation, encompassing conceptual discussions, historical perspectives, explanations, types of inequality, and related issues.

Sexual orientation refers to an individual's preference for engaging in sexual relationships with individuals of the opposite sex (heterosexuality), their own sex (homosexuality), or both sexes (bisexuality). This term is now also increasingly used to encompass transgender individuals, who deviate from conventional norms in behavior, appearance, and gender identity (the personal conception of oneself as female, male, both, or neither). **Transgender** individuals may include transvestites (who dress in the clothing of the opposite sex) and **transsexuals** (whose gender identity differs from their physiological sex and may involve a sex change). A transgender woman is someone born biologically as a male but becomes a woman, while a transgender man is born biologically as a female but becomes a man. The commonly used term "**gay**" now refers to any **homosexual** individual, with "**gay men**" or "**gays**" specifically used for homosexual men, and "**lesbian**" for homosexual women. The collective acronym **LGBTQ+** (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer/questioning) often encompasses all these sexual orientations.

Determining the exact number of individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender poses challenges. Conceptual issues arise, questioning what it means to be gay or lesbian (Gates 2011). For instance, does one need to engage in sexual relations with a same-sex partner to be considered gay? Additionally, empirical challenges exist, and surveys asking about sexuality remain the primary source of evidence, despite potential reluctance in disclosure.

In the mid-20th century, sex researcher Alfred C. Kinsey conducted influential studies, challenging the binary classification of individuals as either exclusively heterosexual or exclusively homosexual (Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, and Gebhard 1953). Kinsey introduced the Kinsey

Scale, a continuum ranging from 0 (exclusively heterosexual) to 6 (exclusively homosexual). His findings suggested that gradations exist between these extremes, with a significant portion of individuals experiencing both heterosexual and homosexual attractions or activities (Kinsey et al., 1953:469).

Recent research finds that 13.9 million adults (5.5% of the U.S. population) identify as LGBT, live in the south, and are young adults 18-24 (Williams Institute 2023). These estimates are calculated using nationally representative samples, combining 2020-2021 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) data. BRFSS is a state-based system of health surveys coordinated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Table 9a. Prevalence of LGBT adults in the United States by region

Region	Adults (#)
Northeast	2,578,700
Midwest	2,941,600
South	5,012,300
West	3,409,600
Total	13,942,200

Table 9b. Prevalence of LGBT adults in the United States age

Age	Adults (#)
18 - 24	4,659,600
25 - 34	4,085,300
35 - 49	2,538,400
50 - 64	1,734,700
65 +	924,300
Total	13,942,200

Source: Williams Institute. 2023. *Adult LGBT Population in the United States*. Los Angeles: School of Law UCLA.

These estimates illustrate that while self-identified LGBT individuals constitute a relatively small portion of the U.S. population, they still represent about 13.9 million adults, including a significant number of adolescents. Furthermore, the total number of individuals who have had same-sex experiences, regardless of sexual orientation, is estimated to be at least 19 million, with at least 25 million reporting some degree of same-sex attraction.

Based on historical evidence, it's understandable why a significant number of individuals in the United States identify as gay/lesbian or have had same-sex experiences. Throughout history, homosexuality has been documented in various societies, often being accepted as a normal form of sexual expression.

In ancient Athens, Greece, there was approval and even encouragement of male homosexuality, particularly sexual relations between men and teenaged boys, as well as between men themselves. According to classical scholar K. J. Dover (1989), Athenian society considered strong homosexual desire and emotion as normal, partly due to a low opinion of women's intellectual capacity. Louis Crompton (2003), a prominent historian of homosexuality, confirms the prevalence of male homosexuality in ancient Greece. He notes that Greek lyric poets and vase-painters depicted numerous homoerotic scenes, and inscriptions celebrated the love of boys. This acceptance of same-sex relationships was not limited to an intellectual elite but was widespread across Greek society for over a millennium, from before 600 B.C.E. to about 400 C.E.

In ancient Rome, male homosexuality was also prevalent and considered a normal aspect of sexuality, albeit in a different context from ancient Greece. While Romans disapproved of relationships between freeborn men and youthful males, they sanctioned sexual interactions between male slave masters and their young male slaves. This form of sexual activity was widespread, with about 40 percent of the ancient Roman population being slaves. However, it's important to note that these relationships were marked by violent domination by the slave masters over their slaves, as pointed out by Crompton (2003).

With the fall of Rome in 476 CE, Europe became a predominantly Christian continent. Influenced by passages in the Bible condemning homosexuality, European societies viewed same-sex relations as sinful, leading governments to outlaw such practices. Over the next fourteen centuries, male homosexuals (or men suspected of homosexuality) faced the risk of execution, and many lost their lives. During the Middle Ages, gay men and lesbians endured horrific treatment, including stoning, burning at the stake, hanging, beheading, and various forms of abuse and mistreatment, as described by Crompton (2003). These atrocities were described as a "**routine of terror**" and a "**kaleidoscope of horrors**." The persecution of gay men by Hitler during the twentieth century found ample precedent in the long history of European persecution of homosexuals.

In contrast to how Europe treated gay men and lesbians, China and Japan had a much more positive outlook on homosexuality since ancient times, as highlighted by Crompton (2003). He describes it as an "unselfconscious acceptance of same-sex relations." In Japan, male love during the 1500s was considered a national tradition, seen as natural and honorable, particularly within the samurai culture before industrialization (Crompton 2003). Similarly, in China, both male and female homosexuality were viewed as normal and healthy expressions of sexuality. Confucianism, the predominant Chinese religion at the beginning of the Common Era, emphasized the importance of male friendships due to its view of women as inferior, potentially inadvertently encouraging same-sex relations among men.

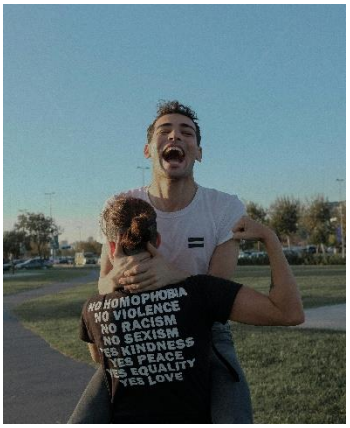
Historical records, including various artworks and written documents, suggest that male homosexuality was quite prevalent in China over the centuries, although exact numbers remain unknown. When China began engaging in trade and communication with Europe during the Ming dynasty, its tolerance for homosexuality shocked and repulsed Catholic missionaries and other Europeans. Some European clergy and scientists even attributed earthquakes and other natural disasters in China to this tolerance.

Apart from historical studies, anthropologists have also examined same-sex relations in small, traditional societies. In many of these societies, homosexuality is common and socially accepted. For example, in a study of seventy-six societies, Ford and Beach (1951) found that nearly two-thirds considered homosexuality normal and socially acceptable for specific members of the community. Among the Azande of East Africa, young warriors live together without marriage and often engage in sexual relations with younger boys. Similarly, among the Sambia of New Guinea, young males live apart from females

and engage in same-sex relations for an extended period, believed to contribute to their strength and masculinity (Edgerton 1976).

This brief historical and anthropological overview offers clear evidence supporting the idea stated at its beginning: homosexuality has been present since ancient times and has been widely accepted as a normal form of sexual expression in some societies. While Western society, influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition, has largely condemned homosexuality over the past 2,000 years, ancient civilizations such as Greece, China, and Japan approved of same-sex relationships until the industrial age. In these cultures, male homosexuality was common, and female homosexuality was also recognized. Similarly, anthropologists have found that same-sex relations are prevalent in many societies they have studied.

Despite Western societies historically viewing homosexuality as sinful and unnatural, and often holding negative attitudes toward it, the historical and anthropological evidence shows that same-sex relationships are not rare and should be considered normal expressions of sexuality. In fact, many well-known figures in Western history, including political, literary, and artistic figures, are believed to have engaged in same-sex relations at some point, including Alexander the Great, Aristotle, Sir Francis Bacon, James Baldwin, Leonard Bernstein, Lord Byron, Julius Caesar, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frederick the Great, Leonardo da Vinci, Herman Melville, Michelangelo, Plato, Cole Porter, Richard the Lionhearted, Eleanor Roosevelt, Socrates, Gertrude Stein, Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Tennessee Williams, Oscar Wilde, and Virginia Woolf, among others (University of Minnesota Libraries 2016). Regardless of or perhaps in some cases due to their sexuality, these individuals made significant contributions to the societies in which they lived.



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Determining the exact number of individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual poses a challenge. Moreover, understanding why some individuals have these sexual orientations while others do not remain a complex issue, with scholars holding differing perspectives on the potential causes (Engle et al. 2006; Sheldon et al. 2007).

The beliefs surrounding the origins of homosexuality and the implications of identifying its potential genetic roots are subjects of discussion in academic circles. Discoveries about the etiology of sexual orientation are not merely academic pursuits. When individuals perceive homosexuality as having biological origins or believe that individuals do not consciously choose their sexual orientation, they tend to hold more positive or at least tolerant attitudes toward same-sex behavior. Conversely, those who view homosexuality as a personal choice are more likely to disapprove of it (Sheldon et al. 2007). Understanding the reasons behind individuals' sexual orientation is essential, if not for any other reason than this one.

Research into the origins of sexual orientation predominantly explores biological and social-cultural factors. There exists a robust scholarly debate regarding the significance of each of these factors in shaping sexual orientation.

Biological factors

Research indicates that there may be genetic and other biological factors contributing to sexual orientation, yet the evidence remains inconclusive. One area of study focuses on genetics. While scientists have not identified a specific "**gay gene**," studies of identical twins suggest a higher likelihood of sharing the same sexual orientation (gay or straight) compared to what would be expected by chance alone (Kendler et al. 2000; Santtila et al. 2008). Since identical twins share the same DNA, this similarity hints at a potential genetic influence on sexual orientation. However, it's important to note that traits solely determined by genetics should manifest in both twins or neither. The fact that many identical twins have differing sexual orientations suggests that genetics alone may not fully account for sexual orientation, if at all. Additionally, methodological issues in some twin studies raise doubts about their conclusions. A recent review suggests that evidence supporting a purely genetic cause of sexual orientation is lacking, because findings from genetic studies are inconsistent and inconclusive (Sheldon et al. 2007).

Another avenue of research examines brain anatomy. Some studies indicate differences in the size and structure of the hypothalamus—the brain region controlling various bodily functions—between gay and straight individuals (Allen and Gorski 1992). However, conflicting findings from other studies challenge this conclusion (Lasco et al. 2002). Moreover, the influence of sexual behavior on the hypothalamus further complicates interpretation, making it difficult to discern whether observed differences reflect the impact of the hypothalamus on sexual orientation or vice versa (Sheldon et al. 2007).

A third line of biological inquiry investigates hormonal balance in the womb, hypothesizing that prenatal androgen levels may influence sexual orientation. Since prenatal androgen levels cannot be directly measured, researchers often indirectly assess them by comparing certain finger and bone lengths believed to be linked to prenatal androgen levels between gay and straight individuals (Martin and Nguyen 2004; Mustanski et al. 2002). While some studies suggest associations between prenatal androgen levels and sexual orientation, others find no such connections. A recent review highlights inconsistencies in hormone studies and concludes that the available data do not support the idea that non-heterosexual preferences stem from deviations in normal prenatal hormonal levels (Rahman 2005).

Social and cultural factors

Sociologists often stress the significance of socialization over biology in shaping various human behaviors. According to this perspective, individuals are born with clean slates and are then influenced by their society, culture, and immediate social surroundings as they grow up, including interactions with parents, teachers, peers, and other aspects of their environment.

Considering this prevailing sociological standpoint, one might assume that sociologists generally believe that individuals identify as gay or straight not because of their biology, but because they learn these identities from their society, culture, and immediate social environment. Indeed, this was a common belief among sociologists about a generation ago (Engle et al. 2006). In a 1988 review article, two sociologists concluded that the "evidence supporting homosexuality as a social construction, learned from society and culture, is more compelling than evidence suggesting a widespread biological predisposition toward homosexual desire" (Risman and Schwartz, 1988:143). Similarly, the most widely used introductory sociology text during that time asserted, "Many people, including some homosexuals, believe that gays and lesbians are simply 'born that way.' But since we know that even heterosexuals are

not ‘born that way,’ this explanation seems unlikely…Homosexuality, like any other sexual behavior ranging from oral sex to sadomasochism to the pursuit of brunettes, is learned" (Robertson, 1987:243).

However, sociologists' perspectives on the origins of sexual orientation appear to have evolved since the time these passages were written. In a recent national survey involving a random sample of sociologists, findings revealed that 22 percent attributed male homosexuality to biological factors, 38 percent to both biological and environmental (learning) factors, and 39 percent to environmental factors (Engle et al. 2006). Hence, a significant majority, approximately 60 percent, believed that biology either wholly or partially accounts for male homosexuality, a figure markedly higher than what might have been observed a generation ago.

It's noteworthy that 77 percent of sociologists still acknowledge the significance of environmental factors, or socialization, in shaping sexual orientation. Scholars holding this perspective argue that sexual orientation is learned, at least in part, from one's society, culture, and immediate social environment. According to this view, individuals absorb "messages" from these influences regarding the acceptability of being sexually attracted to someone of the same sex and the opposite sex. Positive messages about same-sex attraction during upbringing may increase the likelihood of acquiring such attractions, whereas negative messages may decrease this likelihood and foster heterosexual desire.

Although conducting research to test the influence of socialization is challenging, historical and cross-cultural evidence offers some support for this process. Ancient Greece, China, and Japan, where homosexuality was generally accepted and appeared common, illustrate this connection. Similarly, many societies studied by anthropologists exhibit similar patterns. In contrast, homosexuality faced condemnation in early European history, resulting in its perceived rarity, although it's plausible that many gays concealed their orientation due to fear of persecution and death.

The question of the origins of sexual orientation remains unanswered. Some scholars attribute it to unidentified biological factors beyond individual control, akin to handedness. Supporting this notion, many gays report realizing their orientation during adolescence, and evidence from childhood behaviors indicates future sexual orientation (Rieger et al. 2008). Others contend that cultural norms play a role, shaping individuals' identification as gay or straight based on societal views of sexual orientation during upbringing. Ultimately, sexual orientation likely results from a complex interplay of biological and cultural factors yet to be fully understood.

The American Psychological Association (APA) aligns with this perspective, stating, "There is no consensus among scientists about the exact reasons that an individual develops a heterosexual, bisexual, gay, or lesbian orientation..." (American Psychological Association 2008:2). They emphasize the complex roles of nature and nurture, suggesting that most individuals experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation.

While the precise origins of sexual orientation are still unclear, the APA's recent statement underscores a crucial finding, most individuals feel they have little or no control over their sexual orientation. As previously discussed, people tend to be more accepting of homosexuality when they understand that it's not a matter of choice. Therefore, efforts to inform the public about this research finding could promote greater acceptance of LGBT behavior and individuals.

Attitudes about sexualities

As mentioned earlier, attitudes toward gays and lesbians have been largely negative throughout history in regions like Europe and the Americas, which predominantly adhere to the Judeo-Christian tradition. It's undeniable that the Bible condemns homosexuality, with Leviticus containing some of the most frequently cited passages:

> "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable" (Leviticus 18:22).
>
> "If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads" (Leviticus 20:13).

However, the crucial question is to what extent these passages should be interpreted literally. While very few people advocate for the execution of male homosexuals, as Leviticus 20:13 suggests, many who oppose homosexuality often refer to passages like Leviticus 18:22 and Leviticus 20:13 to justify their stance. Though this is not a theology text, it's worth mentioning two points often raised by religious scholars regarding the Bible's stance on homosexuality (Helminiak 2000; Via and Gagnon 2003). First, translations of the Bible's antigay passages may distort their original meanings, and contextual studies of the Bible suggest that these passages may not have universally condemned homosexuality.

Second, many individuals selectively adhere to certain beliefs from the Bible while disregarding others. Despite being a source of inspiration for many, people often exhibit inconsistency in applying Biblical principles. For instance, while some may disapprove of homosexuality based on Biblical teachings, they may not support the prescribed execution of gay men, as Leviticus 20:13 commands. Moreover, numerous Biblical injunctions and penalties are disregarded by even devout believers. Many religious scholars argue against using the Bible as the sole basis for public attitudes toward homosexuality, highlighting the inconsistency with which most people adhere to Biblical commands.
In this module, we explored the concept of racism, which involves negative attitudes and actions directed toward people of color, and sexism, which encompasses negative attitudes and actions toward women. Similarly, **heterosexism** denotes negative attitudes and discriminatory behaviors aimed at LGBT individuals and their sexual orientation.

While the public remains divided on various LGBT issues and heterosexism persists, attitudes toward LGBT behavior and the rights of the LGBT community have notably improved in recent decades. This positive shift aligns with earlier observations regarding attitudes toward people of color and women. Since the 1970s, the United States has undoubtedly become less racist, less sexist, and less heterosexist.

Certain aspects of individuals' sociodemographic backgrounds play a role in shaping their attitudes toward heterosexism. This finding isn't surprising since sociology has long shown that social backgrounds influence attitudes and behaviors. However, the impact of sociodemographic factors on heterosexism stands out. These factors are likely relevant for understanding differing views on other LGBTQ+ issues as well. Reflecting on your own perspectives, you might recognize how your gender, age, education, and other social background aspects influence your views.

Inequality of Sexualities

Just a decade ago, people engaging in consensual same-sex relations risked arrest in many states under sodomy laws. These laws were upheld by the US Supreme Court until 2003 when they were finally outlawed in *Lawrence v. Texas*, *539 US 558*, by a 6–3 vote. The court's majority opinion declared a constitutional right to engage in private sexual activity under the Fourteenth Amendment.

Despite this important ruling, the LGBTQ+ community still faces various challenges. Sexual orientation is a significant source of social inequality, akin to race/ethnicity, gender, and social class. This section examines inequalities based on sexual orientation.

The news story at the beginning of this module highlighted the reported beatings of two gay men. Bullying and violence against individuals perceived or known to be gay or lesbian represent a severe form of inequality based on sexual orientation. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2011), there were 1,277 reported hate crimes, including violence and property destruction, against gays and lesbians in 2010. However, this number is likely an underestimate as many victims do not report their victimization to the police. An estimated 25 percent of gay men have experienced physical or sexual assault due to their sexual orientation (Egan 2010), with some even being murdered, like Matthew Shepard. Shepard, a University of Wyoming student, was kidnapped, tortured, and left tied to a fence in October 1998. He was found in a coma and died a few days later. His murder garnered national attention and contributed to public awareness of the challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community (Loffreda 2001).

Gay teenagers and those perceived to be gay are frequent targets of bullying, harassment, and physical assault in schools and other settings (Denizet-Lewis 2009). Survey data shows that 85 percent of LGBTQ+ students experience verbal harassment, 40 percent face physical harassment, and 72 percent hear antigay slurs frequently or often at school. Additionally, 61 percent feel unsafe, with 30 percent missing school due to safety concerns, and 17 percent experience physical assault requiring medical attention (Kosciw et al. 2010).

The bullying and violence faced by gay teens have profound impacts on their education and mental health. One of the gravest consequences is suicide, as demonstrated by a series of suicides among gay teens in fall 2010. During this time, three male teenagers from California, Indiana, and Texas took their own lives after experiencing antigay bullying. Additionally, a male college student committed suicide after his roommate live-streamed a video of him kissing another male (Talbot 2010).

LGBTQ+ teens are significantly more prone to skipping school, performing poorly academically, dropping out, and facing mental health challenges like depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Mental Health America 2014; Russell et al. 2011). These mental health issues often persist into their twenties. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), LGBTQ+ teens are also at higher risk of engaging in risky behaviors such as tobacco, alcohol, and drug use, unprotected sex, and neglecting seatbelt use (Kann 2011). A CDC official expressed concern, stating, “This report should be a wake-up call. We are very concerned that these students face such dramatic disparities for so many different health risks” (Melnick 2011).

Ironically, although LGBTQ+ teens often face bullying and mistreatment at school, they are disproportionately disciplined for misconduct compared to straight students accused of similar behavior. This discrepancy is more pronounced among girls than boys. The reasons behind this imbalance are

unclear but may arise from unconscious bias against gays and lesbians among school officials. As noted by an educational psychology scholar, "To me, it is saying there is some kind of internal bias that adults are not aware of that is impacting the punishment of this group" (St. George 2010).

Federal law currently prohibits **employment discrimination** based on race, nationality, sex, or religion. Notably, sexual orientation is not included in this list. Thus, it remains legal under federal law for employers to discriminate against LGBTQ+ individuals or those perceived as LGBTQ+. This includes refusing to hire, firing, or refusing to promote openly LGBTQ+ employees. While twenty-one states have laws prohibiting employment discrimination based on sexual orientation, twenty-nine states do not, allowing employers in those states to freely discriminate against LGBTQ+ individuals. Additionally, only fifteen states prohibit discrimination based on gender identity (transgender), leaving thirty-five states where such discrimination may occur according to Human Rights Campaign (2011).

The Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), aimed at preventing job discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, has been introduced in Congress but has yet to pass. In the absence of legal protection for LGBT employees, many companies have implemented their own policies. By March 2011, 87 percent of Fortune 500 companies, the largest corporations in the U.S., had policies against sexual orientation discrimination, with 46 percent also prohibiting gender identity discrimination (Human Rights Campaign 2011).

National surveys reveal a significant incidence of workplace discrimination against LGBT individuals (Sears and Mallory 2011). According to the 2008 General Social Survey, 27.1 percent of LGBTQ+ respondents reported experiencing verbal harassment at work in the past five years, and 7.1 percent reported being either fired or denied employment during the same period (SDA 2008). Other surveys, though not nationally representative, indicate even higher rates of workplace harassment or discrimination among LGBTQ+ individuals. Consequently, over one-third of LGBTQ+ employees admit to concealing their sexual orientation at work. Transgender individuals encounter even more employment difficulties, with 78 percent reporting some form of workplace harassment or discrimination in one study. Researchers have conducted field experiments sending out resumes or job applications to potential employers. Results show that resumes or applicants indicating LGBTQ+ status are less likely to receive positive responses compared to their non-LGBTQ+ counterparts.

LGBTQ+ individuals facing workplace harassment and discrimination endure additional hardships (Sears and Mallory 2011). They are more prone to mental health issues, job dissatisfaction, and increased absenteeism compared to their counterparts who do not face such challenges.

Same-sex marriage has stirred significant controversy in recent years. Despite nearly 650,000 same-sex couples living together in the United States (Gates 2012), many are unable to marry due to legal restrictions. In May 2012, President Obama endorsed same-sex marriage.

Public opinion on same-sex marriage has shifted, with a narrow margin of Americans now supporting the right of same-sex couples to marry. The legalization of same-sex marriage across the United States following the 2015 Obergefell vs. Hodges Supreme Court decision has had substantial effects on various aspects of life. Now, same-sex married couples are entitled to federally mandated spousal rights and benefits, impacting areas such as Social Security, veterans benefits, and family leave. Previously, LGBTQ+ individuals faced barriers in accessing these benefits, including limitations on taking family leave or visiting their partner in the hospital during times of illness.

The 2015 Supreme Court decision in Obergefell v. Hodges, which legalized same-sex marriage nationwide in the United States, was based on four main points:

1. Right to Personal Choice in Marriage: The Court held that the right to personal choice regarding marriage is inherent in the concept of individual autonomy. This right to marry is fundamental because it supports a two-person union unlike any other in its importance to the committed individuals.

2. Right to Marry is Fundamental: The Court affirmed that the right to marry is a fundamental right inherent to the liberty of the person under the Due Process and Equal Protection Clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment. This right extends to same-sex couples in the same way it does to opposite-sex couples.

3. Safeguards for Children and Families: The Court recognized that marriage safeguards children and families and thus draws meaning from related rights of childrearing, procreation, and education. Excluding same-sex couples from marriage would harm and humiliate the children of same-sex couples.

4. Marriage as a Keystone of Social Order: The Court stated that marriage is a keystone of the Nation's social order and that there is no difference between same- and opposite-sex couples with respect to this principle. Denying same-sex couples the right to marry would disparage their choices and diminish their personhood.

These points collectively emphasize the protection of individual liberties, equality, and the recognition of the fundamental role of marriage in society, leading to the decision that same-sex marriage is a constitutional right.

Image by Mikhail Nilov on Pexels

Opponents of same-sex marriage argue along three main lines (Emrich 2009). First, they contend that marriage is designed for procreation, which same-sex couples cannot fulfill. Second, they suggest that children raised by same-sex couples may face psychological issues due to their parents' sexual orientation or the absence of both a father and a mother. Thirdly, they argue that legalizing same-sex marriage would weaken the institution of marriage.

In response, advocates for same-sex marriage present their arguments (Barkan, Marks, and Milardo 2009; Human Rights Campaign 2009). First, they point out that many heterosexual couples marry without the intention or ability to have children. Second, research indicates that children raised by same-sex couples have comparable psychological well-being to those raised by opposite-sex couples. Thirdly, there is no evidence suggesting that legalizing same-sex marriage has undermined the institution of marriage in jurisdictions where it has been permitted.

Although children raised by same-sex couples generally fare as well as those raised by heterosexual couples, same-sex couples still face significant challenges in adopting children, particularly in many states. Currently, Mississippi and Utah outright prohibit adoptions by same-sex couples, while half of the other states impose significant barriers to such adoptions (Tavernise 2011). For example, some states

mandate that social workers prioritize married heterosexual couples over same-sex couples in adoption decisions. Additionally, several states require that adoptive parents must be married, effectively excluding same-sex couples from adoption eligibility. Despite these obstacles, the number of adoptions by same-sex couples has increased in recent years due to the growing number of children in need of adoption and the shifting public opinion towards greater acceptance of gays and lesbians.

Marriage grants numerous legal rights, benefits, and responsibilities to spouses. However, in most states, same-sex couples are prohibited from marrying, and even if they manage to marry, their union lacks federal recognition. As a result, they face significant material disadvantages. In fact, heterosexual married couples receive over 1,000 federal rights that married same-sex couples are denied (Shell 2011).

Traditionally, LGBTQ+ individuals were barred from serving openly in the U.S. military. Those who concealed their sexual orientation could serve without repercussions, but many faced dishonorable discharges if their orientation was discovered. Living in fear of exposure, they endured constant anxiety about their status in the military.

In 1992, presidential candidate Bill Clinton pledged to lift the ban on LGBTQ+ individuals in the military. However, upon his election, his proposal faced staunch opposition from military leaders, Congress, and the public. The compromise was the implementation of the "don't ask, don't tell" (DADT) policy in 1993. DADT allowed members of the military to serve without disclosing their sexual orientation but mandated discharge if they openly acknowledged being LGBTQ+. Despite this policy, advocates continued to push for full inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals in the military.

In 2010, a federal judge deemed DADT unconstitutional following a lawsuit. Concurrently, President Barack Obama, both as a candidate and as president, called for the repeal of DADT. Congress passed legislation to repeal DADT later that year, with President Obama signing it into law, effective September 2011. With the official end of discriminatory practices, LGBTQ+ individuals are now permitted to serve openly in the U.S. armed forces. However, concerns persist regarding the potential for negative experiences such as verbal and physical abuse.

The **HIV/AIDS epidemic** significantly impacted the LGBTQ+ community from the 1980s onwards, resulting in numerous deaths from AIDS-related complications. Today, HIV and AIDS remain serious health concerns for both LGBT individuals and heterosexuals. Approximately 1.2 million Americans are living with HIV, with about 35,000 diagnosed with AIDS. Over 50,000 new HIV cases are reported annually, with a majority being among men who have sex with men. Thankfully, appropriate medical treatment can now effectively manage HIV (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2011).

Less recognized is that LGBTQ+ adults face higher rates of physical and mental health issues compared to their heterosexual counterparts. Research suggests that these challenges stem from the stress of living in a society where LGBTQ+ individuals often encounter harassment, job discrimination, and the need to conceal their sexual identity. Additionally, the lack of equal treatment, particularly due to the absence of legal recognition for same-sex marriage, contributes to these health disparities (Frost et al. 2011; Institute of Medicine 2011).

As highlighted earlier, LGBTQ+ secondary school students also experience educational and mental health challenges due to mistreatment. By the time LGBTQ+ individuals reach adulthood, the cumulative effect of these stressors begins to impact their physical and mental well-being.

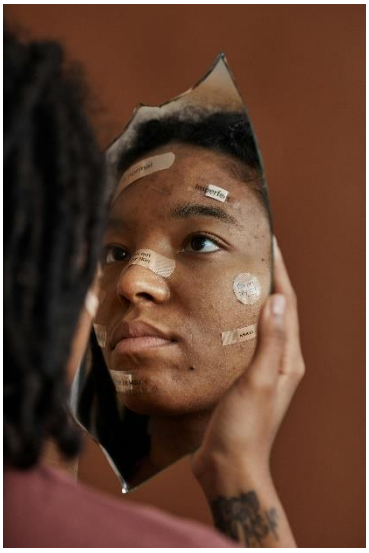
Because stress is believed to weaken immune systems, LGBTQ+ individuals generally have lower immune functioning and perceive their physical health as poorer compared to heterosexual individuals. Stress also negatively affects mental health, leading to higher rates of depression, loneliness, low self-esteem, and other psychiatric issues among LGBTQ+ individuals, including a higher tendency to attempt suicide (Sears and Mallory 2011). Those who face greater stress due to their sexual orientation typically experience more physical and mental health problems than those with lower stress levels. It's crucial to note that these health issues stem not from being LGBTQ+ per se, but from living in a society that is homophobic and discriminates against LGBTQ+ individuals and behaviors.

Despite the health challenges faced by LGBTQ+ people, medical students receive limited education on these matters. A recent survey of medical school deans revealed that one-third of medical schools offer no clinical training on LGBTQ+ health issues. Even in schools that do, students receive an average of only five hours of training (Obedin-Maliver et al. 2011). Commenting on the findings, the senior author of the study emphasized the need for deeper conversations on LGBTQ+ health topics, noting that many medical schools overlook these important issues (White 2011).

In earlier sections, we explored the concepts of White privilege and male privilege. White individuals can navigate daily life without concern for the subtle and overt negative experiences faced by people of color, while men similarly avoid many challenges that women encounter due to their gender. Whether conscious of it or not, whites and men inherently enjoy privileges compared to people of color and women, respectively.

A similar concept applies to sexual orientation and inequality is **heterosexual privilege**. This term describes the numerous advantages enjoyed by heterosexual individuals, simply because their sexual orientation is not LGBTQ+. Here are some examples:

- Heterosexuals can freely express affection in public without fear of harassment or violence based on their sexuality.
- Employment opportunities are not hindered by heterosexuality, avoiding discrimination in hiring, firing, or promotion.
- Heterosexual marriage is legally recognized nationwide, granting access to various benefits.
- Public displays of affection between heterosexual couples are generally accepted without negative reactions.
- Heterosexual individuals are not questioned or criticized for their sexual orientation choices or pressured to change.
- Concerns about parenting abilities due to sexuality are absent for heterosexual parents.
- Heterosexual individuals can openly discuss their sexual orientation without fear of judgment or discrimination.
- Heterosexuals are not accused of imposing their sexuality on others.



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APPLYING A SOCIAL ANALYTIC MINDSET

The Social Construct of Sexuality

Thomas Beatie has become a public image for transgendered people. He underwent a sex change operation and is now legally male. Beatie, known to may as the "pregnant man," gave birth to three children with his wife Nancy. Even so, he was listed on the birth certificate as the baby's mother. He feels that the words mother and father are just social terms and he views himself as his daughter's father. While he is biologically related to the baby, his wife is not, and he currently has sole custody of their children post-divorce.

Watch the video "The Pregnant Man's Life Today" explore how marriage and parental issues continue to be gray areas for transgender individuals. How do Americans view issues of sex and sexuality? How are sex, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation different from one another? What speaks to you personally regarding Thomas Beatie and the social construction of sexual biology?

CORE INSIGHTS

Race and ethnicity are analyzed as social constructs, illuminating how they shape identity and intersect with systems of power and privilege. Prejudice and discrimination, manifested through stereotypes, microaggressions, and institutional biases, perpetuate inequalities and marginalization across diverse racial and ethnic groups.

Dimensions of racial and ethnic inequality, including the wealth gap and white privilege, highlight systemic disparities rooted in historical legacies of colonization, slavery, and structural racism. Examining these disparities underscores the need for redistributive policies and antiracist interventions to promote equity and social justice.

Sociological explanations for racial and ethnic inequality elucidate structural and institutional mechanisms that perpetuate disparities in education, employment, housing, and criminal justice. Factors associated with prejudice, including socialization processes, intergroup contact, and media representations, shape attitudes and behaviors toward marginalized communities.

Understanding sex and gender entails recognizing their multidimensional nature, influenced by biological, cultural, and social factors. Gender inequality, manifested through wage gaps, occupational segregation, and gender-based violence, reflects entrenched patriarchal norms and power imbalances within societies.

Feminism emerges as a critical framework for challenging sexism and advocating for gender equality globally and within the United States. Addressing gender disparities requires dismantling systemic barriers, promoting intersectional approaches, and amplifying marginalized voices in policy and advocacy efforts.

Inequalities related to sexualities encompass discrimination, legal recognition, and health disparities experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals. Analyzing these inequalities underscores the importance of inclusive

policies, nondiscriminatory healthcare practices, and cultural competency training to promote LGBTQ+ rights and well-being.

In summary, examining race, ethnicity, sex, gender, and sexualities through a sociological lens reveals intersecting forms of inequality and oppression embedded within social structures and institutions. By interrogating power dynamics, challenging dominant narratives, and advocating for systemic change, scholars and activists contribute to more inclusive and equitable societies.

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MODULE 4: ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

At the end of the module, students will be able to:

1. Understand the scope and social patterns of poverty.
2. Explore various sociological views on poverty, including functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionism.
3. Examine the consequences of poverty on family dynamics, health, education, housing, and crime.
4. Analyze disparities in elementary and secondary education, including school segregation.
5. Explore how job loss, declining labor unions, and unemployment impact economic inequality.
6. Evaluate corporate and economic policies' impact on economic inequality.

KEY TERMS & CONCEPTS

Define and offer real-world illustrations of the fundamental terms and concepts as you read the module to encourage active participation and learning.

- Capital flight
- Economic inequality
- Episodic poverty
- Feminization of poverty
- Individualistic explanation
- Income inequality
- Low-income children
- Low-income families
- Long-term unemployment
- Multinational corporations
- Outsourcing
- Poverty line
- Social stratification
- Stratification
- Structural explanation
- Supplemental Poverty Measure
- Twice poverty
- War on poverty
- Wealth inequality

INTRODUCTION

Economic inequality refers to the uneven distribution of income and opportunity among different groups in society. It can be measured through **income inequality**, which is the extent to which income is distributed unevenly in a group of people, and **wealth inequality**, which refers to the unequal distribution of assets in a group of people. This disparity can lead to various social and health problems and lower rates of social cohesion. This module will explore economic inequalities, examining differences in income, wealth, education, and occupation.

INCOME & WEALTH

"Survey: More US Kids Go to School Hungry," the headline read, revealing the impact of ongoing economic challenges in the United States. A nationwide survey of 638 public school teachers in grades K–8, conducted by Share Our Strength, a nonprofit organization dedicated to combating childhood

hunger, unveiled concerning findings. The survey indicated that a significant portion of students arrived at school without having eaten, and more than two-thirds of teachers reporting that some students regularly came to school too hungry to focus on learning, often having missed dinner the night before. Over 60 percent of teachers noted that this issue had worsened in the past year, and over 40 percent labeling it as a "serious" problem. Many teachers admitted to using their own funds to provide food for their students. As one elementary school teacher recounted, "I've had numerous students—not just a few—who come to school, put their heads down, and cry because they haven't eaten since yesterday's lunch" (United Press International 2011).

While the United States boasts immense wealth, with many Americans enjoying luxury or comfortable lifestyles, the stark reality of childhood hunger serves as a poignant reminder of the prevalent poverty within the nation. This module examines the factors that contribute to poverty, the high poverty rate in the U.S., and the devastating effects on millions living in or near poverty. Additionally, it sheds light on poverty in the world's poorest nations and discusses initiatives aimed at alleviating poverty both domestically and internationally.

