

Sociological Analysis of Social Problems

Spring 2016 (920:103:01)

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Class hours: MW 1:40 – 3:00 **Location:** LSH A143

Office hours: W 10-12, TH 12-3 **Location:** Davison Hall (Douglas) – 132b

Broadly speaking, the purpose of this course is to provide a basic understanding of sociology. Specifically, this course addresses the uses of sociology to understand social problems. I selected a series of social problems, mostly based in the U.S. Many of these social problems conflict with American ideals – the belief in equality, democracy, liberty etc. In other words, the social problems we will discuss are defined as problems, in part, because social conditions fail to reflect these ideals. Since this class focuses on social problems and not, say, ‘social phenomena that are great’ much of the class may seem to project a negative assessment of contemporary life. However, the ability and willingness to critically examine our society is a positive attribute and something to celebrate. Understanding social problems and the obstacles to their amelioration is a necessary first step to solving these problems. Therefore, the goal of this class is not to memorize statistics and facts and regurgitate them onto a test (and then forget them) but rather to learn useful knowledge – knowledge that you can use to more fully understand the world around you and the social forces that will and do (whether or not you are aware) affect your lives and the lives of the other 6 billion people with whom we share this planet.

Additional Course Costs: There are no books to buy for this course. All of the readings are available on Sakai. I have provided links to the films, all of which should be viewed outside of class. While most of those films are available for free, a few may require Netflix membership or a rental fee.

Grading: 35% midterm (multiple choice and essay)

5% daily writings

35% final (multiple choice)

15% final paper (3-4 pages)

10% class participation and class exercises

Grading Scale: A 90-100, B+ 86-89, B 80-85, C+ 76-79, C 70-75, D 66-69, F 65 or below.

Multiple Choice: Questions that will focus on understanding and application of ideas from the articles. Questions will not test your ability to memorize statistics or definitions but measure your ability to interpret the meaning of the author’s argument and/or follow the logic of the question.

Essays and Final Paper: Essay writing is not about simply recalling information. Indeed, all of your essays will be open book. I will be assessing your ability to apply sociological concepts and to put different articles in conversation with each other. You can do this in two ways: 1. By using the concepts from one article to frame the case in another article OR 2. By explaining how two different articles comprise competing or complimentary paradigms for understanding some social phenomena. Remember that essays should answer “how” questions rather than yes or no questions.

Daily Writings: I will provide five minutes at the beginning of class for you to assemble your thoughts on paper. I will collect and grade these papers (I will randomly pick 3 for each student). I am not expecting a polished essay. A paragraph demonstrating your understanding of the material is sufficient. Questions are on the syllabus after each introduction of the readings.

The writing assignments have several functions. First, they help me assess your understanding of the material prior to exams. Second, I find that if students are allowed to think about the material before class it makes for more productive discussions. Third, the questions will help guide your reading and give you an idea of what kind of knowledge I will test (in this way the syllabus can serve as your study guide). Lastly, the writings will help you focus on learning concepts rather than the kind of memorization of disconnected facts that can often accompany expectations of in-class exams.

Final Paper: I will assign a 4-page paper due the last week of the semester. This is not a research paper but instead I will ask you to put two or more readings in conversation (very similar to what you are asked to do in Expository Writing).

Academic Integrity: Rutgers policy can be found here - http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/files/documents/AI_Policy_9_01_2011.pdf

Absences: Students are expected to attend all classes (**note: leaving early, sleeping in class and/or texting does not count as attending**); if you expect to miss one or two classes, please use the University absence reporting website <https://sims.rutgers.edu/ssra/> to indicate the date and reason for your absence. An email is automatically sent to me. Students are excused one absence, after that I will deduct one point per absence from the participation grade.

Email: – put “SOC 103” in the subject line. I do not open emails with no subject.

Since this course deals with contemporary social issues, I highly recommend regularly visiting one of the sites listed below. The theories and ideas from class will be easier to learn if you can recognize the concepts outside of the classroom. I will periodically post news articles on Sakai. You can also like the sites on facebook and articles will appear on your feed.

