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Social Problems Essay

  Student debt is, in my opinion, the most important social issue facing our nation right now. From a constructivist viewpoint, this problem has been discussed and addressed for more than one hundred years starting with, “The passage of the Second Morrill Act in 1890 gave the then-named Office of Education responsibility for administering support for the original system of land-grant colleges and universities” (FED par 5). On that day the concern for a student’s ability to pay for higher education has been in the mind of the public and has seen repeated attempts at solving the issue and continued to modernity.

In 2024 Americans collectively owe a total of $1.75 trillion in federal and private student debt, of which $1.62 trillion is federal. Out of all Americans 16.6% of them have outstanding student debt with 12.4% of student loan debt being delinquent as of March 2020. Since 2007, the ratio of cumulative student debt to federal borrowers has seen an increasingly wider gap with debt consistently leading (STATS pg 1).

The first stage of the natural history of student debt was with the creation of The Department of Education, signed in 1867, initially as a department to just collect statistics about the nation’s schools and study the information. This would lead to the second stage of its history where this newly concerned put forth the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 targeting vocational education. The third stage would show its renewed claims making with the National Defense Education Act of 1958 where support would expand to allow more students to pursue STEM degrees.

The fourth stage of its natural history is what we are currently in. This is evident by the multitude of alternative strategies that are put forth for implementation to address the issue. It is a consistently prevalent topic in politics for candidates to only debate over their strategies, as they already established as being in agreement with it being a known issue.

The major assumption of functionalism is that social stability is necessary for a strong society, and adequate socialization and social integration are necessary for social stability. The major assumption of conflict theory is that society is characterized by pervasive inequality based on social class, race, gender, and other factors. The major assumption of symbolic interactionism is that people construct their roles as they interact; they do not merely learn the roles that society has set out for them.

The theory that makes the most sense to me is that of symbolic interactionism. In the social problem of unemployment, you can see this is most prevalent in the capitalistic approach to solving the issue, where every individual would take the initiative to create their business and set forth their own worth and status. The other way to look at this is the growing number of individuals that are opting out of the workforce entirely to focus on themselves, where in years prior doing so had a social stigma discouraging such thoughts.

The first method to study social problems is the survey, where large groups of individuals are used as a sample of the population. The second method is experiments, where a control group is used to test against an experiment group that is given an additional variable to measure the change. It should be noted that this method is regarded primarily in the natural and physical sciences and is typically only used in psychology when it comes to the study of social problems. The third method is observational studies, or field research, where analysts watch the behavior of groups through nonparticipant observations. The fourth method is existing data, where data that has already been recorded doesn’t need to spend time and money on gathering the information.

The most useful research method, in my opinion, would have to be the existing data method. This is primarily because of its practicality for the vast majority of researchers, as the resources for everyone to use the other three methods simply aren’t there. It is also likely that the existing data is an amalgamation of the previous three methods that have been catalogued for future use. The combination of all methods is likely the strongest of which the existing data method is the closest to achieving that goal.

The concept of sociological imagination is that the problems that are present in the individual stem from issues with society as a whole. This is a theory of sociology that spawned from some people’s idea that the blame for personal problems lies entirely with the individual in question. Problems in society at large help account for problems experienced by the individual through their influence on daily life.

One such example that I think best illustrates this idea is crime, and more specifically recidivism. Crime itself is often seen as an almost sacred concept, that any individual who breaks the rules must surely be of moral bankruptcy. This societal stigma against anyone with the label of criminal for any reason removes the offender from participating in society to the point that they have no recourse but to continue down the road that they are often forced down.

Citations

FED. US Department of Education, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/fed/role.html>, May 2024

STATS. *Melanie Hanson* <https://educationdata.org/student-loan-debt-crisis> July 2024

HIST. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/focus/what.html>, September 2010