Despite the bleak portrayal of poverty in this module, there remains room for optimism. As demonstrated by the impactful "**war on poverty**" initiated in the 1960s in the United States, significant strides were made in reducing poverty. This effort was inspired by influential literature such as *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* by Harrington (1962) and Bagdikian's (1964) *In the Midst of Plenty: The Poor in America* (1964). Bagdikian vividly portrays the struggles of the poor, and in response, the federal government implemented various funding programs and policies that significantly reduced the poverty rate in less than a decade (Schwartz 1984). However, since the 1960s and 1970s, the United States has scaled back on these initiatives, resulting in poverty no longer being a priority on the national agenda. In contrast, other affluent democracies allocate more funding and offer more extensive services for their impoverished populations, leading to considerably lower poverty rates compared to the U.S.

Nevertheless, both the history of the war on poverty and the experiences of these other nations illustrate that effective policies and programs can indeed reduce poverty in the United States. By revisiting its past efforts in combating poverty and drawing lessons from other Western democracies, the United States could once again make strides in reducing poverty and improving the lives of millions of Americans.

But why should we even care about poverty? Many politicians and a significant portion of the public tend to blame the poor for their situation, opposing increased federal spending to assist them and even advocating for reductions in such spending. Poverty specialist Mark R. Rank (2011) suggests that we often tend to perceive poverty as a concern that belongs to others. Rank contends that this indifferent outlook is narrow-minded because, as he asserts, "poverty affects us all" (p. 17). He elaborates on this point, highlighting at least two reasons why this is the case.

First, the United States expends a significant amount of resources due to the repercussions of poverty. Individuals facing economic hardship often grapple with deteriorating health, familial challenges, heightened crime rates, and various other issues, all necessitating substantial annual expenditures by the nation. In fact, it has been estimated that childhood poverty alone imposes a staggering $500 billion burden on the U.S. economy each year, stemming from associated problems such as unemployment, low-wage employment, increased crime rates, and both physical and mental health issues (Eckholm 2007). If the poverty rate in the U.S. were on par with that of other democratic nations, substantial tax dollars and other resources could be saved.

Second, a significant portion of the American population is likely to experience poverty or near-poverty at some juncture in their lives. Statistics reveal that approximately 75 percent of individuals aged 20 to 75 will encounter poverty or near-poverty for at least one year within this span of time. As noted by Rank (2011:18), most Americans "will find ourselves below the poverty line and using a social safety net program at some point." Given the considerable financial toll of poverty on the United States and the widespread prevalence of such experiences, Rank argues that there should be a collective desire for the nation to pursue every avenue possible to mitigate poverty.

Sociologist John Iceland (2006) provides two more compelling reasons why poverty concerns everyone and why its reduction is imperative. To begin, a pervasive poverty rate hinders the economic advancement of our nation with a substantial portion of the population unable to afford essential goods and services, attaining economic growth becomes considerably challenging. Second, poverty generates crime and various other societal issues that impact individuals across all socioeconomic levels. Consequently, alleviating poverty would not only benefit those living in poverty but also extend its positive effects to those who are not economically disadvantaged.

Understanding Poverty

Our exploration of poverty starts with an analysis of how poverty is assessed and the extent to which it prevails. In the 1960s, when U.S. officials began grappling with concerns about poverty, they quickly recognized the necessity of establishing a metric to gauge its extent. This led to the introduction of an official measure of poverty, known as the **poverty line**. Economist Mollie Orshansky, devised this line in 1963 by multiplying the cost of a very basic diet by three, based on a 1955 government study indicating that the average American family allocated one-third of its income to food. Consequently, a family with a cash income lower than three times the cost of this minimal diet was deemed officially impoverished.

However, this method of determining the poverty line has remained unchanged since 1963, rendering it outdated for several reasons. Modern-day expenses, such as heating, electricity, childcare, transportation, and healthcare, now represent a larger portion of a typical family's budget than they did in 1963. Moreover, the official measure overlooks noncash income from benefits like food stamps and tax credits. Additionally, as a national metric, the poverty line fails to accommodate regional variations in the cost of living. These shortcomings render the official measurement of poverty highly questionable. As noted by one poverty expert, "The official measure no longer corresponds to reality. It doesn't get either side of the equation right—how much the poor have or how much they need. No one really trusts the data" (DeParle et al. 2011:A1). We'll revisit this matter shortly.

The poverty line undergoes annual adjustments for inflation and considers family size. For instance, in 2010, the poverty line for a nonfarm family of four (comprising two adults and two children) stood at $22,213. A family of four earning even a dollar more than $22,213 in 2010 did not fall under the official poverty category, despite their "additional" income barely alleviating their financial situation. Poverty analysts have devised a bare-bones budget to cover essential needs like food, clothing, and shelter, which roughly doubles the poverty line. Families earning between the poverty line and twice that amount, often termed "**twice poverty**," struggle to make ends meet but do not meet the official poverty criteria. Thus, when discussing the poverty level here, it's important to note that we are solely referring to official poverty, while acknowledging numerous families and individuals living near poverty who struggle to meet basic needs, especially when confronted with significant medical or transportation expenses. Consequently, many researchers argue that families require incomes twice as high as the

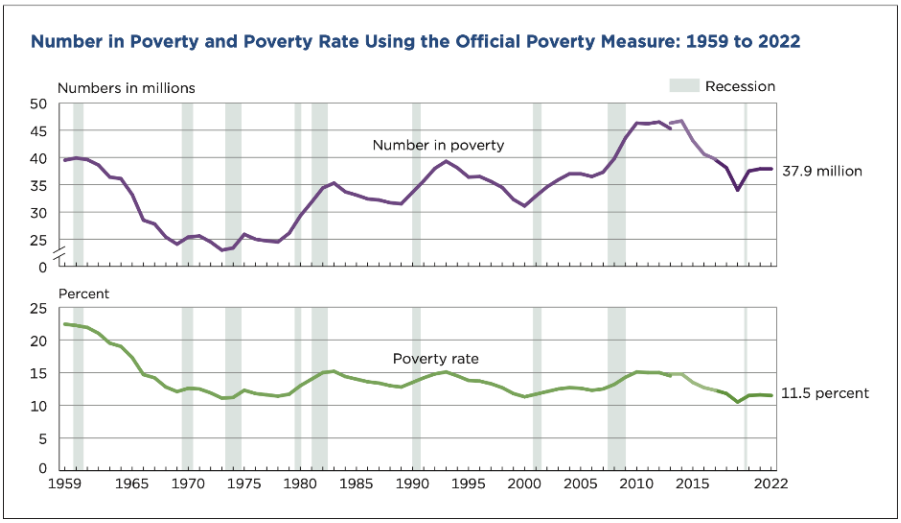
federal poverty level just to manage (Wright et al. 2011). As a result, they rely on twice poverty data (i.e., family incomes below twice the poverty line) to offer a more accurate portrayal of the number of Americans experiencing severe financial hardships, even if they do not technically fall under the official poverty designation.

The scope of poverty

Keeping this caveat in mind, let's explore the extent of poverty in America. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, using the traditional official poverty measure established in 1963, approximately 15.1 percent of the U.S. population, equivalent to over 35 million individuals, were living below the poverty line in 2010 (DeNavas-Walt et al. 2011). Although this percentage showed a decline from the early 1990s, it remained higher than the rate in 2000 and even surpassed the levels observed in the late 1960s (see Figure 5. "Number in poverty and poverty rate using the official poverty measure: 1959–2022"). While there was a significant reduction in poverty during the 1960s (as evidenced by the sharp decline in Figure 5. "Number in poverty and poverty rate using the official poverty measure: 1959–2022," progress seems to have stalled since then with poverty rates showing minimal improvement.

Another way to grasp the scale of poverty is by considering **episodic poverty**, which the Census Bureau defines as experiencing poverty for at least two consecutive months within a specific timeframe. Between 2004 and 2007, nearly one-third of the U.S. population, approximately 95 million individuals, encountered poverty for at least two consecutive months, although only 2.2 percent experienced poverty continuously for all three years (DeNavas-Walt, et al. 2010). These data highlight the dynamic nature of poverty, with individuals transitioning in and out of impoverished circumstances. However, even those who escape poverty typically do not move far from its grasp. Moreover, as previously mentioned, a significant majority of Americans can anticipate facing poverty or near-poverty at some juncture in their lives.

Figure 5. Number in poverty and poverty rate using the official poverty measure: 1959–2022



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 1960 to 2023 Annual Social and Economic Supplements. Retrieved April 23, 2024 (https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/2023/demo/p60-280/figure1.pdf).

Image by Wayne S. Grazio is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Recognizing the limitations of the official poverty measure, the Census Bureau has developed a **Supplemental Poverty Measure**. This measure takes into consideration various family expenses beyond food, accounts for regional differences in the cost of living, factors in taxes paid and tax credits received, and incorporates government assistance programs such as food stamps, Medicaid, and certain other forms of aid. As a result, this updated measure provides a more nuanced estimate of poverty compared to the simplistic official poverty measure, which primarily focuses on family size, food costs, and cash income. According to this revised measure, the poverty rate in 2010 stood at 16.0 percent, equating to 49.1 million Americans (Short 2011). Given that the official poverty measure identified 46.2 million people as poor, the more accurate supplemental measure revealed an increase of nearly 3 million individuals classified as poor in the United States. Without the support of programs like Social Security and food stamps, at least an additional 25 million people would fall below the poverty threshold (Sherman 2011). These programs play a crucial role in keeping many individuals above the poverty line, despite ongoing financial challenges and persistently high poverty rates.

One last statistic deserves attention. Many poverty experts argue that twice-poverty data—reflecting the percentage and number of individuals residing in households with incomes below twice the official poverty threshold—offer a more accurate measure of the true magnitude of poverty, broadly defined, in the United States. By utilizing the twice poverty benchmark, it is estimated that approximately one-third of the U.S. population, exceeding 100 million Americans, either live in poverty or hover dangerously close to it (Center for American Progress 2011). Those teetering on the brink of poverty are merely one crisis away—such as losing a job or experiencing a severe illness or injury—from falling into poverty. The twice poverty data present an exceptionally disheartening outlook.

Social Patterns of Poverty

Who makes up the poor? While the official poverty rate stood at 15.1 percent in 2010, this figure varies significantly based on key sociodemographic factors such as race/ethnicity, gender, and age, as well as by geographic region and family composition. Understanding these variations in poverty rates based on these factors is essential for comprehending the dynamics and social distribution of poverty in the United States. We will examine each of these factors using Census data (DeNavas-Walt et al. 2011).

Race and ethnicity

Let's try a quick quiz; please select the correct answer.

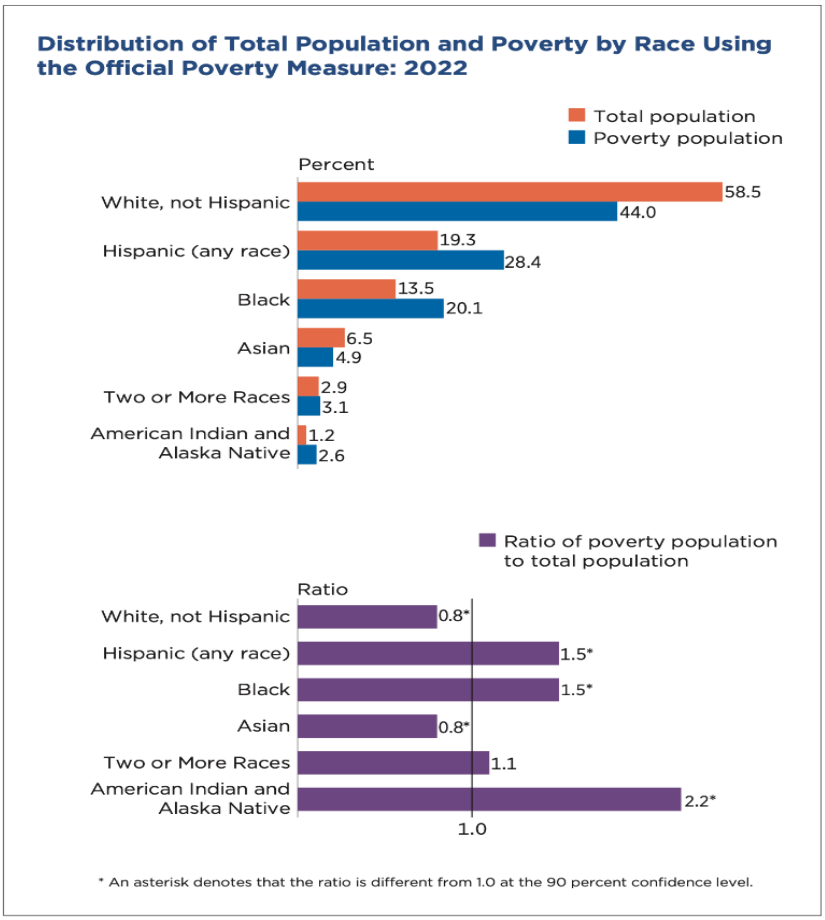
The majority of poor people in the United States are:

a. Black/African American
b. Latinx/e
c. Native American/Indigenous
d. Asian/Pacific Islanders
e. White

What did you choose? If you're like most respondents in public opinion surveys, you likely selected option a. *Black/African American*. When considering impoverished individuals, Americans often envision African Americans (White 2007). This prevalent perception is believed to diminish public empathy towards people in poverty and contribute to resistance against increasing government assistance for the impoverished. Public sentiments on these matters are considered pivotal in shaping government policies on poverty. Therefore, it's crucial for the public to possess an accurate understanding of the racial and ethnic distribution of poverty.

Unfortunately, the public's perception of the racial demographics of poverty is flawed, as Census data in Figure 6 reveal that the most common demographic among those living in poverty is White (non-Latinx/e). To be specific, 44 percent of individuals in poverty are White (non-Latinx/e), 28.4 percent are Latinx/e, 20 percent are African American, and 4.9 percent are Asian American (refer to Figure 6. "Distribution of total population & poverty by race using the official poverty measure: 2022"). These statistics underscore that non-Latinx/e Whites make up the largest segment of the impoverished population in America.

Figure 6. Distribution of total population & poverty by race using the official poverty measure, 2022



Source: U.S. Census Bureau. Current Population Survey, 2023 Annual Social and Economic Supplement. Retrieved April 23, 2024 (https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/2023/demo/p60-280/figure3.pdf)

However, it's important to note that race and ethnicity significantly influence the likelihood of experiencing poverty. While a 08. ratio of non-Latinx/e Whites live below the poverty line; the figures rise to a 1.5 ratio for African Americans and 2.2 for American Indian and Alaska Natives. This means that African Americans and American Indian and Alaska Natives are more likely to be impoverished. Considering the large population of non-Latinx/e whites in the United States, the majority of impoverished individuals are White, even though the percentage of Whites in poverty is comparatively lower. The pronounced disparities in poverty rates among people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds are so noteworthy and impactful that they have been labeled the "colors of poverty" (Lin and Harris 2008).

Gender

Many women are familiar with the unfortunate reality that they are more likely to experience poverty compared to men. Census data reveals that 16.2 percent of females live below the poverty line, whereas only 14.0 percent of males do. This means there is a significant gender disparity in poverty rates, with 25.2 million women and girls living in poverty, compared to 21.0 million men and boys, marking a difference of 4.2 million individuals. This phenomenon, known as the **feminization of poverty**, is extensively discussed by Iceland (2006).

Age

When we consider age, it's evident that a significant portion of children under 18 experience poverty, with 22 percent, totaling 16.4 million children, living below the poverty line. This percentage is notably higher for African American and Latinx/e children, at around 39 percent and 35 percent respectively. Additionally, about 37 percent of all children will encounter poverty at some point before reaching adulthood, as highlighted by Ratcliffe and McKernan (2010). The United States' childhood poverty rate is strikingly high compared to other affluent democracies, being 1.5 to 9 times greater than rates in Canada and Western Europe, as noted by Mishel et al. (2009). Looking specifically at families with incomes below twice the official poverty level, referred to as **low-income families**, we find that nearly 44 percent of American children, approximately 32.5 million, belong to such households and are commonly referenced as **low-income children***,* with a disproportionately high number being African American and Latinx/e children.

Shifting the focus to older individuals, approximately 9 percent of those aged 65 or older are living in poverty, totaling around 3.5 million seniors. However, when we analyze these age demographics, we find that nearly 36 percent of all poor individuals in the United States are children, while nearly 8 percent are 65 or older. This means that more than 43.4 percent of Americans living in poverty are either children or elderly individuals.

Region

Poverty rates vary across the United States, with some states and counties experiencing higher levels of poverty than others. One way to grasp these geographical differences is by examining poverty rates across the nation's four major regions. The South emerges as the region with the highest poverty rate, standing at 16.9 percent, followed by the West (15.3 percent), the Midwest (13.9 percent), and finally the Northeast (12.8 percent). The elevated poverty rate in the South is believed to contribute

significantly to the region's higher incidence of illnesses and health issues compared to other regions, as discussed by Ramshaw (2013).

Family structure

Various family structures exist, including those where a married couple resides with their children, an unmarried couple cohabitates with one or more children, a household with children led by a single parent (typically a woman), a household comprising two adults without children, and a household where a single adult lives independently. Poverty rates across the nation vary depending on the family structure.

As expected, poverty rates tend to be higher in single-adult households compared to those with two adults, largely because dual-income households are more common. Additionally, within single-adult households, poverty rates are higher in those led by a woman than in those led by a man, as women typically earn lower incomes than men. Specifically, 31.6 percent of families led by a single woman live in poverty, whereas only 15.8 percent of families led by a single man do. In contrast, a mere 6.2 percent of families led by a married couple experience poverty. The elevated poverty rate among female-headed families further substantiates the notion of the feminization of poverty discussed earlier.

As discussed earlier, a notable 22 percent of American children experience poverty. However, this percentage significantly fluctuates depending on the family structure they belong to. For instance, only 11.6 percent of children living with married parents are classified as poor, contrasting sharply with the 46.9 percent of those residing solely with their mother. This latter percentage further escalates to 53.3 percent for African American children and 57.0 percent for Latinx/e children, as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau (2012). Regardless of racial or ethnic background, children living with only their mothers face particularly heightened risks of poverty.

Labor force status

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024), approximately 6.1 million people are without jobs. The rates across different demographic groups, such as adult men, women, teenagers, Whites, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinx/e Americans, saw little to no change.

About 1.3 million individuals had been unemployed for 27 weeks or more, constituting around 20.8 percent of the total unemployed population. The labor force participation rate stayed steady at 62.5 percent, and the employment-population ratio barely changed at 60.2 percent, showing minimal fluctuations throughout the year.

In terms of part-time employment due to economic reasons, approximately 4.4 million individuals saw little change. These individuals were working part-time either because their hours were reduced or they couldn't secure full-time positions.

The number of individuals not actively participating in the labor force but desiring employment, totaling 5.8 million, remain relatively stable. These individuals weren't classified as unemployed because they hadn't actively sought work in the past four weeks or weren't available for employment.

Among those outside the labor force yet seeking employment, approximately 1.7 million were marginally attached to the workforce. These individuals were willing and able to work, having searched for employment within the past year but not in the past month. The number of discouraged workers, a subgroup of the marginally attached who believed no job opportunities were available to them, rose to 452,000.

FEEDING MOTEL KIDS

In Anaheim, California, just a short distance from Disneyland, over 1,000 families are residing in budget motels, often used by individuals involved in illicit activities such as drug dealing and prostitution. These families are unable to afford the upfront costs required for renting an apartment, leaving them with no alternative but to stay in these motels to avoid homelessness. As highlighted by Bruno Serato, a local restaurant owner, "Some people are stuck, they have no money. They need to live in that room. They've lost everything they have. They have no other choice. No choice."

Serato became aware of these families in 2005 when he encountered a young boy at the local Boys & Girls Club who was eating a bag of potato chips for dinner. Learning that the boy and his family were living in a motel, Serato discovered that the Boys & Girls Club had initiated a program to assist these "motel kids" by providing transportation from school to their motels. Despite receiving free breakfast and lunch at school, many of these children were still experiencing hunger in the evenings. In response, Serato began serving pasta dinners to around seventy children at the club each night, a number that grew to almost three hundred children by spring 2011. Serato covers the costs of food and transportation, amounting to approximately $2,000 per month, and estimates that his program has provided over 300,000 pasta dinners to motel kids by 2011.

Carlos and Anthony Gomez, aged 12, along with their family, who live in a motel room, are among those who benefit from Serato's pasta dinners. Their father expressed gratitude for the meals, stating "I no longer worry as much, about them [coming home] and there being no food. I know that they eat over there at [the] Boys & Girls Club."

Bruno Serato is simply delighted to lend a hand. "They're like customers," he elaborates, "but they're my favorite customers" (Toner 2011).

Serato's charitable efforts have been documented in various media outlets, and further information can be found on his charity's website at www.thecaterinasclub.org.

Toner, Kathleen. 2011. "Making Sure 'Motel Kids' Don't Go Hungry." *CNN.* Retrieved from (http://www.cnn.com/2011/LIVING/03/24/cnnheroes.serato.motel.kids/index.html).

Explaining Poverty

The question of why poverty exists and how individuals become impoverished is a central concern in sociology. Module 1 "The Importance of a Social Analytic Mind" introduces various sociological perspectives that offer insights into these questions by examining the structure of American society and its **stratification**, which encompasses a spectrum of wealth from the very affluent to the extremely poor. Before turning to explanations specific to poverty, it is important to grasp the broader views on **social stratification** presented in this module.

Generally, the functionalist and conflict perspectives seek to explain the origins and persistence of social stratification, while the symbolic interactionist perspective explores how such stratification shapes interpersonal dynamics in daily life. Table 10. "Theory snapshot on stratification," provides a concise overview of these three approaches.

Table 10. Theory snapshot on stratification

Theoretical Perspective	Major Assumptions
Functionalism	Stratification is necessary to induce people with special intelligence, knowledge, and skills to enter the most important occupations. For this reason, stratification is necessary and inevitable.
Conflict theory	Stratification results from lack of opportunity and from discrimination and prejudice against the poor, women, and people of color. It is neither necessary nor inevitable.
Symbolic interactionism	Stratification affects people's beliefs, lifestyles, daily interaction, and conceptions of themselves.

Source: University of Minnesota Libraries. 2016. *Social Problems: Continuity and Change*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing.

The functionalist perspective

In Module 1 "The Importance of a Social Analytic Mind" we discussed the functionalist theory, which suggests that societal structures and processes exist because they serve vital functions for the stability and continuity of society. Within this framework, functionalist sociologists assume that stratification exists because it fulfills important functions for society. This perspective was initially articulated over sixty years ago by Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore (1945) and their theory is grounded in several logical assumptions, positing that social stratification is both essential and unavoidable. When applied to American society, these assumptions can be summarized as follows:

1. **Certain occupations hold more significance than others.** For instance, brain surgery is deemed more critical than shoe shining.
2. **Certain occupations demand a greater level of expertise and knowledge than others.** Following the example above, brain surgery requires more specialized skills and education compared to shoe shining.
3. **Few individuals possess the aptitude to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge for these critical and highly specialized roles.** While many of us could proficiently shine shoes, only a select few could ever aspire to become brain surgeons.
4. **To incentivize individuals to pursue these crucial, highly skilled occupations, society offers them higher incomes or other rewards.** Consequently, certain individuals ascend higher in society's hierarchy, leading to the inevitability of social stratification.

To illustrate these assumptions, let's imagine a society where both shining shoes and performing brain surgery yield annual incomes of $150,000. While this scenario is purely *hypothetical*, it helps to demonstrate the following concept. If one opts for shining shoes, they can start earning this income at the age of 16. However, if they choose to pursue a career in brain surgery, they won't reach the same income level until around the age of 35. This is because they must first complete college and medical school, followed by several more years of medical training. While dedicating nineteen additional years beyond the age of 16 to education and training, along with taking on significant student loan debt, one

could have potentially earned $150,000 a year by shining shoes, amounting to a total of $2.85 million over those years. This prompts the question: which profession would you choose?

This example suggests that many individuals may not opt for careers such as brain surgery unless significant financial and other incentives are guaranteed. Consequently, society might face a shortage of individuals willing to undertake crucial roles unless similar rewards are assured. This leads to the necessity of stratification. With stratification comes the reality that some individuals will possess considerably less wealth than others. If stratification is deemed unavoidable, then poverty becomes an inevitable outcome. The functionalist perspective further implies that individuals experiencing poverty do so because they lack the capacity to attain the skills and knowledge required for high-paying, essential occupations.

While the functionalist perspective may initially appear logical, several years following the publication of Davis and Moore's theory, other sociologists highlighted significant flaws in their argument (Tumin 1953; Wrong 1959). First, comparing the significance of various types of jobs poses a challenge. For instance, consider the comparison between brain surgery and coal mining. While brain surgery may seem more crucial at first glance, society heavily relies on coal mining for its functioning. Similarly, when pondering the importance of professions like attorney and professor, one must be cautious in their assessment. Both roles play essential roles in society, each contributing in distinct yet valuable ways.

Second, the functionalist perspective suggests that the most critical roles in society command the highest salaries, while less crucial roles receive lower incomes. However, various examples, as highlighted earlier, challenge this notion. For example, coal miners typically earn considerably less than physicians, and professors generally have lower average earnings compared to lawyers. Moreover, a professional athlete may earn millions annually, dwarfing the income of the U.S. president, yet the relative importance to the nation is debatable. Despite the vital role elementary school teachers play, their salaries pale in comparison to those of sports agents, advertising executives, and many others whose contributions are arguably less essential.

Third, the functionalist perspective assumes that individuals ascend the socioeconomic hierarchy based on their abilities, skills, knowledge, and overall merit. This suggests that those who do not progress lack the necessary merit. However, this viewpoint overlooks the pervasive influence of unequal opportunities in shaping social stratification. Subsequent modules in this book discuss how factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, and class position profoundly affect individuals' opportunities to attain the necessary skills and training for occupations discussed within the functionalist framework.

Image by Timur Weber on Pexels

While the functionalist perspective may offer some insights, it falls short in explaining the glaring disparities in wealth and poverty witnessed not only in the United States but also in other nations. Even if we argue that higher incomes are necessary to incentivize individuals to pursue professions such as medicine, it doesn't necessarily justify the prevalence of poverty. Do CEOs truly require multimillion-dollar salaries to attract qualified candidates? Is the allure of challenge, favorable working conditions, and other perks not motivation enough for individuals to pursue high-paying positions? These questions remain unanswered by the functionalist framework, highlighting its limitations in addressing the complexities of economic inequality.

Another line of functionalist thinking directs its attention more specifically toward poverty rather than addressing social stratification in general. This functionalist perspective boldly argues that poverty endures because it serves certain beneficial roles within our society. These roles include the following: (1) individuals living in poverty undertake tasks that others are unwilling to perform; (2) the programs designed to aid impoverished individuals generate numerous employment opportunities; (3) impoverished individuals contribute to the economy by purchasing goods like day-old bread and secondhand clothing, thus enhancing the economic utility of these items; and (4) those in poverty create employment opportunities for professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and teachers who may not be qualified for positions serving wealthier clientele (Gans 1972). Due to poverty fulfilling these functions and more, the affluent classes have a vested interest in disregarding poverty to ensure its continued existence.

The conflict perspective

Conflict theory's perspective on stratification builds upon Karl Marx's notion of class-based societies and critiques the functionalist viewpoint previously discussed. Various interpretations rooted in conflict theory exist, all positing that social stratification arises from a fundamental conflict between the interests of the powerful, termed as the "haves," and those of the weak, known as the "have-nots" (Kerbo 2012). These individuals at the top of the social hierarchy exploit their position to perpetuate their dominance, even if it entails suppressing those at the bottom. At the very least, they wield considerable influence over legal systems, media, and other institutions, thereby reinforcing society's class divisions.

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Conflict theory generally ascribes social stratification and consequently poverty to the absence of opportunities resulting from discrimination and bias against marginalized groups such as the poor, women, and people of color. This perspective echoes one of the initial criticisms outlined in the previous section against the functionalist perspective. As previously mentioned, several subsequent modules in this book investigate the multitude of challenges that hinder upward mobility and the pursuit of healthy and fulfilling lives for individuals from these marginalized groups in the United States.

The symbolic interactionism perspective

Symbolic interactionism, with its focus on individual interactions and interpretations in everyday life, seeks to comprehend stratification, including poverty. Unlike functionalist and conflict perspectives, it doesn't aim to provide a root cause explanation for the existence of stratification. Instead, it examines how stratification influences people's lifestyles and their interactions with others.

Numerous sociological texts meticulously examine the lives of both urban and rural impoverished communities from a symbolic interactionist perspective (Anderson 1999; C. M. Duncan 2000; Liebow 1993; Rank 1994). Though these works vary in their subjects and settings, they collectively highlight the harsh reality that the poor often endure lives marked by silent anguish, necessitating various coping mechanisms to navigate their circumstances. Through vivid narratives, these texts humanize the consequences of poverty, providing readers with intricate insights into the daily struggles of impoverished individuals.

Classic journalistic works by authors outside the realm of social sciences also offer vivid portrayals of the lives of impoverished individuals (Bagdikian 1964; Harrington 1962). Following this tradition, a newspaper columnist who experienced poverty firsthand recently reminisced, "I know the feel of thick calluses on the bottom of shoeless feet. I know the bite of the cold breeze that slithers through a drafty house. I know the weight of constant worry over not having enough to fill a belly or fight an illness…Poverty is brutal, consuming and unforgiving. It strikes at the soul" (Blow 2011:A19).

Taking a lighter approach, instances of the symbolic interactionist framework are evident in various literary works and films illustrating the challenges encountered when individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds interact. For instance, in the film *Pretty Woman*, Richard Gere portrays a wealthy businessman who engages the services of a prostitute, played by Julia Roberts, to accompany him to upscale events. Robert's character undergoes a transformation, needing to acquire a new wardrobe and adapt to the etiquette of affluent social circles. The humor and emotional depth of the film arise from her struggles in assimilating into an affluent lifestyle.

Perspectives of poverty

The functionalist and conflict perspectives broadly address social stratification but do so indirectly regarding poverty. It wasn't until the 1960s when poverty gained national attention that scholars began to specifically investigate why individuals become and remain impoverished. Two contrasting explanations emerged, centering on whether poverty stems from issues within the poor themselves or from societal factors (Rank 2011). The former aligns with the functional theory of stratification and can be viewed as an individualistic explanation. The latter, stemming from conflict theory, offers a structural explanation, highlighting systemic issues within American society that contribute to poverty. Table 11. "Explanations ofpPoverty" summarizes these perspectives.

Table 11. Explanations of poverty

Explanation	Major Assumptions
Individualistic	Poverty results from the fact that poor people lack the motivation to work and have certain beliefs and values that contribute to their poverty.
Structural	Poverty results from problems in society that lead to a lack of opportunity and a lack of jobs.

Source: University of Minnesota Libraries. 2016. *Social Problems: Continuity and Change*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing.

It's crucial to determine which explanation is more plausible because, as sociologist Theresa C. Davidson (2009) notes, "beliefs about the causes of poverty shape attitudes toward the poor" (p. 136). More specifically, the explanation that individuals prefer influences their perception of government interventions aimed at assisting those in poverty. Those who attribute poverty to systemic issues within society are far more inclined than those who attribute it to personal shortcomings to advocate for increased government assistance for the impoverished (Bradley and Cole 2002). The explanation of poverty we endorse presumably impacts the level of empathy we feel towards those experiencing poverty, and our empathy, or lack thereof, subsequently influences our stance on the government's role in poverty alleviation efforts. Keeping this context in mind, what do the individualistic and structural explanations of poverty suggest?

Individualistic explanation

The **individualistic explanation** suggests that personal problems and deficiencies are the primary reasons for poverty among the poor. Historically, there was a perception that the poor were biologically inferior, although this viewpoint persists to some extent, it has become less prevalent. Instead, a more common belief today is that the poor lack the ambition and motivation to work hard and succeed. Surveys indicate that a majority of Americans hold this belief (Davidson 2009). A refined version of this explanation is known as the culture of poverty theory (Banfield 1974; Lewis 1966; Murray 2012). According to this theory, the poor typically possess beliefs and values that differ from those of the nonpoor, which perpetuates their poverty. For instance, they are characterized as impulsive and focused on immediate gratification rather than planning for the future.

No matter which viewpoint one adopts, the individualistic explanation can be seen as a blaming-the-victim approach (refer to Module 1 "The Importance of a Social Analytic Mind"). Critics argue that this explanation overlooks discrimination and other societal issues in the United States while overstating the differences in values between the poor and nonpoor (Ehrenreich 2012; Holland 2011; Schmidt 2012). In relation to the latter argument, they highlight that economically disadvantaged employed individuals work longer hours per week compared to their wealthier counterparts. Additionally, surveys indicate that impoverished parents place similar importance on education for their children as affluent parents do. These shared values and beliefs prompt critics of the individualistic explanation to argue that attributing poverty solely to a culture of poverty is not reasonable.

Structural explanation

According to the second perspective, known as the **structural explanation**, poverty in the United States is attributed to systemic issues within American society that result in unequal opportunities and a shortage of jobs. These issues encompass various forms of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, and age, as well as deficiencies in education and healthcare. Additionally, structural shifts in the American economy, such as the relocation of manufacturing industries from urban areas during the 1980s and 1990s, leading to substantial job losses, contribute to the problem. These factors collectively perpetuate a cycle of poverty, wherein the children of impoverished individuals often find themselves trapped in poverty or precarious financial situations as adults.

Rank (2011) summarizes this perspective "American poverty is largely the result of failings at the economic and political levels, rather than at the individual level…In contrast to [the individualistic] perspective, the basic problem lies in a shortage of viable opportunities for all Americans" (p. 18). According to Rank, the U.S. economy has increasingly generated low-paying, part-time, and benefit-lacking jobs over recent decades. Consequently, more Americans find themselves trapped in jobs that barely lift them out of poverty, if at all. Sociologist Fred Block and his colleagues echo this critique of the individualistic viewpoint, emphasizing "Most of our policies incorrectly assume that people can avoid or overcome poverty through hard work alone. Yet this assumption ignores the realities of our failing urban schools, increasing employment insecurities, and the lack of affordable housing, health care, and child care. It ignores the fact that the American Dream is rapidly becoming unattainable for an increasing number of Americans, whether employed or not" (Block et al. 2006:17).

Most sociologists lean towards the structural explanation. Subsequent sections in this book demonstrate that racial and ethnic discrimination, inadequate access to education and healthcare, and various other

challenges hinder the ability to escape poverty. Conversely, some ethnographic studies provide support for the individualistic explanation, revealing that certain values and behaviors among the poor exacerbate their situation (Small et al. 2010). For example, individuals with lower incomes exhibit higher rates of cigarette smoking (34 percent among those earning between $6,000 and $11,999 annually, compared to only 13 percent among those with incomes exceeding $90,000 (Goszkowski 2008), contributing to more severe health issues.

APPLYING A SOCIAL ANALTIC MINDSET

Too Poor to Work?

After watching the video "The Working Poor: The Price of the American Dream" explain why you think the majority of Americans believe poor people lack the motivation to work. Consider some of the comments people posted regarding this video. Next, discuss the research on labor-force participation and conclude if this data supports the belief that poor people lack motivation to work. Explain how research on this topic has impacted your thinking and perspective of the poor.

Taking an integrated perspective, certain researchers argue that the values and behaviors observed among impoverished communities stem from the condition of poverty itself (Small et al. 2010). These scholars acknowledge the existence of a culture of poverty, but they also posit that it exists as a means for the poor to navigate daily challenges imposed by their socioeconomic status. They suggest that if these challenges contribute to the formation of a culture of poverty, then poverty becomes a perpetuating cycle. Viewing poverty as both culturally and structurally rooted, these scholars advocate for initiatives aimed at enhancing structural opportunities for the impoverished while also addressing certain aspects of their values and behaviors, to effectively uplift those living in marginalized circumstances in the "other America."

The Consequences of Poverty

Poverty carries profound repercussions for those ensnared by its grasp, regardless of its origins. Numerous studies, conducted and analyzed by scholars, government bodies, and nonprofit organizations, have extensively outlined the impacts of poverty (and near-poverty) on the lives of those affected (Lindsey 2009; Moore et al. 2010; Neville 2011). Many of these investigations zoom in on childhood poverty, revealing its enduring effects. Broadly speaking, children raised in poverty are more likely to remain impoverished into adulthood, face higher odds of dropping out of high school, have an increased likelihood of becoming teenage parents, and encounter difficulties in securing employment. While a mere 1 percent of children who never experience poverty end up grappling with it as young adults, a staggering 32 percent of children raised in poverty find themselves in similar circumstances in their early adult years (Ratcliffe and McKernan 2010).

