Course Description
The topics of study in the sociology of culture are incredibly vast—meaning, symbols, classification, narratives, beliefs, inequality, organizations, cultural products and more—and these topics and approaches to them cluster into subgroups. The sociology of culture also interfaces with other disciplines—anthropology, psychology, economics, even ecology—in more and less productive ways. This course will familiarize you with many, but not all, of the subfields in cultural sociology. I’ll try to make clear what kind of work is missing from this syllabus and what conceptualizations of culture I find most useful. We’ll focus particularly on empirical work in the sociology of culture, and the theoretical traditions most responsible for that empirical work. One of the challenges of the field is that people use very different conceptualizations of culture and/or focus on very different types of cultural elements. There is also enormous methodological variation in the field. We’ll try to sort through all of these differences in our readings.

There are also many ways to organize and group readings together; many of our readings could fit in multiple categories. Keep in mind that this is only one way among many to think about the readings; considering other possible groupings of readings may help you make sense of this literature. Please pay particular attention to the definitions of culture being used in the empirical examples.

Learning Goals
In this course, you will:
- Think theoretically and critically about the use of the concept of culture in sociological explanations
- Assess the validity of different methodological approaches to the empirical study of culture
- Develop opinions on the approach to culture you find most compelling and useful
- Learn the contours of the field of the sociology of culture and its intersections with other disciplines
- Identify significant and novel research questions related to the sociology of culture or applying cultural approaches to other literatures

You will work towards these goals by:
- Participating in in-depth weekly discussions of assigned readings
- Generating discussion by doing short presentations and helping to lead the class for a session or two
- Writing memos that critically assess and synthesize the readings and generate new research ideas
- Writing a final research paper or research proposal
Structure of the Course  All readings are required and should be completed before class. I recommend doing the readings in the order indicated on the syllabus, if at all possible. While you are doing the readings, keep in mind: a) what question is addressed by the author(s)? b) what is the significance of that question for key issues in the field?, c) what are competing answers to that question?, d) how well does the author address that question, in terms of logic and methodology?, e) what would be a different, valid and maybe preferable way of addressing the same question?

I’ll provide an overview of the readings and the theme for the week at the beginning of class and the rest of the class will be discussion that everyone is expected to contribute to. I’ll also have you trade off doing mini-presentations each week: when presenting, individuals will be responsible for short summaries and a couple of discussion questions to start the conversation.

All reading material is either available on the Sakai site or will be shortly. For every reading I chose, there are a dozen others I could have selected. To give you a sense of the breadth of the field, take a look at the document on Sakai: “Sociology of Culture Additional Readings.” If you are particularly interested in a type of reading or topic, let me know and I can point you to more readings.

Before each class, you’ll submit a 600-800 word memo on the readings. Please discuss at least three of the readings in your memos. The memos are a chance for you to consolidate your thoughts on the readings, so please don’t use the space for summaries. Instead, make connections between readings or themes, point out conflicts or convergences, discuss implications for research, try out theoretical arguments. You’ll submit these via Sakai. You can choose which weeks you skip, but please complete 10 memos during the semester. I’ll have you turn in a draft or very detailed outline of your proposal before it is due so I can provide feedback.

Summary of Grading

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<tr>
<td>Discussion Participation</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Response Memos (10)</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research Proposal (due Dec. 15)</td>
<td>35%</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100%</td>
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Class Policies Because much of this class is discussion-based, to encourage the free exchange of ideas, the classroom should be safe, supportive, and productive. To facilitate such an environment, all class participants, students and faculty, must act with mutual respect and common courtesy. Please come talk with me about these issues at any point.

The Rutgers Sociology Department strives to create an environment that supports and affirms diversity in all manifestations, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, social class, disability status, region/country of origin, and political orientation. We also celebrate diversity of theoretical and methodological perspectives among our faculty and students and seek to create an
atmosphere of respect and mutual dialogue. We have zero tolerance for violations of these principles and have instituted clear and respectful procedures for responding to such grievances.

**READINGS**

**Week One** Perspectives on Culture and Cultural Explanation

The first three readings provide theoretical perspectives on the concept of culture, and the final two readings are examples of “lay understandings” of culture or forms of cultural explanation. As you do these readings, keep in mind what these readings suggest about what a cultural explanation is NOT: what are the alternatives to cultural explanations?

**Reading for Thursday September 4:**


**Week Two** Culture and Behavior

We’ll talk about theories and empirical examples attempting to explain behavior and action, and the role of culture in shaping behavior. The first two readings are theoretical perspectives and the other three readings are empirical examples. Pay attention to the authors’ conceptualization of culture in each of these.

**Reading for Thursday September 11:**


Margaret Frye. 2012. “Bright Futures in Malawi’s New Dawn: Educational Aspirations as Assertions of Identity.” American Journal of Sociology 117: 1565-1624. [This article is very long—make sure you read the intro and discussion well and skim the evidence parts.]


**Week Three Culture and Interaction**

**Reading for Thursday September 18:**


**Week Four Elements of Culture: Attitudes, Morals, Scripts, Frames, Emotions**

**Reading for Thursday September 25:**


**Week Five** Rituals and Classification

Reading for Thursday October 2:


Daniel McFarland. 2004. "Resistance as a Social Drama: A Study of Change-Oriented Encounters." *American Journal of Sociology* 109: 1249-1318. [This is another very long one—again make sure you read the intro carefully and skim the evidence.]


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**Week Six** Inequality and Tastes

Reading for Thursday October 9:


**Week Seven** Networks

Reading for Thursday October 16:


**Week Eight** Economic Exchange

Reading for Thursday October 23:


**Week Nine** Organizations and Institutions

Reading for Thursday October 30:


**Week Ten** Cultural Production and Reception

Reading for Thursday November 6:


**Week Eleven** Cultural Change

Reading for Thursday November 13:


**Week Twelve** Cultural Analysis

Reading for Thursday November 20:


**Week Thirteen** No Class (November 27) – Draft of Research Proposal or Paper Due

**Week Fourteen** Culture and Action Debates

Reading for Thursday December 11:


Plus responses from: Doug Maynard, Karen Cerulo, Steve Vaisey, Paul DiMaggio, and Jerolmack and Khan’s reply (all in same volume)