**Robert H. Lauer and Jeannette C. Lauer, *Social Problems and the Quality of Life*, 12th edition, McGraw-Hill; Chapter 1: “Understanding Social Problems,” pages 15 – 23**

**Critical Thinking: Recognizing Fallacies**

Nine different fallacies have been used to analyze social problems. An important aspect of critical thinking is the ability to recognize these fallacies. This ability enables you not only to assess the validity of information and arguments presented by others but also to make your own analyses with logic and clarity.

**Fallacy of Dramatic Instance**

The fallacy of dramatic instance refers to the tendency to *overgeneralize*, to use one, two, or three cases to support an entire argument. This mistake is common among people who discuss social problems. It may be difficult to counter because the limited number of cases often are a part of an *individual’s personal experience*. For example, in discussing the racial problem in the United States, a man said to us: “Blacks in this country can make it just as much as whites. I know a black businessman who is making a million. In fact, he has a better house and a better car than I have.” We pointed out that this successful businessperson is an exception. The man dismissed the point: “If one guy can make it, they all can.” The fallacy of dramatic instance mistakes a few cases for a general situation.

This fallacy is difficult to deal with because the argument is based partly on fact. There are, after all, African Americans who are millionaires. Does this mean there is no discrimination and that any black person can attain success? To use another example, many Americans believe that welfare recipients are “ripping off” the rest of us, that we are subsidizing their unwillingness to work and supporting them at a higher standard of living than we ourselves enjoy. Is this true? Yes, in a few cases. Occasionally, newspapers report instances of individuals making fraudulent use of welfare. But does this mean that most welfare recipients are doing the same? Do people on welfare really live better than people who work for a living?

The point is, in studying social problems, you must recognize that exceptions always exist. To use such cases in support of your argument is to fall into the trap of the fallacy of dramatic instance, because social problems deal with general situations rather than with individual exceptions.

As this fallacy suggests, the fact that you hear about a lazy poor person or a rich African American or a corrupt politician does not mean that such cases represent the typical situation. Millions of people are involved in the problems of poverty, race, and government. *Systematic studies* are needed to determine whether the one or two cases you know about represent the norm or the exception. For instance, the fact that there are black and Hispanic millionaires is less important than the government report showing that in 2007 the median annual household income for non-Hispanic whites was $54,920, while that for Hispanics was $38,679 and that for African Americans was $33,916 (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Smith 2008). The same report showed that

8.2 percent of non-Hispanic whites, but 21.5 percent of Hispanics and 24.5 percent of African Americans, lived in poverty. Such figures are more pertinent to the race problem than are cases that represent exceptions to the general pattern.

We are not saying that individual examples or cases are unimportant or unusable. At various points throughout this book (including the chapter opening vignettes) we use examples of people’s experiences. These examples are not given as proof or even as evidence. Rather, we use them to *illustrate the impact of social problems on people’s quality of life*. These examples may dramatize better than statistics the ways in which people’s lives are adversely affected by social problems.

**Fallacy of Retrospective Determinism**

The fallacy of retrospective determinism is the argument that things could not have worked out any other way than the way they did. It is a *deterministic* position, but the determinism is aimed at the past rather than the future. The fallacy asserts that what happened historically *had* to happen, and it *had* to happen just the way it did. If you accept this fallacy, the present social problems are inevitable. Whether the issue is racial discrimination, poverty, war, or the well-being of the family, the fallacy of retrospective determinism makes it unavoidable.

This fallacy is unfortunate for a number of reasons. History is more than a tale of *inevitable tragedies*. History is important for understanding social problems. You cannot fully understand the tensions between America’s minority groups and the white majority unless you know about the decades of exploitation and humiliation preceding the emergence of the modern civil rights movement. Your understanding will remain clouded if you regard those events as nothing more than an inevitable process. Similarly, you cannot fully understand the tension between the People’s Republic of China and the West if you view it only as a battle of economic ideologies. It is vital to know that the tension is based in the pillage and humiliation to which China was subjected by the West. Yet your understanding will not be enhanced by the study of history if you regard the Western oppression of China in the 19th century as inevitable.