A recent study utilized government data to track the progress of children born between 1968 and 1975 until they reached ages 30 to 37 (Duncan and Magnuson 2011). The study compared individuals who experienced poverty during their early childhood with those whose families had incomes at least twice

the poverty line during the same period. In contrast to individuals who grew up in more affluent circumstances, adults who experienced poverty during their early childhood:

- completed, on average, two fewer years of schooling;
- earned incomes that were less than half of those achieved by adults from wealthier backgrounds;
- received an average of $826 more annually in food stamps;
- were nearly three times more likely to report being in poor health;
- were twice as likely to have a history of arrest (for males only); and
- were five times as likely to have become parents (for females only).

Family problems

Individuals living in poverty face a greater risk of encountering family issues such as divorce and domestic violence. As discussed in Module 3 "Social Inequality," stress plays a significant role in exacerbating these family problems. Managing a household, caring for children, and meeting financial obligations are stressors that affect families regardless of their economic status. However, poverty adds an extra layer of stress to these challenges. Consequently, families living in poverty experience heightened levels of stress compared to wealthier families, intensifying the occurrence of various family problems. Additionally, when these issues arise, impoverished families have fewer resources at their disposal to address them compared to their wealthier counterparts. To learn more about how these stressors impact children, visit the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) website created by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

EXAMINATION OF CHILDHOOD POVERTY

As highlighted in the text, childhood poverty can lead to lasting consequences throughout an individual's life. Children who grow up in poverty are more likely to remain in poverty as adults and are at a heightened risk of engaging in antisocial behavior during their youth. Additionally, they face increased chances of experiencing unemployment, involvement in criminal activities, and other challenges as they transition into adolescence and young adulthood.

Recent findings suggest that one explanation for these outcomes lies in the neurological effects poverty has on children, which can hinder their cognitive abilities and subsequently impact their behavior and learning potential. As Duncan and Magnuson (2011) note, "Emerging research in neuroscience and developmental psychology suggests that poverty early in a child's life may be particularly harmful because the astonishingly rapid development of young children's brains leaves them sensitive (and vulnerable) to environmental conditions."

In essence, poverty can alter the developmental trajectory of a child's brain, primarily due to stress. Children raised in poverty often encounter multiple stressors such as community crime, familial conflicts, financial instability, and health issues among family members. These stressors, as observed by Grusky and Wimer (2011), not only affect mental well-being but can also manifest in physiological changes, essentially "getting under the skin" and altering the body's response to its surroundings.

One significant physiological impact of poverty-induced stress is evidenced by Evans, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov (2011), who found that impoverished children experience elevated levels of stress hormones like cortisol and higher blood pressure, which impede neural development, affecting memory, language skills, behavior, and learning potential. Moreover, chronic stress can compromise the immune system, making children more

susceptible to illnesses during childhood and increasing the likelihood of health problems like hypertension and obesity later in life.

The policy implications of this scientific research are clear for public health scholar Shonkoff (2011), who emphasizes the importance of addressing the needs of disadvantaged children from an early age. Similarly, Duncan and Magnuson (2013) advocate for policies that target deep and persistent childhood poverty, suggesting increased support for families with young children and improvements in living conditions and nutrition. The scientific evidence underscores the urgency of mitigating poverty's detrimental effects during the crucial early years of a child's life.

Duncan, Greg J. and Katherine Magnuson. 2013. "The Long Reach of Early Childhood Poverty." *Economic Stress, Human Capital, and Families in Asia: Research and Policy Challenges,* 57-70.

Grusky, David and Christopher Wimer, eds. 2011. "Editors' note." *Pathways: A Magazine on Poverty, Inequality, and Social Policy*, p. 2.

Evans, Gary W., Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, and Pamela K. Klebanov. 2011. "Stressing Out the Poor: Chronic Physiological Stress and the Income-Achievement Gap." *Pathways: A Magazine on Poverty, Inequality, and Social Policy*, pp. 16–21.

Health, illness, and medical care

Those living in poverty often face a myriad of health challenges, including higher rates of infant mortality, premature death in adulthood, and mental health issues. Access to adequate medical care is also more limited among the poor. Also, children from low-income families are more likely to experience malnutrition, leading to many health, behavioral, and cognitive issues. These difficulties can hinder their academic performance and future job prospects, perpetuating the cycle of poverty from one generation to the next. Prior to the full implementation of the U.S. health-care reform legislation in 2010, many impoverished individuals lacked proper health insurance coverage, resulting in overcrowded and understaffed health clinics being their primary source of medical attention.

It is unclear to what extent health disparities experienced by impoverished individuals are attributable to their financial struggles and inadequate access to quality healthcare, as opposed to their own lifestyle choices like smoking and poor diet. Regardless of the precise factors at play, poverty significantly contributes to poor health outcomes. Recent studies suggest that poverty leads to nearly 150,000 deaths each year, a figure comparable to the mortality rate from lung cancer (Bakalar 2011).

The extent to which poor individuals' health suffers due to financial constraints and inadequate healthcare, as opposed to their own behaviors like smoking and poor dietary habits, is not fully understood. Nevertheless, what is clear is that poor health is a significant outcome of poverty. Recent studies indicate that poverty contributes to nearly 150,000 deaths each year, a figure roughly equivalent to the mortality rate from lung cancer (Bakalar 2011).

School Resources

Children from low-income backgrounds often attend poorly maintained schools with insufficient resources, resulting in substandard education. Compared to their wealthier peers, they are significantly less likely to graduate from high school or pursue higher education. This lack of educational attainment perpetuates a cycle of poverty, trapping them and their offspring in a cycle of deprivation that persists across generations. Scholars discuss whether the underperformance of economically disadvantaged

children primarily stems from inadequate schooling or their own impoverished circumstances. Nonetheless, irrespective of the root causes, the educational challenges stemming from poverty remain a significant consequence.

Housing and homelessness

As expected, individuals living in poverty face a higher likelihood of experiencing homelessness compared to those who are not impoverished. Additionally, they are more prone to residing in deteriorating housing conditions and facing barriers to homeownership. Many impoverished families allocate over half of their income towards rent and often reside in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, which lack essential amenities such as job opportunities and quality education. The insufficient availability of adequate housing for the poor remains a significant nationwide issue, compounded by the alarming rates of homelessness. According to Lee et al. (2010), an estimated 1.6 million individuals, including over 300,000 children, experience homelessness at least intermittently throughout the year.

Crime and victimization

Individuals living in poverty (and those on the brink of it) are disproportionately involved in street crimes such as homicide, robbery, and burglary, as well as being the primary victims of such crimes. This module will explore various factors contributing to this intertwined relationship between poverty and street crime. Among these factors are the intense frustration and stress associated with poverty and the concentration of impoverished individuals in high-crime areas. In these neighborhoods, children are more likely to be influenced by older peers involved in gangs or criminal activities, increasing the likelihood of both perpetrating and falling victim to crime. Also, due to their higher likelihood of engaging in street crimes, poor and near-poor individuals constitute most of those arrested, convicted, and imprisoned for such offenses. Notably, most of the over 2 million individuals incarcerated in the nation's prisons and jails come from impoverished backgrounds. Thus, criminal behavior and victimization are significant outcomes of poverty.

POVERTY POLICIES IN WESTERN DEMOCRACIES

When examining poverty rates across different countries, scholars often use a metric based on the percentage of households earning less than half of the nation's median household income after taxes and government transfers. In data from the late 2000s, 17.3 percent of US households fell under this definition of poverty. The average poverty rate among other Western nations, excluding the United States, is 9.5 percent. Therefore, the US poverty rate is nearly twice as high as the average among these other democracies.

Why does the United States experience significantly higher poverty levels compared to its Western peers? Several distinctions between the United States and other nations emerge (Brady 2009; Russell 2011). First, other Western countries maintain higher minimum wages and more robust labor unions compared to the United States, resulting in incomes that help lift individuals above the poverty threshold. Second, compared to the United States, other nations allocate a significantly larger portion of their gross domestic product towards social expenditures, which encompass income support and various social services like child-care subsidies and housing allowances. Sociologist John Iceland (2006) highlights this, stating that "Such countries often invest heavily in both universal benefits, such as maternity leave, child care, and medical care, and in promoting work among [poor] families…The United States, in comparison with other advanced nations, lacks national health insurance, provides less publicly supported housing, and spends less on job training and job creation" (p. 136). Block and colleagues (Block et al. 2006) echo

this sentiment, affirming that "These other countries all take a more comprehensive government approach to combating poverty, and they assume that it is caused by economic and structural factors rather than bad behavior" (p. 17).

The comparison between the United Kingdom and the United States offers a clear illustration of the differing strategies employed in addressing poverty. In 1994, approximately 30 percent of British children were living in poverty. However, by 2009, this number had decreased by more than half to 12 percent. In stark contrast, the child poverty rate in the United States in 2009 was nearly 21 percent, highlighting the inadequacy of the American approach compared to the more effective methods adopted by other wealthy democracies.

Britain employed three approaches to diminish its child poverty rate and provide support for impoverished children and their families. Initially, it encouraged more economically disadvantaged parents to enter the workforce by introducing several new measures, such as a national minimum wage set higher than its US equivalent and various tax benefits for low-income earners. Consequently, the proportion of single parents engaged in employment surged from 45 percent in 1997 to 57 percent in 2008. Secondly, Britain augmented child welfare benefits regardless of parental employment status. Thirdly, it extended paid maternity leave from four months to nine months, introduced two weeks of paid paternity leave, established universal preschool (which not only enhances children's cognitive development but also facilitates parental workforce participation), amplified child-care assistance, and facilitated adjustments in working hours for parents with young children to align with their caregiving responsibilities (Waldfogel 2010). Despite the significant decline in the British child poverty rate attributed to these strategies, the child poverty rate in the US remained stagnant.

In summary, the United States experiences significantly higher poverty rates compared to other democratic nations, partly due to its comparatively lower expenditure on poverty alleviation efforts. Despite having substantial wealth, the U.S. has opted not to emulate the strategies of other countries, resulting in persistently high poverty levels. As Nobel laureate economist Paul Krugman (2006) succinctly puts it, "Government truly can be a force for good. Decades of propaganda have conditioned many Americans to assume that government is always incompetent…But the [British experience has] shown that a government that seriously tries to reduce poverty can achieve a lot" (p. A25).

Krugman, Paul. 2006. "Helping the poor, the British way." *New York Times*, p. A25.

Waldfogel, Jane. 2010. *Britain's War on Poverty*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

EDUCATION

Today, the education system for grades kindergarten through eighth grade (K–8) and high school (9–12) encounters various challenges and concerns. These aren't only relevant to teachers and families but also attract attention from sociologists and other social scientists. While we can't cover all these matters in detail here, we'll focus on some of the most intriguing and significant ones.

Schools & Inequality

As we mentioned before, schools vary widely in their funding, conditions, and other factors. Renowned author and education critic Jonathan Kozol describes these differences as "savage inequalities," which is the title of one of his books (Kozol 1991). Kozol became concerned about the unequal treatment of schools based on his experience as a young teacher in a public elementary school in a Boston inner-city neighborhood during the 1960s. He was shocked to find that his school was in terrible condition. The building itself was falling apart, with crumbling plaster and inadequate facilities. Class sizes were large,

and the school was so overcrowded that Kozol's fourth-grade class had to meet in an auditorium shared with another class, the school choir, and, at times, students practicing for the Christmas play. Kozol's observations inspired him to write his first acclaimed book, *Death at an Early Age* (Kozol 1967).
In 1991, Kozol conducted a nationwide study comparing public schools in inner-city neighborhoods to those in suburbs. He found significant differences in school funding and quality of education. For example, in Camden, New Jersey, schools spent less than half per student compared to wealthier towns like Princeton. Similar disparities were seen in Chicago and New York City, where urban schools spent only about half as much as nearby suburban schools.

Kozol's visits to the city and suburban schools revealed further contrasts. In East St. Louis, Illinois, where most residents are poor and African American, schools faced serious issues such as sewage backups and outdated science labs. One high school had inadequate resources, including a shortage of textbooks and missing window glass. Conversely, suburban schools boasted impressive facilities and resources. For instance, a Chicago suburb high school had multiple gyms and an Olympic-sized swimming pool, while a New Jersey suburban high school offered a wide range of AP courses, sports, and a robust music program.

Image by Katrina Holmes on Pexels

Based on his observations, Kozol concluded that children in poor rural and urban areas are not receiving adequate support from the United States. He argued that starting life in poverty already puts these children at a disadvantage, and the quality of education they receive exacerbates these challenges, hindering the realization of equal opportunities for all Americans. Kozol emphasized that regardless of background, all children should have access to the opportunities America offers. Kozol (1991) observed, “All our children ought to be allowed a stake in the enormous richness of America. Whether they were born to poor white Appalachians or to wealthy Texans, to poor black people in the Bronx or to rich people in Manhasset or Winnetka, they are all quite wonderful and innocent when they are small. We soil them needlessly.”

Despite being published over thirty years ago, the conditions described by Kozol persist today, as evident from recent reports. In Washington, DC, many public schools faced various issues, including leaking roofs, electrical problems, and health violations in cafeterias. Building repairs were delayed and thousands of urgent requests were pending for over a year. Mouse infestations were common; students were even naming and drawing the mice in one elementary school.

Disparities in funding between urban and suburban schools continue to be substantial. For instance, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, per-pupil expenditure was significantly lower than in nearby suburban areas like Lower Merion Township. Consequently, teacher salaries in low-income schools are notably lower, leading to a higher prevalence of inexperienced teachers compared to wealthier schools, which impacts teaching effectiveness.

School segregation

An important aspect of educational inequality is racial segregation in schools. Prior to 1954, Southern schools were legally segregated based on race (known as de jure segregation). Laws dictated which

schools children attended, with White schools receiving better funding. The landmark Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954 outlawed de jure segregation, but Southern districts resisted change, and segregation persisted until the civil rights movement achieved significant victories a decade later.
In the North, schools were also segregated, and despite the Brown decision, segregation intensified over time. Northern segregation wasn't enforced by law but arose from residential patterns. When neighborhoods were racially homogenous, so were the schools serving them. This informal segregation is termed de facto segregation.

Today, many children still attend segregated schools due to residential patterns, a situation termed "apartheid schooling" by Kozol (2005). Approximately 40 percent of African American and Latinx/e American students attend highly segregated schools, where at least 90 percent of students are of color—a higher level of segregation compared to four decades ago. Despite its legality, this segregation leads to schools primarily composed of African American and/or Latinx/e American students, which suffer from insufficient funding, inadequate facilities, and underpaid teachers (Orfield et al. 2011).

During the 1960s and 1970s, attempts were made to combat de facto segregation through busing. Urban African American children were bused to suburban white schools and vice versa, although less frequently (Lukas 1985). However, busing sparked intense controversy, particularly among white parents who opposed it out of concerns for their children's safety and education quality in urban schools. Racial prejudice further fueled their opposition. African American parents, while more supportive of busing, also questioned its effectiveness, especially considering their children's frequent busing and encounters with racial hostility in formerly all-white schools.

In the 1960s and 1970s, attempts were made by states, municipalities, and federal courts to reduce de facto segregation through busing. This involved transporting urban African American children to suburban White schools and, less frequently, vice versa. Busing sparked intense controversy, with white parents opposing it due to concerns about safety and the quality of education in urban schools, fueled by racial prejudice. African American parents, while more supportive of busing, also questioned its effectiveness, particularly as their children often faced hostility when integrating formerly all-White schools.

EMPLOYMENT

The economy and the nature of employment significantly impact the lives of all Americans. Concurrently, they also give rise to numerous issues that affect millions across the nation. This section will explore several of these challenges.

Wages & Job Loss

Given the significant economic downturn that struck the United States starting in late 2007, it's unsurprising that millions of jobs vanished over the past five years and wages have dwindled for numerous Americans. However, even prior to the recession's onset, troubling signs were apparent in the American economy. These signs included a widespread decline in job opportunities across various sectors and a stagnation of wages.

These trends are partly due to the United States transitioning into a *post-industrial* economy, aligning with other industrialized nations. In this type of economy, information technology and service-based

occupations take precedence over traditional manufacturing roles reliant on machinery. While physical strength and manual dexterity were essential for many industrial jobs, cognitive abilities and effective communication skills are now crucial for success in postindustrial occupations.

The transition to a postindustrial economy has brought both advantages and challenges for many Americans. The benefits of the information age are numerous and apparent, but there is also a downside for the workers who have been marginalized by post-industrialization and the globalization of the economy. Starting from the 1980s, numerous manufacturing companies relocated their operations from US urban centers to locations in the developing world, primarily in Asia and other regions, a phenomenon known as **capital flight**. Coupled with economic struggles, these developments have contributed to the loss of 5.5 million manufacturing jobs in the American economy since 2000 (Hall 2011).

Another issue of concern is **outsourcing**; where American companies opt to employ workers from abroad for tasks such as customer care and billing services, roles that were traditionally held by Americans. China, India, and the Philippines, with their proficient English-speaking workforces, are the main destinations for outsourcing by US companies. Dube and Kaplan (2010), Goldschmidt and Schmieder (2017), Dorn et al. (2018), and Drenik et al. (2020) have all found evidence indicating a growing trend of domestic outsourcing. Their studies reveal that workers who are outsourced are facing wage decreases in the United States, Germany, and Argentina, respectively.

These issues reflect a broader trend in the United States shifting away from jobs in goods production towards service sector employment. While some service jobs, particularly in fields like finance and technology, offer high salaries, many others involve low-wage positions such as those in restaurants and clerical work. These jobs typically pay less than the manufacturing roles they've replaced. Consequently, the average hourly wage for workers (excluding managers and supervisors) in the U.S., adjusted for inflation to 2009 dollars, only increased by one dollar from $17.46 in 1979 to $18.63 in 2009. This minimal change signifies a mere 0.2 percent annual increase over three decades, indicating stagnation in workers' wages as noted by the Economic Policy Institute in 2012.

Recent wage changes also vary depending on an individual's social class. From 1989 to 2007, while the average compensation for chief executive officers (CEOs) of large corporations surged by 167 percent, the average compensation for the average worker only increased by 10 percent (Mishel et al. 2009). Another striking perspective on this gap is evident when comparing CEO compensation to that of the typical worker. In 1965, CEOs earned on average twenty-four times more than the typical worker; by 2009, this figure had ballooned to 185 times greater (Economic Policy Institute 2012). These statistics highlight the increasing economic disparity in the United States, a concern that we will explore in more detail later in this module.

The decline of labor unions

One of the significant changes that came with industrialization in the nineteenth century was the emergence of labor unions and their clashes with management regarding wages and working conditions (Dubofsky and Dulles 2010). Workers were paid meager wages and toiled under dreadful conditions. A typical worker put in at least ten hours per day, six or seven days a week, with minimal or no extra pay for overtime, and no compensation for vacations or holidays. To enhance their wages and working conditions, many labor unions were established post-Civil War. However, they faced staunch resistance

from corporations, the government, and the legal system. Companies shared information about suspected union members, effectively blacklisting them from employment. Striking workers often faced arrest for violating anti-strike laws, and when acquitted by juries, employers sought injunctions from judges to prevent strikes. Workers who persisted in striking were then held in contempt of court, bypassing jury involvement in the process.

Labor disputes were a significant feature of the Great Depression era, with many attributing their financial struggles to business leaders. Detroit's auto plants witnessed extensive sit-ins and other forms of labor protests during this time. In reaction to these events, Congress enacted various laws granting workers fundamental rights such as a minimum wage, the freedom to join unions, a maximum limit on working hours, and other rights that are now considered standard in American labor practices.

Labor unions have experienced a decline in their influence, particularly with the shift from industrial to postindustrial economies and the dwindling manufacturing sector in the United States. Approximately forty years ago, a quarter of all private-sector nonagricultural employees were union members. By 1985, this percentage had decreased to 14.6, and presently, it stands at a mere 7.2 (Hirsch and Macpherson 2011). In response to this trend, unions have redoubled their efforts to recruit members. However, they have encountered obstacles within US labor laws that permit companies to impede union formation. For instance, following a successful unionization vote, companies can challenge the decision, leading to prolonged legal battles that delay union recognition. Consequently, the issues driving workers to seek union representation, such as low wages and inadequate working conditions, persist unabated in the interim.

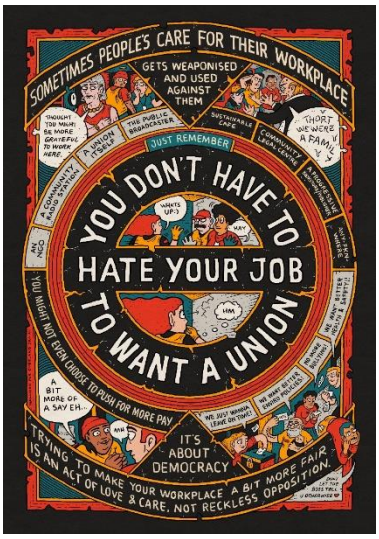


Image by Sam Wallman, licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

As unions flourished in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they played a crucial role in elevating workers' wages. Conversely, the diminishing presence of unions has had a detrimental impact on wages. Mishel et al. (2009) offer two explanations for this decline. First, unionized workers typically earn about 14 percent more than their non-union counterparts, even when factors such as experience, education, and occupation are considered. This phenomenon, termed the union wage premium, has become less accessible to workers due to the dwindling membership in unions over the past four decades. Second, the diminishing influence of unions has resulted in reduced pressure on non-union employers to match the wage levels set by unionized workplaces.

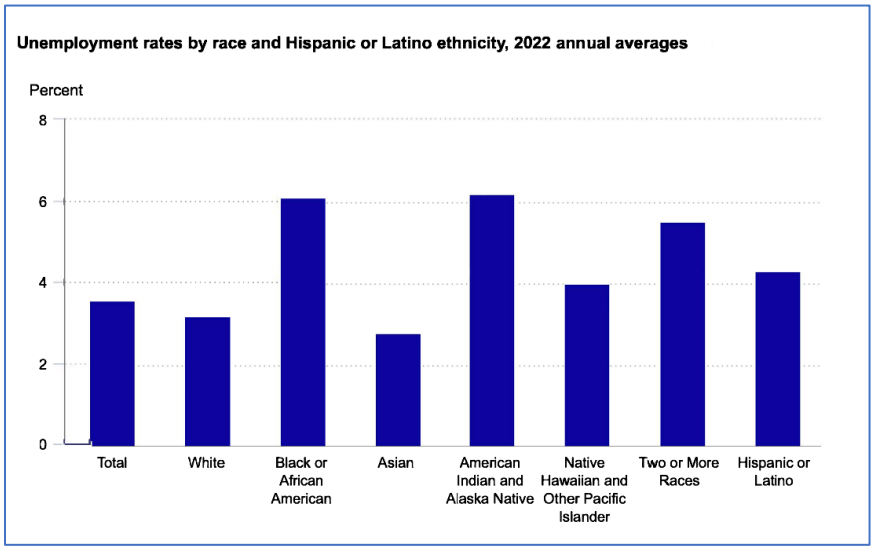
Given that the union wage premium is higher for African Americans and Latinx/e people compared to Whites, the impact of declining unions on wages has likely been more pronounced for these groups than for Whites. Additionally, unionized workers are more inclined to have employer-provided health insurance with lower premiums and deductibles compared to nonunion workers. Consequently, the erosion of unions has resulted in a scenario where the typical worker today is less likely to have employer-sponsored health insurance and, if they do, is more likely to face higher premiums and deductibles.

Unemployment

Many unemployed individuals find themselves in involuntary unemployment. For them, the repercussions, both financial and psychological, can be severe, as highlighted in the news story that introduced this module.

Unemployment rates fluctuate in accordance with economic conditions, reaching a peak of 10.2 percent in October 2009 during the Great Recession, which commenced nearly two years prior. By 2022, the national unemployment rate declined to 3.6 percent. However, irrespective of whether unemployment is high or low, it consistently differs across racial and ethnic lines. African American and Latinx/e American communities experience disproportionately higher unemployment rates compared to their white counterparts, as illustrated in Figure 6. "Unemployment rates by race and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, 2022 annual averages." Additionally, younger individuals face higher unemployment rates compared to older individuals. In February 2012, 23.8 percent of teenagers in the labor force (aged 16–19) were unemployed, a rate three times higher than that of adults. Among this demographic, African Americans experienced a particularly elevated unemployment rate of 34.7 percent, which was twice as high as the rate for whites in the same age group (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2022).

Figure 6. **Unemployment rates by race and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, 2022 annual averages**



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey. Retrieved April 23, 2024 (bls.gov/opub/reports/race-and-ethnicity/2022/home.htm).

Unemployment figures can be deceptive because they overlook individuals who are underemployed. This category encompasses not only the unemployed but also two other groups: (a) individuals who work part-time but desire full-time employment, often referred to as the marginally attached, and (b) those who have ceased job hunting due to unsuccessful searches. Numerous economists argue that underemployment offers a more precise gauge than unemployment of the extent of employment challenges faced by individuals.

For instance, in December 2011, amidst an 8.5 percent unemployment rate with 13 million individuals officially without work, the underemployment rate stood at 15.2 percent, encompassing 23.8 million individuals (Shierholz 2012). These numbers nearly double the official unemployment count. Demonstrating the racial and ethnic divide in unemployment, 24.4 percent of African American workers

and 22.3 percent of Latinx workers experienced underemployment, compared to only 12.5 percent of white workers. Reflecting on the substantial underemployment during the Great Recession, one economist remarked, “When you combine the long-term unemployed with those who are dropping out and those who are working part time because they can’t find anything else, it is just far beyond anything we’ve seen in the job market since the 1930s” (Herbert 2010: A25).

As we've observed, unemployment tends to increase during economic downturns, and one's race and ethnicity can influence the likelihood of experiencing unemployment. These findings align with the sociological imagination, as highlighted in “Module 1. The Importance of a Social Analytic Mind.” C. Wright Mills (1959) stressed that unemployment should be seen more as a societal problem rather than an individual challenge. When a significant portion of the population faces unemployment during an economic crisis, particularly when there is clear evidence of disproportionately higher unemployment rates among marginalized racial and ethnic groups who often lack access to education and training necessary for employment, it becomes evident that high unemployment rates reflect broader societal issues rather than isolated personal difficulties.

Various challenges hinder people of color from securing employment opportunities, thereby exacerbating racial and ethnic disparities in unemployment rates. The issues are highlighted below.

RACE, ETHNICITY, & EMPLOYMENT

As discussed in the text, individuals from racial minority groups are more likely to face unemployment or underemployment compared to white individuals. While differences in educational attainment contribute to these disparities, there are other significant challenges at play.

One notable issue is racial discrimination by employers, irrespective of their awareness of such behavior. A study detailed in Module 3 "Social Inequality," conducted by sociologist Devah Pager (2003), illustrates this point. Pager's study involved young white and African American men applying independently for various jobs in Milwaukee. Despite wearing similar clothing and presenting comparable levels of education and qualifications, some applicants disclosed a criminal record while others did not. Shockingly, African American applicants *without* criminal records were hired at the same dismal rate as white applicants *with* criminal records, providing compelling evidence of racial bias in hiring practices.

Pager and sociologists Bruce Western and Bart Bonikowski conducted a study on racial discrimination through a field experiment in New York City (Pager, Bonikowski, and Western 2009). They enlisted individuals of different racial backgrounds – white, African American, and Latinx – who were described as "well-spoken, clean-cut young men" (p. 781). These testers applied in person for entry-level service positions, such as retail sales and delivery drivers, which required only a high school education, and all had similar qualifications on paper. The results revealed that 31 percent of white testers received callbacks or job offers, while only 25.2 percent of Latinx testers and 15.2 percent of African American testers did. The researchers concluded that these findings contribute to a “large research program demonstrating the continuing contribution of discrimination to racial inequality in the post-civil rights era” (p. 794).

Further evidence indicates racial discrimination in hiring practices. Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) conducted a study where job applications were submitted in response to help-wanted ads in Boston and Chicago. These applications were randomly assigned either a "white-sounding" name (e.g., Emily or Greg) or an "African American–sounding" name (e.g., Jamal and Lakisha). The results revealed that applications with white names received 50 percent more callbacks for job interviews compared to those with African American names.

Racial disparities in job access are partly influenced by differences in access to informal networks, which are crucial for job opportunities. Sociologist Steve McDonald and his colleagues discovered, in a study based on nationwide survey data, that people of color and women are less likely than white males to hear about available high-level supervisory positions through informal channels (McDonald, Nan, and Ao 2009).

As highlighted by these studies, research conducted by sociologists and other social scientists underscores the enduring impact of race and ethnicity on employment opportunities for Americans. This research consistently demonstrates the presence of discrimination, whether conscious or unconscious, in the hiring process, as well as disparities in access to informal networks which play a crucial role in securing employment. By revealing such evidence, these studies emphasize the urgency of addressing issues related to discrimination, equitable access to informal networks, and other contributing factors that perpetuate racial and ethnic disparities in employment.

Bertrand, Marianne and Sendhil Mullainathan. 2004. "Are Emily and Greg more Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination." *American Economic Review 94(4)*: 991-1013.

McDonald, Steve, Lin Nan, and Dan Ao. 2009. "Networks of Opportunity: Gender, Race, and Job Leads." *Social Problems 56*(3): 385–402.

Pager, Devah. 2003. "The Mark of a Criminal Record." *American Journal of Sociology 108*(5): 937–975.

Pager, Devah, Bart Bonikowski, and Bruce Western. 2009. "Discrimination in a Low-Wage Labor Market: A Field Experiment." *American Sociological Review 74*(5): 777–799.

The impact of unemployment

While the initial news article shared in this module provided a poignant portrayal of individuals seeking assistance at food banks due to unemployment, survey data also present stark evidence of the social and psychological impacts of joblessness. In July 2010, the Pew Research Center released a report derived from a survey involving 810 adults who were either presently unemployed or had experienced unemployment since the onset of the Great Recession in December 2007, alongside 1,093 individuals who had remained employed throughout the recession (Morin and Kochhar 2010). The report, titled "Lost Income, Lost Friends—and Loss of Self-Respect," succinctly captured its key findings.

Among those who endured **long-term unemployment**, a staggering 44 percent reported significant life-altering effects due to the recession, contrasting sharply with only 20 percent of those who had never faced unemployment. Over half of those long-term unemployed witnessed a decrease in their family income, while more than 40 percent indicated strained family relations and loss of contact with close friends. Additionally, 38 percent admitted to a decline in self-respect due to unemployment. Financial strain was prevalent, with one-third struggling to meet rent or mortgage payments, compared to just 16 percent of those unaffected by unemployment during the recession. Half resorted to borrowing money from relatives or friends to cover expenses, a stark contrast to the 18 percent among the never unemployed. Sleep difficulties afflicted nearly half of all unemployed individuals, and 5 percent reported grappling with substance abuse issues. These statistics collectively portray the distressing social and psychological toll of unemployment during the Great Recession, which commenced in late 2007.

Corporations

One significant aspect of modern capitalism that sparks debate is the corporation, an organized entity with a legal identity distinct from its members, granting it the authority to enter contracts.

Adam Smith, the architect of capitalism, envisioned a system where individuals would possess the means of production and engage in competitive pursuit of profit. This blueprint was initially adopted by the United States during its early phase of industrial development. However, post-Civil War, a significant shift occurred, with corporations swiftly supplanting individuals and families as the proprietors of production means and as the primary contenders for profit. As these corporate entities burgeoned in the aftermath of the Civil War, they promptly sought to dominate their respective markets through tactics such as acquiring competitors and driving others out of business. This endeavor often involved engaging in unethical practices such as bribery, kickbacks, and intricate financial maneuvers. Moreover, these corporations were notorious for establishing workplaces characterized by deplorable conditions. Their dubious financial dealings earned their top executives the moniker "robber barons" and prompted the federal government to enact the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890, aimed at prohibiting anti-competitive behavior that inflated prices (Hillstrom and Hillstrom 2005).

Over a hundred years later, corporations have proliferated in both quantity and scale. While the United States boasts several million corporations, the majority are relatively modest in size. Conversely, the largest five hundred corporations each generate annual revenues surpassing $4.3 billion (as of 2011) and employ thousands of individuals. Cumulatively, their assets reach into the trillions of dollars (CNN Money 2015). As of 2020, the Fortune 500 companies represent approximately two-thirds of the United States' gross domestic product with approximately $14.2 trillion in revenue, $1.2 trillion in profits, and $20.4 trillion in total market value. It's accurate to assert that these entities wield significant control over the nation's economy. Together, they account for the bulk of the private sector output, employ millions, and generate revenues comparable to a substantial portion of the U.S. gross domestic product. The enormity and influence of corporations often dampens the competitive spirit intrinsic to capitalism. For instance, several industries, such as breakfast cereals, are dominated by just a handful of corporations, which curtails competition by limiting product variety and the number of competitors, leading to higher prices for consumers (Parenti 2011).

In recent decades, there has been a notable increase in the prevalence of **multinational corporations**, which are companies headquartered in one country but have operations spread across multiple nations (Wettstein 2009). Multinational corporations based in the United States and their overseas subsidiaries collectively possess assets exceeding $17 trillion and provide employment to over 31 million individuals (US Census Bureau 2012). Remarkably, the assets of the largest multinational corporations surpass the wealth of many sovereign nations. Frequently, these corporations establish operations in developing countries where low labor costs make them attractive investment destinations. In these nations, many multinational employees toil in sweatshops for meager wages and endure inadequate living conditions. Critics argue that multinational corporations not only mistreat workers in these countries but also exploit their natural resources. Conversely, proponents argue that these corporations bring employment opportunities to impoverished nations and contribute to their economic advancement. The ongoing

debate surrounding multinational corporations underscores the contentious nature of their dominance and its implications.

Economic inequality.

In 2011, the Occupy Wall Street movement gained widespread recognition for drawing attention to economic inequality. By highlighting the gap between the wealthiest 1% and the remaining 99%, they criticized the increasing concentration of wealth among the ultra-rich and the widening inequality over recent decades. This movement's slogan, "We are the 99%," symbolized the collective discontent with this disparity. Further exploration of economic inequality is warranted in this context.

OCCUPY WALL STREET

Prior to 2011, economic inequality in the United States undoubtedly existed and had notably escalated since the 1970s. However, while social scientists were concerned about economic inequality, it did not capture the attention of the mainstream news media. Consequently, since economic inequality was largely overlooked by the news media, it also failed to resonate as a significant concern among the public. Everything changed on September 17, 2011, when a large group identifying themselves as "Occupy Wall Street" marched through New York City's financial district. They established encampments that lasted for weeks, protesting the major banks and corporations for their role in the 2007-2008 economic collapse and highlighting their influence over the political system. This movement quickly gained momentum, with similar Occupy protests popping up in over one hundred U.S. cities and hundreds more worldwide. Their rallying cry, "We are the 99%," echoed across the nation as "occupy" became a commonly used verb.

By winter, most Occupy encampments had disbanded, primarily due to legal crackdowns or harsh weather conditions. Nonetheless, by this time, the Occupy protesters had garnered widespread attention from the news media. According to a December 2011 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, 44 percent of Americans voiced their support for the Occupy Wall Street movement, while 35 percent expressed opposition. Nearly half (48 percent) indicated agreement with the movement's concerns, whereas 30 percent disagreed. The poll also revealed that 61 percent of respondents believed that the US economic system “unfairly favors the wealthy,” while 36 percent deemed it fair to all Americans. Moreover, a significant majority (77 percent) stated that “there is too much power in the hands of a few rich people and corporations.” Interestingly, these opinions varied notably based on political party affiliation. For instance, 91 percent of Democrats agreed that a select few rich individuals and corporations held too much power, compared to 80 percent of Independents and only 53 percent of Republicans. Despite political disagreements, Occupy Wall Street effectively highlighted economic inequality and associated issues on a national scale. Within a mere few months in 2011, it significantly impacted the discourse.

Pew Research Center. 2011. “Frustration with Congress Could Hurt Republican Incumbents.” Retrieved from (https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2011/12/15/frustration-with-congress-could-hurt-republican-incumbents/).

