Lecture 3

Approaches to the Study of Social Problems

Social Structure as the Basic Unit of Analysis

The Person-Blame Approach

People generally understand social problems as some sort of pathology experienced by individuals. This approach to understanding social problems is what Eitzen calls the person-blame approach.

This approach tends to assume that universal norms exist. Behavior is deviant depending on how much it strays from these norms.

Most people define a social problem as behavior that deviates from the norms and standards of society.

The system is not only taken for granted; it has, for most people, an aura of sacredness because of traditions and customs they associate with the system.

From the person-blame approach, those who deviate are seen as the source of trouble. The obvious question observers ask is, why do these people deviate from norms? Because most people view themselves as law abiding, they feel those who deviate do so because of some kind of unusual circumstances: accidents, illness, personal defect, character flaw, or maladjustment. For example, a person-blamer might argue that a poor person is poor because he or she is not bright enough to succeed. In other words, the deviant is the cause of his or her own problem.

The following are examples of perspectives that replay on person-blame approaches.

- Cultural Deprivation
  Eitzen et al. (2009:16) contends that people who blame the victim often cite cultural deprivation as the "cause" of social problems. Culture is seen as the "cause" of the problem. In other words, people who blame the victims see the culture of the group with the problem as inferior and deficient when compared to the culture of the dominant group in society.
  For example, kids who don't do well in school have parents who don't speak proper English or who are uneducated.

- Recidivism
  How successful are Prisons in rehabilitating criminals? Not VERY! Three-fourths of the released criminals are re-arrested within four years. Recidivism
refers to ex-offenders who are arrested for another criminal offense once they have been released from jail.

Why are recidivism rates so high? The person-blame approach might argue that the fault lies in the characteristics of the individual. Maybe they are greedy. Perhaps they have higher than usual levels of aggression. Person-blamers may also point out the ex-criminals lack of social controls (in Eitzen et al. 2009:16).

Social Darwinism

The discoveries of Charles Darwin had a profound impact on other branches of scientific inquiry. Charles Darwin, of course, is famous for his Theory of Evolution. In the world of biology the species most fit survived while those less fit eventually became extinct.

Social Darwinism is a distorted view of Darwin's theory. Many social scientists, most notably Herbert Spencer, attempted to apply the logic of Charles Darwin to the social world. The essence of the social Darwinist perspective is that races or cultures, who occupied a "superior position" in the social world, deserved that position because they were the most socially fit (Eitzen et al. 2009:18).

According to Spencer "the poor are poor because they are unfit." The poor are poor because they do not have the intellectual ability to be wealthy.

Spencer argued that "poverty is nature's way of 'excreting ... unhealthy, imbecile, slow, vacillating, faithless members' of society in order to make room for the fit" (Eitzen and Baca-Zinn, 1994:170).

Social Darwinists, therefore, oppose social programs because, they argue, social programs perpetuate the existence of the unfit group who would probably disappear in the absence of social welfare.

The Consequence of Blaming the Individual

Person-Blame distracts attention away from institutions

When one uses only the person blame approach, it frees the government, the economy, and the educational system (among other institutions) from blame. The person blame approach ignores the strains that are caused by inequalities within the system.
Person-Blame makes it more difficult to institute systemic change
By excluding the existing order from blame it makes it that much harder to initiate change in economic, social, or political institutions. By replying on a personal-blame approach, societal conditions such as norms that are racist, sexist, or homophobic go unchallenged.

Person-Blame allows the powerful to control dissidents
Blaming the individual allows the government to "control" dissidents more easily. Deviants are sent to prisons or hospitals for rehabilitation. Such an approach directs attention away from the system. It eliminates the individual under consideration. Replying on a personal-blame approach legitimizes social programs aimed at individuals. It encourages treatment of the individual in terms of counseling, behavior modification, or psychotherapy.

Person-Blame Reinforces Stereotypes
Person blame also has the potential to reinforce stereotypes. (e.g., the poor are poor because they are lazy). The person-blame approach tends to support the Social Darwinist position that people are placed in the system according to their ability or inability.

The System-Blame Approach
This course often advocates a system-blame approach.
System-blamers argue that societal conditions are the primary source of social problems.
They may suggest that the key to understanding social problems is understanding the distribution of power in society.

Problems with the System-blame Approach
Sometimes Individuals are the Problem
Blaming the system also presents problems for social scientists as well. Ultimately the system is made up of people. Society results from the interaction of individuals. Individuals are sometimes aggressive, means, and nasty (Eitzen, 2000:14). Systemic explanations for social problems is only part of the truth. The system-blame approach may, therefore, absolve individuals from responsibility for their actions.
Example: When a robber breaks into your house, damn the problems with the system. You have problems with that particular individual.
System-Blame: A Dogmatic Approach?

Blaming the system is only part of the truth. Blaming the system tends to assume a very rigid dogmatic approach to the understanding of society. It tends to present a picture that people have no free will (Eitzen, 2000:15).

**Why we use the System-Blame Approach?**

We tend to use the system-blame approach for a couple of reasons.

- Since most people tend to blame individuals, we need a balance.
- Sociology is concerned with societal issues and society's institutional framework is responsible for creating many social problems.
- Since institutions are human creations, we should change them when they no longer serve the will of the people. Democratic conceptions of society have always held that institutions exist to serve people, not vice versa. Institutions, therefore, are to be accountable to the people whose lives they affect. When an institution, any institution, even the most "socially valued" -- is found to conflict with human needs, democratic thought holds that it ought to be changed or abolished (in Eitzen, 2000: 15-16). Accepting the system-blame approach is a necessary precondition to restructuring society along more human needs.