

# Society's problems with reference to social construction



The debate over whether social problems are socially constructed or biologically determined takes us immediately into the realms of constructivism and positivism. As such, we must begin our essay by offering a definition of the two fundamentally important sociological paradigms. Constructivism implies that social problems are indeed the result of socially constructed phenomena. Viewed from the constructivist perspective, the myriad of social, cultural, economic and political factors that affect the day to day running of contemporary society are subject to a variety of competing pressures, each of which are able to create new social problems where – in a different social, cultural, economic and political context – none would have arisen. Thus, society itself is the trigger for conflict and resolution; society itself is the location of the answers to the questions posited by the complexities of social construction. Thus, “ because we are locked into our society, because our journey of knowledge occurs within the journey of our societies, we cannot know things about society with absolute certainty – the ‘ truth’s of the social sciences are interpretative.”

The positivist tradition, on the other hand, takes a different approach. Beginning with the publication of *The Positive Philosophy* by French intellectual Auguste Comte in 1853, the positivist tradition to sociological theory has historically sought to underline the significance of science to the study of society and its ills. According to Comte, “ the social world of human relationships could be treated as though it is similar to the natural world of inanimate objects.” As a result, positivist sociologists have since aimed to show how t is possible to develop a scientific study of society as though the study of society is equivalent to studying ‘ social physics.’ Thus, human

beings, their behaviour and interaction, have since been treated as scientific variables while society itself has been interpreted as methodological, scientific data with 'cause and effect' reduced to 'results and equations.' The implication here is that biology and other scientifically verifiable instances of pre-disposition towards deviance are responsible for the creation of social problems.

Taken at face value, these two opposing sociological theories would appear to suggest a deep-seated theoretical schism in the understanding of society and its many and varied problems. Yet both the positivist tradition and the constructivist tradition seek in the first instance to underscore that social problems are the result of delinquency and abnormal psychology. However, because, according to Gerald Davison, John Neale and Ann Kring, "the way different societies understand abnormal behaviour strongly affects the way they treat it," the divergence between these two opposing sociological schools should be considered to be a natural schism over what is an inexorably complex, multi-faceted subject.

For instance, if we start from the assumption that society is, as a construct of human beings, controlled by the behaviour of people, then we must assume that biology plays some kind of a role in determining which elements of society are prone to problem types of behaviour and, conversely, which elements of society conform to cultural 'norms.' As the fundamental building blocks upon which humankind has been built, biology has historically been the first place to look in attempting to rationalise people and the deviations inherent within the organisation of any given society. Biology has, it can be argued, been able to show the innate behavioural differences between the <https://assignbuster.com/societys-problems-with-reference-to-social-construction/>

sexes, highlighting how males have traditionally been more prone to producing social problems such as crime and disorder than females.

However, according to Anthony Giddens, any attempt to understand society (even the differences between the sexes) as a 'natural' product of biology and genetic engineering can only remain fixed firmly within the realms of scientific hypothesis and not scientific fact.

“ There is no evidence of the mechanisms which would link such biological forces with the complex social behaviour exhibited by human men and women. Theories which see individuals as complying with some kind of innate predisposition neglect the vital role of social interaction in shaping human behaviour.”

Ultimately, although adopting such a standpoint enables science to provide answers as to why social problems exist, it does not take into account the inherent diversity between peoples that is such a crucial part of the human condition. If, for example, we think of the modern urban space as representing a microcosm of human society, we can see how biology is completely incapable of accounting for the vast range of characteristics, problems and successes of the modern urban community. Factors such as 'social exclusion' and 'urban degeneration' are equally, if not more, important than biology in determining which sectors of society are subject to the most social problems. In bypassing the potentially debilitating sociological effects of poverty, exclusion and housing, the proponents of the positivist approach to sociology ignore some of the most basic triggers for social problems in the contemporary era. Only by understanding and acknowledging the complex interaction of sociological forces which conspire

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to render a person or a community problematic can policies be put in place to remedy the ills.

We should also note how social problems are in many ways created by the very society which purports to be in such a state of distress. Stan Cohen observed as much in his seminal study *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: the Creation of Mods and Rockers* where the author acknowledged that, throughout history “ societies appear to be subject, every now and again, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of person emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people.”

Viewed through this prism, social problems – especially those social problems relating to crime, delinquency and disorder – can be seen to have been constructed as a means of protecting the traditional socio-political elite from what it perceives as a threat to its moral authority with the global mass media being the vehicle through which the social construction of delinquency has been transported to the news-consuming general public. The vilification of youth culture which Cohen so brilliantly exposed can be seen to have been repeated in a variety of forms since the 1970s. When, for instance, we pause to consider the media’s portrayal of youth culture at the dawn of the twenty first century with the incumbent demonisation of ‘ hoodies’, we can see the extent to which social problems can, firstly, be constructed by a fearful socio-political elite and, secondly, how that fear can be disseminated via the media as a sociological fact. This is what Cohen refers to as “  
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deviancy amplification” whereby the projection of the threat from a perceived social problem is grossly over-exaggerated, resulting in many cases in the cultural myth transpiring into a social reality. In this way, then, we can begin to see how the question of society and its myriad of problems is not nearly as straightforward a question as it at first appears.

### **Conclusion**

One cannot offer a conclusion as to the production of society’s problems without reference to social construction. The idea that all of society’s problems are the result of pre-determined biological engineering is little short of preposterous, having its roots in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries imperialism and the need to underscore the white European man’s position at the top of the global hierarchy. Ultimately, sociology, while designated a ‘ social science’, is not a science in the strictest sense. As Ken Browne notes, “ the differences between the ‘ natural’ sciences and sociology mean that sociologists cannot follow exactly the same procedures or produce such precise findings as those in the natural sciences.”

In the final analysis, as a study of people and their interactions with one another, the study of society cannot be reduced to scientific pre-determination, methodology, facts and figures. Only by acknowledging the complex interaction of forces that conspire to trigger social problems, can the broader issues of society and humanity be more adequately understood.

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