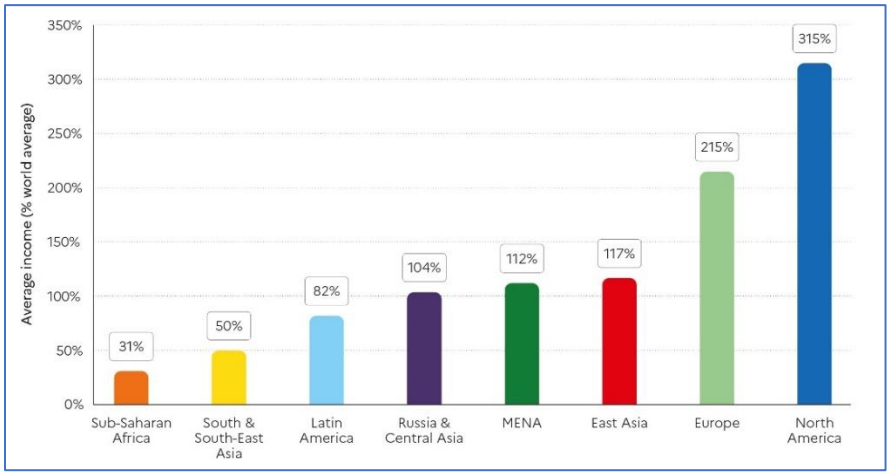
Vanden Heuvel, Katrina. 2012. “The Occupy Effect.” *The Nation*. Retrieved from (http://www.thenation.com/blog/165883/occupy-effect?rel=emailNation).

Let's begin by reviewing economic inequality, which is the degree of difference in wealth between the affluent and the impoverished. In virtually all societies, there are varying levels of wealth among individuals, but the crucial aspect to consider is the *magnitude* of these differences. When there is a significant gap between the wealthy and the poor, we describe this as substantial economic inequality. Conversely, when the gap is minimal, we characterize it as relatively limited economic inequality.

Viewed through this lens, the United States displays a significant level of economic inequality. A common method for assessing this inequality involves arranging the nation's families by income, dividing them into *fifths* from lowest to highest. This results in the poorest fifth, the second fifth, and so forth, until reaching the wealthiest fifth. By doing so, we can analyze what proportion of the nation's total income each fifth possesses. The data reveals that the poorest fifth of families only holds 3.3 percent of the nation's income, while the richest fifth enjoys a substantial 50.2 percent. Another perspective is that the wealthiest 20 percent of the population possesses as much income as the remaining 80 percent combined.

This level of inequality is unparalleled among industrialized nations. Figure 7. "Average income across world regions, 2021," illustrates average incomes across various world regions, represented as a percentage of the global average income of $18,250 per year. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the average income is 31% of the global average, while in South and Southeast Asia, it stands at 50% (Chancel et al. 2022). Latin America, East Asia, and Russia and Central Asia hover around the global average. Europe exceeds the global average by more than double (215%), while North America triples it. Consequently, North Americans earn 6 to 10 times more on average than Sub-Saharan Africans and South and Southeast Asians, whereas East Asians earn half of what Europeans do.

Figure 7. Average income across world regions, 2021



Source: “Global Economic Inequality – Insights” in the World Inequality Report, 2022. Retrieved April 23, 2024 (https://wir2022.wid.world/chapter-1/).

If we were to analyze income earned per hour worked, the disparity between affluent and impoverished countries would be even more pronounced (due to Sub-Saharan Africans and Southeast Asians working around 30% more hours per year than Europeans and North Americans). Additionally, the hourly income gap between Europeans and North Americans would decrease by 30% because North Americans work longer hours. This underscores the importance of considering various indicators such as time spent at work, quality of public services and infrastructure, civic and human rights, and environmental standards alongside income to gauge living standard inequalities across nations. There is no singular indicator to measure inequality across nations and individuals globally (Chancel et al. 2022).

APPLYING A SOCIAL ANALYTIC MINDSET

PEW Research Center: Poverty & Income Calculator

Read the article "Are you in the American middle class?," and complete the "Income Calculator Exercise."

1. See where you are in the distribution of Americans by income tier.
2. Compare yourself to others in the U.S. with similar demographic data.
3. Think about it. . . after reading the article, what trends are indicated in the distribution of wealth among classes. Does this research align with your current thinking on class?

Pew Research Center. 2020. "Are You in the American Middle Class?" Pew Research Center: Washington, D.C. Retrieved March 3, 2024 (http://www.pewresearch.org/topics/poverty/).

CORE INSIGHTS

Understanding the scope and social patterns of poverty reveals its multidimensional nature and pervasive impact on individuals and communities. Sociological perspectives on poverty, including functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionism, offer distinct lenses for interpreting its causes, consequences, and societal implications.

Exploring various sociological views on poverty underscores the role of social structures, power dynamics, and cultural norms in perpetuating or alleviating economic disparities. While functionalists emphasize the role of poverty in maintaining social order, conflict theorists highlight its function in perpetuating inequality and social stratification. Symbolic interactionists focus on the subjective meanings and experiences of poverty within interpersonal interactions and societal contexts.

Examining the consequences of poverty illuminates its detrimental effects on family dynamics, physical and mental health, educational attainment, housing stability, and involvement in criminal activities. Persistent poverty exacerbates social exclusion, limits opportunities for upward mobility, and perpetuates intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.

Disparities in elementary and secondary education, including school segregation and resource allocation, underscore systemic barriers that perpetuate educational inequalities along racial, socioeconomic, and geographic lines. Addressing these disparities requires equitable funding, inclusive curriculum, and policies that promote diversity and integration.

The impact of job loss, declining labor unions, and unemployment exacerbates economic inequality by eroding workers' bargaining power, diminishing social protections, and widening the wealth gap. Structural changes in the labor market, coupled with globalization and technological advancements, contribute to precarious employment conditions and income instability for marginalized populations.

Evaluating corporate and economic policies' impact on economic inequality reveals the role of deregulation, tax policies, and corporate practices in exacerbating wealth concentration and income disparities. Addressing economic inequality necessitates progressive taxation, labor rights protections, and policies that prioritize equitable wealth distribution and social welfare.

In summary, analyzing poverty and economic inequality through a sociological lens elucidates their systemic roots, social consequences, and policy implications. By interrogating structural barriers, advocating for social justice, and promoting inclusive economic policies, scholars and policymakers strive to create more equitable and sustainable societies.

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MODULE 5: ECOLOGICAL INEQUALITY

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

At the end of the module, students will be able to:

1. Understand sociological perspectives on population and the environment.
2. Explore population dynamics including, fertility, mortality, and migration.
3. Analyze debates on overpopulation and demographic transition theory.
4. Investigate issues related to population decline, immigration, and restrictions.
5. Examine environmental sociology, decision-making, and environmental inequality.
6. Explore environmental problems such as pollution, climate change, and health disparities.

KEY TERMS & CONCEPTS

Define and offer real-world illustrations of the fundamental terms and concepts as you read the module to encourage active participation and learning.

- Air pollution
- Bycatch
- Climate change
- Conflict theory
- Crude death rate
- Demographic transition theory
- Demography
- Domestic migration
- Environmental degradation
- Environmental inequality
- Environmental racism
- Environmental sociology
- Functionalism
- General fertility rate
- Global climate change
- Hazardous wastes
- Hazardous waste sites
- Health disparities
- Housing affordability
- Immigration
- Immunity
- In-migration
- Infectious disease
- International migration
- Migration
- Mortality
- Nuclear power
- Overfishing
- Overpopulation
- Population
- Pro-natalist policies
- Social epidemiology
- Study of population
- Symbolic interactionism
- Total fertility rate
- Unequal food distribution
- Vaccine
- Water quality

INTRODUCTION

In this module, we'll examine the social issues of food shortage and climate change linked to population growth and its impact on the environment. These issues are complex and lack simple fixes, but they are urgent and demand attention. It's not an overstatement to say that finding adequate solutions to these problems is crucial for the well-being of our planet.

POPULATION & THE ENVIRONMENT

A headline declared, “India Tops Chart for World's Most Unhealthy Air,” highlighting findings from a study conducted by researchers from Columbia and Yale Universities (Timmons and Vyawahare 2012). The study revealed that India possesses the highest levels of air pollution globally, particularly in terms of fine particulate matter, which surpass safe thresholds for human health by nearly fivefold. A representative from an environmental organization in India attributed this concerning air quality to the proliferation of motor vehicles. Despite having fewer vehicles per capita compared to affluent nations, India's vehicles significantly contribute to pollution due to their high emission rates, exacerbated by the country's large population. Emphasizing India's lax emission regulations, the spokesperson advocated for more stringent standards, warning of the dire consequences if substantial measures are not promptly implemented: “We must take significant strides forward, or else the magnitude of the issue will become insurmountable.”

This news story highlights the global challenge of air pollution. It underscores that India's large population, ranking second globally with 1.2 billion people, is a significant factor contributing to its air pollution issue, following closely behind China. India's situation illustrates how population size can intertwine with environmental concerns.

Theoretical Perspectives

The theoretical perspectives in sociology provide valuable insights into understanding topics concerning population growth and the environment. Table 12. “Theory snapshot on population and the environment,” outlines their key ideas and viewpoints for easy reference.

Table 12. Theory snapshot on population and the environment

Theoretical Perspective	Major Assumptions
Functionalism	Population and the environment affect each other. Normal population growth is essential for any society, but population growth that is too great or too little leads to various problems. Environmental problems are to be expected in an industrial society, but severe environmental problems are dysfunctional.
Conflict theory	Population growth is not a serious problem because the world has sufficient food and other resources, all of which must be more equitably distributed. The practices of multinational corporations and weak regulation of these practices account for many environmental problems.
Symbolic interactionism	People have certain perceptions and understandings of population and environmental issues. Their social backgrounds affect these perceptions, which are important to appreciate if population and environmental problems are to be addressed.

Source: University of Minnesota Libraries. 2016. *Social Problems: Continuity and Change*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing.

Functionalism views population growth, including its components like birth, death, and migration, as natural and necessary for any society's functioning. Losing members jeopardizes a society's survival, while growth enables it to thrive and tackle future challenges. Functionalism also acknowledges

pollution and environmental issues as inevitable outcomes of modern society, but excessive problems are deemed harmful.

The significance of population growth varies depending on the society's economy. Agricultural and nonindustrial societies rely on high birth rates to offset high death rates, while industrial societies need a steady influx of younger workers to replace retirees and sustain new industries. However, rapid and extreme population growth can strain resources, cause crowding, and harm the environment.

Functionalism highlights the interplay between population and the environment. Population growth contributes to environmental problems, while environmental issues impact entire populations and even global communities. Conversely, some industrial nations face challenges due to insufficient population growth, leading to workforce shortages and tax revenue concerns. Thus, both excessive and inadequate population growth pose problems.

Conflict theory views population growth differently from other perspectives. It argues that the world has enough resources to support its growing population, but problems like food shortages occur because powerful groups in poor countries make decisions that keep resources from reaching everyone. Multinational companies also play a role by exploiting natural resources in these countries. So, according to conflict theory, the issue isn't that there's not enough food or resources, but rather that they're not shared fairly. To address this, efforts should focus on making sure resources are distributed more equally instead of just trying to limit population growth.

However, conflict theory also recognizes that in many poor countries population growth is too high. It blames this on governments not making birth control easily available and not doing enough to educate and empower women, which can lower birth rates. When it comes to a specific population issue like immigration, conflict theory highlights the role of racism and discrimination. It supports making immigration to the United States easier and giving undocumented immigrants a path to citizenship if they want it. Additionally, conflict theory argues that environmental problems aren't inevitable. It says that big companies pollute the environment, and governments like the United States don't have strong enough rules to stop them or make them follow the rules they do have.

Symbolic Interactionism provides four perspectives on how we understand population and environmental issues. Firstly, it considers why individuals choose to participate or not in activities related to population growth, contraception use, or environmental actions like recycling. To effectively tackle these problems, it's crucial to grasp the motivations behind people's involvement or lack thereof.

Secondly, it focuses on how people perceive population and environmental challenges. Since public attitudes significantly impact the persistence of these issues, it's vital to comprehend the reasons behind these views to better direct problem-solving efforts.

Thirdly, symbolic interactionism suggests that population and environmental issues are partially socially constructed. These problems only gain recognition as societal concerns when enough people or influential organizations acknowledge them. For instance, lead poisoning was identified as a health hazard long before governmental action was taken. Despite scientific evidence, industries insisted on lead's safety until environmental groups and overwhelming evidence forced regulatory changes.

Lastly, symbolic interactionism highlights how individuals from diverse social and cultural backgrounds may have varying understandings of population and environmental matters. For instance, someone from

a rural background might perceive even a small city as overcrowded, while someone from an urban setting might find smaller cities lacking in amenities compared to larger ones.

Population Growth

Population changes carry significant implications for societies. While we often focus on the challenges of population growth, it's important to recognize the impact of population decline as well. Take Michigan, for instance (Dzwonkowski 2010). Like many other northern states, Michigan has seen a decrease in its population over the past few decades. This decline is coupled with a 21 percent drop-in birth rates since 1990, leading to shrinking elementary school populations and closures of several schools. Moreover, more people are leaving Michigan than moving in, particularly young, college-educated adults, resulting in a drain on the state's economy and tax base.

Due to population decline, Michigan's demographics are shifting towards an older population, straining state services geared towards elderly residents. This trend has far-reaching effects, impacting the economy, education system, and social services. Meanwhile, states in the southern and western regions of the U.S. are experiencing population growth, which brings its own set of challenges. Growing cities face overcrowded schools, stretched healthcare facilities, and increased demand for social services.

These issues of population change are not unique to the U.S. but are global phenomena. In the following sections, we will discuss the study of population and explore these challenges in greater detail.

The study of population

We've noted that changes in population play a crucial role in shaping broader societal changes. In sociology, the **study of population** dynamics holds such significance that it has its own specialized branch known as demography. Essentially, **demography** investigates shifts in population size and composition. This field covers various key concepts, including fertility and birth rates, mortality and death rates, as well as migration. Let's briefly explore each of these.

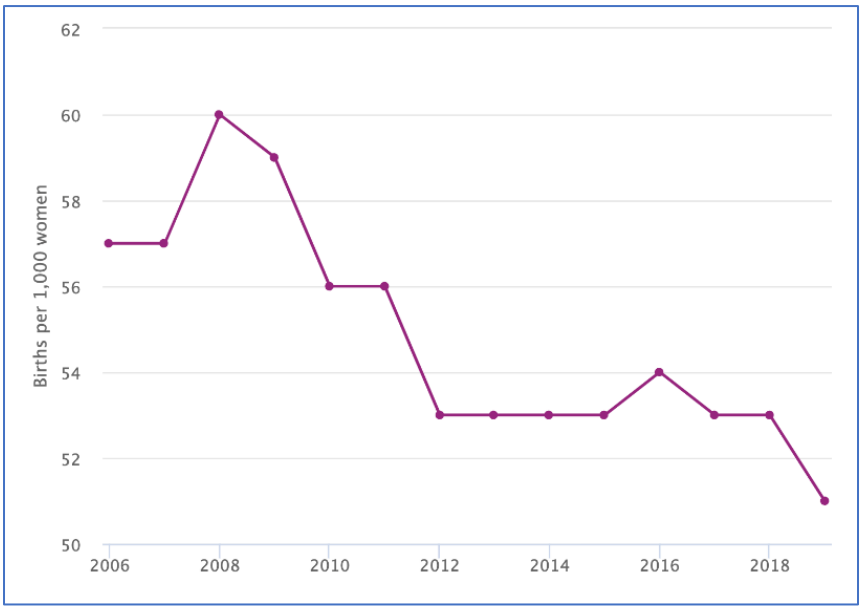
Fertility essentially refers to the number of live births occurring within a population. Demographers utilize different measures to assess fertility levels. One common measure is the crude birth rate, which indicates the number of live births per 1,000 individuals in a population within a given year. It's called 'crude' because it considers the entire population, not solely women or women within childbearing age (typically 15–44 years old).

Another measure is the **general fertility rate**, also known simply as the fertility rate or birth rate, which denotes the number of live births per 1,000 women aged 15–44 (the age range commonly associated with childbearing). For instance, in 2010, the general fertility rate in the US was approximately 64.7, indicating 64.7 births per 1,000 women aged 15–44 (Sutton and Hamilton 2011).

Another factor to consider is the **total fertility rate**, which represents the average number of children a woman is anticipated to have during her lifetime. This statistic takes into consideration variations among women. Some have more children while others have fewer or none at all. This measure is frequently discussed in the media and is generally easier for the public to grasp compared to the previous two measures. For example, in 2010, the total fertility rate in the United States stood at approximately 1.93, meaning there were around 1,930 births for every 1,000 women (Hamilton et al. 2011).

As Figure 8. “U.S. General Fertility Rate, 2006-2019" shows, the fertility rate in the United States has undergone significant changes over the past century. The General Fertility Rate (GFR) is a measure that tells us how many babies are born per 1,000 women of reproductive age. It's a simple way to understand fertility levels at a given time (Erbabian, Osorio, and Paulson 2022). However, changes in the age distribution of the population can affect the GFR. For example, if more women are over 40, the GFR tends to drop. In 2008, the GFR hit 60 births per 1,000 women but then fell, reaching 51 births per 1,000 women in 2019. This decline suggests that women in their 40s are having fewer children in recent years.

Figure 8. U.S. General Fertility Rate, 2006-2019



Sources: Erbabian, Maddison, Victoria Osorio, and Mariko Paulson. 2022. “Measuring Fertility in the United States.” Data from American Community Survey (ACS). *The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania*. Retrieved April 23, 2024 (https://budgetmodel.wharton.upenn.edu/issues/2022/7/8/measuring-fertility-in-the-united-states).

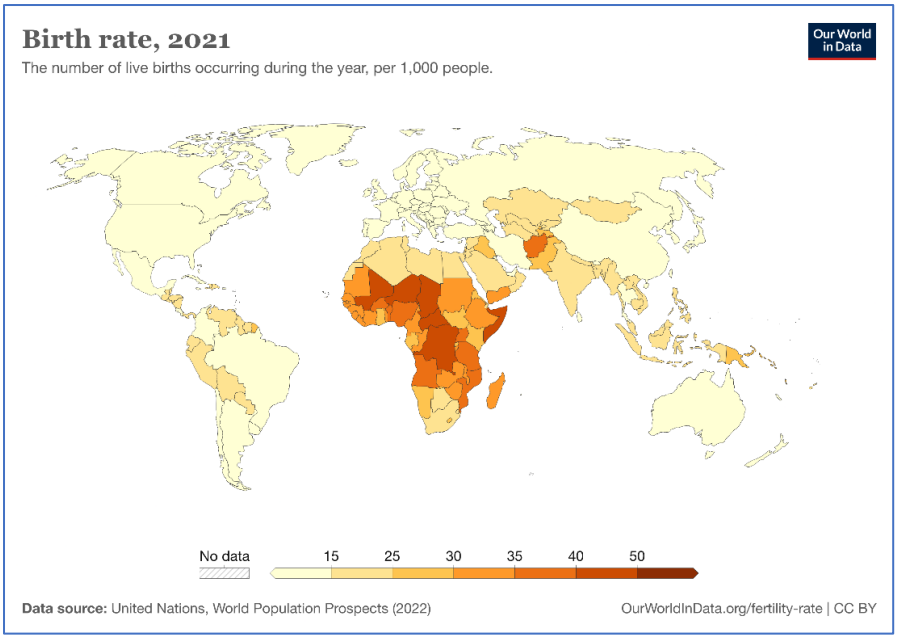
Fertility rates vary globally, with notably high rates observed in economically disadvantaged countries (refer to Figure 9. "Crude birth rates around the world, 2021" depicting the number of births per 1,000 population). Experts in population studies, known as demographers, pinpoint several factors contributing to these elevated rates (Weeks 2012).

To begin with, many low-income countries rely heavily on agriculture. In such societies, having more children is seen as advantageous for families, as they are considered valuable economic assets that can contribute to the productivity of agricultural work. Second, infant and child mortality rates tend to be elevated in these regions. Due to the fear of losing children prematurely, parents often choose to have more offspring to compensate for the potential losses.

A third factor stems from the preference for sons over daughters in many low-income societies. When a daughter is born, parents may try for additional children in the hope of having a son. Moreover, traditional gender norms are deeply entrenched in these communities, often emphasizing women's roles as wives and mothers above all else. As a result, women may feel societal pressure to have multiple children. Lastly, access to contraception is limited in many low-income nations, leading to higher rates of

unplanned pregnancies and births. Collectively, these factors contribute to the higher fertility rates observed in low-income countries compared to wealthier nations.

Figure 9. Crude birth rates around the world, 2021



Source: UN, World Population Prospects (2022). *Our World in Data*. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

Mortality refers to the number of deaths in a population. Demographers use the **crude death rate** to measure it, which is the number of deaths for every 1,000 people in a population in a given year. We call it "crude" because it doesn't consider the age distribution of the population. A society with more older people typically has a higher crude death rate. Demographers often adjust for age distribution when calculating *age-adjusted* death rates.

Migration is the movement of people into and out of specific regions. Throughout history, people have migrated to seek a better life due to conflicts or forced migration like the slave trade.

There are different types of migration. When people move into a region, it's called **in-migration** or **immigration**; when they move out, it's called out-migration or emigration. The in-migration rate is the number of people moving into a region per 1,000 people already there, while the out-migration rate is the number of people leaving per 1,000 people. The *net migration rate* is the difference between the two (in-migration minus out-migration). For example, Michigan has had a net migration less than zero because more people have left than moved in.

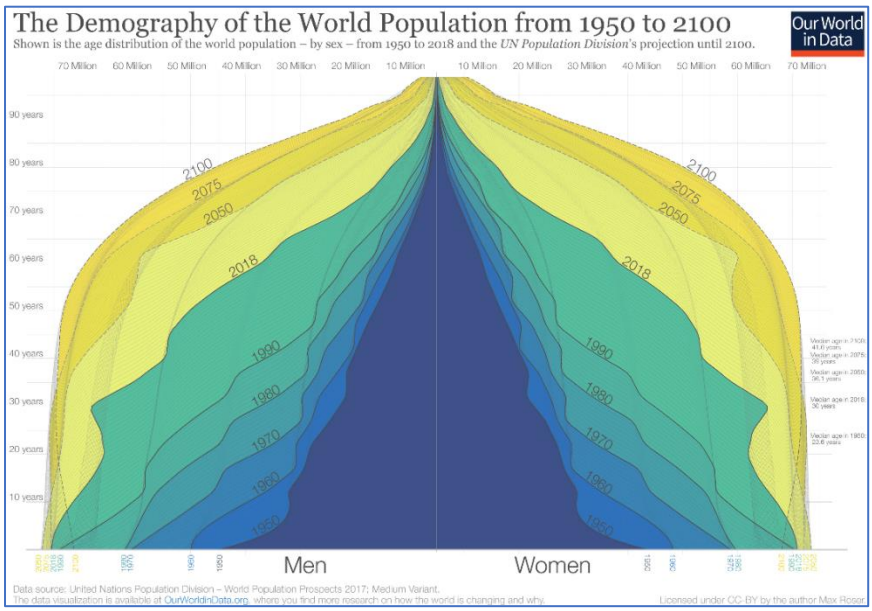
Migration can occur within a country (domestic) or across countries (international). **Domestic migration** refers to people moving within a country, like when retired individuals from the northeastern United States relocate to places like Florida or the Southwest. **International migration**, on the other hand, involves crossing national borders. Heavy international immigration can significantly affect population growth and various aspects of national life; sometimes it leads to increased prejudice against newcomers. Domestic migration can also bring about significant changes. For instance, the mass movement of African Americans from the South to northern cities in the first half of the twentieth

century had profound effects on those cities. Similarly, the recent trend of people from northern regions moving to the South and Southwest has had notable impacts, such as a surge in the housing market and increased traffic (Wilkerson 2011).

Now that you understand some basic demographic concepts, let's look into population change further. Three main factors influence changes in population size: fertility (crude birth rate), mortality (crude death rate), and net migration. The natural growth rate is simply the difference between the crude birth rate and the crude death rate. In the U.S., the natural growth rate is approximately 0.6 percent per year, meaning about 6 per 1,000 people. When we consider immigration as well, the total population growth rate has been close to 1.0 percent per year (Rosenberg 2011).

Figure 10. "Demography of the world population from 1950 to 2100" illustrates how global population by sex has changed and what we can expect for the 21st century. When comparing 1950 to 2018, we observe an increase in the number of children born, from 97 million to 143 million, alongside a decrease in child mortality. However, when comparing the population pyramid base in 2018 to the projected figures for 2100, it becomes evident that future decades will diverge from the past. Projections indicate a decrease in the number of children born by the end of the century, resulting in a narrower base for the future population structure (Roser 2019).

Figure 10. **Demography of the world population from 1950 to 2100**



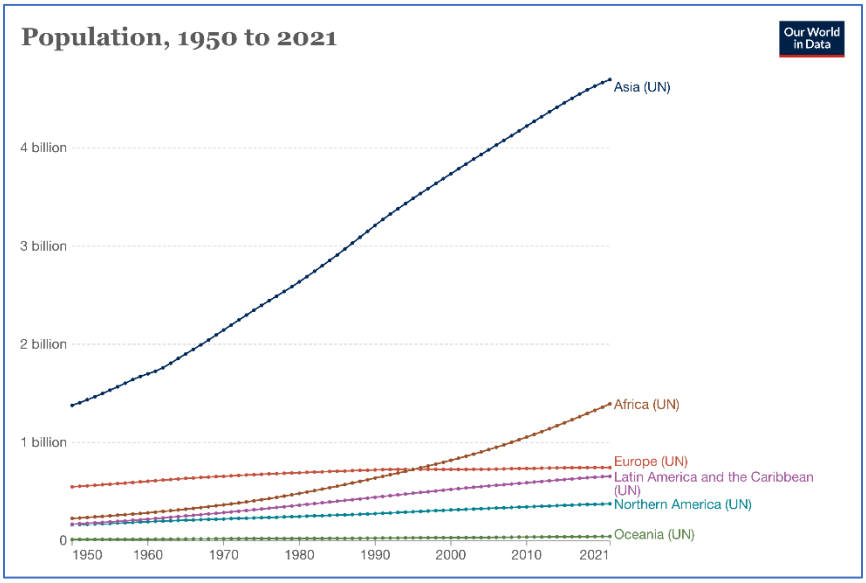
Source: UN, Population Division: World Population Prospects (2017). *Our World in Data*. Licensed by CC BY 4.0.

To find out how long it takes for a country to double its population, you can use a simple calculation. Divide the number 70 by the population growth rate of the country. For instance, if a country has a yearly growth rate of 3 percent, it will take about 23.3 years (70 ÷ 3) for its population to double. Looking at the map in Figure 3. "Demography of the World Population from 1950 to 2100," you'll notice that several countries are expected to double their population size within this timeframe if their current growth rates persist. For these countries, managing population growth will become a significant challenge if resources like food are not distributed adequately.

Demographers study factors like birth rates, death rates, and migration patterns to predict how populations will change over the coming decades. By combining this knowledge with historical population data, we can understand long-term population trends. One important trend is that as societies grow larger, their populations tend to grow faster. Initially, when a society is small, population growth is slow because there are fewer adults having children. But as the population increases, so does the number of adults, leading to more births each generation and rapid population growth.

We can see this trend throughout history. Around 12,000 years ago, when agricultural societies first emerged, the global population was only about 8 million. It grew to around 300 million about 2,100 years ago and reached about 500 million by the fifteenth century. By 1850, it had doubled to 1 billion, then doubled again to 2 billion by 1950. In just fifty more years, it tripled to over 6.8 billion, and projections suggest it will exceed 9 billion by 2050 (refer to Figure 11. "World population, 1950–2021") and 10 billion by 2100 (Gillis and Dugger 2011).

Figure 11. World population, 1950–2021

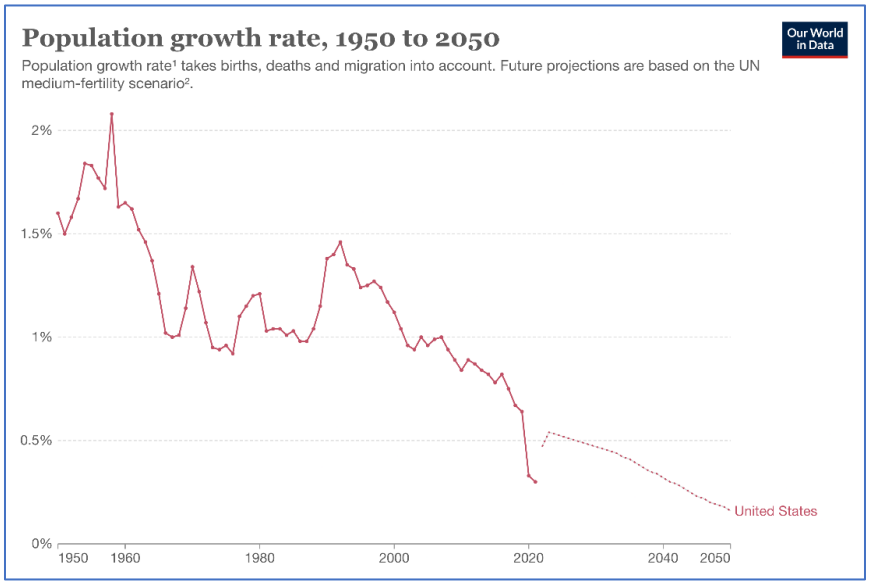


Source: United Nations, World Population Prospects (2022). *Our World Data*. Retrieved April 23, 2024 (https://ourworldindata.org/population-growth).

Over time, the rate at which the world's population grows starts to slow down after a period of rapid increase, as explained by demographic transition theory. This trend is illustrated in the lower section of Figure 11. "World population, 1950–2021," which displays the average yearly growth rate of the global population. This rate has been decreasing over recent decades and is predicted to continue declining for the next four decades. Essentially, although the world's population will keep growing in the foreseeable future, the rate of growth will gradually decrease over time. As indicated in Figure 10. "Demography of the world population from 1950 to 2100" the growth that does occur will mainly happen in impoverished nations in Africa and some other regions. Nonetheless, even in these countries, the average number of children per woman has dropped from six in the past generation to about three today.

Figure 12. "Past and projected size of the U.S. population, 1950–2050," provides insights into the historical and expected future sizes of the U.S. population. Population growth is expected to decrease from 2023 to 2053, with an average annual growth rate of 0.3 percent during this time. Immigration will play a larger role in driving this growth, as fertility rates are projected to remain below the level needed for natural replacement without immigration (Congressional Budget Office 2023).

Figure 12. Past and projected size of the U.S. population, 1950–2050



Source: United Nations, World Population Prospects (2022). *Our World Data*. Retrieved April 23, 2024 (https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/population-growth-rates?time=earliest..2050&country=~USA).

Population growth perspectives

The numbers we've just reviewed reveal something pretty astounding; the populations of both the United States and the world have shot up dramatically in just a few hundred years. It's no wonder that people during this time have been concerned about population growth, particularly the idea of overpopulation. One of the early voices to raise alarm about population growth was Thomas Malthus (1766–1834), an English economist. He suggested that populations grow exponentially (like 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, 512, 1024…). If you keep going with that list, you'll see how quickly it gets really big in just a few "generations."

Malthus, in his work published in 1798, argued that while populations grow rapidly, food production only increases linearly (like 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6…). He believed that food production wouldn't be able to keep pace with the growing population, leading to widespread starvation.

By the 1970s, population growth became a big concern in the United States and some other countries. You might have heard the term "Zero Population Growth," or ZPG, thrown around. People were really worried about the fast-growing population, both in the U.S. and globally, fearing that our planet couldn't handle such a huge number of people. Some predictions even warned of serious food shortages by the end of the century.

Luckily, Malthus and those advocating for ZPG were somewhat off the mark. While population levels have definitely skyrocketed, the projections in "World Population, 1950–2021" (see Figure 4) show that the rate of increase is actually slowing down. Thanks to various factors, like better contraception methods—especially the birth control pill—population growth has been curbed, not only in wealthier countries but also increasingly in poorer nations. Additionally, food production has increased much more than Malthus and ZPG advocates foresaw.

The debate on overpopulation

Many experts are worried about **overpopulation** because they believe it directly leads to hunger and malnutrition affecting millions of people in poorer countries (Gillis 2011). One expert put it simply: "Every billion more people makes life more difficult for everybody—it's as simple as that. Is it the end of the world? No. Can we feed 10 billion people? Probably. But we obviously would be better off with a smaller population" (Gillis and Dugger 2011: A1). Recognizing this issue, India has started providing cash bonuses to poor, rural married couples, who typically have many children, to delay having more children, and it has increased its promotion of contraception (Yardley 2010).

However, some experts argue that the world has enough resources and downplay the issue of overpopulation. They recognize the presence of widespread hunger in Africa and other areas but attribute it not to overpopulation or lack of food, but rather to difficulties in distributing the existing amount of food. An official from Oxfam International explained, "Today's major problems in the food system are not fundamentally about supply keeping up with demand, but more about how food gets from fields and on to forks" (King 2011). They noted that there is plenty of grain like cereal and soy available to feed the world, but a significant portion of it is used as animal feed rather than for direct human consumption. Transitioning away from diets heavily reliant on meat consumption could free up more grain to address hunger among the world's poor.

Sociologists Stephen J. Scanlan and his colleagues also argue that food scarcity is more a result of **unequal food distribution** rather than overpopulation: "[Food] scarcity is largely a myth. On a per capita basis, food is more plentiful today than any other time in human history…Even in times of localized production shortfalls or regional famines there has long been a global food surplus…A good deal of thinking and research in sociology…suggests that world hunger has less to do with the shortage of food than with a shortage of affordable or accessible food. Sociologists have found that social inequalities, distribution systems, and other economic and political factors create barriers to food access" (Scanlan et al. 2010:35).

This sociological perspective has significant implications for addressing global hunger. Traditionally, organizations like the World Bank and various United Nations agencies have believed that hunger results from a lack of food, leading them to focus on boosting food production and distribution efficiency through new technologies and methods. However, this view overlooks social factors.

According to Scanlan et al. (2010), global hunger isn't solely due to food scarcity. Instead, it's influenced by social inequalities that restrict access to food, particularly in poorer nations. For example, these nations often lack the financial resources to import available food. Poverty is one key factor contributing to this, but gender and ethnic disparities also play significant roles. Nations with higher levels of gender and ethnic inequality tend to experience more hunger. Given these insights, Scanlan et al. (2010) argue that "International attention to food security should therefore shift from increasing food supply to

regulating armed conflict, improving human rights, and promoting gender equity throughout the world—factors that reduce barriers to access and empower populations throughout the world to benefit from their food entitlements."

Demographic transition theory

When we think about whether overpopulation is as big of a problem as Malthus and modern scientists say, it's crucial to understand **demographic transition theory**. Remember we talked about this theory before? It basically connects how fast a population grows to how technologically advanced a society is, dividing it into three stages of development. It suggests that population growth slows down a lot as countries become more industrialized.

In the first stage, which corresponds to preindustrial societies, both the birth and death rates are high. This is because there is limited access to contraception and many health issues. However, because the high birth rate is balanced by the high death rate, there isn't much population growth.

In the second stage, as societies become more industrialized, the death rate decreases due to advancements in food production, sanitation, and medicine. However, the birth rate remains high because people still value large families and contraception may not be widely available. This leads to a significant increase in population.

In the third stage, the death rate remains low, but the birth rate starts to decrease. Families realize that having many children is more challenging in an industrialized society. Additionally, contraception becomes more accessible. As a result, population growth slows down, and in some industrialized nations, it even declines.

Demographic transition theory offers a reason to cautiously hope about overpopulation. It suggests that as less developed countries modernize, like industrial nations did two hundred years ago, their population growth rates should decrease. However, population growth rates in these countries remain high. Gender and ethnic inequality contribute to widespread hunger, with hundreds of thousands of women dying each year in poor nations during pregnancy and childbirth. Educated women with higher incomes typically have fewer children.

Population decline and pro-natalism

While population growth is still a concern in poorer countries, some wealthier nations are facing a different issue: population decline. This means that in these countries there are fewer people being born than there are dying. By the year 2050, it's expected that more countries will see their populations decreasing (Brooks 2012). To keep a population steady, on average, each woman needs to have 2.1 children. However, many industrialized nations, except for the United States, are falling below this level. This is happening because more women are using birth control and also because many women are choosing to stay in school longer, start working after finishing school, and delay having their first child.

Interestingly, the declining populations in these countries are starting to worry experts who study population trends and the people who make decisions about policies (Haartsen and Venhors 2010). In many industrialized countries, people are living longer lives, but there are fewer babies being born. This means that there are more elderly people compared to younger people. In some European countries,

there are more people over 61 years old than under 19. As this continues, it could become harder to take care of the health and financial needs of so many older people. Plus, there might not be enough younger people to fill all the jobs and provide the services that a modern society needs. With a smaller workforce, governments might also collect less money in taxes, which could make it even harder to pay for these services.