<http://thesocietypages.org/>, <http://www.nytimes.com>, <http://www.theatlantic.com/>, <http://www.vox.com>

Required and Recommended Readings: You are responsible for all the required readings. The recommended readings are for those who would like additional information. I may refer to recommended readings in lecture. However, I will only test students on information from recommended readings that I have presented in lecture.

January 20th (Wednesday) – Introduction

In this first class we will review basic sociological concepts and the use-value of a sociological analysis.

Lecture: What is Sociology? What is a Social Problem?

January 25th (Monday) - Social Problems and Conventional Wisdom

All of us can offer explanations of the social world and different social problems that we encounter. A sociological analysis of social problems, however, may conflict with our ‘common sense’ understanding of social problems. The following articles distinguish sociology from conventional wisdom and demonstrate how the former provides a more accurate picture of the social world.

Q. What does Mills mean when he says, ‘ordinary men are ... bounded by the private orbits in which they live’?

Readings: Mills – The Promise of Sociology (1-5)

**Recommended: Cerulo and Ruane – The Sociological Perspective (3-8)
Cerulo and Ruane – Why do Conventional Wisdoms**

January 27th (Wednesday) – Social Research Methods

Sociology is the systemic study of social behavior and human groups. The systemic part of that definition often gives students difficulty. The following articles explore methods used to produce sociological claims. The articles also address how some claims, which seem sound, may fail to pass standards of validity and/or reliability.

Q. How does common sense differ from a sociological analysis?

Readings: Schwalbe – Finding Out How the Social World Works (32-42)

**Recommended: Schuman – Sense and Nonsense about Surveys (40-47)
Cerulo and Ruane – Numbers Don’t Lie (1-6)**

February 1st (Monday) – Thinking about Inequality

Class Exercise: I will provide several questions about social class and inequality. Students will write down their beliefs and note what kinds of evidence they would need to support those beliefs. We will then discuss the answers as a group.

February 3rd (Wednesday) – Social Class and Inequality

Social class at first glance appears to be an individually achieved status. The following articles, however, define class and show how it is not solely the result of individual achievement. The articles further discuss how class functions to shape life chances for members of different classes.

Q. How do social capital and cultural capital function to limit equal opportunity?

Readings: McNamee and Miller Jr. – The American Dream (1-4)
McNamee and Miller Jr. – Social and Cultural Capital (71-94)
McElwee – Saving Our Kids (59-61)

February 8th (Monday) – Poverty and the Social Structure

Many sincere attempts to ameliorate poverty focus primarily on changing the individual. While some policy makers favor job training and financial aid, others argue that poor people need to alter their behavior and values. As Rank demonstrates both of these, often competing, prescriptions may fall short.

Q. Think of a common trope about poverty and how Rank might respond. How might Rank challenge and alter the underlying question/assumptions?

Readings: Rank – Rethinking American Poverty (16-21)

Film: A Place at the Table

Recommended: Harrington – The Other America

February 10th (Wednesday) – Poverty and Welfare

The welfare reform bill of 1996, entitled the Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act, left little doubt who policymakers believed was to blame for poverty. A series of myths about welfare shaped welfare reform, such as the idea that welfare mothers had more kids to get more welfare money, did not need welfare, or preferred not working. Acting on these myths policymakers cast welfare restrictions and work as the solution to poverty. Collins and Meyer examine poverty in the age of Welfare Reform.

Q. Pull out one concept that you think is important AND at least one that you aren't sure you fully understand. Explain Why. We will discuss these in class.

Readings: Collins and Meyer – Both Hands Tied (Intro and Chapter 1)

Recommended: Excerpt from 2 Dollars A Day

February 15th (Monday) – The Labor Movement and the Market Economy

In recent decades the share of the workforce represented by a collective bargaining agreement has dropped from a high of about 1 in 3 to a low today of about 1 in 10. In that time, inequality has also increased dramatically. One way to look at the labor movement is to gauge what they do for individual workers (increasing their wages and job security) but we should also look more broadly to the impact on the larger economy. The following articles, which reference scholarly works by Karl Polanyi and recent statements by the Pope, take this larger view of the relationship between labor and the economy.

