

Social problems and issues
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Session one: What is a social problem?

Social problems are distinct and yet tied to other types of problems. Social problems are a particular way of understanding the social issues that emerge in public life. They may be distinguished from individual problems which are largely a matter for the private sphere. However, private matters can become public concerns if a collective threat is perceived. Social problems may also be distinguished from economic issues. Economic models and theories cannot explain the historical and sociological reasons for social problems. However, significant economic change can be part of the reasons for the emergence of a social problem, such as poverty. Social problems are not necessarily associated with government intervention. But discussing social problems does involve making political judgments about the kind of society we believe is just.

Social problems are contemporary and culturally embedded. Social problems come and go as public discussion shifts. These changes may be tied to what is currently going on in British society, cultural shifts such as greater ethnic diversity or the rise of insecurity in the workplace. However, social problems almost always have a history to them. They are connected in some way to on-going debates about key social structures and institutions.

Identifying social problems cannot be done using a purely empirical measure. The scale of the problem is no indication of its public importance. This means that the significance of a particular social problem becomes a matter of argument and debate. The most convincing arguments are based on social research, where the assumptions of the author are made explicit.

Social scientists abstract collective identities from practical experience. To these identities (be they 'asylum seekers', 'lone parents', 'liberals', 'contingent choosers' or whatever) they subscribe particular social attitudes. This is done in order to make meaningful statements about the social world. However, social scientists undertake this task using a clear methodology and theoretical framework. Other social actors (politicians, media commentators, pressure group representatives and so on) tend to do so in a less self-reflective and analytical mode.

As students of social policy or any of the social sciences our task is to try to identify the assumptions built into the discourses surrounding social problems. That is, to attempt to explain the way the meanings and definitions implied in the language used about certain social groups are loaded with assumptions. We also try to construct more rigorous explanations of social problems using the tools of social science. In short, to turn what is an unexamined social problem into an examined one.

Further reading

Chapter 2 of 'Social Problems in the UK: An Introduction' by Stuart Isaacs, David Blundell, Anne Foley, Norman Ginsburg, Brian McDonough, Dan Silverstone, Tara Young

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