Image by NICHOLAS TE on Pexels

To address these issues, many governments have started **pro-natalist policies** to encourage women to have more children. Pro-natalist policies are government initiatives and programs designed to encourage higher birth rates and support families in having children. These policies are implemented with the aim of addressing concerns related to declining birth rates, aging populations, and potential negative economic consequences associated with low fertility rates. Pro-natalist policies can take various forms, including financial incentives such as tax breaks, cash payments, or subsidies for childcare and parental leave, as well as offering family-friendly workplace policies and access to affordable housing. Additionally, pro-natalist campaigns may include educational initiatives promoting the benefits of parenthood and larger families. The overarching goal of pro-natalist policies is to increase the number of births within a society to ensure demographic stability and support future economic growth.

Several countries have implemented pro-natalist policies to address declining birth rates and aging populations. Some countries give cash directly to couples when they have another child. For example, Russia sometimes gives around $9,000 for each child after the first one, and Spain offers €2,500 (about $3,400) for each child. (Haub 2009). Here are additional examples of countries with pro-natalist policies and a brief overview of their initiatives:

1. France has one of the most comprehensive pro-natalist policies globally. Its policies include financial incentives such as monthly child benefits, tax breaks for families with children, subsidized childcare facilities, and parental leave allowances. France also promotes work-life balance through shorter working hours and flexible schedules for parents.

2. Facing low birth rates and an aging population, Singapore has implemented various pro-natalist measures. These include cash incentives for parents, subsidized healthcare and childcare services, housing grants for families with children, and extended maternity and paternity leave.

3. Sweden offers generous parental leave policies, allowing parents to take up to 480 days of leave per child with a significant portion of the leave being paid. The country also provides affordable childcare options, financial support for families with children, and access to subsidized healthcare and education.

4. South Korea has introduced pro-natalist policies to combat its low birth rate and aging population. These include cash incentives for parents, subsidized childcare services, housing support for families with children, and measures to promote work-life balance such as flexible working hours and parental leave.

5. Hungary has implemented pro-natalist policies aimed at boosting birth rates and supporting families. These policies include financial incentives such as tax breaks for families with multiple children, subsidized childcare services, housing benefits, and loan programs for young couples.

These are just a few examples of countries with pro-natalist policies, and the specific initiatives may vary in scope and effectiveness depending on the country's demographic challenges and socio-economic context.

Additional population growth problems

As we've explored, experts in population studies often discuss how population growth impacts global poverty and hunger. However, there's widespread acknowledgment that population growth also contributes to two other significant global issues.

One of these concerns relates to the environment. Whether in affluent or impoverished nations, the increasing population has led to **environmental degradation** in various forms (Walsh 2011). For instance, countries with large populations heavily rely on motor vehicles, which contribute to air pollution. Also, both developed and developing nations pollute the air, water, and soil. Furthermore, as human populations have expanded, extensive deforestation has occurred worldwide. This destruction of forests disrupts animal habitats and exacerbates global warming because trees play a crucial role in absorbing carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen into the atmosphere.

Another issue is interpersonal conflict, including armed conflict. As populations grow, the demand for food, water, and resources escalates. Historically, when resources have become scarce, societies have resorted to acquiring them from others through forceful means, as the saying goes, "by any means necessary" (Buhaug, Gleditsch, and Theisen 2008). Population growth contributes to armed conflicts between societies and within societies themselves. As communities expand, competition for resources intensifies, often leading to various forms of hostility, including interpersonal violence. The history of immigration in the United States serves as an example; where rapid increases in immigrant populations triggered perceptions of threats among native-born Whites, resulting in instances of mob violence.

Population growth contributes to conflicts both between different societies and within a single society. As a society expands, competition for resources intensifies, often leading to various forms of hostility, including interpersonal violence. The history of immigration in the United States provides a clear example of this phenomenon. During periods of rapid immigration, native-born Whites perceived immigrants as threats to their jobs, land, and other resources, prompting violent reactions such as mob violence.

Immigration

Remember that migration and immigration are important topics when studying populations. As we've just mentioned, immigration often sparks heated debates in the United States and other countries. This is because the arrival of more immigrants can impact various parts of a society, such as making cities more crowded, increasing the number of students in schools, and potentially affecting job availability. However, it's crucial to understand that these challenges don't excuse the unfair treatment and unfriendliness that immigrants often face when they come to the United States or other places.

Throughout the history of the United States, there have been instances of prejudice and hostility toward immigrants. Beginning with the Pilgrims, this country was built by people who came here in search of political and religious freedom and economic opportunities. However, when large numbers of immigrants arrived in the nineteenth century, they were not always welcomed with open arms (Roediger 2006). For example, around three million Irish immigrants, many of whom were Catholic, came to the United States during the first half of that century. Because they were not Anglo-Saxon Protestants like many of the native-born Americans, they faced discrimination and were even viewed as a different race. The Know-Nothing Party, made up of native-born Whites, openly opposed Irish immigrants and sometimes resorted to violent acts against them, including murders. Later immigrants from Italian, Polish, and Jewish backgrounds also faced discrimination in employment and other areas due to ethnic prejudice and hostility.

Starting with the California gold rush in 1849 and continuing after the Civil War, many Chinese immigrants came to the United States. They played vital roles in building the nation's railroads and contributing to various other important tasks. However, they faced hostility from native-born Americans who were worried about losing their jobs to the Chinese (Pfaelzer 2008). This hostility intensified during the 1870s when the national economy was struggling, leading to riots against the Chinese in western cities. In over three hundred cities and towns, mobs of white Americans attacked Chinese neighborhoods, burning them down and killing some residents while forcing others to leave. In response to this discrimination, Congress passed a law in 1882 that banned Chinese immigration for nearly a century.

Similarly, during the 1930s, there was a growing number of Mexican Americans in the western United States, which sparked similar hostility (Daniels 2002). This was exacerbated by the Great Depression, as white Americans became increasingly concerned about losing their jobs to Mexican immigrants. White-owned newspapers spread false claims that these immigrants were violent and prone to criminal behavior, often linking it to their alleged use of marijuana. As a result, around 500,000 Mexicans either faced forced deportation or returned to Mexico due to immense pressure.

Immigration remains a significant issue for many Americans, with much of the focus centered on Mexican immigrants, even though they don't make up the majority of all immigrants. According to political scientist Victoria M. DeFrancesco Soto (2012), this focus is often driven by racial prejudice. She explains that opposition to immigration isn't primarily about personal economic concerns or states' rights, but rather reflects negative attitudes towards Latinx/e Americans.

In 2021, the number of unauthorized immigrants from Mexico residing in the U.S., totaling 4.1 million, reached its lowest level since the 1990s, accounting for 39% of the nation's unauthorized immigrant population, marking the smallest share on record (Pew Research Center 2023a). This decline in unauthorized immigrants from Mexico is attributable to several factors, including a broader decrease in migration from Mexico to the U.S., ongoing return migration of Mexican immigrants to Mexico, and increased opportunities for legal immigration from Mexico and other nations, particularly for temporary agricultural workers. Meanwhile, the overall number of unauthorized immigrants in the U.S. from countries besides Mexico has markedly increased, reaching 6.4 million in 2021, reflecting a rise of 900,000 since 2017. Notably, after Mexico, the countries with the largest unauthorized immigrant populations in the U.S. in 2021 were El Salvador (800,000), India (725,000), Guatemala (700,000), and Honduras (525,000), with India, Guatemala, and Honduras experiencing growth in their unauthorized immigrant populations since 2017 (Pew Research Center 2023a).

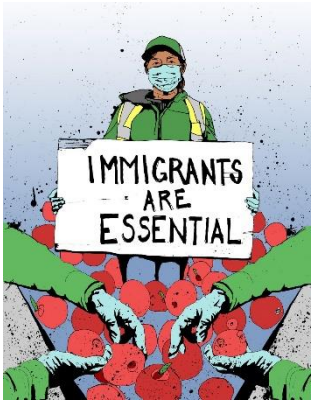
Roughly three-fourths of immigrants in the United States are either naturalized citizens, legal residents, or legal temporary migrants. Around one-fourth, or 28 percent, totaling about 11 million people, are undocumented residents. Among these undocumented residents, nearly 60 percent, or close to 7 million, are from Mexico. Additionally, approximately 4.5 million children born in the United States, who are citizens by birthright, have at least one parent who is an undocumented immigrant.

Undocumented immigrants make up more than 5 percent of the US workforce, totaling about 8 million workers. Households led by undocumented immigrants contributed an estimated $11.2 billion in state and federal taxes in 2010. According to the Immigration Policy Center (2012), if all undocumented immigrants were to leave the United States, the economy would suffer an annual loss of 2.8 million jobs, $552 billion in economic activity, and $245 billion in gross domestic product (GDP).

The numbers regarding jobs and the economy show that undocumented immigrants play a significant role in the U.S. economy. Surprisingly, research suggests that immigrants, whether they're here legally or not, are less likely to commit crimes compared to people born in the U.S. (Wadsworth 2010). This lower crime rate is attributed to immigrants having strong family ties, active involvement in religious communities, and a high number of small businesses, which contribute to safer neighborhoods. However, a curious trend emerges as immigrant families spend more time in the United States, the crime rates among their descendants tend to increase. This is partly because successive generations of immigrants assimilate more into American culture, which can lead to higher crime rates (Sampson, 2008).

Despite the positive impact immigrants have on the U.S. economy and their relatively low involvement in crime, many people are against immigration. According to a survey conducted in 2010 called the General Social Survey (GSS), half of the participants believed that the number of immigrants coming to the United States should be reduced either by a small amount or by a large amount. Only about 14 percent of respondents thought that the number should be increased. In a 2011 poll by CNN, one-third of the public expressed some level of unsympathetic feelings toward illegal immigrants and their families. Additionally, in the same poll, over half of the participants supported the construction of a seven-hundred-mile fence along the border with Mexico (PollingReport.com 2012).

In recent years, several states have passed strict laws regarding immigrants, including denying schooling and various social services to unauthorized immigrant families. States like Arizona, Georgia, and Alabama have implemented some of the toughest legislation.



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Arizona's law, which was enacted in 2010, made it a crime to not carry immigration documents and required police to question and detain anyone they suspected of being an illegal immigrant. Previously, such restrictions were primarily handled by the federal government. Critics argued that this new law could lead to ethnic and racial profiling, for individuals who appeared Mexican might be disproportionately targeted by police for suspicion of being illegal immigrants (Archibold 2010). They also pointed out that the law resulted in an economic loss of $250 million during its first year due to a decline in conference and convention business in Arizona (Brown 2011).

Georgia passed a law in 2011 that gave police the authority to ask for immigration documents from people suspected of committing crimes. If someone couldn't provide these documents, they could be held for deportation by federal officials. The law also made it harder for businesses to hire workers without proper documentation and increased the penalties for those who did. Additionally, it set penalties for anyone who housed or transported unauthorized immigrants. The Georgia Chamber of Commerce was worried about how this law would affect the economy, especially tourism. Reports suggested that if the law led to all unauthorized workers leaving Georgia, the state's agricultural industry could lose up to $1 billion each year because most farm workers in Georgia are unauthorized immigrants (Berman 2011).

Alabama passed a law in 2011 that gave police the authority to detain individuals suspected of being unauthorized immigrants. Additionally, the law required schools to keep records of students' immigration status and mandated that individuals applying for a driver's license to prove their U.S. citizenship. These measures caused significant delays in obtaining driver's licenses and led to many immigrant workers leaving the state, resulting in crops being left unharvested on farms. Business leaders worried that the law would negatively impact the state's economy, especially after a Mercedes-Benz executive from Germany was detained by police (Ott 2012).

A study conducted several months after the law was enacted found that it prompted between 40,000 and 80,000 unauthorized workers to leave Alabama (Lee 2012). As a result, the state suffered an estimated annual GDP loss of at least $2 billion, a decrease in state revenue from income and sales taxes of at least $57 million, and a reduction in local sales tax revenue of at least $20 million. The federal government is responsible for holding and sending back unauthorized immigrants. Each year, over 360,000 immigrants are detained, usually for about three months on average, but some over a year. This detention system costs over $21 billion annually, with each detainee costing more than $60,000. Most detainees are held for minor violations like overstaying a visa, not for serious crimes, so they're not considered dangerous to the public.

There's ongoing debate about how much the government should deport people, but critics, including immigration judges, criticize the conditions in which illegal immigrants are detained. They argue that detainees are denied basic rights, like the right to have a lawyer appointed by the court. More than four-fifths of them don't have any legal help, and those who do often get inadequate assistance (Semple 2011).

Another issue regarding immigration involves battered women who are immigrants (Constable 2012). When women experience abuse from their husbands or partners, it's often hard for them to escape the situation. Many of them are only allowed to stay in the United States because their husbands are legal residents or citizens. They fear being deported if they seek help from the authorities and their husbands are deported. Similarly, abused immigrant women who are in the United States illegally also fear deportation if they seek assistance from the police. Fortunately, there's now a federal law that allows abused immigrant women to apply for legal residency, but many women aren't aware of this option.

Despite highlighting various flaws in U.S. immigration policy, it's worth noting that the United States is relatively favorable towards immigrants compared to many other countries. More detailed information on this international comparison is provided below.

LEGAL IMMIGRANTS IN WESTERN DEMOCRACIES

The Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) is a project by the British Council and the Migration Policy Group, which is a global partnership. This index evaluates the United States, Canada, and twenty-eight European nations regarding how well legal immigrants are integrated into the political and economic aspects of each country and their journey toward full citizenship. It also assesses the presence of anti-discrimination laws in each country to safeguard immigrants. MIPEX comprises a total of 148 policy indicators. In the most recent (2011) MIPEX report, the United States ranked ninth among the thirty-one countries on this index. Sweden claimed the top position, followed by Portugal and Canada. A news report summarized one of the main discoveries of the study by noting that "strong U.S. antidiscrimination laws protect immigrants and guarantee them equal rights and opportunities, a model for immigration rules elsewhere." MIPEX also highlighted the United States' favorable rankings concerning legal immigrants' access to employment, education, and family reunification opportunities.

However, the MIPEX report also pointed out areas where the United States falls short. Many immigrants are denied certain federal benefits, and there are substantial fees associated with specific immigration processes. Additionally, U.S. immigration laws are deemed overly intricate, with limited availability of visas. These shortcomings contributed to the United States lagging behind other nations with higher scores on the index. In response to the MIPEX report, the director of the Immigration Policy Center in Washington, DC, emphasized the need for the United States to enhance efforts in immigrant integration, such as providing better support for English language learning. She also cautioned against potential reductions in federal and state budgets, which could negatively impact the U.S. ranking. Although the United States holds a relatively high position among global democracies concerning the status of its legal immigrants, the superior status of immigrants in countries like Canada suggests areas for improvement and provides guidance for enhancing the U.S. ranking and fostering a more welcoming environment for immigrants.

Huddleston, Tom and Jan Niessen. 2011. *Migrant Integration Policy Index III*. Brussels, Belgium: British Council and Migration Policy Group.

Restrepo, M. 2011. "International Study Points Out U.S. Immigration Policy Successes, Failures." *The American Independent.*

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

At first glance, the environment might not seem like a topic for sociology. It's usually studied by scientists like geologists, meteorologists, and oceanographers. However, we've seen how population growth affects the environment, which sounds like something sociologists would discuss. In fact, the environment is very relevant to sociology for a few reasons.

Firstly, many of our biggest environmental issues are caused by human actions. Just like we study behaviors like racism, sexism, and crime in sociology, studying how people affect the environment is also important. Secondly, environmental problems have a big impact on people's lives, just like other social issues sociologists' study. We can see this clearly when natural disasters like hurricanes or earthquakes happen. For example, in January 2010, a massive earthquake hit Haiti and killed over 250,000 people, which was about 2.5% of the country's population. The effects of these disasters on Haiti's economy and society will be felt for many years.

Slower changes in the environment can still have significant social effects. For instance, industrialization and population growth have led to increased pollution of our air, water, and land over time. Another major concern, climate change, though it has been gradual, poses a global threat that researchers

continue to study extensively. The impacts of these environmental issues will likely persist for generations to come.

Another reason why the environment is a topic of interest in sociology is because addressing environmental problems involves making changes to economic and environmental policies. However, the success and effects of these changes depend heavily on social and political factors. In the United States, for instance, there are ongoing debates between political parties, corporate interests, and environmental groups regarding the strengthening of environmental regulations.

Image by Arnav Kainthola on Pexels

Moreover, many environmental problems highlight social inequalities based on factors like social class, race, and ethnicity. Similar to other issues in society, disadvantaged groups such as the poor and people of color often bear the brunt of environmental challenges. This concept will be revisited later in our discussion when we explore environmental racism.

Additionally, the efforts aimed at enhancing the environment, known as the environmental movement, represent a social movement worthy of sociological examination. Sociologists and other researchers have conducted numerous studies to understand why individuals join the environmental movement and the impacts it has on society.

Environmental Sociology

All these reasons indicate that the environment is a significant topic in sociology, and one that sociologists should understand well. Many sociologists focus on studying the environment, forming a specialized area within sociology known as **environmental sociology**. This field simply looks at how people interact with the natural world. According to a report by the American Sociological Association, environmental sociology "has provided important insights" into areas such as public opinions on the environment, how people's values affect their environmental actions, and how environmental issues affect different communities and individuals unequally (Nagel et al. 2010: 13).

Environmental sociology assumes "that humans are part of the environment and that the environment and society can only be fully understood in relation to each other" (McCarthy and King 2009:1). Since humans are responsible for many environmental problems, we also have the ability and responsibility to solve them. As sociologists Leslie King and Deborah McCarthy argue, "We both strongly believe that humans have come to a turning point in terms of our destruction of ecological resources and endangerment of human health. A daily look at the major newspapers points, without fail, to worsening environmental problems…Humans created these problems, and we have the power to resolve them. Naturally, the longer we wait, the more devastating the problems will become; and the more we ignore the sociological dimensions of environmental decline the more our proposed solutions will fail."

Environmental sociologists focus on two key aspects of the relationship between society and the environment: (a) the impact of human activities and decisions, and (b) the presence and effects of environmental inequalities and racism. Let's now explore these two aspects further.

Human Activity & Decision Making

Environmental sociologists emphasize that human decisions and actions are the primary causes of environmental issues. Many people, acting independently, make choices and do things that harm the environment. For example, leaving lights on, setting our homes at extreme temperatures, and driving cars with low gas mileage all contribute to environmental damage. Not only individuals but also corporations, government bodies, and other organizations make decisions that harm the environment. Sometimes, these actions are deliberate, while other times they're due to carelessness or lack of consideration for the environment. Regardless of intent, the environment suffers from these actions.

A significant example of environmental damage caused by human activity occurred during the British Petroleum (BP) oil spill in April 2010. This incident began when an oil rig leased by BP exploded in the Gulf of Mexico, resulting in the release of nearly 5 million barrels of oil (about 200 million gallons) into the ocean. Investigations by Congress revealed that BP's decisions, aimed at cutting costs, increased the risk of a catastrophic well failure. For instance, they opted for inferior casing for the well, making an explosion more likely, despite warnings from their own employees and outside contractors.

Additionally, sociologists McCarthy and King (2009) highlight several other environmental disasters caused by reckless decision-making and human-induced natural disasters. One such incident occurred in Bhopal, India, in 1984, when a Union Carbide pesticide plant leaked forty tons of deadly gas. This resulted in the immediate deaths of between 3,000 and 16,000 people, and another half million suffered permanent illnesses or injuries. Union Carbide's decision to cut corners and disregard safety standards during the construction and management of the plant contributed to the severity of the leak.

Another avoidable accident was the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* oil tanker disaster. It happened when the tanker ran aground near Alaska and spilled 11 million gallons of oil into Prince William Sound. This disaster caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of birds and marine animals, and nearly wiped-out local fishing and seafood industries. The main reason behind this accident was that the ship's captain was drunk and left control of the ship to an unlicensed third mate after drinking five double vodkas. Even though Exxon knew about the captain's alcoholism, they still let him command the ship. Additionally, if the ship had a double hull (where one hull is inside another), it might not have cracked upon impact or released as much oil. However, Exxon and other oil companies persuaded Congress not to make stronger hulls mandatory.

Image by Kevin Baird (original photo by Charlie Riedel), licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

A more recent preventable environmental catastrophe was Hurricane Katrina in August 2005. It caused significant damage after hitting the Gulf Coast, especially New Orleans. The strong winds and flooding led to the deaths of over 1,800 people and left more than 700,000 homeless. McCarthy and King (2009) argue that much of this damage was due to human decisions: "While hurricanes are typically considered 'natural disasters,' Katrina's extreme consequences must be considered the result of social and political failures" (p. 4). Despite knowing for years that a major flood could breach New Orleans' levees and cause severe damage, officials at various levels of government did nothing to reinforce or rebuild them. Furthermore, the loss of coastal land due to commercial and residential development deprived New

Orleans of natural protection. In essence, the flooding after Katrina was a human-made disaster, not just a natural one.

Environmental Inequality & Racism

Another important aspect of environmental sociology focuses on environmental inequality and a related idea known as environmental racism. **Environmental inequality**, also referred to as environmental injustice, highlights the observation that individuals from lower-income backgrounds and racial minority groups tend to face a disproportionate burden of environmental issues. **Environmental racism** specifically points to the increased likelihood for people of color to encounter these environmental challenges. The term environmental justice encompasses academic research exploring environmental inequality and racism, as well as public policy endeavors and activism aimed at addressing these disparities. The section below, "Applying Social Research," presents significant scholarly work concerning environmental racism.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE

In the 1970s, as concerns about the environment grew worldwide, a spotlight began to shine on environmental issues in the United States. This led some scholars and activists to focus on environmental inequality, particularly the phenomenon known as environmental racism. During the 1980s and 1990s, their research and advocacy efforts gave rise to the environmental justice movement, which aimed to address these disparities.

Sociologists, including Robert D. Bullard of Clark Atlanta University, played a crucial role in the early days of the environmental justice movement and continue to do so today. Bullard, often referred to as "the father of environmental justice," gained recognition for his groundbreaking work in the 1980s, studying environmental racism in the Southern United States. His research shed light on the disproportionate placement of landfills and toxic waste sites in communities of color. Bullard's involvement in environmental justice began when his wife, an attorney, filed a lawsuit on behalf of black residents in Atlanta opposing the construction of a landfill in their neighborhood. Through his research, Bullard uncovered patterns of environmental injustice, such as city-owned landfills predominantly located in black neighborhoods despite African Americans making up only a fraction of the population.

In 1990, Bullard published his seminal book *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality,* which exposed the systematic placement of hazardous facilities in marginalized communities across the South. This book played a pivotal role in raising awareness about environmental racism and bolstering the environmental justice movement. More recently, Bullard and his colleagues have examined the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, highlighting how race and poverty intersect to exacerbate environmental injustices. In cities like New Orleans, low-income and minority residents bore the brunt of the disaster, facing challenges in accessing housing and resources in the flood's aftermath. Bullard's research not only brought attention to environmental racism but also influenced policy, prompting government agencies like the Environmental Protection Agency to address these issues. His work serves as a testament to the power of social research in addressing pressing social problems.

Bullard, Robert D. 1990. *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Bullard, Robert D. and Beverly Wright. 2009. “Race, Place, and the Environment in Post-Katrina New Orleans.” Pp. 19-48 in *Race, Place, and Environmental Justice after Hurricane Katrina: Struggles to Reclaim, Rebuild, and Revitalize New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Dicum, Gregory. 2006. “Meet Robert Bullard, the Father of Environmental Justice.” *Grist Magazine*. Retrieved from (http://www.grist.org/article/dicum).

As mentioned in the report by the American Sociological Association, environmental sociology focuses on how environmental issues affect people differently, especially those who are socially disadvantaged, stating “A central finding of sociology is that unequal power dynamics shape patterns of social mobility and access to social, political, and economic resources” (Nagel et al., 2010:17). This mirrors sociology's overall focus on social inequality. The report also highlights that the poorest countries will be hit hardest by global climate change: “Many of the countries least responsible for the rise in greenhouse gases will be most likely to feel its impacts in changes in weather, sea levels, health care costs, and economic hardships” (Nagel et al. 2010:17).

Some studies indicate that individuals with lower incomes are more likely to face environmental issues. However, research suggests that this burden is even higher for people of color compared to white individuals. A review of this research suggests that low-income individuals, particularly those from non-white communities, bear a disproportionate share of exposure to unhealthy environmental conditions in the United States. Furthermore, as researchers continue to examine data on environmental exposure and health, the evidence increasingly suggests that significant environmental injustices have affected communities across the country (Evans and Kantrowitz 2002:323).

As we've discussed in this section, the presence of environmental inequality and racism highlights how certain groups face more environmental risks than others due to social inequalities. Understanding this is key in environmental sociology because it sheds light on how our larger societal disparities affect who is most exposed to environmental hazards.

Environmental Problems

Describing the world as in danger, environmentally, might seem like an exaggeration, but it's true. By looking at various environmental issues, we can see just how serious and widespread the problem. Estimates suggest that each year in the United States, anywhere from 10,000 to 60,000 people pass away due to air pollution (Reiman and Leighton 2010). The problem is even more serious globally. According to the World Health Organization (2011), about 1.3 million individuals around the world lose their lives annually due to air pollution.

Image by Johannes Plenio on Pexels

These deaths result from health issues caused by air pollution like heart disease, lung cancer, and respiratory diseases such as asthma. Most **air pollution** comes from burning fossil fuels like oil, gas, and coal. This problem isn't limited to wealthy industrial nations; it's also prevalent in developing countries like China and India, where air pollution is particularly severe. In these nations, cities with high levels of particulate matter (carbon, nitrates, sulfates, and other particles) have mortality rates 15–50 percent higher than cleaner cities. In European countries, air pollution is estimated to shorten average life expectancy by 8.6 months. The World Health Organization (2011) rightly emphasizes that air pollution “is a major environmental health problem affecting everyone in developed and developing countries alike.” Pollution, especially of various kinds, notably affects children's health. For further details on this impact, refer to the "Children and Our Future" box below.

CHILDREN & ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH HAZARDS

When we talk about problems in the environment, we need to think about how they affect children. Kids face particular risks when it comes to environmental health issues because their bodies are still growing quickly, and they breathe in more air relative to their size than adults. They also absorb substances, including harmful ones, faster than adults do.

These differences mean that children are more vulnerable than adults to getting sick from environmental hazards. Their behavior also plays a role. For instance, a child might eat paint chips they find on the ground, which adults wouldn't do. Children often spend time playing in places where pesticides are used, increasing their exposure to harmful chemicals. They also tend to put their hands in their mouths frequently, which can lead to them swallowing toxins.

Being poor makes these problems worse. Poor children are more likely to live in homes with lead paint, in areas with lots of air pollution, and near places where hazardous waste is dumped. This is especially true for poor children of color.

Three big environmental health risks for kids are lead, pesticides, and air pollution. Lead can harm the brain and nervous system, cause hearing loss, and stunt growth. Pesticides can lead to immune system problems, neurological issues, and respiratory illnesses. Air pollution can trigger asthma and other breathing problems. These health issues can affect kids for their whole lives.

Unfortunately, some health problems caused by the environment are becoming more common among children. For example, asthma cases in U.S. kids have gone up by over 40 percent since 1980, with more than four hundred thousand American children now affected. Two types of childhood cancer linked to environmental factors have also increased in the past twenty years: acute lymphocytic leukemia by 10 percent and brain tumors by 30 percent. From all of this, it's clear that environmental health risks are a big problem for children in the US and around the world. Since kids are the future, it's crucial that we do everything we can to make the environment safer for them.

Children's Environmental Health Network. 2009. "An Introduction to Children's Environmental Health." Retrieved from (https://cehn.org/).

The burning of fossil fuels adds to **global climate change**, also known as global warming. This happens because certain gases get trapped in the atmosphere, causing what's called the greenhouse effect. This leads to Earth getting warmer, and temperatures went up by almost 1°C in the last hundred years. Besides impacting the ecology of polar regions and sea levels worldwide, climate change brings a bunch of other problems. These include more diseases spread through food and water, less food due to reduced farming and droughts, more hurricanes and other extreme weather events, and the extinction of some species (Gillis and Foster 2012; Zimmer 2011). All these issues lead to more deaths globally. According to the World Health Organization in 2010, climate change causes over 140,000 extra deaths every year.

Climate change can lead to more interpersonal violence and armed conflict between people (Agnew 2012; Fisman and Miguel 2010; Kristof 2008). Historically, when there were extreme weather events like droughts or floods, violence often followed. For instance, during the unusually cold weather in medieval Europe, there were more witch-burnings because crops failed, and people blamed witches. Similarly, economic problems caused by failing crops in the southern United States led to more violence against African Americans. As global warming continues and rainfall decreases, there may be more civil wars in

African countries. According to an economist at Oxford University, if there's a drought, there's a 50 percent higher chance that an African country will have a civil war the next year (Kristof 2008).

Considering climate change, it's crucial to remember certain inequalities mentioned earlier (McNall 2011). Firstly, the wealthiest countries in the world contribute more to climate change than is fair. Countries like the United States, Canada, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom make up only 15 percent of the global population but are responsible for half of the world's carbon dioxide emissions. Secondly, the impacts of climate change hit poorer nations much harder than wealthier ones. For instance, people in Africa are far less equipped than Americans to handle the effects of droughts, extreme weather events, and other issues caused by climate change.

According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center from September 25 to October 1, 2023, 43% of U.S. adults believe that climate change is currently causing significant or considerable harm to people in the United States. An additional 28% acknowledge that it is causing some level of harm. Looking towards the future, young adults aged 18 to 29 are particularly concerned about worsening climate impacts, with 78% anticipating that harm caused by climate change in the U.S. will increase to some degree during their lifetime. Approximately a quarter of Americans (23%) anticipate needing to make significant adjustments in their daily lives due to climate change, while a larger portion (48%) expects to make minor adjustments, and 28% do not anticipate making any sacrifices at all (Pew Research Center 2023b).

There are notable disparities between Republicans and Democrats regarding their expectations of how climate change will affect their lives. Nearly half of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents anticipate making no adjustments to their daily lives because of climate change. In contrast, 88% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents expect to have to make at least minor adjustments. These partisan differences are closely linked to varying perceptions of the national impacts of climate change: 86% of Democrats anticipate worsening harm from climate change in the U.S. during their lifetime, compared to only 37% of Republicans who share the same expectation (Pew Research Center 2023b).

APPLYING A SOCIAL ANALYTIC MINDSET

Public Perception of Climate Change

Scientists who study climate change confirm that changes in geographic weather patterns are consistent with significant changes in Earth's climatic trends. Long-term, independent records from weather stations, satellites, ocean buoys, tide gauges, and many other data sources all confirm that our nation, like the rest of the world, is warming. Despite the mounting wall of evidence to support climate change theory, many in the public sector continue to challenge that global warming exists. Browse ***The Fifth National Climate Assessment***.

1. Discuss two findings that you found most surprising or concerning from this report.
2. What factors of socialization do you think influence how people think about climate change?
3. How have your perceptions of this problem changed after reading this assessment?

Water quality presents a significant issue worldwide. In many poorer countries, drinking water is often unsafe due to inadequate sanitation practices, particularly concerning human waste. Similarly, industrial discharge into bodies of water like lakes, rivers, and streams in wealthier nations also contributes to this problem. The consequences of poor water quality are severe, leading to parasitic infections and diseases such as diarrhea, malaria, cholera, intestinal worms, typhoid, and hepatitis A. According to the World Health Organization, these issues result in substantial annual mortality rates: (a) approximately 2.5 million deaths from diarrhea, including 1.4 million among children; (b) around 500,000 deaths from malaria; and (c) approximately 860,000 child deaths from malnutrition. Furthermore, at least 200 million people experience one or more of these serious diseases each year due to inadequate sanitation and unsafe drinking water (Cameron et al. 2008).

Since the 1970s, **nuclear power** has sparked debates about its impact on the environment. Advocates argue that it offers cleaner energy compared to fossil fuels like oil and coal, without contributing to global warming. On the other hand, critics highlight concerns about the dangers of nuclear waste and the potential for catastrophic events like meltdowns, where radioactive gases could be released into the air.

One of the most severe nuclear accidents occurred at the Chernobyl plant in Ukraine in 1986. The core of the reactor exploded, releasing radioactive gases that spread across Europe. The amount of radiation released was much higher than that of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima at the end of World War II. While around sixty people, including Chernobyl workers and nearby residents, died soon after the disaster, the long-term health effects have been more challenging to measure. Scientists have spent the last twenty-five years studying the health impacts of the Chernobyl incident. According to the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR), it's estimated that around 27,000 additional cancer-related deaths worldwide will eventually be linked to the Chernobyl disaster (Gronlund 2011).

In March 1979, there was nearly a major nuclear disaster in the United States at the Three Mile Island plant in central Pennsylvania. Due to a combination of technological malfunctions and human errors, the reactor core almost overheated to dangerous levels. For several days, the nation was on edge as officials worked to control the situation. Around 140,000 people living within twenty miles of the plant had to evacuate as a precaution. This incident significantly reduced support for nuclear power in the U.S., leading to a sharp decline in the construction of new nuclear plants over the next twenty years (Fischer 1997).

In March 2011, Japan experienced its worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl. An earthquake and tsunami severely damaged a nuclear plant in the Fukushima region, located 155 miles north of Tokyo. Over 80,000 residents had to leave their homes due to the release of radioactive gases and water. Even a year later, radiation levels remained dangerously high in the evacuated area. A report on the anniversary of the disaster highlighted the eerie desolation: “What’s most striking about Japan’s nuclear exclusion zone is what you don’t see. There are no people, few cars, no sign of life, aside from the occasional livestock wandering empty roads. Areas once home to 80,000 people are now ghost towns, frozen in time. Homes ravaged from the powerful earthquake that shook this region nearly a year ago remain virtually untouched. Collapsed roofs still block narrow streets. Cracked roads make for a bumpy ride” (Fujita 2012). Fully decommissioning the damaged reactors at Fukushima will require at least thirty years. The news report stated, “This nuclear wasteland may not be livable for decades” (Fujita 2012).

In February 2012, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) released a study suggesting that the likelihood of nuclear power accidents in the United States was very low. According to the study, if an accident were to happen, plant operators would have enough time to cool down reactor cores and prevent or minimize the release of radiation (DiSavino 2012). However, the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) holds a different view. They are worried about the risk, especially because some U.S. reactors have a similar design to the ones at Fukushima, which experienced a severe accident following an earthquake. The UCS (2011) argues: “If [these reactors] were confronted with a similar challenge, it would be foolish to assume the outcome would not also be similar.” Moreover, the UCS points out that earthquakes could trigger fires at reactors, and many U.S. plants fail to meet fire protection standards. A news report also highlighted the similarities between U.S. nuclear plants and Fukushima, concluding that they “share some or all of the risk factors that played a role at Fukushima” (Zeller 2011).

Critics of nuclear power argue that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) doesn't oversee the nuclear industry strictly enough. A 2011 investigation by the Associated Press (AP) supported this criticism (Donn 2011). The AP discovered that the NRC has been “working closely with the nuclear power industry to keep the nation’s aging reactors operating within safety standards by repeatedly weakening those standards or simply failing to enforce them.” The report continued, “Time after time, officials at the [NRC] have decided that original regulations were too strict, arguing that safety margins could be eased without peril.” When some valves at nuclear plants leaked, the NRC changed its rules to allow more leakage. Similarly, when cracks in steam generator tubes led to radiation leaks, the standards for tubing strength were lowered. Additionally, when reactors started to exceed temperature limits, the NRC nearly doubled the allowed temperatures. The investigation uncovered "thousands" of issues in aging reactors that the NRC had overlooked, suggesting a close relationship between the NRC and the nuclear industry.

A former NRC engineer interviewed by the AP agreed that the agency often sided with the nuclear industry by claiming existing regulations were too strict. " That’s what they say for everything, whether that’s the case or not," the engineer remarked. " They say, ‘We have all this built-in conservatism.'"

Air and water pollution pose environmental risks, as mentioned earlier, but so does contamination of the soil from hazardous waste. **Hazardous wastes** are materials or byproducts that can be harmful if not handled properly. If they are disposed of incorrectly, they can seep into the soil or bodies of water and eventually affect humans, animals, and plants.

There are two main sources of hazardous waste: (1) everyday products like pesticides, cleaning fluids, certain paints, batteries, and electronics, and (2) waste from industrial processes like solvents and wastewater. This waste can enter the environment when homeowners and consumers are careless, as well as when large manufacturing companies are negligent. It can lead to birth defects, chronic illnesses, and even death.

