Course Overview:

This seminar grapples with a persistent and vexed set of questions about how best to understand gender—i.e., how best to theorize, conceptualize, define, operationalize, and analyze gender. We begin with the social organization of gender knowledge, relying on a sociology-of-knowledge approach. As with any body of knowledge, how experts and lay publics engage a concept shapes and is shaped by a body of knowledge, its reception, circulation, contestation, and rejection. We identify major epistemological and organizational trends in gender scholarship, paying particular attention to its place in the academy and within the discipline of sociology in the U.S.

The second section of the course critically scrutinizes the most common, taken-for-granted approaches in the study of gender, assessing the relative strengths and weaknesses of each perspective. Rather than assume conventional approaches will suffice, we study alternative and arguably better, more appropriately complex, nuanced, 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 discursive principle of social life. Still other scholars would argue that gender represents a series of continuous and ever-changing identities.

Regardless of the level or mode of analysis, many researchers assume gender is a dichotomous and discrete variable, a relatively stable property, occurring naturally, and learned through socialization. Increasingly scholars have challenged these long-held ideas, proposing instead that gender relations are malleable, multidimensional, and routinely accomplished. Other researchers assert, moreover, that gender represents a series of ever-changing practices or performances that occur in every social interaction and are patterned in a wide gamut of structural locations. Still other researchers have emphasized a macro structural approach interrogating the meanings of gender as a social system or set of institutional practices and patterns.

The seminar readings rely on recent advances in gender scholarship in the Anglophone literature. At times these intellectual projects are easily identified such as the scholarship on intersectionality and transgender. More commonly, however, the work read crosscuts and
transcends more easily cited nominal categories and is intended to help build an analytic toolkit for gender scholars. This class has no pretension of being comprehensive. Instead it provides outstanding illustrations of a range of research strategies in the sociology of gender, which ultimately are intended to facilitate your own innovative theoretical, empirical and methodological research on gender.

Learning goals for this course center on developing a critical and sophisticated understanding of gender. Students should be able to identify the strengths and weaknesses in various theoretical formulations of gender, and develop a more nuanced and appropriately more complex conceptualization of gender. Students should be able to articulate a theoretically and empirically informed understanding of gender relations that will advance their own research projects.

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. Everyone will facilitate at least one session. Facilitators will email a brief analytic overview (2 – 3 pages) to all class members by the Sunday prior to our session. This statement should highlight the core themes and arguments, salient questions, and points of confusion and contradiction in the materials assigned.

Class members will also write short memos (one - two pages) based on the required reading for the week. These concise statements should highlight the aspects of the texts you find most important, promising, troublesome and/or irritating. These memos should be posted on Sakai by noon on Monday prior to the class meeting. Nine memos are minimally required.

In addition, there are three other 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? 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 these researchers of gender employ? Is there a relationship between the working definitions of gender and methods used, between the definitions and the substantive focus of the article? 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 17, 2013.

The second writing project asks you to 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 other definitions. Note there is no single metric to judge which conceptualization is superior. Rather your claims for your working definition should be guided by the work the concept needs to accomplish. This paper is due on November 5, 12, or 19, 2013.

The last paper is an analytic review of best practices of theorizing gender in a clearly delimited
sub-field of sociology. Your writing should consider the following questions: 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? How might an alternate theory of gender enhance the scholarship?

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 papers should be posted by November 5, 2013. All students are encouraged 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 the last four weeks of the semester. Final papers are due on December 13, 2013 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 15 percent of your final grade, the second and third papers each contribute 30 percent of your final grade, and the remaining 25 percent is based on your weekly participation in the seminar, your class facilitation, and presentation.

Required Readings

The required books listed below are available for purchase at New Jersey Books, 39 Easton Avenue, New Brunswick (732.253.7666 or http://newbrunswick.njbooks.com/home.aspx). An asterisk following an article or chapter indicates it is a required reading and posted on the course Sakai website. All other readings are supplementary and recommended for your reference.


Schedule of Readings and Assignments:

Part I: Social Organization of Gender Scholarship: Mainstream and Margins (September 3 - 17)

A. Course Overview (September 3)

B. Epistemology and Knowledge Production (September 10 - 17)

1. Field Formations (September 10)


2. Subject Matters (September 17)


2. Subject Matters (September 17, continued)


Part II: Conceptualizing and Theorizing Gender (September 24 – November 8)

A. The Biological-Social Nexus (September 24)


Jordan-Young, Rebecca M. 2012. “Hormones, Context, and “Brain Gender”: A Review of
Evidence from Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia.” *Social Science & Medicine* 74:1738-44.*


A. The Biological-Social Nexus (September 24, continued)


B. Social Constructions of Gender (October 1 – November 19)

1. Minority Groups and Social Roles Reconsidered (October 1)


2. Social Processes (October 8)


3. Inequality and Difference  (October 15)


4. Gender Regimes, Institutions, and the State  (October 22)


Acker, Joan. 2006. “Inequality Regimes: Gender, Class, and Race in Organizations.” *Gender & Society* 20:441-64. *


5. Agency and Discipline (October 29)


6. Interactions and Social Processes (November 5)


7. Phenomenology, Discourse and Materiality (November 12)


8. Intersectionality (November 19)


9. Theorizing Trans, Theorizing Gender (December 3)


Rubin, David A. 2012. “‘An Unnamed Blank that Craved a Name’: A Genealogy of Intersex as Gender.” *Signs* 37:883-908.*


C. Protest, Accommodation, and Resistance (December 10)


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.


Kibria, Nazli. 1990. “Power, Patriarchy and Gender Conflict in the Vietnamese Immigrant