Q. What is the relationship between the treatment of labor as a commodity and labor unions?

Readings: Horn – Pope Francis's Theory of Economics

Book Review – What Unions No Longer Do

Recommended: Stepan-Norris - Social Justice & Next Upsurge for Unions (47-51)

Polanyi – Fictitious Commodities

February 17th (Wednesday) – Race and Racism

Despite what many believe, the world's peoples simply don't come bundled into distinct biological groups. Instead, race is something that societies invent for the purpose of creating and maintaining social hierarchies. The film will begin our exploration into race.

Q. What did you find most surprising about the explanation of race? And what do you think most Americans get wrong about race? (In other words, what do you think is the most important point the film makes?)

Film: Race: The Power of Illusion Part 1

Recommended: Part 2 and 3 of Race: The Power of Illusion

Recommended: Roberts – The Invention of Race (3-25)

February 22nd (Monday) – Contemporary Racial Inequality

Popular culture often depicts racism as policies, ideas, and events of the distant past. Such an analysis may cause one to suspect that racism happened a long time ago, and, therefore, is no longer relevant today. While virtually every American, at least publicly, would say that racial inequality is not desirable and that they would not participate in its continuation, racial inequality persists and achieves some measure of legitimacy. Shapiro demonstrates how racial inequality continues in a supposedly 'race neutral' environment. Pager shows how stereotypes about race and criminality can have negative effects without conscious intent to discriminate.

Q. Why does the racial wealth gap matter and how is the past implicated? How does race condition the effect of a criminal record?

Readings: Shapiro – Inheritance and Privilege (82-92)

Pager – Blacks and Ex-Cons (58-59)

Recommended: Shapiro et al. – The Racial Wealth Gap Increases Fourfold

Powell – Blacks in Memphis Lose Decades of Economic Gains

February 24th (Wednesday) – White Privilege

Privilege is a fairly well known but often poorly understood concept. Johnson's essay discusses privilege and oppression and how they function in our society. He expands his essay to deal with several forms of privilege in the United States in order to demonstrate the broad utility of the concept?

Q. Find a quote that you think is particularly enlightening and one that you are not sure about and explain why you think the first is important and what you find confusing about the second one.

Readings: Johnson – Privilege, Oppression, and Difference (12-40)

Recommended: Johnson – Getting Off the Hook: Denial and Resistance (108-124)

February 29th (Monday) - Syrian Refugee Crisis

Here we will use a recent event in order to concretize some of the concepts we have discussed so far in this course.

Q. Find an opinion piece on this issue (try not to just pick the first one that pops up after a Google search of Syrian Refugee Crisis) and write a thoughtful reaction (i.e. don't rely on empty platitudes).

Recommended Readings: TBA I will add articles as events develop.

March 2nd (Wednesday) - Gender and Inequality

Sociological theory separates gender and sex. Sex refers to biological characteristics while gender refers to the socially constructed categories. Institutions and cultural practices shape the meaning of gender (i.e. masculinity and femininity). The following articles examine how social actors continually recreate the norms and cultural practices that we call gender.

Q. What is the difference between depicting gender as biological rather than social? According to Charles, why are there so few women in the fields of science and math?

Readings: Lorber – The Social Construction of Gender (112-119)

Charles – What Gender is Science (22-28)

March 7th (Monday) – Gender and Masculinity

Students often assume that gender studies means women's studies, as if men do not have a gender. Men, however, like women also have a gender. Gender is also, like race, a relational concept that denotes a hierarchy. With regard to race we talk about white supremacy, while for gender we refer to patriarchy. As both white supremacy and patriarchy come under challenge, a defense of privilege (partly from those who do not also have class privilege) emerges. Kimmel's book *Angry White Men* is about recent defenses of white supremacy and patriarchy.