Sometimes, companies dump so much hazardous waste in one area that they create **hazardous waste sites**. These sites are pieces of land and water contaminated by dangerous chemicals dumped by factories and other industries. One well-known hazardous waste site in the United States is Love Canal, located near Niagara Falls, New York. In the 1940s and 1950s, a chemical company dumped 20,000 tons of toxic chemicals into the canal, filled it with dirt, and sold it for development to the local school board. Later, a school and over eight hundred homes, many for low-income families, were built nearby. The chemicals eventually seeped into the groundwater, yards, and basements of these homes, reportedly causing birth defects and other health problems.

The Superfund program, started around thirty years ago by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), keeps an eye on and cleans up places across the country where hazardous waste is found. Over the years, it has found and started fixing up over 1,300 of these spots. And get this, around 11 million folks live within just a mile of one of these spots.

CELEBRATING TWO COURAGEOUS WOMEN

In the history of fighting against hazardous waste dumping, two women stand out for their important roles.

One of them is Lois Gibbs, who led a movement of Love Canal residents to protest the dumping of hazardous waste in their neighborhood, as mentioned earlier. Gibbs, who was never involved in politics before 1978 when evidence of the dumping was uncovered, started a petition to close a local school near the dump site after reading a newspaper article about it. Her actions gained significant attention and prompted state officials to conduct environmental tests in nearby homes. Two years later, the federal government provided funding to relocate 660 families from the area deemed unsafe. Reflecting on her experience, Gibbs later stated, “It will take a massive effort to shift society away from corporate dominance, where the rights of industry to pollute and harm health and the environment outweigh the public’s right to live, work, and play in safety. This is a political struggle. The scientific evidence is already there, showing that people’s health is at risk. To succeed, we must continue to build the movement, connect with each other, plan, strategize, and move forward. The futures of our children, and those yet unborn, are at stake.”

The other woman is Erin Brockovich, portrayed by Julia Roberts in a 2000 film bearing her name. Before uncovering hazardous waste dumping, Brockovich, like Gibbs, wasn't politically active. She stumbled upon evidence of Pacific Gas & Electric's thirty-year dumping of a toxic industrial solvent into the water supply of Hinkley, a small town in California, while working as a legal assistant for a small law firm. Her investigation led to a lawsuit that resulted in a $333 million settlement for several hundred Hinkley residents in 1996.

Both Lois Gibbs and Erin Brockovich have continued to be active advocates for environmental safety long after their initial efforts gained acclaim. They are two courageous women who have made a significant impact.

Brockovich, Erin. 2010. “Erin Brockovich Biography.” Retrieved from (http://www.brockovich.com/mystory.html).

Gibbs, Lois M. 1998. “Learning from Love Canal: A 20th Anniversary Retrospective.”

The world's oceans face serious threats that could harm millions of people worldwide, according to a report (ScienceDaily 2010). One major issue is **overfishing**, which has led to a significant decrease in the number of certain ocean animals. This decline not only affects what fish we see in restaurants or supermarkets but also disrupts the ocean food chain (Weise 2011). With fewer smaller ocean animals available, larger animals that depend on them for food are struggling to survive. As a result, the entire ocean ecosystem is at risk of serious consequences due to this chain reaction.

One example of this chain reaction can be seen with killer whales and sea otters in the ocean off the coast of western Alaska (Weise 2011). Killer whales have a varied diet, including sea lions and harbor seals. However, due to human overfishing of the prey fish species that sea lions and harbor seals feed on, their population has decreased in western Alaska and other areas. Consequently, killer whales have turned to eating more sea otters, leading to a drastic 90 percent decline in the sea otter population in western Alaska. Since sea otters feed on sea urchins, their decline has resulted in an increase in the sea

urchin population. As sea urchins consume kelp beds, the disappearance of kelp beds in the area has occurred, which serves as a vital food source for other ocean creatures (Estes et al, 2011).

Another instance of the ocean chain reaction involves whales. About 1,000 years ago, people started hunting whales for various reasons, and this became more widespread during the 18th century, leading to a significant decrease in whale populations, especially right whales. In the southern oceans, whale poop is crucial because it provides essential nutrients for tiny creatures and plankton. Over time, as the number of whales in these oceans has decreased, these creatures and plankton, which play a vital role in the ocean's ecosystem, have faced significant declines (Weise 2011).

Besides overfishing, **bycatch**, which refers to the unintentional capture and harm of marine mammals, sea turtles, and seabirds while fishing for other species, also threatens many ocean creatures. According to the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (2012), bycatch "can have significant social, environmental, and economic impacts." It not only consumes valuable time and resources within the fishing industry but also jeopardizes various marine species and disrupts the delicate balance of the ocean ecosystem.

A common example of bycatch that many Americans are familiar with is when dolphins are accidentally caught and killed in large fishing nets used to catch tuna. However, a less well-known example involves sea turtles. Over the past few decades, the number of sea turtles has decreased dramatically, and six out of the seven species now at risk of extinction. The main reason for this decline is bycatch from shrimp trawl nets and other fishing methods. Since 1990, millions of sea turtles have been killed due to bycatch (Viegas 2010).

Climate change contributes to additional issues affecting the oceans. Coral reefs, which are renowned for their vibrant colors and stunning beauty, play crucial roles in marine ecosystems. They serve as vital sources of nutrients for various marine life and provide a significant protein source for approximately 500 million individuals worldwide. Additionally, coral reefs aid in safeguarding coastlines against natural calamities like tsunamis, while also attracting considerable tourism revenue amounting to tens of billions of dollars.

Image by Elianne Dipp on Pexels

Despite their numerous benefits, coral reefs have long faced threats from overfishing, tourism, coastal development, and other factors. Recent research indicates that climate change is also negatively impacting coral reefs (Rudolf 2011). Global warming associated with climate change is causing coral reefs worldwide to become overheated. This overheating leads to the expulsion of algae the reefs rely on for food and their vibrant colors. Consequently, the reefs become pale and eventually die, exacerbating the ocean's existing food chain issues. Scientists estimate that three-quarters of the world's reefs are in danger due to global warming, with one-fifth of them already destroyed. Additionally, they predict that almost all reefs will be at risk by the year 2050.

Global warming will still be a big issue, and so will increasing acidity, which is another problem caused by climate change. When carbon dioxide goes into the air, a lot of it ends up in the ocean. This makes the

ocean less basic and more acidic. The increasing acidity harms coral reefs and is also dangerous for animals we eat like clams, lobsters, and mussels.

Another issue related to climate change and oceans is the rising sea levels (Daley 2011). Due to global warming, the polar ice caps are melting, leading to an increase in sea levels. This results in more severe storm surges during bad weather. Even without storms, coastal areas are losing land to the rising oceans. Despite these challenges, many coastal communities haven't built enough barriers to reduce the damage from flooding.

This module has talked about food shortages before as a problem for the population. But besides that, food can also be dangerous for the environment. To put it simply, sometimes food isn't safe to eat. For example, in 2011, there was an outbreak in Europe where at least 31 people died and over 3,000 got very sick from a rare type of E. coli, which is a harmful bacterium. The cause was contaminated bean sprouts, as reported by CNN. Similarly, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, around 325,000 Americans end up in the hospital every year because they get sick from eating contaminated food, and sadly, about 5,000 Americans die annually from these illnesses (Kristof 2011).

The harmful bacteria usually come from mishandling and other actions involved in raising animals and preparing food. It's not just that, though. Livestock are regularly given antibiotics to keep them well even though they often live in crowded and dirty spaces. Unfortunately, using antibiotics so widely lets bacteria become resistant to them. When people get sick from these bacteria, antibiotics don't help them get better (Kristof 2012).

A journalist highlighted a clear issue: “We would never think of trying to keep our children healthy by adding antibiotics to school water fountains, because we know this would breed antibiotic-resistant bacteria. It’s unconscionable that Big Ag [Big Agriculture] does something similar for livestock” (Kristof, 2011, p. WK10). A U.S. Congressman who studies tiny organisms agrees with this: “These statistics tell the tale of an industry that is rampantly misusing antibiotics in an attempt to cover up filthy, unsanitary living conditions among animals. As they feed antibiotics to animals to keep them healthy, they are making our families sicker by spreading these deadly strains of bacteria.”

HEALTH

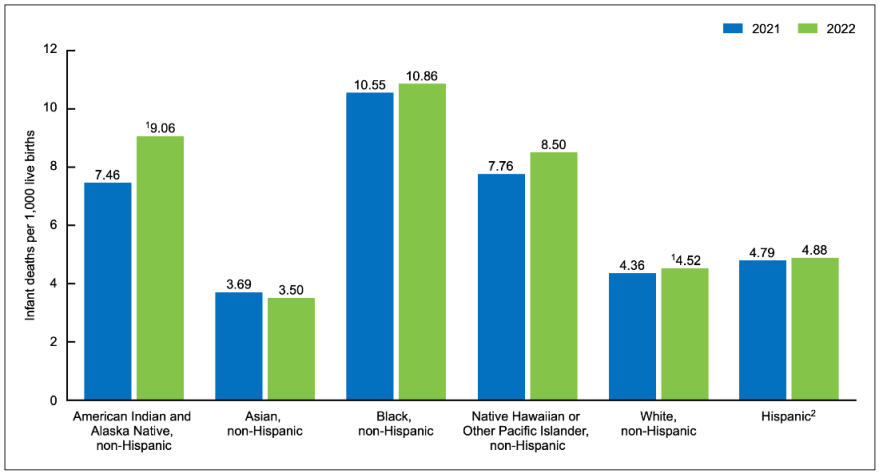
When we look at health and healthcare in the United States, we find both positive and negative aspects. Let's start with the positive news, which is significant. Health has gotten better over the past hundred years, mainly because of improved public cleanliness and finding antibiotics. Illnesses like pneumonia and polio, which used to be fatal or cause severe disability, are either extremely rare today or can be treated with modern medicines. Additionally, other medical breakthroughs and progress have lessened the impact and severity of major illnesses, such as various forms of cancer, and have extended our lifespans.

Due to these and other reasons, the average lifespan in the U.S. increased from around 47 years in 1900 to about 78 years in 2010. A recent report by the National Center for Health Statistics reveals concerning trends in infant mortality rates in the United States (Ely and Driscoll 2023). In 2022, there was a 3% increase in the provisional infant mortality rate compared to 2021, marking the first rise in this rate since 2001-2002 (see Figure 13). Prior to this increase, there had been a consistent decline in the infant

mortality rate, which had decreased by 22% from 2002 to 2021 (see Figure 6. "Infant Mortality Rate, By Race and Hispanic Origin: United States").

Smoking rates also went down considerably, and the percentage of male smokers decreased from 51 percent in 1965 to 23 percent in 2009, and female smokers from 34 percent to 18 percent in the same period (National Center for Health Statistics 2011). Additionally, over the past three decades, various policies have significantly lowered levels of lead in young children's blood: around 88 percent of children had unsafe lead levels in the mid-1970s, compared to less than 2 percent three decades later (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2007).

Figure 13. Infant mortality rate, by race and Hispanic origin: United States



Source: Ely, Danielle M. and Anne K. Driscoll. 2023. "Infant Mortality in the United States: Provisional Data from the 2022 Period Linked Birth/Infant Death File." *Vital Statistics Rapid Release* 33:1-8. Data from National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System, linked birth/infant death file.

Unfortunately, there's quite a bit of bad news too. Despite the improvements we mentioned earlier, the United States isn't doing as well as most other rich democracies in terms of health measures. Even though it's the richest country globally, it falls behind in several health areas. Additionally, around 14.5 percent of American households, nearly 49 million people, struggle with "food insecurity" at least part of the year, meaning they don't always have enough money for proper food and nutrition. More than one-fifth of all kids live in such households (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2011). Over 8 percent of babies are born underweight (less than 5.5 pounds), which can lead to health issues later on. This rate has been going up since the late 1980s and is now higher than in 1970 (National Center for Health Statistics 2011). Additionally, rates of childhood obesity, asthma, and other chronic conditions are increasing, with about a third of kids now considered obese or overweight (Van Cleave et al. 2010). It's clear that the United States still has a lot of work to do to improve the health of the nation.

Health issues in the United States aren't distributed fairly. They tend to affect people who are poor, from specific racial or ethnic groups, and sometimes affect women or men more depending on the issue. **Social epidemiology** is the study of how health and sickness change based on factors like where people come from or how much money they have. These differences are called **health disparities**. In the United States, there are many health disparities when we look at social epidemiology. This means that both being healthy and being sick can show and make worse the unequal parts of society. Now, let's look at the most important health disparities, starting with physical health and then mental health.

Health Disparities

Besides having less money, poor people also suffer from much worse health. The government and experts in medicine and academia are increasingly realizing that your social class plays a big role in your health and sickness (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2011).

Various health measures highlight the connection between social status and health in the United States. Each year, the government conducts a survey where people rate their health. Individuals with lower incomes are much more likely to report their health as only fair or poor compared to those with higher incomes. While these self-reports are based on personal opinions and may vary in interpretation, objective health measures also confirm a strong link between social class and health (National Center for Health Statistics 2011).

HEALTH PROBLEMS FACING POOR CHILDREN

When we talk about health differences, some of the most concerning evidence involves kids. According to a recent report by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, "The data illustrate a consistent and striking pattern of incremental improvements in health with increasing levels of family income and educational attainment: As family income and levels of education rise, health improves. In almost every state, shortfalls in health are greatest among children in the poorest or least educated households, but even middle-class children are less healthy than children with greater advantages." Government data highlights how poverty affects kids in the country:

- Kids born to poor moms are more than twice as likely to be born with low birth weight compared to those born to wealthier moms.
- By 9 months old, poor kids are already more likely to have health issues and lower brain development and social skills.
- By age 3, poor kids are much more likely to have asthma compared to kids whose families make more than 150 percent of the poverty line.
- According to their parents, poor kids are almost five times more likely (33 percent compared to 7 percent) to be in less-than-good health.

In these ways and others, kids in low-income families are more likely to have health problems than kids in richer families, and many of these issues continue into teenage years and adulthood. The poor health of these kids has a big impact on their whole lives. As sociologist Steven A. Haas and his colleagues note, “A growing body of work demonstrates that those who experience poor health early in life go on to complete less schooling, hold less prestigious jobs, and earn less than their healthier childhood peers.”

One reason why poor children aren't as healthy is because their families often deal with a lot of different kinds of stress. Another reason is that their families often struggle to have enough food, especially if they live in cities where there's more lead and pollution in their neighborhoods. Kids from low-income families also tend to watch more TV than kids from wealthier families, which makes them less active. This lack of physical activity is another reason why their health isn't as good. Lastly, their parents are more likely to smoke cigarettes compared to wealthier parents. Breathing in the smoke from these cigarettes, even secondhand, can make their health worse.

The strong proof that poverty negatively impacts the health of children from poor families emphasizes the importance for the United States to take every possible action to lessen these impacts. Investing money to alleviate these effects will be highly beneficial in the long term: These children will experience fewer health issues as they

mature, resulting in lower healthcare costs for the United States. Additionally, they will have better academic performance and higher incomes as adults. Therefore, enhancing the health of underprivileged children will not only benefit them in the short and long term but also contribute to the overall economic and social well-being of the nation.

Haas, Steven A., Maria Glymour, and Lisa Berkman. 2011. "Childhood Health and Labor Market Inequality Over the Life Course." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior 52*(3): 298–313

Kaplan, George A. 2009. *The Poor Pay More: Poverty's High Cost to Health*. Princeton, NJ.

Murphey, David, Bonnie Mackintosh, and Marci McCoy-Roth. 2011. "Early Childhood Policy Focus: Health Eating and Physical Activity." *Early Childhood Highlights 2(*3): 1–9.

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. 2008. "America's Health Starts With Healthy Children: How Do States Compare?" Princeton, NJ: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Global Pandemics

Acute **infectious disease** outbreaks, especially those caused by respiratory pathogens, present significant challenges globally. Diseases like tuberculosis, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS 2003), Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), H1N1 pandemic influenza, and seasonal influenza have highlighted the world's capacity for rapid response. Each outbreak offers valuable lessons for enhancing detection, surveillance, medical countermeasure development, and other vital aspects of prevention, readiness, and response. Additionally, these events emphasize the importance of fairness in pandemic preparedness and response efforts. This includes promoting transparency in product pricing, facilitating technology transfers, and ensuring equitable access and benefit sharing (World Health Organization 2022).

Despite improvements in health security and strengthening of health systems, the emergence and rapid spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus highlighted significant gaps in both national and international preparedness for respiratory pathogens. COVID-19 is the disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus. It usually spreads between people in close contact (World Health Organization 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of having robust health systems and global health security capacities to effectively respond to such crises. Additionally, it exposed how pre-existing inequalities are exacerbated during epidemics and pandemics, affecting all segments of society. Sectors that previously overlooked contingency planning for public health emergencies have now gained firsthand experience in preparing for such events.

Numerous initiatives are ongoing to learn from the COVID-19 pandemic and turn insights into actions, including several led by the World Health Organization (WHO). One of these initiatives is aimed at enhancing pandemic preparedness planning based on how diseases spread. Known as the Preparedness and Resilience for Emerging Threats (PRET), this effort has created guidance and tools for countries to update their pandemic plans specifically focusing on respiratory pathogen outbreaks.

Healthcare systems

Previous epidemics and virus outbreaks have informed global scientists and governments on how to prepare for future threats. In the case of the United States, the response has been distinct. For instance, during the Ebola outbreak in 2014, the U.S. established the Directorate for Global Health and Security

and Biodefense (Ray and Rojas 2020). Despite the Ebola virus claiming over 11,000 lives worldwide, only two deaths occurred in the U.S. However, in 2018, the Trump Administration dissolved this team, with Trump himself expressing ignorance about it during a White House briefing on March 13, 2020 (Dozier and Bergengruen 2020).

This lack of accountability and governmental failure is not unprecedented, particularly within certain vulnerable communities. Roberts (1999) conducts a historical legal analysis, revealing how U.S. policies have systematically oppressed Black motherhood and womanhood from chattel slavery to the present day. Additionally, Watkins-Hayes (2019) illustrates how the courts neglected women diagnosed with HIV/AIDS in the 1980s, emphasizing their struggle for survival during the epidemic. Watkins-Hayes (2019) advocates for an HIV/AIDS safety net providing healthcare access, economic aid, social support, and avenues for political engagement, suggesting a model applicable to COVID-19, especially considering its disproportionate impact on racial and ethnic minorities. As stated by the Combahee River Collective (1983), “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.” According to the World Health Organization (2024), “preparedness works.” Investing in functional capacities, interconnected systems, and critical infrastructure improves emergency response. Pandemic preparedness relies on comprehensive action from governments and society. This includes strong leadership, community engagement, and cross-sector collaboration. In our interconnected world, what affects one community impacts others. Promoting public health and scientific understanding facilitates acceptance of interventions. Priority should be given to vulnerable populations globally. Response efforts must be agile, monitoring developments, planning contingencies, and learning from experience.

Vaccinations and immunizations

Vaccines have been instrumental in safeguarding public health against infectious diseases. In the United States, their development has progressed through centuries, marked by key milestones and medical advancements. Edward Jenner coined the term "**vaccine**" in 1796 after successfully inoculating a boy against smallpox using cowpox lesions (Saleh et al. 2021). In 1872, Louis Pasteur created the first laboratory-produced vaccine for fowl cholera. Significant strides were made with vaccines for diseases such as diphtheria, tetanus, influenza, yellow fever, polio, measles, mumps, rubella, and varicella in the 20th Century.

The vaccine development process includes: 1) Research and Discovery; 2) Proof of Concept; 3) Clinical Trials; and 4) Regulation and Approval (CDC 2023). This process can take 10-15 years of laboratory research, often through collaboration between private industry and universities. Initial testing in animal models is done to assess immune response later in humans. Three phases of trials evaluate safety, immune response, dosage, effectiveness, and side effects. Lastly, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) oversees stages to ensure safety and efficacy before recommending vaccines for use.

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Operation Warp Speed* accelerated vaccine development while maintaining safety standards through government funding and collaboration. FDA's fast track designation expedites review for critical vaccines like those for COVID-19 without compromising safety or efficacy. The history of vaccine development in the United States illustrates scientific progress, regulatory oversight, and collaborative efforts that have significantly benefited public health by curbing infectious diseases' spread (The College of Physicians of Philadelphia 2024).

Immunity, which refers to the body's ability to resist disease, plays a vital role in protecting individuals from infections and promoting overall health. Vaccines are essential for training the immune system to combat particular diseases without individuals needing to become ill initially, thereby boosting acquired immunity (Pfizer 2024).

Skeptics and misinformation

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a considerable loss of life worldwide, with estimates indicating over 7 million confirmed deaths attributed to COVID-19 reported globally as of March 9, 2024 (World Health Organization 2024b). Estimates suggest that the total number of deaths directly or indirectly linked to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 was about 14.9 million worldwide. This underscores the significant impact of the pandemic beyond the confirmed COVID-19 deaths (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2021). Skepticism about the COVID-19 pandemic and its vaccines has been a major issue, influenced by factors like misinformation, distrust, and personal beliefs. Misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected public health, individual actions, and government strategies worldwide. It has spurred vaccine hesitancy, reluctance to wear masks, and the adoption of unproven treatments, leading to higher illness rates during the pandemic (Caceres et al. 2022). Misinformation has also triggered rumors, stigma, discrimination, unfounded theories, and influenced public beliefs and attitudes (Nelson et al. 2020). These factors have hindered efforts to control the spread of COVID-19 and manage its impact on society.

Employing a social analytic mindset is crucial during global pandemics as it enables individuals to assess information accurately, make informed decisions, and navigate the vast amount of often conflicting data and misinformation circulating in the public sphere. With the rapid spread of information through various media channels, including social media, critical thinking allows individuals to discern between credible sources and misinformation, thus reducing the risk of spreading falsehoods that could exacerbate fear and panic. Critical thinking skills help people to question assumptions, evaluate evidence, and consider multiple perspectives, enabling them to interpret complex scientific findings, understand public health guidelines, and discern between legitimate public health measures and conspiracy theories. By applying critical thinking, individuals can better protect themselves and their communities by making well-informed choices about health behaviors, vaccination, and adherence to public health guidelines, ultimately contributing to collective efforts to mitigate the impact of pandemics.

HOUSING

Housing affordability involves more than just the fluctuation of housing costs. It's about how housing expenses impact one's ability to afford other necessities. Since housing is a long-term investment and typically a top priority expense, affordability assessments look at how it relates to other basic needs. In the United States, institutions like banks, landlords, and government agencies evaluate applicants' income-to-housing cost ratio to determine eligibility for housing (Delgadillo and Jewkes 2012). The widely used 30% rule suggests that housing expenses should not exceed 30% of pre-tax income. Exceeding this threshold is considered "cost burdened," while surpassing 50% is termed "severely cost burdened" by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). HUD identifies households with the most critical housing needs as those earning less than 50% of the median family income in their area and spending more than 50% of their income on housing.

When determining severe housing needs, considering a household's total income is crucial. Some families may spend a significant portion of their income on housing but still have enough left for other necessities due to their overall income. Thus, solely relying on the percentage of income spent on housing may not accurately gauge financial strain on essentials like food and transportation (Stone 2012). Michael Stone proposes the residual income approach, which assesses the income remaining after deducting housing costs. This method identifies "shelter poverty," where households cannot afford basic needs due to high housing expenses. By calculating the income required for essential expenses, it determines the affordable housing expenditure percentage. If a household exceeds this percentage, it's deemed shelter poor. Since 1970, roughly 30-36% of U.S. households have been classified as shelter poor.

This aligns with HUD's housing affordability criteria, where around 45% of renter households were considered cost-burdened in 2020. However, there's a disproportionate impact on households of color. For instance, 54% of Black renter households, 52% of Latino renters, and 44% of white and Asian renters were cost-burdened (Joint Center for Housing Studies 2020). When considering the shelter poverty measure, 50% of renter households and 25% of homeowners are deemed shelter poor (Stone 2012). This measure reveals a different demographic composition. Families with children are more prevalent among the shelter poor, whereas couples and single-person households are less represented. Latino households are most affected by shelter poverty, followed by Black families, Asians, and Whites. Additionally, women and female-headed households are at higher risk of being shelter poor. Among homeowners, single mothers and the elderly are disproportionately impacted by shelter poverty.

National and local governments can tackle housing affordability by boosting the supply of affordable options or curbing demand for lower-cost housing. Policies can target either the public or private sector. On the supply side, governments can build low-cost housing to increase availability. Public or social housing, owned and managed by government housing authorities, is one such approach. In the United States, large-scale public housing began with the 1949 Housing Act, which allowed urban renewal and created a replacement public housing program (Schwartz 2010). Despite aiming for 810,000 units in six years, this goal wasn't met until 1968. Construction peaked at 1.4 million units in 1994 but has since declined. By the mid-1980s, public housing lost favor with lawmakers who favored demand-side programs like the Section 8 subsidy. Since 1994, the number of public housing units has steadily decreased with new construction mainly replacing demolished units.

One of the main reasons for creating public housing projects in the United States was to improve housing quality. In 1920, only 1% of U.S. housing units had indoor plumbing and electricity. By 1970, almost all homes had these amenities (Whitehead and Goering 2021). In Europe, housing shortages after World War II led to the establishment of social housing programs. Governments in devastated cities launched large-scale initiatives to address the housing crisis (Scanlon, Whitehead, and Arrigoitia 2014). Unlike in the U.S., European social housing wasn't limited to the poorest; it was available to working and middle-class families. In countries like the Netherlands, Austria, and Scotland, around 30% of housing is social housing. In England, it's 20%. Denmark, Hungary, and France are also increasing their public housing stock. Social housing is common in Asia too; for example, in Hong Kong, 30% of all units are publicly owned (Gurran and Bramley 2017). The Hong Kong government can provide affordable housing because it owns the land, making construction of low-cost housing easier.

Housing as a human right

Every country globally has endorsed at least one international agreement acknowledging the fundamental human right to adequate housing (UN Habitat 2009). This right doesn't mandate governments to construct homes for all citizens, but rather, it entails providing legal safeguards against eviction, ensuring secure tenure rights, and combating housing discrimination. Certain nations, including Mexico, South Africa, Russia, and Portugal, have constitutional provisions guaranteeing the right to housing. However, such language holds little value without concrete policies to translate this right into reality.

In 2003, Scotland updated its Homelessness Act, granting anyone who becomes homeless the right to immediate permanent housing in a public or private rental unit. Scotland thus became the first country to guarantee this right, expanding its definition of homelessness to include various situations like domestic violence, doubling up, or living in unconventional arrangements. The legislation ensures a right to housing, compelling local governments to create more housing units and reduce homelessness rates. By 2020, 80% of homeless applicants had been permanently housed, with the rest often returning to friends or family (Scottish Government 2021). Only 4% of applicants had been sleeping on the streets, with few experiencing evictions. This low rate is attributed to Scotland's comprehensive homelessness prevention services, including options like government purchase of foreclosed homes for rental and immediate housing placement for individuals leaving institutions (Tars and Egelson 2009). While Scotland's system isn't flawless, it has significantly reduced street homelessness by prioritizing holistic solutions.

In contrast, the United States lacks a right to housing. While places like New York City, Washington D.C., and Massachusetts guarantee a right to shelter, this doesn't ensure access to permanent housing (Solomon 2020). Homeless individuals are often accommodated in large, emergency shelters. Some cities, like Sacramento, are considering right-to-housing mandates tied to obligations to accept shelter, sparking debate among advocates about respecting individuals' autonomy and dignity (Hubler 2021).

APPLYING A SOCIAL ANALYTIC MINDSET

Critical Thinking: Website Credibility Challenge

Thinking critically is a process. Knowing your sources and the background information regarding where the information is published is a large part in making informed decisions and arguments. For this exercise, investigate a website related to one of the topics presented in this module.

1. Choose a website related to your topic of choice, and list the source information.
2. Summarize the content of the website, including the relevance to course content.
3. Assess the credibility of this source by examining the site's top-level domain. Who hosts the site? Is the site hosted using a free platform such as Geocities, Blogger/Blogspot, Wordpress or Yahoo?
4. What is the author's education level? Does he or she have a degree? From what school? In what subject?
5. How much does the author probably know about the topic or topics on which they are writing?
6. Does they deal intimately with this subject in daily life, or only research it for the purpose of writing about it? If relevant, have they performed experiments and independent research projects on this topic?
7. Does the author have a neutral perspective on the site's subject matter, or are they trying to promote a particular viewpoint?
8. Is there an organization that is in charge of the site's content or that funds the site's operation?

9. Does this organization have an interest in the site's subject matter? Is it likely to want people to have a particular perspective on this topic?
10. Might the organization encourage the author(s) and editor(s) to give a skewed presentation?
11. Would you consider this a relevant and reliable source based on the above assessment? Explain your reasoning.

CORE INSIGHTS

Sociological perspectives on population and the environment offer critical insights into the interplay between human societies and ecological systems. By examining population dynamics, including fertility rates, mortality patterns, and migration trends, scholars can discern the demographic shifts that shape social and environmental landscapes.

Debates on overpopulation and demographic transition theory underscore contrasting views on population growth, resource depletion, and sustainable development. While some argue that overpopulation exacerbates environmental degradation and resource scarcity, others advocate for demographic transition models that predict declining birth rates and improved living standards as societies modernize.

Issues related to population decline, immigration, and restrictions reflect complex social and political dynamics surrounding labor markets, national identity, and immigration policies. Striking a balance between population stabilization and fostering inclusive societies requires addressing demographic imbalances and promoting equitable migration policies.

Environmental sociology explores the intersections between human behavior, institutional practices, and ecological outcomes, emphasizing the role of power dynamics and social inequalities in shaping environmental decision-making processes. Environmental inequality exacerbates disparities in exposure to pollution, access to natural resources, and vulnerability to environmental hazards, highlighting the need for environmental justice interventions.

Investigating environmental problems such as pollution, climate change, and health disparities reveals systemic factors that perpetuate environmental degradation and undermine human well-being. Addressing these challenges necessitates collective action, policy interventions, and sustainable development practices that prioritize environmental stewardship and social equity.

In summary, understanding sociological perspectives on population and the environment requires recognizing the interconnectedness of social, economic, and environmental systems. By integrating demographic analysis, environmental sociology, and policy advocacy, scholars and practitioners can contribute to more holistic approaches to sustainable development and environmental justice.

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MODULE 6: DECISION MAKING & PROBLEM SOLVING

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

At the end of the module, students will be able to:

1. Classify problems using strategic reasoning.
2. Apply ethical reasoning to decision-making processes.
3. Analyze policy implications through policy analysis.
4. Evaluate the impact of racial prejudice on public policy preferences.
5. Examine social movements targeting racial, ethnic, and gender inequality.
6. Explore alternative programs and policies aimed at reducing racial/ethnic inequality, gender inequality, and sexuality inequality.

KEY TERMS & CONCEPTS

Define and offer real-world illustrations of the fundamental terms and concepts as you read the module to encourage active participation and learning.

- Acting crowd
- Affirmative Action
- Agenda
- Asylum seekers
- Casual crowd
- Celebration riots
- Children of displaced families
- Collective behavior
- Conceptual questions
- Contagion theory
- Conventional crowd
- Convergence theory
- Craze
- Crowd
- Detention without charge or trial
- Disaster
- Disaster behavior
- Displaced individuals
- Domestic violence
- Emergent norm theory
- Empirical questions
- Ethical reasoning
- Evaluative questions
- Expressive crowd
- Fade
- Female Genital Mutilation
- Human rights
- Issue recognition
- Labor trafficking
- Mass hysteria
- Mixed-status families
- Mob
- Moral panic
- Panic
- Policy problem
- Political opportunity theory
- Protest crowd
- Protest riot
- Public policy
- Purposive riots
- Reactionary movements
- Reform movement
- Refugee families
- Relative deprivation
- Religious movements
- Revelous riots
- Revolutionary movement
- Riot

- Rumor
- Self-help movements
- Sex trafficking
- Social movement
- Strategic reasoning
- Structural-strain theory
- Symbolic riots
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- Value-added theory

INTRODUCTION

Critical and creative thinking play essential roles in crafting solutions to social problems that are not only effective but also sustainable and just. Proficiency in strategic and ethical reasoning further provides the essential frameworks needed to comprehend, strategize, and execute interventions that foster positive outcomes for society.

STRATEGIC REASONING

Strategic reasoning plays a crucial role in understanding the intricate nature of social problems. This entails identifying their root causes, stakeholders, and potential consequences associated with different courses of action (Lau and Chan 2004-2024). The allocation of limited resources is often a necessity in addressing social problems, and strategic reasoning proves instrumental in prioritizing and efficiently utilizing these resources to tackle the most pressing issues.

Additionally, strategic reasoning extends to long-term planning and the anticipation of potential outcomes. To ensure that solutions do not unintentionally result in negative consequences or perpetuate injustices, ethical implications must be carefully considered. Engaging diverse stakeholders is a key aspect of strategic thinking, facilitating the development of effective solutions that encompass various perspectives.

Image by Christina Morillo on Pexels

Addressing social problems necessitates collaboration among various entities, including government agencies, nonprofits, and the public. The combination of strategic and ethical reasoning becomes essential in building public trust. This is achieved by demonstrating transparency, accountability, and a commitment to moral values, factors crucial for the successful implementation and acceptance of solutions.

Strategic reasoning also involves navigating legal complexities, where the balance between legal and moral considerations becomes pivotal for responsible and effective problem-solving. The incorporation of ethical perspectives in strategic planning contributes to the creation of more equitable and inclusive societies.

Recognizing the dynamic nature of social problems that may evolve over time, strategic reasoning emphasizes adaptability and responsiveness to changing circumstances. In essence, the synergy of strategic and ethical reasoning forms a comprehensive framework for addressing social problems, ensuring thoughtful planning, ethical implementation, and sustained positive impacts on society.

To utilize strategic reasoning skills effectively, it is essential to evaluate competence in general problem-solving skills, self-development, organizational strategies, and tactical thinking.

Table 13. Strategic reasoning competencies

Skills	Level of Competency
Problem-solving	How adept are we at analyzing intricate problems and breaking them down into manageable components? What constitutes a sound decision, and how can we enhance our decision-making process? What measures can be taken to boost our creativity and effectiveness in problem resolution?
Self-development	What attitudes or personality traits contribute to devising superior strategies? Which thinking systems and work habits prove beneficial for self-improvement?
Organizational strategies	How should organizations and businesses formulate new strategies? What processes should be followed for their development and implementation? How can strategies be optimized for increased productivity and responsiveness to challenges and emerging opportunities?
Tactical thinking	What approaches should be employed in addressing challenges and competition? How can we maximize our impact? In times of confrontation, what strategies enable us to safeguard ourselves, forge new alliances, and counteract adversaries effectively?

Source: University of Minnesota Libraries. 2016. *Social Problems: Continuity and Change*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing.

Classifying Social Problems

Solving problems requires good critical and creative thinking skills (Lau and Chan 2004-2024). To effectively address a problem, we must first define it, analyze its nature, and devise effective solutions. A key starting point is identifying the problem. In both everyday life and work settings, it's essential to accurately pinpoint and articulate the issue at hand. When defining a problem, several factors come into play:

1. The way we frame a problem can influence the solutions we pursue. It can be helpful to explore alternative problem formulations to determine the most effective approach. For instance, when faced with relationship issues, focusing solely on the other person's faults may not yield the best outcome. Considering one's own actions and potential areas for improvement could lead to a more constructive resolution. Similarly, in a business context, rather than fixating on competitor actions, it may be more beneficial to evaluate internal strategies for adapting to market changes.

2. When addressing goals or targets, clarity is essential. It's important to specify desired outcomes to assess feasibility effectively. For example, if aiming to enhance a company's profit, quantifying the desired increase enables a more realistic evaluation of the goal's attainability.

3. Validating the existence of the problem is crucial. It's essential to assess the availability of data confirming the issue's reality. For instance, if a university suspects declining student standards, gathering evidence beyond subjective observations is necessary to substantiate the claim. Additionally, collecting more data aids in understanding the problem's severity and identifying key factors for resolution.

4. To grasp how public policies originate, it's crucial to consider a stage often overlooked in American government texts: problem identification. As highlighted by screenwriter Aaron Sorkin in *The Newsroom*, character Will McAvoy famously asserts, "The first step in solving any problem is recognizing there is one." This initial phase of the policymaking process, wherein problems are acknowledged, holds significant importance for policymakers tasked with crafting effective strategies for resolution.