If you view the past in terms of determinism, you have little reason to study it and are deprived of an important source of understanding. Furthermore, the fallacy of retrospective determinism is but a small step from the *stoic acceptance of the inevitable*. That is, if things are the way they have to be, why worry about them? Assuming that the future also is determined by forces beyond your control, you are left in a position of apathy: There is little point in trying to contest the inevitable.

This fallacy is probably less common in discussions about social problems than the fallacy of dramatic instance, but it does appear in everyday discussions. For example, in responding to the question about the causes of poverty in America, a 64-year-old service station owner told us: “Go back through history, it’s traditional; there’s no special reason, no cause for it. We can’t get away from it. It has just always been this way.” A businessman expressed a similar fatalism: “I don’t actually know the cause of poverty, but it’s here to stay and we must learn to live with it. We have to take the good with the bad.”

An individual might view social problems in deterministic terms for reasons other than intellectual conviction. Determinism can relieve you of responsibility and can legitimate a lack of concern with efforts to effect changes you do not want. Whatever the basis for affirming determinism, the outcome is the same: You may as well accept the problem and learn to live with it, because it is inevitably and inextricably with you

**Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness**

Some people have a tendency to explain some social problems by resorting to *reification*—making what is abstract into something concrete. “Society,” for example, is an abstraction. It is not like a person, an animal, or an object that can be touched. It is an idea, a way of thinking about a particular collectivity of people. Yet we often hear people assert that something is the fault of “society” or that “society” caused a certain problem. This is the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. In what sense can society “make” or “cause” or “do” anything? To say that society caused a problem leaves you helpless to correct the situation because you haven’t the faintest notion where to begin. If, for example, society is the cause of juvenile delinquency, how do you tackle the problem? Must you change society? If so, how?

The point is that “society” is an abstraction, a concept that refers to a group of people who interact in particular ways. To *attribute social problems to an abstraction* like “society” does not help resolve the problems. Sometimes people who attribute the cause of a particular problem to society intend to *deny individual responsibility*. To say that society causes delinquency may be a way of saying that the delinquent child is not responsible for his or her behavior.

You can recognize the social causes of problems without either attributing them to an abstraction like society or relieving the individual of responsibility for his or her behavior. For instance, you could talk about the family’s role in delinquency. A family is a concrete phenomenon. Furthermore, you could say that the family itself is a victim of some kind of societal arrangement, such as government regulations that tend to perpetuate poverty, cause stress, and create disruption in many families. You could say that families can be helped by changing the government regulations that keep some of them in poverty and, thereby, facilitate delinquent behavior.

Society, in short, does not cause anything. Rather, problems are caused by that which the concept of society represents—people acting in accord with certain social arrangements and within a particular cultural system.

**Fallacy of Personal Attack**

A tactic among debaters is to attack the opponent personally when they can’t support their position by reason, logic, or facts. This tactic diverts attention from the issue and focuses it on personality. We call this the fallacy of personal attack (philosophers call it *ad hominem*). It is remarkably effective in avoiding the use of reason or the consideration of evidence in discussing a social problem. In analyzing social problems, this fallacy can be used either to attack an opponent in a debate about a problem or to *attack the people who are the victims of the problem*. Ryan (1971) called this “blaming the victim” and said it involves nearly every problem in America.

Historically, the poor have suffered from this approach. Instead of offering sympathy or being concerned for the poor, people may label the poor as disreputable and, consequently, deserving of or responsible for their plight. People who are not poor are relieved of any responsibility. In fact, government efforts to alleviate poverty are even thought to contribute to the problem by taking away any incentive of the poor to help themselves, and leading them instead to become sexually promiscuous, irresponsible, and dependent on others (Somers and Block 2005).

