Course Overview

This seminar focuses on the recent developments in the sociology of gender, broadly defined. We begin with an overview of the field, using the framework of sociology of knowledge. We identify major trends in the area and consider the relationship of gender scholarship to the discipline of sociology, the social sciences, and scholarly inquiry more generally. Introductory readings address gendered modes of knowledge production in the field.

The second section of the course scrutinizes the most common, taken-for-granted approaches in studies of gender and concentrates on alternative and arguably more appropriately complex and sophisticated conceptualizations of gender. While many would agree that gender relations comprise a basic dimension of social life, there is no consensus about what gender actually is or what it represents. Some speak of gender as an individual attribute; some assume sex and/or sexuality are synonymous with gender, while others maintain gender is a basic structural or ideological principle of social life. Still other scholars would argue that gender represents a series of continuous but ever-changing identities. Regardless of the level of analysis, many researchers have assumed gender is a dichotomous and discrete variable, a relatively stable property, one that occurs naturally, is essential, and/or learned through socialization. Recently some scholars have challenged these long-standing ideas, proposing instead that gender relations are malleable and multidimensional, routinely accomplished and ever-changing practices or performances that occur in every social interaction and are patterned in a wide gamut of structural locations. Other researchers have articulated a macro structural approach that interrogates the meanings of gender as a social system, form of organization or set of institutional practices and patterns. Recently there has been renewed interest in the study of intersectionality as a way to understand gender. Though evident in the scholarly literature for decades, we review some of the current writings.

The third section focuses on several exemplars of empirical research on gender relations and thus provides evidence of how some scholars have analyzed gender. This overview has no pretensions of being comprehensive. Instead my goal is to provide outstanding illustrations of a range of research strategies in the sociology of gender intended to enable you to think in innovative ways about your own empirical and theoretical projects in this area. This course is organized as a working seminar. In practical terms this means that every member
must come to class weekly, prepared to actively discuss the readings. Two or three people will co-facilitate each session with me. Co-facilitators will email a brief analytic overview (2 – 3 pages) to all class members by the Sunday before the class at 4 pm. This statement should highlight the core themes and arguments, salient questions, and points of confusion and contradiction in the materials assigned. In addition, there are three writing assignments.

The first project asks you to survey three volumes of a sociological or interdisciplinary social science journal published at least five years apart to ascertain the current state of gender research as represented in that journal. Approximately what proportion of the articles pertains to gender? Does the rise of journals devoted to gender seem to have an effect on the number of gender-related articles in the journal studied? How do these articles conceptualize gender? Do the investigators go beyond a categorical operationalization of gender as female/male? If so, how do they operationalize gender? What methodological approaches do researchers of gender employ? Is there a relationship between the working definitions of gender and methods used? What are the consequences for knowledge production—both opportunities and constraints invoked by relying on particular definitions of gender? Summarize your journal survey in a brief report, which you will also present in class. This paper is due in class on September 13th. The seminar that day will be devoted to a discussion of your findings, a succinct overview of the history of gender studies within the academy and its organization within sociology in the U.S.

The second writing project is due at the end of the second section of the course. In this paper you should succinctly review the major conceptualizations of gender studied and compare the relative strengths and weaknesses of each. In the conclusion to this essay, develop your own working definition of gender, making clear why your conceptualization is the most effective and/or has relative strengths in comparison to competing definitions. This paper is due in class on November 8th or November 15th. Whether you include the readings in your paper assigned for class on those two weeks, is your choice.

The last paper is an analytic review of the gender research literature in one clearly delimited sub-field of sociology. Your writing should consider the following questions: What have been the major gender-related findings in this sub-field? What are the predominant modes of conceptualization and methodological approaches in the research summarized? What has research on gender contributed to this sub-field, and what has this area of inquiry contributed to our knowledge of gender? What are the important research questions yet to be explored? Students more advanced in their careers may opt instead to write a research proposal or a gender-focused substantive paper as the final assignment. Regardless of its form, this proposal or paper must also clearly demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of gender in its conceptual framework. Abstracts for the final projects are due as email attachments on November 1st. All students should make appointments to discuss their final projects with me well in advance of this deadline. In-class presentations of the final projects in progress will be scheduled for November 15th, 29th, December 6th and 13th. Final papers are due in my departmental mailbox on December 17th at noon.

Except under the most extreme circumstances, I will not give incomplete grades. Instead the
work you complete during the term will be the basis of your evaluation. The first paper comprises 10 percent of your final grade, the second and third papers together contribute an additional 70 percent, and the remaining 20 percent is based on your weekly participation in the seminar, your class facilitation, and presentation.

Required Readings

The books listed immediately below are available for purchase at New Jersey Books (732.253.7666 or http://newbrunswick.njbooks.com/home.aspx). An asterisk following a citation indicates a required reading. Required articles and chapters may be accessed through the class’ Sakai website. All other readings are supplementary and recommended for your future reference.


Schedule of Readings and Assignments:

Part I: Gender Scholarship: Mainstream and Margins (September 8 - 13)

A. Course Overview (September 8)

B. Epistemology and Knowledge Production (September 13)


Part II: Conceptualizing Gender (September 20 – November 8)

A. The Biological and the Social Nexus (September 20)


Cambridge: Harvard University Press.


B. Social Constructions of Gender (September 27 – October 4)

1a. Gender: Groups, Identities, Relations (September 27)


1b. Gender: Groups, Identities, Relations (October 4)


Ferree, Myra Marx, Judith Lorber and Beth B. Hess, eds. 1998. Revisioning Gender. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press.


2. Structures and Institutions, Inequalities, and Differences (October 11)


Lesbian Communities.” *Signs* 32:113-39.*


3. Social Processes (October 18)


4. Intersectionality (October 25)


5 a. Gender Categories and Continua (November 1)


5 b. Gender Categories and Continua (November 8)


Part III: Empirical Analyses of Gender (November 15 – December 13)

A. Gender and the State (November 15)


B. Gender at Work, Gender Work, and the Work of Gender (November 29)


C. Protest, Accommodation, and Resistance (December 6 – 13)


Rostami-Povey, Elaheh. 2007. “Gender, Agency and Identity, the Case of Afghan Women in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran.” *Journal of Development Studies* 43:294-311.*