Once we've identified the problem, the next step is understanding its type. Generally, problems can be presented in the form of questions, which we categorize into three kinds:

1. **Empirical questions**: These questions concern factual information, specific events, or cause-and-effect processes in the world. Examples include:

    - Who is the current president of the United States?
    - Did Germany participate in the First World War?
    - Can AIDS be transmitted through kissing?
    - Is the universe expanding?

To address empirical questions, we rely on observations, experiments, or seek guidance from experts in relevant fields like physics, biology, psychology, economics, or history. Often, answers to these questions require more than just contemplation; they demand empirical evidence. For instance, the question of human evolution necessitates careful scientific inquiry rather than mere speculation.

2. **Conceptual questions**: These questions focus on logic and the meaning of words and concepts. Examples include:

    - Is the rule of law sufficient for democracy?
    - Can a woman sexually harass a man?
    - Are there any married bachelors?
    - Is 981567 divisible by 3?

To answer conceptual questions, we rely on reasoning and conceptual analysis rather than empirical evidence. For instance, determining if the rule of law guarantees democracy involves understanding the concepts involved and their logical implications.

3. **Evaluative questions**: These questions involve values and norms, prompting judgments about moral correctness or aesthetic values. Examples include:

    - Is abortion immoral?
    - Is Beethoven a more profound composer than Mozart?
    - Should the amount of unemployment benefits be raised?

To address evaluative questions, we must grasp the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental values. Intrinsic value exists independently, while instrumental value depends on serving a further end. Answering these questions requires considering underlying values and their implications.
Conceptual questions are often seen as the most fundamental among the three types of questions. This is because factual and evaluative questions rely on understanding the concepts involved. For instance,

without knowing what a black hole is, we can't answer whether light can escape from it. Similarly, to determine the morality of abortion, we first need to understand what abortion entails.

Empirical questions are typically separate from evaluative questions. While answering empirical questions doesn't require evaluating judgments, the reverse isn't true. Many evaluative questions necessitate knowledge of empirical facts. For example, when assessing the morality of an action, we often consider its consequences or motives. Once we have these empirical facts, we can apply appropriate moral standards to make judgments. Consider the question of whether the U.S. was justified in dropping atomic bombs on Japan. To answer this, we need to examine empirical facts such as Japanese wartime actions, the effects of the atomic bombings, civilian casualties, and alternative ways to end the war. These empirical factors are crucial in forming our judgments.

Many disagreements arise due to flawed thinking, often stemming from a failure to grasp the nature and types of questions at hand. Understanding the distinction between these three question types is a fundamental aspect of problem-solving methodology, aiding in clearer thinking and more effective resolution of disputes and controversies.

Solving problems.

G. Polya's book "How to Solve It," published in 1971, remains a timeless guide to problem-solving. According to Polya, most problem-solving approaches can be categorized into four key principles:

1. Understand the nature of the problem.
2. Develop a plan to solve the problem.
3. Implement the plan.
4. Evaluate the outcome of the plan.

Here are some essential considerations when applying these principles:

1. Understanding the nature of the problem.

- Is the problem clearly defined? Can it be broken down into smaller parts?
- What type of problem is it? (Refer to previous tutorials on problem classification.)
- What information can be gathered about the problem?
- Have others solved similar problems before? What lessons can be learned from their experiences?
- What constraints (time, money, resources, etc.) exist in solving the problem?

2. Develop a plan.

- Determine the required time and resources.
- Make necessary preparations, such as research or coordination.
- For complex problems, document the plan systematically.

3. Implement the plan.

    - Monitor progress to ensure adherence to the plan.
    - Document any errors or special considerations for future reference.

4. Evaluate the outcome of the plan.

    - This step is often overlooked but critical for improvement.
    - Reflect on past experiences to understand successes and failures.
    - Review the entire process to identify areas for improvement in future endeavors.

Making effective decisions is essential for success in our endeavors. Many CEOs regard decision-making as the foremost management skill. However, what defines a good decision? Some believe it's simply a decision with a positive outcome. Yet, relying solely on luck for favorable outcomes isn't reliable in the long term. Therefore, it's vital to focus on the decision-making process itself. Enhancing the quality of this process increases the likelihood of favorable outcomes over time.

What constitutes a reliable decision-making process? Some advocate for "trusting your gut" and making decisions without overthinking. Conversely, others argue for rational, emotion-free decision-making to avoid bias. Who is correct?

Image by Anna Nekrashevich on Pexels

The reality is likely more nuanced. Different people, situations, and decisions call for varied approaches. Furthermore, reasoning and emotions often intertwine in complex ways. Consider the pros and cons method, where emotions influence how we perceive the benefits and drawbacks of a choice. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio's research revealed the crucial role of emotions in decision-making. Patients with damaged emotional processing areas struggled to make even simple decisions, despite intact reasoning abilities. This suggests emotions play a pivotal role in decision-making. However, this doesn't mean blindly following gut instincts is wise. Acting impulsively can lead to regret, and gut feelings are often unreliable, except for experts with extensive experience in a specific domain.

Still, acknowledging our emotions is essential because our decisions often impact our emotional well-being. Deep-seated emotional responses may stem from immutable aspects of our personality. For instance, if we have an inexplicable aversion to someone's voice, pursuing a romantic relationship with them might be unwise, as suggested by Blaise Pascal's famous quote: "the heart has its reasons which reason does not know."

Policy problems

A **policy problem** arises when individuals or groups are dissatisfied with a situation and seek government intervention for a solution (Anderson 2015). Governments address a wide range of issues, from agricultural relief to nuclear disarmament, tax reform, and school bus safety. Identifying a problem, as described by Nelson (1984), involves recognizing an issue's potential for government action. This can stem from various sources, such as deep-sea divers noticing excessive oceanic plastic, coastal residents experiencing oxygen depletion (red tide), incidents like college hazing fatalities, or rising numbers of

babies born to drug-addicted mothers. These instances, among many others, form the basis for future public policy. **Issue recognition** entails identifying and describing the problem, often starting with questions like "What are the concerns, and what are their causes?" For example, learning that elementary school students face lunch withholding due to unpaid debts prompts outrage and recognition of the problem's cause: students are denied lunch due to their parents' unpaid debts.

The next questions to consider are: Can the situation be improved, and if so, by whom? If you are wealthy, you could donate a significant amount to the school district to clear the debt, provided they accept such donations. Alternatively, you could rally support from the community, but this might only provide a temporary fix as the debt could recur. Another approach is to express your concerns directly to the school district or attend a school board meeting. While contacting authorities can sometimes prompt action, your ultimate goal is to ensure that children never go without lunch again. You believe that governmental intervention to change public policy is the most effective solution to address this issue.

Ensuring practical solutions for public issues involves determining the appropriate level of government responsible for implementing specific policies. When uncertain, it's advisable to start locally and escalate to state or federal levels, if needed. For instance, if car break-ins rise in a neighborhood, it's ineffective to involve the U.S. President; instead, addressing local law enforcement is more suitable. Similarly, if facing challenges obtaining a fishing permit at a national park, the Secretary of the Interior isn't the appropriate contact. Regarding school lunch debt, each government level holds different authority. Citizens can engage with their local school district, making meal debt policies public and advocating for change if needed, possibly through community campaigns. Successful local efforts may obviate the need for higher government involvement, although media coverage or public outcry might spur state or federal action, as seen in legislation addressing school lunch shaming.

Problem-solving through government action varies in complexity. Identifying underlying issues is crucial but often challenging. Policymakers may lack complete understanding of problems, such as failing schools, with factors like low test scores and teacher shortages. Deciphering root causes, like parental involvement or poverty, is essential for effective policy formulation.

Agendas and Agenda Setting

Once a public issue is recognized, policymakers must decide to address it before implementing a policy solution. How do policymakers become aware of a problem? Why do they focus on certain issues more than others? When you visit the website of any Congress member, you'll find a list of priority "issues" known as their **agenda**. Every policymaker, implicitly or explicitly, maintains an agenda, which comprises topics under discussion in the media, by interest groups, constituents, and the public. According to John Kingdon (1985), the agenda represents the subjects or problems receiving serious attention from government officials at any given time.

Although the term "agenda" may suggest sinister intentions, it typically reflects plans of action or topics under consideration by the public and policymakers. Agendas can take various forms, from lists of proposed bills to guiding principles or values motivating citizens, organizations, and governments to act. Policymakers prioritize based on their personal interests and the needs of their constituents.

Table 14. Examples of congressional agendas

Senator (A)	Congresswoman (B)	Congresswoman (C)
Virginia	**Georgia**	**Minnesota**
Consumer Protection	Agriculture	Immigrant Rights
Cyber Security	2nd Amendment Rights	Environmental Justice
Education and Workforce Training	Health Care Reform	Medicare for All
Infrastructure	Pro-Life	Worker's Rights

Source: University of Minnesota Libraries. 2016. *Social Problems: Continuity and Change*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing.

ETHICAL REASONING

Ethical reasoning guarantees that proposed solutions undergo evaluation based on moral principles and societal values. Ethical considerations play a crucial role in ensuring the just distribution of resources and preventing disproportionate impacts on vulnerable populations. In designing sustainable interventions that contribute to long-term societal well-being, ethical reasoning becomes instrumental. Ethical reasoning also ensures the inclusion of the interests and perspectives of all stakeholders, particularly marginalized groups, promoting inclusivity and fairness within the decision-making process. Adhering to legal frameworks and ethical standards is imperative in social problem-solving, and ethical reasoning ensures that actions remain aligned with moral principles. At its core, ethical reasoning is vital for advancing social justice by identifying and addressing systemic inequalities, discrimination, and biases that contribute to social problems. Additionally, ethical reasoning provides a structured framework for assessing new challenges, allowing for strategic adjustments while upholding a commitment to moral values.

Human Rights

Currently, around 263,000 refugees and 84,300 asylum seekers are living in the United States (UNHCR 2013). These numbers are expected to rise due to ongoing conflicts and political turmoil worldwide. Without widespread human rights violations, the number of displaced families, including immigrants and refugees, would be significantly lower. Families leave their home countries for various reasons, such as escaping oppressive regimes in Syria and Iraq or seeking better economic opportunities in Mexico and Latin America. The United States and other Western nations regularly receive immigrant and refugee families from across the globe, depending on the prevailing sociopolitical climate. While some families arrive intact, many others are separated and dispersed globally.

According to the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), the top five countries of origin for resettlement in the United States are the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burma, Ukraine, Eritrea, and Afghanistan. President Trump's introduction of additional refugee screening measures for certain countries may alter these demographics (MPI 2015). The controversy surrounding the admission of refugees from specific regions,

such as Syria, continues to garner attention in the media and online. Following the November 2015 Paris attacks, fear prompted governors of 31 states to refuse Syrian refugees, although they lack authority over nationality laws (Barajas and Frazee 2015).

This section aims to offer a broad overview of human rights and essential concepts relevant to understanding the impact on immigrant and refugee families globally. It will explore the history and key theories of human rights law, as well as how various issues relating to the intersection of international human rights law and domestic sovereignty are addressed in the United States. Additionally, it will examine how specific human rights issues affect immigrant and refugee families in the United States. The module concludes with implications for research, policy, and practice, along with discussion questions and a case study.

Defining human rights

António Guterres, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR), stated that the "…UNHCR has never had to address so much human misery in its 64-year history" (Project Syndicate 2015). This underscores the significance of understanding and delving into the complexities of human rights. According to the UNHCR, **human rights** encompass "…inherent rights to all human beings, whatever the nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, color, religion, language, or any other status." This foundational definition is crucial for comprehending the global efforts to define and safeguard these rights. Understanding human rights involves moral values and ethical norms such as autonomy, justice, beneficence, and non-maleficence, which have shaped international law since the establishment of the United Nations in 1945 (Payne 2020).

While human rights are rooted in moral values, it's essential to distinguish between values and rights. Values pertain to *what is important*, whereas human rights focus on social practices aimed at empowering individuals. A right confers a benefit and significant legitimacy within the governmental authority framework. According to Donnelly, "…a human rights conception of human dignity and political legitimacy rests on the fact that human beings have an essential, irreducible moral worth and dignity irrespective of the social groups to which they belong" (2003: 27). Universal human rights, in this context, refer to rights codified by the international community into legal frameworks.

Human rights, rooted in an ideal, serve as a social mechanism to ensure that all individuals can live with dignity. This concept is detailed in documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR 1993), which views human rights as a fundamental moral principle (Donnelly 2003). The UDHR has inspired international treaties like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. These agreements are formed by societies to establish global standards for behavior conducive to the well-being of all. Therefore, understanding human rights as a societal practice is crucial in assessing their impact on immigrant and refugee families.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

In response to severe human rights abuses post-World War II, the United Nations established the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)** to prevent such atrocities from recurring. The UDHR preamble affirms the fundamental principle that every person possesses inherent dignity and equal,

unalienable rights, forming the bedrock of global freedom, justice, and peace (OHCHR 1948). Following the preamble are 30 articles delineating the rights that every individual should have. Remarkably, the UNHCR reports that this document has been translated into 389 languages worldwide.

The UDHR includes both *negative* rights (e.g., freedom from torture, arbitrary imprisonment, and slavery) and *positive* rights (e.g., the right to own property, freedom of thought, and the right to marry). It also outlines fundamental human rights principles for the first time, such as universality, interdependence, indivisibility, equality, and non-discrimination. Moreover, it emphasizes that human rights entail not only entitlements but also responsibilities. This means that enjoying rights comes with the obligation to respect the rights of others. These principles have been echoed in numerous international human rights agreements following the UDHR. Together with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the UDHR forms the cornerstone of international human rights law, serving as the legal foundation for subsequent human rights norms, standards, and regulations.

Human rights in the United States

Although human rights have gained international recognition, their application primarily occurs at the national level. According to Donnelly (2003), this presents a dual role for countries: as protectors and violators of human rights principles. In the United States, this dichotomy is evident in the contrast between the foundational laws and their equitable enforcement.

The Bill of Rights, enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, outlines fundamental human rights akin to those upheld by international standards. Hence, the country's founding values emphasize human rights (Donnelly 2003). This principle is common among liberal democracies, as noted by Koopmans (2012), who suggests that shared constitutional principles lead to similar rights across democracies. However, despite these ideals, there are instances where U.S. domestic policies infringe upon the rights of various groups within its population.

The primary human rights concerns in the United States center on immigrant and refugee families. The UNHCR highlights strategic priorities, including: (a) combating discrimination, (b) ensuring accountability, (c) addressing economic, social, and cultural rights, and fighting poverty, (d) safeguarding human rights amidst migration, (e) protecting rights during conflicts and insecurity, and (f) enhancing international human rights mechanisms and law development. Priorities (a), (c), and (d) are especially relevant to the current U.S. human rights landscape. Immigrant and refugee families encounter challenges such as classism, racism, sexism, religious discrimination, and economic instability.

The United States supported the UDHR but did not formally sign it. While scholars propose various explanations for this, many rights outlined in the UDHR are already protected by the Constitution and Bill of Rights. The U.S.'s perceived exceptionalism to international norms has been evident in two main ways: the continued use of torture at Guantanamo Bay and the involvement of American social scientists in developing torture techniques. While the U.S. may sometimes diverge from international standards, this is not the primary focus here. According to the UNCHR, “national and local politicians have sought to mobilize electoral support by promoting xenophobic sentiments, exaggerating the negative impact of hosting refugees while ignoring the fact that refugees can actually attract international assistance and

investment to an area, creating new jobs and trading opportunities" (2006:32). Thus, the refugee issue is frequently politicized in U.S. political discourse.

The current legal environment in the United States presents challenges for international human rights, especially regarding the legal status of displaced persons—those forced to leave their home countries due to conflict, persecution, or natural disasters. There are significant obstacles to utilizing international human rights arguments to advance the rights of displaced persons in the United States (Chilton 2014; Cole 2006; ICHR 2008). Despite its immigrant history, the U.S. legal system is characterized by nationalism and parochialism, as noted by Cole (2006). Moreover, "International human rights arguments are often seen as the advocates' last refuge pulled out only when there is no other authority to cite" (Cole 2006).

Image by Kelly on Pexels

However, the current trend appears to be steering the nation towards a transnational approach in how human rights law is understood and applied within the legal system and culture of the United States. This shift reflects the growing impact of globalization and interdependence, which has bolstered the influence of international human rights standards in the U.S. context. It is hoped that these standards will "command greater respect from our own domestic institutions" (Cole 2006: 643). Cole suggests that this paradigm shift mirrors the historical transition in the United States from state to federal power during the New Deal era of the 1930s. This indicates a potential for gradual change within the U.S. legal system regarding its acceptance of international human rights regimes, norms, and standards, as national and international domains merge.

Regarding **refugee families** and **asylum seekers**, while the terms are often used interchangeably, there are crucial legal distinctions between them. These disparities not only dictate the resources available to them upon arrival in the United States but also determine their position within the legal process. Since 2013, approximately 51.2 million people have been displaced due to persecution, war, violence, and human rights abuses (UNHCR 2018). In 2017, USCIS received 139,801 affirmative asylum applications, and the EOIR received 119,303 defensive asylum applications, but only 26,568 applications were approved (DHS 2019). The rest were either abandoned (1,439), withdrawn (6,400), or unaccounted for (11,391). Considering the recent United States population estimate of 318 million people, refugees constitute less than 1% of the population. Families seeking asylum often have significant traumatic histories and attract more attention in the public sphere than other types of immigrants. Most of these families are escaping extreme injustices in their home countries, such as war, political instability, genocide, and severe oppression. Due to the uncertainty of their situations, determining legitimate asylum eligibility remains challenging for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

Government agencies face further complexity in deciding when and how to return rejected asylum seekers to their home countries (Koser 2007). While traditionally, international migration studies distinguish between refugees (involuntary migration) and labor seekers (voluntary migration), it's evident that migration is driven by a complex array of reasons, including social factors (Koser 2007). If an asylum

seeker's claim is denied, they enter deportation proceedings overseen by an immigration judge (IJ) who, along with the asylum-seekers' attorney, decides on the removal process. It's worth noting that displaced persons are seldom detained or immediately deported to their country of origin.

In the past decade, the UNHCR has officially acknowledged gender as a crucial aspect of human rights. Their policy regarding refugee women recognizes that the experience of displacement affects men and women differently. Even outside of armed conflicts, women and children often face severe human rights violations due to gender-based discrimination and violence (Stange et al. 2012). These violations, rooted in historical views of women and children as property, deeply impact families.

Domestic violence disproportionately affects women and children. In immigrant families from patriarchal societies, traditional gender roles often persist, with women managing the household while men are the primary earners, even when both work outside the home. This imbalance of power can heighten the risk of domestic violence within these relationships (Perilla 1999). Additionally, when immigrant women gain autonomy and gender equity through employment, it can further threaten male self-esteem, already affected by classism, racism, and legal status (Mahler and Pessar 2006).

Children of displaced families, particularly asylum-seekers, often lack health insurance and access to public programs due to their legal status (Blewett et al. 2010). Traumatic events affect all family members, impacting the family as a whole (Nickerson et al. 2011). Detention and deportation separate families and hinder access to necessary resources, leading immigrant families to be cautious about seeking services due to fear of immigration enforcement.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a human rights issue, increasingly relevant due to refugees from East and West Africa arriving in the United States. Although practiced in some Muslim communities, it lacks religious mandate (Cook et al. 2002). Despite being illegal in many African nations, it remains widespread. Enforcement challenges persist, as seen in the anecdote of Fatima, who questioned the enforceability of laws against FGM (Personal communication 2011).

According to Mather and Feldman-Jacobs (2015), over 500,000 girls and women in the United States have undergone genital mutilation, which is considered a violation of human rights due to its severe health consequences. Despite familial consent, such procedures are never legally acceptable (Cook et al. 2002). Recommendations emphasize education and counseling for affected women rather than strict legal enforcement. While illegal in the U.S., the practice persists, often driven underground by shame and stigma. Although some may seek asylum based on FGM, many refrain due to discomfort (USCIS 2019). In 2012, the United Nations issued a resolution urging the global eradication of FGM, labeling it as a severe form of gender-based discrimination (WHO 2024a; WHO 2024b). The hope is that this ban will expedite the elimination of this harmful practice worldwide.

The United Nations *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons* defines trafficking as the "…recruitment, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by any means of threat or force…for the purpose of exploitation." This crime is broadly categorized as either **sex trafficking or labor trafficking**. Since 2001, the United States has seen an estimated 100,000 to 150,000 victims of sex trafficking and 40,000 to 50,000 individuals subjected to forced labor or sexual servitude.

In fiscal year 2011, the leading countries of origin for foreign victims included Mexico, the Philippines, Thailand, Guatemala, Honduras, and India (DOJ 2012). Notable prosecutions in 2011 "included those of sex and labor traffickers who used threats of deportation, violence, and sexual abuse to compel young, undocumented Central American women and girls into hostess jobs and forced prostitution in bars and nightclubs on Long Island, New York" (DOS 2012). Globally, an estimated 4.5 million women, men, and children are sexually exploited according to the International Labor Organization (2019). While there are legal provisions in the United States for trafficking victims who cooperate in prosecuting their traffickers, such as a self-petitioned visa providing four years of legal status, only a fraction of victims receive immigration aid compared to those identified as victims of sex trafficking (DOS 2012).

Human trafficking presents significant human rights concerns, particularly regarding the physical safety and sexual exploitation of immigrant and refugee women and children. Contrary to common belief, sex trafficking involves not only young girls but also boys, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations such as immigrant and refugee families in the United States (DOS 2012).

One of the most urgent human rights concerns facing **displaced individuals** in the United States today is the situation of **mixed-status families**, where some members hold legal documentation while others do not. These families consist of individuals with varying levels of legal status, such as asylum-seekers, permanent residents, citizens, and undocumented migrants. While children born to undocumented parents in the U.S. typically gain citizenship by birth, their parents' legal status remains unchanged. An exception arises when undocumented parents return to their home country and wait until their child turns 18, enabling the child to sponsor their parents for U.S. citizenship. The presence of both documented and undocumented members in these families creates uncertainty and significant vulnerabilities.

Research by Brabeck and Xu (2010) on the impact of detention and deportation on Latinx/e immigrant children revealed that the legal insecurity of their parents significantly affects child well-being. The uncertainty over whether parents can remain in the U.S. on a day-to-day basis takes a toll on children. Kanstroom (2010) highlights the tension between international human rights norms and U.S. immigration practices; noting that while states have the authority to deport noncitizens, they also have obligations to uphold procedural fairness, preserve family unity, and ensure proportionality. When these norms are violated, the state may be required to provide remedies. However, the clash between international human rights standards and U.S. political realities persists, leaving this issue unresolved.

In 2011, the United States Congress passed the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), allowing indefinite **detention without charge or trial**, reminiscent of the McCarthy era. Detaining refugees in this manner causes unnecessary psychological harm and violates human rights principles outlined in the ICCPR preamble (Prasow 2012). The idea of indefinite detention without constitutional protections for citizens, documented, or undocumented immigrants contradicts international human rights law and is opposed by civil liberties groups. Efforts to repeal or amend the NDAA began in late 2012, with Senator Dianne Feinstein of California stating, "Just think of it. If someone is of the wrong race and they are in a place where there is a terrorist attack, they could be picked up, they could be held without charge or trial for month after month, year after year. That is wrong" (Prasow 2012). While Senator Feinstein proposed an amendment to protect citizens and lawful residents, undocumented immigrants would remain vulnerable to indefinite detention without charge or trial.

Emerging Directions

While human rights literature often overlooks the family unit, the United Nations recognizes the "…family is the basic unit of society" (UN n.d.). Consequently, the treatment of immigrant and refugee families in the United States significantly impacts their human rights. Issues such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), deportation of undocumented immigrants separating families, prolonged detention, and sex trafficking have profound negative effects on families. Despite discussions primarily focusing on individual and community rights, there's a notable absence of family-specific references in human rights literature.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), concentrating on individuals and state actors, contributes to this research gap. However, a deeper understanding of how human rights issues affect families is crucial for supporting immigrant and refugee families effectively. Questions such as how families perceive their situations uniquely, whether family structures offer protective measures, and the dynamics of women's and children's issues in this context require exploration. Particularly urgent is further research into how mixed-status immigrant families navigate the challenges of varying documentation and legal statuses within a single-family unit.

POLICY ANALYSIS

What's the biggest issue in America today? Is it immigration reform, soaring healthcare costs, the student debt crisis, stagnant wages, or the trillion-dollar budget deficit? And what about climate change or the threat of plastic pollution in our oceans? Then there's gun violence and the debate over gun rights. The list goes on, but there are solutions, and it's up to the government to implement effective public policies.

Public policy, unlike the precise definition of "public," can be interpreted in various ways. It's about how the government addresses the needs and concerns of the people it serves. Table 15. in leading books offer different definitions of public policy.

Table 15. Public policy definitions

Definition	Author
"Public policy is the outcome of the struggle in government over who gets what."	Clark Cochran et al. 2010
"Stated most simply, public policy is the sum of government activities, whether acting directly or through agents, as it has an influence on the life of citizens."	B. Guy Peters 2010
"Whatever governments choose to do or not to do."	Thomas Dye 2013
"A statement by government—at whatever level, in whatever form—of what it intends to do about a public problem."	Thomas Birkland 2019
"A course of action adopted by the government in response to public problems."	Rinfret et al. 2019

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Source: University of Minnesota Libraries. 2016. *Social Problems: Continuity and Change*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing.

While there isn't a single agreed-upon definition, common themes emerge in the literature regarding public policy. First, public policy is crafted by the government and excludes private business activities. For example, private social networking sites may establish policies barring certain individuals, like suspected terrorists or hate groups, from their platforms. Actions such as those aren't considered public policy as they originate from private entities. However, there are cases where public and private sector policies intersect. Notably, Apple's consistent refusal to unlock iPhones for the FBI, owned by terrorist suspects, exemplifies this intersection (Collier and Farivar 2020). Despite ongoing debates between the Department of Justice and the tech industry regarding privacy versus national security, the government pressures Apple to change its stance.

Second, public policy responds to public problems—issues within the government's purview to address. Despite its power, the government faces unresolved challenges like drug addiction, poverty, and homelessness. An example of successful government intervention is the regulation of shrimping nets to protect sea turtles. The National Marine Fisheries Service mandates the use of turtle excluder devices in shrimp fishing to prevent turtle entrapment, demonstrating public policy tailored to address a specific public problem (NOAA).

If a state governor introduces a program to promote healthy food options in school lunches, it constitutes a public policy initiative. Conversely, when a senator from Georgia expresses opposition to same-sex marriage, it doesn't qualify as public policy. While the senator is entitled to their opinion, legislative actions like the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) of 1996 and the Supreme Court's decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) directly address same-sex marriage and are considered public policy. DOMA exemplifies legislative policymaking, highlighting Congress's authority in creating public policy. In contrast, *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) showcases judicial policymaking, where court rulings play a significant role in shaping or amending existing policies. Although some scholars debate the extent of the courts' power in making public policy, their decisions often lead to the formulation of new policies or modifications to existing ones. This text will further explore the roles of Congress and the courts in the policy-making process.

APPLYING A SOCIAL ANALYTIC MINDSET

Mayor Platform

Major issues and problems confronting U.S. cities today include those involving fiscal difficulties, crowding, housing, traffic, pollution, public education, and crime. Several of these problems stem directly from the fact that cities involve large numbers of people living in a relatively small amount of space.

If you were to work for a mayor of a large city to help address one specific problem in that city, which problem would you prefer to work on? Why? Discuss three solutions, organizations, or social movements designed to combat the problem of your choice.

Racial Prejudice & Public Policy Preferences

According to researchers studying modern prejudice, if white individuals continue to adhere to racial stereotypes, they are more inclined to oppose government assistance for people of color. For instance, studies show that whites who hold such stereotypes are more likely to resist government programs aimed at aiding African Americans (Quillian 2006). Those who attribute poverty to lack of motivation are more prone to believe that government spending to aid Black people is excessive compared to those who attribute it to discrimination.

Racial prejudice also impacts other public policy preferences. In the realm of criminal justice, white individuals harboring racial stereotypes or animosity towards African Americans tend to exhibit heightened fear of crime. They often perceive courts as lenient, support the death penalty, advocate for increased crime-fighting expenditures, and endorse aggressive police tactics (Barkan and Cohn 2005; Unnever and Cullen 2010).

COLLEGE STUDENTS & THE SOUTHERN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

The opening module of this book features a well-known quote by anthropologist Margaret Mead: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” This quote sets the tone for discussing the Southern civil rights movement, highlighting how the actions of dedicated individuals can bring about significant change. It serves as an inspiring reminder that even young people have the power to make a difference.

While African Americans had made attempts to end legal segregation in the 1950s, the civil rights movement is commonly credited with beginning on February 1, 1960. On this significant day, four African American students from the Agricultural and Technical College of North Carolina peacefully sat at a segregated lunch counter in a Greensboro Woolworth's store, requesting service. Despite being denied, they remained until closing and returned the next day, joined by others. The sit-in protests rapidly spread, prompting similar demonstrations across North Carolina and beyond. By late July 1960, Woolworth's desegregated its lunch counters nationwide. This series of events, initiated by college students, marked the official start of the civil rights movement.

During the peak years of the civil rights movement, college students from both the South and North united with thousands in sit-ins, marches, and various efforts to dismantle legal segregation. Many faced arrest, and tragically, at least forty-one lost their lives. Their courageous actions, risking freedom and even their lives, had a profound impact on millions of African Americans. This movement traces back to a pivotal moment in Greensboro, where a small group of college students peacefully sat at a lunch counter, sparking a powerful wave of change.

Branch, Taylor. 1988. *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–1963*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Southern Poverty Law Center. 2011. “41 Lives for Freedom.” Retrieved from (http://www.crmvet.org/mem/41lives.htm).

If racial prejudice impacts views on various issues, it poses a concern for democratic societies like the United States. In a democracy, it's normal for people to disagree on topics such as criminal justice, including differing views on the death penalty. However, should racial prejudice be a factor in these disagreements? If elected officials respond to public opinion, as they should in a democracy, and if racial prejudice influences public opinion, then it may affect government policies on criminal justice and other matters. In a democratic society, allowing racial prejudice to influence policy decisions is unacceptable.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS & ACTIVISM

Collective behavior, a term used by sociologists, encompasses a range of behaviors involving large groups of people. Specifically, **collective behavior** refers to relatively spontaneous and unstructured actions by individuals influenced by others. Relatively spontaneous implies a mix of spontaneity and planning, while relatively unstructured suggests a blend of organization and unpredictability. Some forms of collective behavior are more spontaneous and unstructured than others, and some involve coordinated actions rather than mere influence. Overall, collective behavior is considered less spontaneous and structured compared to conventional behavior in familiar settings like classrooms or workplaces.

As previously mentioned, collective behavior encompasses various behaviors that may not share much in common beyond their classification as such. This section discusses several common forms of collective behavior, including crowds, mobs, panics, riots, disaster behavior, rumors, mass hysteria, moral panics, and fads and crazes. Some of these forms, like crowds, panics, riots, and disasters, involve people physically present and interacting, while others, such as rumors, mass hysteria, moral panics, and fads and crazes, involve individuals who may be geographically distant but share common beliefs or concerns.

Social movements represent another significant form of collective behavior. The study of social movements gained significant traction in the 1960s and 1970s, overshadowing research on other types of collective behavior. Consequently, the latter part of this module is dedicated exclusively to exploring social movements.

Crowds

A **crowd** refers to a large group of people coming together for a shared short-term or long-term goal. Sociologist Herbert Blumer (1969) categorized crowds into four main types based on their purpose and behavior: casual crowds, conventional crowds, expressive crowds, and acting crowds. Additionally, scholars have identified a fifth type known as protest crowds.

A **casual crowd** consists of individuals coincidentally gathered in the same place at the same time, lacking a significant common bond or shared purpose. An example is people waiting to cross a busy city intersection; though they share the immediate goal of crossing, their connection is fleeting. According to Erich Goode (1992), members of casual crowds typically share only their physical location, lacking deeper commonalities. Goode suggests that these crowds don't exhibit true collective behavior, as their actions generally conform to societal norms for such situations.

Conventional crowd

A **conventional crowd** consists of individuals gathering for a particular purpose, such as attending a movie, play, concert, or lecture. According to Goode (1992), conventional crowds typically engage in behavior that is orderly and structured, reflecting their name. Unlike crowds exhibiting collective behavior, conventional crowds adhere to societal norms and expectations.

Expressive crowd

An **expressive crowd** consists of individuals coming together primarily to share and express various emotions. Examples include gatherings such as religious revivals, political rallies supporting a candidate, and festivities like Mardi Gras. According to Goode, the central aim of expressive crowds is to collectively experience and display emotions:

> ... is belonging to the crowd itself. Crowd activity for its members is an end in itself, not just a means. In conventional crowds, the audience wants to watch the movie or hear the lecture; being part of the audience is secondary or irrelevant. In expressive crowds, the audience also wants to be a member of the crowd, and participate in crowd behavior—to scream, shout, cheer, clap, and stomp their feet (1992:23).

A typical crowd can transform into an expressive one, like when moviegoers start shouting if the film projector malfunctions. This blurring distinction between conventional and expressive crowds suggests their fluid nature. Expressive crowds are characterized by heightened emotions and outward expression, as seen in the movie theater example. In these crowds, individuals participate in collective behavior driven by excitement and emotional reactions.

Acting crowd

An **acting crowd** takes a step further from an expressive crowd by engaging in violent or destructive behavior, like looting. A classic example is a **mob**, which is highly emotional and prone to violence. In historical contexts like the Wild West, mobs often carried out vigilante justice, bypassing trials and resorting to lynching. Lynch mobs, particularly prevalent in the South post-Reconstruction, targeted thousands of individuals, predominantly African Americans, in what would now be classified as hate crimes. Another form of acting crowd is a **panic**, characterized by sudden and self-destructive reactions, such as stampedes during emergencies or rushes into stores during sales. Acting crowds can escalate into full-scale riots when they become uncontrollable, a phenomenon we will touch on shortly.

Protest crowd

Identified by Clark McPhail and Ronald T. Wohlstein (1983), the **protest crowd** is a type of crowd that forms specifically for expressing dissent on political, social, cultural, or economic matters. Examples include sit-ins, demonstrations, marches, or rallies where individuals unite to voice their grievances or advocate for change.

Riots

A **riot** is a sudden eruption of violence involving a large group of people. While the term *riot* carries negative connotations, some scholars have used alternative terms like *urban revolt* or *urban uprising* to describe the social unrest witnessed in many U.S. cities during the 1960s. However, most scholars studying collective behavior still use the term "riot" without inherently attaching positive or negative judgments, and we adopt this neutral stance here.

Regardless of terminology, riots have been part of American history since colonial times. Colonists frequently rioted over issues such as "taxation without representation" during the 17th and 18th centuries (Rubenstein 1970). Estimates suggest between 75 and 100 riots occurred between 1641 and 1759. During the American Revolution, additional riots erupted as colonists resorted to violence against British rule. After the nation's founding, riots persisted, with indebted farmers often rebelling against state authorities. One notable example is Shays's Rebellion, a significant event in U.S. history, which originated as a riot involving hundreds of people in Springfield, Massachusetts.

Rioting surged in the early 19th century, becoming a regular occurrence. Rosenfeld (1997) notes that rioting was pervasive, with nearly three-fourths of U.S. cities experiencing at least one major riot, making it as common as voting or working for civilians. Native-born Whites predominantly targeted African Americans, Catholics, and immigrants in these riots. Abraham Lincoln remarked in 1837 that mob outrages were commonplace across the nation (Feldberg 1980).

Even after the Civil War, rioting persisted. White hostility towards Chinese immigrants stemmed from fears of job competition and suppressed wages. Additionally, labor riots erupted as workers protested harsh working conditions and low pay.

Race riots were prevalent in the early 20th century, with Whites attacking African Americans in major U.S. cities. In 1917, a significant riot in East St. Louis, Illinois, resulted in the deaths of 39 African Americans and 9 whites. Subsequent riots instigated by Whites occurred in at least seven more cities in 1919, leading to numerous casualties (Waskow 1967). During the 1960s, Northern cities witnessed riots as African Americans responded to instances of police brutality and unfair treatment. Estimates suggest that between 240 to 500 riots occurred during the decade, involving anywhere from 50,000 to 350,000 participants (Downes 1968; Gurr 1989).