The meaning and seriousness of any social problem may be sidestepped by attacking the intelligence or character of the victims or of those who call attention to the problem. A few of the labels that have been used illustrate how common this approach is: deadbeats, draft dodgers, niggers, kikes, bums, traitors, and perverts.

**Fallacy of Appeal to Prejudice**

In addition to attacking the opponent, a debater may try to support an unreasonable position by using another technique: fallacy of appeal to prejudice.(Philosophers call it argument *ad populum*.) With this fallacy, debaters use popular prejudices or passions to convince others of the correctness of their position. When the topic is social problems, debaters use *popular slogans* or *popular myths* to sway people emotionally rather than using reasoning from systematic studies.

Some slogans or phrases persist for decades and are employed to oppose efforts to resolve social problems. “Creeping socialism” has been used to describe many government programs designed to aid the underdogs of society. The term is not used when the programs are designed to help business or industry, or when the affluent benefit from the programs. As someone remarked, “What the government does for me is progress; what it does for you is socialism.”

In some cases, the slogans use general terms that reflect *traditional values*. Thus, the various advances made in civil rights legislation—voting, public accommodations, open housing—have been resisted in the name of the “rights of the individual.” These slogans help to perpetuate the myth that legislation that benefits African Americans infringes on the constitutional rights of the white majority.

Myths, in turn, help to perpetuate social problems. In the absence of other evidence, people tend to rely upon popular notions. Many Americans continue to assume that rape is often the woman’s fault because she has sexually provoked the man. These Americans either have seen no evidence to the contrary or have dismissed the evidence as invalid. Unfortunately, myths tend to become so deeply rooted in people’s thinking that when people are confronted by new evidence, they have difficulty accepting it

Myths are hard to break down, but if you want to understand social problems, you must abandon popular ideas and assumptions and resist popular slogans and prejudices that cloud your thinking. Instead, you must make judgments based on evidence.

**Fallacy of Circular Reasoning**

The ancient Greek physician Galen praised the healing qualities of a certain clay by pointing out that all who drink the remedy recover quickly—except those whom it does not help. The latter die and are not helped by any medicine. Obviously, according to Galen, the clay fails only in incurable cases. This is an example of the fallacy of circular reasoning: using conclusions to support the assumptions that were necessary to draw the conclusions.

Circular reasoning creeps into analyses of social problems. Someone might argue that Hispanics are inherently inferior and assert that their inferiority is evident because they hold only menial jobs and do not do intellectual work. In reply, you might point out that Hispanics are not doing more intellectual work because of discriminatory hiring practices. The person might then counter that Hispanics could not be hired for such jobs anyway because they are inferior.

Similarly, you might argue that homosexuals are sex perverts because they commonly have remained secretive about their sexual preference. But, we counter, the secrecy is due to the general disapproval of homosexuality. No, you reply, homosexuality is kept secret because it is a perversion. Thus, in circular reasoning people *bounce back and forth between assumptions and conclusions*. Circular reasoning leads nowhere in the search for an understanding of social problems

**Fallacy of Authority**

Virtually everything you know is based on some authority. You know comparatively little from personal experience or personal research. The authority you necessarily rely on is someone else’s experience, research, or belief. You accept notions of everything from the nature of the universe to the structure of the atom, from the state of inter-national relationships to the doctrines of religion—all on the basis of some authority. Most people accept a war as legitimate on the authority of their political leaders. Many accept the validity of capital punishment on the authority of law enforcement officers. Some accept that use of contraceptives is morally wrong on religious authority. Most rely on the authority of the news media about the extent and severity of various problems.

The knowledge that you acquire through authority can be inaccurate and can exacerbate rather than resolve or ameliorate social problems. The fallacy of authority means an *illegitimate appeal to authority*. Such an appeal obtrudes into thinking about social problems in at least four ways.