Q. How might someone misinterpret Kimmel's argument? Why do you think that might happen?

Reading: Kimmel – *Excerpt from Angry White Men*

Recommended: Rios – Proving Manhood (124-141)

March 9th (Wednesday) – Midterm Exam

March 21st (Monday) – Rape Culture

Sexual Assault is a crime that typically involves an individual perpetrator and an individual victim. However, as these articles point out, sexual assault is both highly patterned and conditioned by larger cultural forces. Rape Culture is the term we use to depict these cultural forces.

Q. What kind of social circumstances do you think give rise to rape culture? What kind of social circumstances might decrease it?

**Reading: Taub – Rape Culture Isn't a Myth. It's Real, and It's Dangerous
Contexts – Ruling Out Rape (collection of short essays)**

March 23rd (Wednesday) – Moral Panics and Feminism

Feminism has been accompanied by a series of backlashes. This is not unique to feminism. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, all challenges to social hierarchy provoke backlashes. Often such backlashes emerge as moral panics. The articles below offer critiques of feminism and point to two contemporary moral panics.

Q. How might Hays and Butler interpret the phenomenon of sexting and/or hooking up?

Readings: Hays and Butler - Low-Calorie Feminism (72-74)

Rosin: Why Kids Sext

Armstrong et al. - Is Hooking Up Bad for Young Women? (22-27)

March 28th (Monday) – The Family and the State

Governments, as well as the populations, have long-considered the family an area of national concern. In the United States birth control, abortion, and reproduction in general have long been divisive political issues. Here we will take a look at reproduction controversies in Turkey and India.

Q. On the surface, the case in Turkey is one of denying choice, while women in India are making their own choices. How can we complicate this simple dichotomy?

Readings: Altiok – Reproducing the Nation

Rudrappa - India's Reproductive Assembly Line (22-27)

March 30th (Wednesday) – Social Movements

Social movements are collective efforts to change society – or, in our terms, the larger cultural and structural forces that shape our lives and condition life outcomes. Meyer points out that we cannot measure the impact of social movements by categorizing them as successes or failures. Breiens discusses rifts within social movements.

Q. Apply some of the insights from Meyer or Breiens to discuss the film Makers.

Readings: Meyer – How Social Movements Matter (30-35)

Film: Makers Part II: Changing the World

Reading: Breiens – Struggling to Connect (18-24)

April 4th (Monday) – Case Study: Gay Rights

A key moment in the Gay Rights movement was the onset of the AIDS crisis. At first, this tragedy did not engender a militant social movement. However, many would consider the 1980s as not only a key turning point for gay rights but as Hirschman writes, “The AIDS movement was an inspiration for every progressive movement of the next quarter century...”

Q. How did a social movement emerge from a tragic disease?

Readings: Gould – Ambivalence and the Emergence of Militant AIDS Activism

Recommended: Hirschman – Victory – The Triumphant Gay Revolution (Chp. 6-7)

Connell – Pride and Prejudice and Professionalism (32-37)

April 6th (Wednesday) — Remembering Movements

The following film depicts the activist group ACT UP and their battles during the AIDS crisis. The film relies primarily on archival footage and thus provides an up close look at the movement as it was developing. The film was also nominated for an Academy Award.

Q. How does the film (i.e. actually seeing rather than reading about) shape your understanding of the AIDS crisis?

Film: How to Survive a Plague

Recommended: Schudson – Telling Stories about Rosa Parks (23-27)

Schilt and Westbrook - Bathroom Battlegrounds and Penis Panics

April 11th (Monday) - Crime and Mass Incarceration

Over the last thirty years the United States has undergone an unprecedented and unparalleled (with regard to the industrialized world) experiment in mass incarceration. The United States now imprisons more of its citizens than any country on Earth. Mass Incarceration, in Western's words, is not random but "flows along the contours of social inequality." Western, however, does not contend that the poor commit less crime than the more well off nor that those in prison are innocent. Still, the author views mass incarceration as problematic.

Q. Beyond the overrepresentation of the poor and minorities in prisons, what does Western conclude about the relationship between mass incarceration and inequality in the United States?