Types of riots

Various types of riots can be categorized based on the motivations and objectives of the participants. One commonly used classification, proposed by McPhail (1994), distinguishes between protest riots and celebration riots. **Protest riots** stem from dissatisfaction with political, social, cultural, or economic issues, whereas **celebration riots** arise from the exuberance of an event or outcome, like the unruly festivities following a football team's championship win. Protest riots are inherently political, while celebration riots lack political motivation.

Another widely recognized classification categorizes riots into four types: purposive, symbolic, revelous, and issueless (Goode 1992). **Purposive riots** stem from dissatisfaction with a specific issue and aim to achieve a particular goal related to that issue. Examples include colonial riots and many prison riots in the U.S. **Symbolic riots**, on the other hand, express general discontent without targeting specific objectives, such as the early 20th-century riots by whites. **Revelous riots**, as previously discussed, are celebratory in nature, while *issueless riots* lack a clear purpose or basis, like the looting and violence observed during citywide power outages. Understanding the participants' demographics is crucial in comprehending riots.

Social movements

A **social movement** is when many people come together to either promote or hinder social, political, economic, or cultural change. Later in this module, we'll look deeper into social movements, but for now, recognize them as a crucial type of collective action that influences social change.

Disaster behavior

A **disaster** refers to an accident or natural event that causes significant loss of life and extensive damage to property. Hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, fires, and floods are common natural disasters, while events like the sinking of the *Titanic* and the April 2010 BP oil well explosion are notable accidents with disastrous outcomes. Some disasters, such as plane crashes, have localized impacts, affecting a small number of people intensely. In contrast, others like hurricanes and earthquakes have widespread effects, impacting a larger geographical area and population. While some sociologists investigate the causes of disasters, others focus on the study of collective behavior during and after these events, known as **disaster behavior**. Disasters disrupt people's daily lives and routines, leading to significant changes. As noted by David L. Miller, disasters often strike without warning, and when they do, people face unexpected and unfamiliar problems that demand direct and prompt action. There is the obvious problem of sheer survival at the moment when disaster strikes. During impact, individuals must confront and cope with their fears while at the same time looking to their own and others' safety. After disaster impact, people encounter numerous problems demanding life-and-death decisions as they carry out rescues and aid the injured (2000:250).

Image by Josh Fields on Pexels

In the aftermath of a disaster, people undergo a period of adjustment lasting days, weeks, and sometimes months as they strive to return to normalcy. Amidst this process, how do individuals typically behave? Following a disaster, it's often believed that individuals tend to prioritize their own interests, potentially resorting to self-centered and exploitative behavior fueled by panic (Goode 1992). Sociologists studying disaster behavior have found that individuals often exhibit a collective response, engaging in dialogue with others to evaluate the situation, weigh options, and devise solutions together (Goode 1992). Emotional shock is relatively uncommon, as individuals, including strangers, extend support and demonstrate a significant level of concern and generosity towards those affected (Miller 2000). While feelings of grief and depression may arise, they are typically no more severe than those experienced after the loss of loved ones under ordinary circumstances.

Rumors, mass hysteria, and moral panics

The collective behaviors we've explored—crowds, riots, and disaster behavior—typically entail physical interaction among individuals. However, other forms of collective behavior involve widely dispersed groups who don't necessarily interact but share common beliefs and perceptions. Sociologists categorize these phenomena into two main groups: (a) rumors, mass hysteria, and moral panics; and (b) fads and

crazes.

Rumors, mass hysteria, and moral panics all involve strongly held beliefs and perceptions that are often untrue or distorted versions of reality. A **rumor** typically originates from unreliable sources and spreads from person to person, often resulting in false or exaggerated information. The key characteristic of a rumor is its lack of reliable evidence when it first emerges, making it unsubstantiated (Goode 1992). In today's digital era, rumors can spread rapidly through platforms like the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media channels. For instance, in October 2010, a baseless rumor circulated that Apple was planning to acquire Sony, causing an increase in Sony's stock shares despite the rumor's lack of truth (Albanesius 2010).

Image by Safari Consoler on Pexels

Mass hysteria is when there is widespread, intense fear of a danger that later proves to be false or greatly exaggerated. It's not very common, but one well-known example is the "War of the Worlds" episode (Miller 2000). In 1938, Orson Welles aired a radio adaptation of the H.G. Wells story about Martians invading Earth. Many listeners in New Jersey and New York believed the invasion was real and panicked. Despite reports of stampedes and other extreme reactions the next day, these turned out to be untrue.

A **moral panic**, similar to mass hysteria, occurs when there is widespread alarm about a perceived threat to moral standards, which later turns out to be untrue or greatly exaggerated. This usually happens concerning issues like drug use or sexual activity. These concerns may lack evidence or greatly amplify the actual danger posed by the behavior. Nevertheless, people's strong moral beliefs about the situation heighten their worry, often leading them to advocate for laws or take other actions to combat the perceived moral problem.

Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda (2009) documented various moral panics in American history. One significant instance was the Prohibition movement of the early 20th century, driven by concerns about alcohol consumption. Led mainly by rural Protestants, who viewed drinking as a moral and social wrongdoing, the movement targeted urban areas, particularly those with large Catholic Irish and Italian immigrant populations. The immigrant status and Catholic faith of these urban residents intensified the activists' condemnation of their alcohol consumption.

In the 1930s, another moral panic emerged surrounding marijuana, leading to its prohibition. Previously legal, marijuana came under scrutiny due to concerns among Anglo Americans about its use among Mexican Americans. Newspapers circulated sensationalized stories about marijuana's alleged transformation of users into violent criminals. The Federal Bureau of Narcotics contributed to the hysteria by disseminating misleading information to the media.

These instances highlight how moral panics often target marginalized social groups, such as the poor, people of color, and religious minorities. Pre-existing prejudices against these groups amplify the intensity of moral panics, which, in turn, perpetuate and exacerbate societal biases.

Fads and crazes

Fads and crazes represent a significant aspect of collective behavior. A **fad** refers to a short-lived trend or product, while a **craze** captures the temporary obsession of a small group (Goode 1992). Throughout American history, various fads and crazes have emerged, such as goldfish swallowing, telephone booth stuffing, and streaking. Examples of fad products include Rubik's Cube, Pet Rocks, Cabbage Patch dolls, and Beanie Babies. Initially, cell phones were considered a fad, but their widespread adoption and importance have elevated them beyond that classification. Social media plays a significant role in amplifying and spreading fads and crazes by providing platforms for rapid dissemination of trends, fostering a sense of belonging and social validation among participants, and facilitating viral sharing of content that captures widespread attention. The immediacy and reach of social media platforms enable fads and crazes to gain momentum quickly, often resulting in widespread adoption and cultural impact within a short period.

Explaining Collective Behavior

Over time, sociologists and scholars have put forth numerous theories to explain collective behavior. The majority of these theories concentrate on phenomena like crowds, riots, and social movements, rather than on less interactive behaviors such as rumors and fads. Table 16. "Collective behavior theory snapshot," provides a summary of these explanations.

Table 16. Collective behavior theory snapshot

Theory	Major Assumption
Contagion theory	Collective behavior arises from the emotional and irrational influence of the crowd.
Convergence theory	Crowd behavior mirrors the beliefs and intentions individuals hold before joining the crowd.
Emergent norm theory	When people begin interacting in groups, they may feel unsure about how to behave. Through discussion, norms emerge, guiding their actions with social order and rationality.
Value-added theory	Collective behavior arises when specific conditions are met, including structural strain, shared beliefs, triggering events, and a lack of social regulation.

Source: University of Minnesota Libraries. 2016. *Social Problems: Continuity and Change*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing.

Contagion theory

Contagion theory, introduced by French scholar Gustave Le Bon (1841–1931) in his book, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (Le Bon 1982), emerged in response to concerns about social disorder following the French Revolution and prevalent mob violence during the 19th century in Europe and the United States. Intellectuals, often residing in affluent conditions, perceived this violence as irrational and attributed it to the sway of intense emotions and peer influence within mobs.

Le Bon's contagion theory, outlined in his book, mirrored these concerns. It posited that individuals, when part of a crowd, succumb to a nearly hypnotic influence, acting irrationally and emotionally, unable to control their instincts. This theory suggests that collective behavior stems from the contagious sway of crowds, leading individuals to behave in ways they wouldn't when alone. Contagion theory was widely accepted until the 20th century. However, scholars began to realize that collective behavior is more rational than previously thought by Le Bon. Additionally, they found that individuals are not as heavily influenced by crowd dynamics as Le Bon proposed.

Convergence theory

Convergence theory offers a fresh perspective on collective behavior. It suggests that crowds are not solely responsible for provoking individuals into emotional or violent actions. Instead, crowd behavior mirrors the attitudes and actions of the individuals comprising it. When like-minded individuals gather in a crowd, their collective behavior reflects their shared beliefs and intentions. In essence, rather than being influenced by the crowd, individuals shape the behavior of the crowd through their own attitudes and actions. This theory aligns with the idea that individuals with similar beliefs tend to gravitate towards one another, forming crowds that embody their collective values and objectives. As Goode (1992:58) explains,

> convergence theory says that the way people act in crowds or publics is an expression or outgrowth of *who they are ordinarily*. It argues that like-minded people come together in, or converge on, a certain location where collective behavior can and will take place, where individuals can act out tendencies or traits they had in the first place (emphasis in original).

Convergence theory acknowledges that individuals in a crowd may behave differently than they would alone, but it asserts that the collective actions of a crowd mainly stem from the characteristics of its members. For instance, consider a hate crime like gay bashing perpetrated by a small group or mob. This scenario aligns with convergence theory as the individuals involved share a common hatred towards homosexuality and individuals who identify as gay or lesbian. Consequently, the violence enacted by the group mirrors the beliefs held by its members.

Emergent norm theory

In the mid-20th century, Ralph H. Turner and Lewis M. Killian (1957) introduced their **emergent norm theory** of collective behavior, which offered a different perspective from earlier theories like Le Bon's emphasis on irrationality. According to Turner and Killian, when people engage in collective behavior, they initially lack clear guidelines for how to act. Through discussion, norms governing behavior emerge, leading to social order and rationality guiding their actions.

Emergent norm theory strikes a balance between contagion theory and convergence theory in two keyways. It views collective behavior as more rational than contagion theory does. However, it also acknowledges that collective behavior is less predictable than convergence theory suggests, as it assumes individuals may not necessarily share beliefs and intentions before joining a group.

Value-added theory

Neil Smelser's (1963) **value-added theory**, also known as **structural-strain theory**, is a key explanation for social movements and collective behavior. According to Smelser, these phenomena emerge under specific conditions. Structural strain, which refers to societal problems causing anger and frustration, is one such condition. Without this strain, there's no impetus for protest or movement formation. Another condition is generalized beliefs, which are people's perceptions of the causes of societal issues and their potential solutions. If individuals attribute problems to themselves or believe protest won't effect change, they're less likely to mobilize. Additionally, precipitating factors—sudden events like unjust arrests—can trigger collective action, as seen in urban riots of the 1960s. Lack of social control, where participants don't fear punishment, also fosters collective behavior. While Smelser's theory identifies crucial conditions for collective action, it's criticized for its vagueness, particularly regarding the threshold of societal strain needed to spur movement formation (Rule 1988).

Understanding Social Movements

Social movements are powerful drivers of social change globally. However, they frequently encounter resistance from governments and other adversaries. Understanding the origins, successes, failures, and impacts of these movements is essential to comprehending the dynamics of social change.

To grasp the concept of social movements, it's vital to define them. As stated, a social movement is a coordinated effort by many individuals aimed at promoting or hindering social, political, economic, or cultural transformation. While social movements share similarities with special-interest groups, their methods set them apart. Special-interest groups typically operate *within established systems* through conventional political tactics like lobbying and campaigning. In contrast, social movements often operate *outside established systems*, employing tactics such as protests, picket lines, sit-ins, and occasionally, violent actions.

Conceived in this manner, social movements operate as a form of "politics by other means." These "other means" become necessary because movements lack the resources and access to the political system typically enjoyed by interest groups (Gamson 1990).

Types of social movements

Sociologists categorize social movements based on the type and scope of change they aim for. This classification system helps us distinguish between various social movements from the past and present (Snow and Soule 2009).

One prevalent type of social movement is the **reform movement**, which seeks specific but significant changes within a nation's political, economic, or social systems. Unlike revolutionary movements, reform movements do not aim to overthrow the existing government but instead focus on improving conditions within the current framework. Many influential social movements in U.S. history fall into this category, such as the abolitionist movement before the Civil War, the women's suffrage movement after the Civil War, the labor movement, the Southern civil rights movement, the antiwar movement during the Vietnam era, the contemporary women's movement, the gay rights movement, and the environmental movement.

A **revolutionary movement** aims to completely replace the current government and transform society, going beyond mere reforms. Historically, revolutionary movements have sparked major upheavals such as the revolutions in Russia, China, and other countries. Unlike reform movements that seek gradual changes, revolutionary movements seek to establish not only a new government but also a different way of life. Both reform and revolutionary movements are often categorized as *political* movements due to their focus on political change.

Similarly, **reactionary movements** oppose or attempt to reverse social changes. An example is the antiabortion movement in the United States, which emerged following the legalization of most abortions in *Roe v. Wade* (1973). This movement seeks to restrict or abolish abortion rights.

Two additional types of movements are self-help and religious movements. **Self-help movements** involve individuals seeking to enhance various aspects of their personal lives. Examples of self-help groups include Alcoholics Anonymous and Weight Watchers. **Religious movements**, on the other hand, focus on reinforcing religious beliefs within their members and spreading these beliefs to others. Early Christianity serves as a significant example of a religious movement, while contemporary religious cults are part of this broader phenomenon. Occasionally, self-help and religious movements overlap, especially when self-help groups emphasize religious faith as a means of personal growth.

Image by Kelly on Pexels

Origins of social movements

To grasp how social movements begin, we must address two key questions. Firstly, what societal, cultural, and other elements contribute to their emergence? Social movements don't appear out of nowhere; they stem from dissatisfaction within society. Secondly, once these movements start, why do certain individuals engage in them more readily than others?

Discontent with existing conditions and relative deprivation

Social movements emerge when people are spurred by existing political, economic, or other issues that ignite dissatisfaction and prompt collective action. These issues may stem from a struggling economy, restricted political freedoms, unfavorable government foreign policies, or various forms of discrimination based on factors like gender, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. This aligns with Smelser's value-added theory, which emphasizes structural strain as a catalyst for collective behavior. Without such strain, characterized by societal problems that evoke anger and frustration, there would be little incentive for protest or the formation of social movements.

Dissatisfaction, regardless of its source, can lead to shared discontent among a population, which may spark a social movement. This discontent often arises from a sense of **relative deprivation**, where individuals feel they lack compared to others or an ideal state they aspire to reach. James C. Davies (1962) and Ted Robert Gurr (1970) popularized the concept of relative deprivation's significance in social protest, building upon earlier research on frustration and aggression by social psychologists. Davies proposed that when a deprived group perceives improving social conditions, they feel hopeful about

their lives. However, if these conditions stagnate, frustration mounts, potentially leading to protest or collective violence. Both Davies and Gurr stressed that feelings of relative deprivation were more influential in driving collective behavior than actual deprivation levels.

Image by Bret Sayles on Pexels

Initially popular, relative deprivation theory suggests that frustration resulting from perceived deprivation may lead to protest. However, scholars have noted that individuals may not always express their frustration through protest; some may internalize blame instead (Gurney and Tierney 1982). Proponents of the theory argue that participation in social movements is often linked to feelings of deprivation. Despite this, many individuals who feel deprived may still choose not to participate in protests (Snow and Oliver 1995).

While discontent is often a precursor to social movements and political collective actions like riots, it doesn't invariably trigger such events. For instance, although one might assume that a prison riot erupts due to dire prison conditions, some poorly maintained prisons don't witness such outbreaks. Therefore, while discontent lays the groundwork for social movements and collective behavior, it alone doesn't ensure the initiation or participation of discontented individuals in such movements.

A well-known study from the 1980s highlights this important concept within social movements (Klandermans and Oegema 1987). Conducted in the Netherlands, the study focused on the peace movement's efforts to oppose the deployment of cruise missiles. In a town near Amsterdam, approximately 75% of residents expressed opposition to the deployment according to a survey. However, only around 5% of these residents participated in a protest organized by the peace movement against the deployment. This significant difference between the number of residents who sympathized with the movement's cause and those who actively participated in protests underscores the substantial gap between potential *sympathizers* and actual *activists* within social movements.

Social networks and recruitment

The significant decrease in involvement from sympathizers to activists highlights a key aspect of social movement research, individuals are more likely to engage in movement activities when encouraged by friends, acquaintances, or family members. As noted by David S. Meyer (2007: 47), “[T]he best predictor of why anyone takes on any political action is whether that person has been asked to do so. Issues do not automatically drive people into the streets.” Having concerns about issues is not typically enough to motivate people to act. Social movement participants tend to have extensive social networks and affiliations with various organizations, which play a crucial role in recruiting them into movements. This *recruitment* process is vital for the success of social movements, as they rely on recruiting enough people to thrive. In today's world, electronic methods are increasingly used to recruit and organize people for social movements.

Resource mobilization and political opportunities

Resource mobilization theory, originating in the 1970s, encompasses various perspectives on social movements (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Oberschall 1973; Tilly 1978). This theory posits that social movement activity arises as a rational response to societal dissatisfaction. While discontent with prevailing conditions is perpetual, actual protests are infrequent. Therefore, the theory suggests that it's

not just the presence of discontent, but the strategic efforts of movement leaders to mobilize resources—such as time, money, and energy—from the population, directing them towards effective political action, that are crucial.

Resource mobilization theory, originating in the 1970s, has been highly influential. However, critics argue that it overlooks the significance of harsh social conditions and discontent in driving social movements. When conditions deteriorate, people are spurred to collective action. For instance, reductions in higher education funding and steep tuition hikes led to widespread student protests across California and other states in late 2009 and early 2010 (Rosenhall 2010). Critics also contend that resource mobilization theory fails to acknowledge the role of emotions in social movements, portraying activists as detached and rational (Goodwin et al. 2004). They argue that this depiction is inaccurate, asserting that social movement participants can be both emotional and rational simultaneously, akin to individuals in various other pursuits.

Another significant viewpoint is **political opportunity theory,** which suggests that social movements are more likely to emerge and succeed when there are favorable political conditions. For example, when a repressive government transitions to democracy or when a government faces instability due to economic or foreign crises (Snow and Soule, 2010). In such situations, discontented individuals perceive a higher likelihood of success if they engage in political action, motivating them to do so. As Snow and Soule (2010: 66) elaborate, "Whether individuals will act collectively to address their grievances depends in part on whether they have the political opportunity to do so." Applying this perspective, one reason social movements are more prevalent in democracies compared to authoritarian regimes is that activists feel more liberated to engage in activism without fear of government repression like arbitrary arrests or violence.

Life cycle of social movements

Various social movements worldwide, although diverse in nature, typically follow a recognized life cycle comprising distinct stages, as identified by Blumer (1969).

Stage 1 marks the *emergence* of a social movement, triggered by various reasons outlined earlier. In

Stage 2, known as *coalescence*, movement leaders strategize recruitment and plan tactics to achieve their objectives. Utilizing the media for positive coverage becomes crucial in garnering public support.

At **Stage 3**, *institutionalization* occurs, leading to *bureaucratization*. Paid leaders and staff often replace volunteers, establishing clear hierarchies and emphasizing fundraising. However, as movements bureaucratize, they may shift towards conventional methods, potentially diminishing their earlier disruptive impact (Piven and Cloward 1979). Yet, failing to bureaucratize can result in loss of focus and insufficient funding for sustained activity.

Stage 4 marks the *decline* of a social movement, which can happen for various reasons. Some movements accomplish their objectives and naturally wind down. However, many decline due to failure. Factors like financial constraints, waning enthusiasm among members, and internal divisions can contribute to this decline.

Government actions can influence the decline of a social movement. One way is through "co-optation," where the government offers small concessions to appease activists without addressing underlying issues. This can reduce discontent but maintain the original problems that sparked the movement. Additionally, repression by authoritarian governments, such as arbitrary arrests or violence against protesters, can suppress movements (Earl 2006). Even in democratic systems, arrests and legal actions against activists can impose financial burdens and deter others from joining protests. For instance, during the Southern civil rights movement, while police violence garnered sympathy, mass arrests served to quell dissent without sparking national outrage (Barkan 1985).

Social movements making a difference

Social movements typically function outside the political system through various forms of protest. Rallies, demonstrations, sit-ins, and silent vigils draw significant attention, especially when covered by the news media. This attention focuses on the core issue or grievance, exerting pressure on governments, corporations, or other entities targeted by the protest.

Throughout U.S. history, social movements have sparked significant changes (Amenta et al. 2010; Meyer 2007; Piven 2006). For instance, the abolitionist movement highlighted the atrocities of slavery, leading to increased public condemnation. Following the Civil War, the women's suffrage movement secured women's voting rights with the 19th Amendment in 1920. Similarly, the labor movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries established crucial labor rights like the minimum wage and the 40-hour workweek. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s ended legal segregation in the South, while the Vietnam antiwar movement of the 1960s and 1970s contributed to public opposition to the war. In contemporary times, the women's and LGBTQ+ rights movements have secured various social rights. Additionally, the environmental movement has advocated for legislation to mitigate pollution in air, water, and land.

Pre-election suffrage pararde, New York City, October 23, 1915. 20,000 women marched.

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While it's clear that social movements have had a significant impact, until recently, scholars studying social movements have primarily focused on their origins rather than their outcomes (Giugni 2008). However, recent research has started to address this gap by examining the effects of social movements on different areas. These include their political impact on the political system (political consequences),

their influence on various aspects of society's culture (cultural consequences), and the effects they have on the individuals involved in the movements (biographical consequences).

Scholars have examined the political impact of social movements, considering factors such as the effectiveness of protest intensity and issue focus. Research suggests that movements employing higher levels of protest and concentrating on a single issue tend to be more successful. Additionally, movements are often more likely to succeed when protesting against a weakened government facing economic or other challenges. Furthermore, there is debate among movement scholars regarding the organizational structure of movements. Some argue for centralized, bureaucratic organizations, while others advocate for decentralized structures, which may facilitate greater protest engagement (Piven and Cloward 1979; Gamson 1990).

In terms of cultural impact, movements can unintentionally influence various aspects of a society's culture (Earl 2004). As one scholar noted, the ability to shape the broader cultural landscape might be where movements leave their most profound and enduring mark (Giugni 2008: 1591). Social movements have the power to shape values, beliefs, and cultural practices like music, literature, and fashion.

Engaging in social movements during adolescence and early adulthood can have lasting effects on individuals. Research suggests that participation in such movements can lead to significant personal transformation. Individuals often experience shifts in their political beliefs, which may become more firmly established or altered altogether. Moreover, they are more inclined to remain politically engaged and pursue careers related to social change. As one scholar notes, even minimal involvement in social movement activities can leave a lasting impact on individuals throughout their lives (Giugni 2008: 1590).

In the subsequent sections of the module, we will explore initiatives and societal transformations influenced by public policy and grassroots movements to reduce inequalities.

Reducing Racial & Ethnic Inequality

After exploring race and ethnicity in the United States, what conclusions can we draw about our current situation in the second decade of the twenty-first century? Did Barack Obama's historic election as president in 2008 mark a turning point towards racial equality, as some suggested, or did it happen despite ongoing racial and ethnic disparities?

There are reasons for optimism. Legal segregation is no longer in place, and the blatant racism of the past has significantly diminished since the 1960s. People of color have achieved notable advancements in various areas of life, and individuals from these communities now hold significant elected positions both within and beyond the South, a development unimaginable just a generation ago. Notably, Barack Obama, with African ancestry, self-identifies as African American, and his election in 2008 was celebrated nationwide for its symbolic significance. Undoubtedly, progress has occurred in racial and ethnic relations in the United States.

However, there is also reason for concern. Traditional racism has evolved into a modern form of symbolic racism, which still holds people of color responsible for their difficulties and undermines public support for government interventions to address their challenges. Institutional discrimination persists, along with hate crimes like the cross burning mentioned earlier. Suspicion toward individuals based solely on their skin color remains prevalent, as highlighted by incidents such as the Trayvon Martin tragedy.

Despite these challenges, there are several promising programs and policies that, if properly funded and implemented, could effectively reduce racial and ethnic inequalities. We will explore these shortly, but first, let's address affirmative action, a topic that has sparked controversy since its inception.

Affirmative action

Affirmative action involves giving special consideration to minorities and women in employment and education to address the discrimination and lack of opportunities they face. Originating in the 1960s, these programs aimed to provide African Americans initially, and later, other people of color and women, with access to jobs and education to offset past discrimination. President John F. Kennedy first used the term in 1961 when he issued an executive order mandating federal contractors to take affirmative action in hiring without regard to race and national origin. President Lyndon B. Johnson expanded this to include sex as a demographic category six years later.

While affirmative action programs still exist today, their number and scope have been constrained by court rulings, state laws, and other initiatives. Despite these limitations, affirmative action remains a contentious topic, with scholars, the public, and elected officials holding divergent views on its efficacy and fairness.

One significant court ruling discussed is the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, 438 US 265 (1978). Allan Bakke, a 35-year-old white applicant, applied twice to the University of California, Davis medical school but was denied admission. UC Davis had a policy of reserving sixteen seats in its class of one hundred for qualified individuals of color to address their underrepresentation in the medical field. Despite Bakke's higher grades and test scores compared to some admitted applicants of color, he claimed reverse racial discrimination based on his White identity and sued for admission (Stefoff 2005).

The Supreme Court ruled 5–4 that Bakke had to be admitted to UC Davis medical school because he was unfairly rejected due to his race. This decision marked a historic shift away from strict racial quotas in admissions, emphasizing that no applicant should be denied solely based on race. However, the Court also acknowledged that race could be one of many factors considered in admissions, alongside grades and test scores, particularly if a school aims to promote diversity among its student body.

Two recent Supreme Court cases focused on the University of Michigan: Gratz v. Bollinger, which concerned undergraduate admissions, and Grutter v. Bollinger, which addressed law school admissions. In Grutter, the Court upheld the right of colleges to consider race in admissions. However, in Gratz, the Court ruled against the university's practice of giving extra points to students of color, stating that admissions evaluations should be more personalized than a point system allows. These rulings affirm that affirmative action in higher education admissions based on race/ethnicity is acceptable if it avoids strict quotas and instead uses an individualized assessment approach. Race can be one of several factors considered, but it should not be the sole criterion.

Opponents of affirmative action argue against it for various reasons (Connors 2009). They claim it constitutes reverse discrimination, violating legal and moral principles. They argue that beneficiaries of affirmative action are often less qualified compared to white counterparts competing for jobs and college admissions. Moreover, opponents suggest that affirmative action perpetuates the perception of beneficiaries as less capable, thereby stigmatizing them.

In contrast, proponents of affirmative action offer several justifications in support of it (Connors et al. 2009). They contend that it serves to rectify historical and ongoing discrimination against people of color, addressing disparities in opportunities. For instance, due to social networks, Whites have better access to job opportunities, placing people of color at a disadvantage. Affirmative action is seen as a means to level the playing field in employment. Additionally, proponents argue that affirmative action promotes diversity in workplaces and on campuses, akin to preferences given to out-of-state students or legacy applicants. They argue that considering racial and ethnic backgrounds alongside other criteria helps achieve a diverse student body, aligning with broader goals of inclusivity and equal opportunity.

Supporters argue that affirmative action has successfully broadened employment and educational prospects for people of color. They contend that beneficiaries of affirmative action generally thrive in both the workplace and academic settings. For example, research shows that African American students admitted to selective U.S. colleges and universities under affirmative action are slightly more likely than their white peers to attain professional degrees and engage in civic activities (Bowen and Bok 1998).

Despite these achievements, the debate surrounding affirmative action persists. Critics raise concerns about its fairness and effectiveness. However, proponents advocate for its necessity to address historical and ongoing discrimination, providing opportunities to marginalized communities. Without such programs, the cycle of discrimination and inequality faced by disadvantaged individuals is likely to persist.

Other programs and policies

As highlighted earlier in this module, DNA evidence and evolutionary studies emphasize that we are all members of a single human race. Failing to acknowledge this truth risks repeating historical injustices, where racial and ethnic differences led to discrimination and oppression against non-white communities. In America's democratic society, it's imperative to strive for improvement to ensure genuine "liberty and justice for all."

As the United States strives to address racial and ethnic inequality, sociology highlights the structural roots of this disparity. This perspective underscores that such inequality is less about personal shortcomings of people of color and more about the systemic barriers they encounter, including ongoing discrimination and limited opportunities. Therefore, long-term solutions to reducing racial and ethnic inequality must focus on addressing these structural obstacles (Danziger et al. 2004; Syme 2008; Walsh 2011). Some strategies, similar to those targeting poverty reduction, include:

1. Implementing a national "full employment" policy with federally funded job training and public works programs.
2. Increasing federal assistance for low-income workers, including earned income credits and child-care subsidies.
3. Expanding well-funded early childhood intervention programs and adolescent intervention programs like Upward Bound for low-income teenagers.
4. Enhancing the quality of schooling for poor children and expanding early childhood education initiatives.
5. Providing improved nutrition and healthcare services for economically disadvantaged families with young children.
6. Strengthening efforts to reduce teenage pregnancies.

7. Reinforcing affirmative action programs within legal boundaries.
8. Enhancing legal enforcement against racial and ethnic discrimination in employment.
9. Intensifying efforts to diminish residential segregation.

Reducing Gender Inequality

Gender inequality persists in most societies globally, including the United States. Just as racial and ethnic biases contribute to racial and ethnic inequality, gender stereotypes and false beliefs perpetuate gender inequality. While these stereotypes have diminished since the 1970s, they still hinder efforts toward achieving full gender equality.

A sociological perspective underscores that gender inequality arises from a complex interplay of cultural and structural factors. Despite progress, traditional gender norms persistently shape socialization from infancy, limiting both girls' and boys' potential. Structural barriers in workplaces and other spheres further maintain women's subordinate social and economic status relative to men. Efforts to reduce gender inequality must address both cultural and structural dimensions to build on the progress made since the 1970s.

To address gender inequality, sociological insights recommend implementing various policies and measures targeting the cultural and structural factors contributing to this issue. These actions may encompass:

1. Reducing the influence of parental and societal gender socialization on children.
2. Challenging gender stereotypes perpetuated by the media.
3. Raising public awareness about the causes, prevalence, and consequences of sexual violence, harassment, and pornography.
4. Strengthening enforcement of laws against gender-based employment discrimination and sexual harassment.
5. Allocating more resources to rape-crisis centers and support services for women who have experienced sexual violence.
6. Expanding government funding for high-quality childcare facilities to support parents, particularly mothers, in pursuing employment opportunities without financial or childcare-related constraints.
7. Promoting mentorship programs and initiatives to increase female representation in traditionally male-dominated fields and in positions of political leadership.

When discussing ways to address gender inequality, we must recognize the significant impact of the modern women’s movement. Since its inception in the late 1960s, this movement has driven important progress for women across various domains. Courageous individuals challenged societal norms, highlighting gender disparities in workplaces, education, and beyond. They also raised awareness about issues such as rape, sexual assault, harassment, and domestic violence on a national scale. Sustaining momentum in the fight against gender inequality requires ongoing support for a robust women’s movement, which serves as a crucial reminder of the persistent sexism in American society and globally.

Addressing rape and sexual assault

Gender inequality is evident in the prevalence of violence against women. A sociological viewpoint highlights how cultural narratives, economic disparities, and gender inequality contribute to rape, extending beyond individual perpetrators. Addressing this issue requires broader societal changes, challenging beliefs about rape and addressing poverty while empowering women. Randall and Haskell (1995) emphasize the need to question the structural inequalities embedded in our society.

In addition to these fundamental shifts, improving and adequately funding rape-crisis centers is crucial for supporting survivors. However, women of color face further obstacles as many of these centers were established in areas primarily inhabited by white, middle-class individuals, neglecting the needs of women of color in inner cities and Native American reservations. This disparity means that women of color often lack the support available to their white counterparts, highlighting ongoing inequalities despite some progress (Matthews 1989).

Reducing Inequality of Sexualities

The inequality based on sexual orientation stems from longstanding prejudice against non-heterosexual attraction and behavior. However, attitudes towards same-sex sexuality have improved significantly over the past generation. This positive trend is reflected in the increased number of openly gay elected officials and candidates for office. In many parts of the country, a candidate's sexual orientation is no longer a significant issue. For instance, a Gallup poll conducted in 2011 found that two-thirds of Americans would vote for a gay candidate for president, a sharp increase from just one-fourth in 1978. Additionally, in 2011, the U.S. Senate confirmed the nomination of the first openly gay man for a federal judgeship. These developments suggest progress towards greater acceptance and equality. In summary, as exemplified by a nationwide campaign aimed at supporting gay teens, there is a growing recognition that societal attitudes are improving for non-heterosexual individuals.

Much of the progress in LGBT rights can be attributed to the gay rights movement, widely recognized to have started in June 1969 in New York City following a police raid at the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar, leading to protests and riots. This marked the beginning of the gay rights movement.

While significant strides have been made and public attitudes towards LGBTQ+ issues have improved, this module highlights ongoing inequalities and challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals. Similar to efforts to address inequalities based on race, ethnicity, social class, and gender, there remains substantial work to be done to reduce discrimination based on sexual orientation.

To reduce inequality, it's crucial for heterosexuals to actively avoid mistreating LGBTQ+ individuals and to treat them equally. Additionally, several measures can help address LGBTQ+ inequality, including:

1. Encouraging parents to affirm the validity of all sexual orientations to their children, showing equal love and support regardless of sexual orientation.
2. Strengthening school programs to create a positive environment for all sexual orientations, educating students about LGBTQ+ issues, and preventing bullying and harassment. States should consider implementing curriculum like California's requirement to teach gay and lesbian history.

3. Enacting federal laws to prohibit employment discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals and legalizing same-sex marriages nationwide. In the interim, legislation should grant same-sex couples the same rights and benefits as heterosexual married couples.
4. Police departments should enhance their understanding of LGBTQ+ issues and ensure that physical attacks against LGBTQ+ individuals are treated with the same seriousness as attacks against heterosexual individuals.

APPLYING A SOCIAL ANALYTIC MINDSET

Exploring Social Movements

Research a current social movement that is addressing one of the social problems or issues we have explored in this book – for example, unions, non-profit organizations, web-based advocacy groups, government programs, churches, schools, etc.

1. Choose a social movement related to your topic of choice, and provide information about the group or organization and their movement.

2. Describe the social movement or solution. What defines this as a social movement? What is the focused goal of the group? Who participates? Where does their funding come from? Is it local, national, or global?

3. Evaluate the effectiveness of the program. Discuss local, national, and global impact. Are they meeting their stated goals?

4. Explain the steps you would take to enhance the movement for social change and enhance the well-being of individuals.

CORE INSIGHTS

Classifying problems using strategic reasoning involves identifying key issues, stakeholders, and potential solutions within complex socio-political contexts. By employing strategic frameworks, decision-makers can prioritize resources and interventions to address pressing challenges effectively.

Applying ethical reasoning to decision-making processes requires consideration of moral principles, human rights, and social justice imperatives. Ethical dilemmas often arise in policy formulation and implementation, necessitating transparent deliberation and stakeholder engagement to ensure ethical accountability and legitimacy.

Analyzing policy implications through policy analysis entails assessing the intended and unintended consequences of proposed interventions on diverse populations and societal outcomes. Policy analysts employ empirical research, cost-benefit analysis, and stakeholder consultations to inform evidence-based policy recommendations and program evaluations.

Evaluating the impact of racial prejudice on public policy preferences reveals systemic biases and discriminatory practices embedded within political institutions and decision-making processes.

Racialized narratives and ideologies shape policy agendas and resource allocations, perpetuating inequalities and marginalization of racial and ethnic minority groups.

Examining social movements targeting racial, ethnic, and gender inequality highlights collective mobilization efforts aimed at challenging systemic oppression and advocating for policy reforms. Social movements serve as catalysts for social change, amplifying marginalized voices and advancing intersectional approaches to justice and equity.

Exploring alternative programs and policies aimed at reducing racial/ethnic inequality, gender inequality, and sexuality inequality requires innovative strategies and inclusive policy frameworks. Intersectional approaches, community-based initiatives, and participatory governance models offer promising avenues for addressing structural barriers and promoting inclusive development.

In summary, addressing social inequalities and advancing social justice necessitates strategic problem-solving, ethical leadership, and evidence-informed policymaking. By interrogating power dynamics, amplifying marginalized voices, and advocating for inclusive policies, scholars and activists contribute to more equitable and just societies.

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