First, the *authority may be ambiguous*. Thus, appeal is made to the Bible by both those who support and those who oppose capital punishment. Supporters of capital punishment point out that the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, decreed death for certain offenses. Opponents counter that the death penalty contradicts New Testament notions of Christian love. An appeal to this kind of authority, then, is really an appeal to a particular interpretation of the authority. Because the interpretations are contradictory, people must find other bases for making judgments.

Second, the *authority may be irrelevant to the problem*. The fact that a man is a first-rate physicist does not mean he can speak with legitimate authority about race relations. Most of us are impressed by people who have significant accomplishments in some area, but their accomplishments should not overwhelm us if those people speak about a problem outside their area of expertise.

Third, the *authority may be pursuing a bias* rather than studying a problem. To say that someone is pursuing a bias is not necessarily to disparage that person, because pursuing it may be part of a job. For example, military officers are likely to analyze the problem of war from a military rather than a moral, political, or economic perspective. This is their job—and this is why decisions about armaments, defense, and war should not be left solely to the military. From a military point of view, one way to prevent war is to be prepared to counter an enemy attack. The nation must be militarily strong, according to this argument, so that other nations will hesitate to attack—and military strength requires the most sophisticated technology, a stockpile of weaponry, and a large, standing military force.

The shortcomings of this line of reasoning were dramatically illustrated by the incidents of September 11, 2001, when terrorists seized jetliners and crashed them into the World Trade Center towers in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. At the time, the United States was clearly the strongest military power in the world. Nevertheless, the terrorists struck and they struck effectively. The notion of defending against enemies must now be reexamined in the light of a new face of war in the world.

Although some people pursue a bias as a normal part of their work, others pursue it because of *vested interests*. That is, the authority may deliberately or unconsciously allow biases to affect what he or she says because it is personally advantageous. The head of a corporation that builds private prisons and argues that the private sector can deal with prisoners more effectively than can the government will obviously benefit from public policy that privatizes state and federal prisons. The corporate executive who talks about federal overregulation would clearly benefit if the government withdrew from consumer protection programs. Political leaders credit their own policies when crime rates fall and point to uncontrollable circumstances when crime rates rise. Their policies may have no effect on crime rates, but they benefit if they can persuade people that their actions have lowered the rate or will do so in the future.

Finally, the *authority may simply be wrong*. This problem often occurs when one authority cites another. For example, in 2003, the Census Bureau issued a report on the foreign-born population of the United States (Schmidley 2003). The report showed the years of entry of the 32.5 million foreign-born people now living in the nation: 4.1 million came before 1970, 4.6 million came during the 1970s, 7.96 million came during the 1980s, and 15.8 million came after 1990. Suppose that we wanted information about immigration patterns, and we consulted newspapers instead of the Census Bureau. We examined three respectable sources and found the following interpretations of the report. A national financial paper said that the number of immigrants continued to grow at “a blistering pace.” An urban newspaper reported that immigration continued at a steady pace during “the past two years.” And a national newspaper claimed that the Census Bureau report stated that the number of foreign-born coming to live in the United States has “slowed considerably”! Clearly, when one authority cites another, it is best to check out the initial authority before drawing any conclusions.

**Fallacy of Composition**

That the whole is equal to the sum of its parts appears obvious. That what is true of the part is also true of the whole likewise seems to be a reasonable statement, but the former is debatable, and the latter is the fallacy of composition. As economists have illustrated, the notion that *what is valid for the part is also valid for the whole* is not necessarily true. Consider, for example, the relationship between work and income. If a farmer works hard and the weather is not adverse, the farmer’s income may rise; but if every farmer works hard and the weather is favorable, and a bumper crop results, the total farm income may fall. The latter case is based upon supply and demand, while the former assumes that a particular farmer outperforms other farmers.