Readings: Western – Inequality, Crime, and the Prison Boom (34-51)

Recommended: Tierney – For Lesser Crimes... (1-8)

Simon – Carceral Nation (74-76)

April 13th (Wednesday) – Mass Shootings and Gun Control

As mass shootings periodically occur in America at a frequency without precedent or parallel in advanced industrial democracies, gun control has continued to be a volatile and polarizing issue. Much of the debate over gun control is hampered by distortions of relative risks. For example, virtually all politicians accept as legitimate the idea of owning a gun for personal protection. However, gun owners are far more likely to harm themselves or a family member than to protect themselves. In addition, while mass shootings, for obvious reasons, gain the most attention they constitute a very small percentage of gun deaths. The Academy Award winning film *Bowling for Columbine* references a school shooting that took place in 1999. In the film, director, Michael Moore takes a stance on the issue of guns and the media.

Q. What should we take away from an openly biased movie? How can we learn from a biased presentation and still maintain a critical distance?

Film: Bowling For Columbine

Readings: Sternheimer – Do Video Games Kill? (13-17)

Recommended: Glassner – Crime in the News (23-49)

Kimmel – Excerpt from Angry White Men

April 18th (Monday) - Deviance and Drug Abuse [NOTE: I may replace this with articles and a film about the recent rise in Heroin use]

The following excerpt from the book *Methland* takes a, rather horrific, look at the effects of meth on a small town community. However, rather than focus on the extreme stories, the author situates the meth epidemic within its cultural and structural contexts.

Q. What are the cultural and structural contexts, which helped give rise to the meth epidemic in small town America?

Reading: Reding – The Most American Drug (40-57)

Film: The Meth Epidemic

Recommended: Brownstein et al. – Home Cooking: Marketing Meth (30-35)

April 20th (Wednesday) – Binge Drinking and College Campus

Binge drinking on college campuses has sparked concern from parents, administrators, politicians and students. The following excerpt from a book entitled *Getting Wasted* asks why some college students drink too much and party so hard.

Q. What are some of the social reasons why students continue to engage in behavior that even they recognize as potentially destructive?

Readings: Vander Ven – This is the Shit Show! (1-15)

Vander Ven – Using Drunk Support (164-182)

Recommended: *Excerpt from Beer and Circus*

April 25th (Monday) – Higher Education and the College Cultures

Adjusted for inflation, average tuition and fees at universities nationwide have nearly doubled in the past two decades. As a result, the average student now leaves a 4-year college with \$28,000 worth of student debt. Considering these developments, Schwartz discusses the value of education. The other articles explore what college means to today's students.

Q. How might we use concepts from Schwartz (e.g. an instrumental orientation to education) to better understand the “miseducation” or Monica and Karen?

Readings: Schwartz – The Debasing of Education (378-386)

Hamilton and Armstrong - (Mis)education of Monica and Karen (23-27)

Recommended Reading: Yee – Degree by Default (46-50)

April 27th (Wednesday) – Global Poverty and Food Scarcity

While global poverty statistics have somewhat improved in recent years, dire problems remain. Scheper-Hughes documents poverty in 1980s rural Brazil, while Scanlan et al. examine the causes of world hunger.

Q. According to why is the popular explanation for world hunger flawed?

According to Scheper-Hughes what is the cultural effect of poverty?

Readings: Scheper-Hughes – Death Without Weeping (323-328)

Scanlan et al. – The Scarcity Fallacy (34-39)

May 2nd (Monday) – Environment, Politics, and Society

The film traces some of the interaction between environmental problems and America's political, economic, and social histories. The documentary focuses on water pollution problems and the obstacles to their amelioration. The film poses several sociological questions regarding the impact of social institutions, values, policies and movements on creating and potentially resolving environmental problems.

Film: Poisoned Waters (First Part – about 20 minutes)

Recommended: McCright and Dunlap – Politicization of Climate Change (166-180)

Antonio and Brulle – Climate Change Denial Polarization (195-202)

Fisher – Snowball's Chance... (45-49)

Final Exam: TBA