In thinking about social problems, *you cannot assume that what is true for the individual is also true for the group*. An individual may be able to resolve a problem insofar as it affects him or her, but that resolution is not available to all members of the group. For example, a man who is unemployed and living in poverty may find work that enables him to escape poverty. The work may require him to move or to work for less money than someone else, but still he is able to rise above poverty. As you will see in our discussion of poverty, however, that solution is not possible for most of the nation’s poor. Thus, something may be true for a particular individual or even a few individuals and yet be inapplicable or counterproductive for the entire group of which the individuals are members

**Fallacy of Non Sequitur**

A number of the fallacies already discussed involve non sequitur, but we look at this way of thinking separately because of its importance. Literally, non sequitur means “*it does not follow*.” This fallacy of non sequitur is commonly found when people interpret statistical data.

For example, data may show that the amount of welfare payments by state governments has increased dramatically over the past few decades. What is the meaning of such data? You might conclude that the number of people unwilling to work has increased and that more and more “freeloaders” are living off the public treasury, but there are other explanations. The increase may reflect adjustments due to inflation, better efforts to get welfare money to eligible recipients, or a rise in unemployment due to governmental action to control inflation.

Daniel Bell (1960) showed how statistics on crime can be misleading. In New York one year, reported assaults were up 200 percent, robberies were up 400 percent, and burglaries were up 1,300 percent! Those were the “facts,” but what did they mean? A crime wave? Actually, the larger figures reflected a new method of crime reporting that was more effective in determining the total amount of crime. An increase in reported crime rates can mean different things, but it does not necessarily signify an actual increase in the amount of crime.

One other example involves studies of women who work. Some employers believe that women are not desirable workers because they are less committed to the job than men, as indicated by their higher turnover rate. Women do indeed have a higher rate of turnover than men. But what does this mean? Are women truly less committed to their jobs?

When you look at the situation more closely, you find that the real problem is that women tend to be concentrated in lower-level jobs. Also, women who quit a job tend to find another one quickly. Thus, women may be uncommitted to a particular low-level job but strongly committed to work. Furthermore, if you look at jobs with the same status, the turnover rate is no higher for women than men.

These illustrations are not meant to discourage you from drawing conclusions. Instead, they are reminders of the need for thorough study and the need to avoid quick conclusions, even when those conclusions seem logical on the surface. Contrary to popular opinion, *“facts” do not necessarily speak for themselves*. They must be interpreted in the light of the complexities of social life and with the awareness that a number of different conclusions can usually be drawn from any set of data.

**Fallacies and the Mass Media**

In subsequent chapters, we shall discuss how the mass media contribute to particular social problems. Here we want to point out how the media contribute to misunderstandings by committing or facilitating the various fallacies.

In some cases, the media may inadvertently create fallacious thinking by the way something is reported. For instance, a newspaper story about someone who is guilty of welfare fraud, which omits the fact that such fraud represents only a tiny minority of recipients, can lead readers to commit the fallacy of the dramatic instance: The story proves that those on welfare are cheats who want handouts rather than responsibility.

Or a story in a religious magazine about a formerly gay man who is now married to a woman, which omits any mention of the numerous gays who have tried and failed to change their sexual orientation, can lead readers to commit the fallacy of non sequitur: If one man can do it, they all can.

Because the media represent authority in the matter of information, they are particularly prone to the fallacy of authority. That is, they might provide information that is misleading or wrong. It may be a case of bias on the part of those gathering and/or presenting the information. It may be a case of misunderstanding the original source of the information. Or it may be a case of the original source itself being wrong. For example, in 2006 a survey commissioned by the American Medical Association found a startlingly high rate of binge drinking and unprotected sex on the part of female college students while on spring break (Rosenthal 2006). The study, reported widely on TV and in newspapers, was based on a “random sample.” It turned out, however, that the sample was not random. Those who participated were volunteers, and only one-fourth of them had actually been on a spring break trip. In essence, then, no conclusions about college women in general could be drawn from the survey.

We do not intend to commit the fallacy of dramatic instance ourselves by suggesting that such incidents are typical or even very common. Rather, they illustrate the need to be alert, thoughtful, and cautious about the things you read and hear about social problems