

Sociological Analysis of Social Problems

Fall 2018 (920:103:01)

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

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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, most 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 (2-3 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.

Essay 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 2-3 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.

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.

Current Events: I highly recommend reading a quality newspaper/magazine on a daily basis or listening to high quality podcasts/radio. The theories and ideas from class will be easier to learn if you can recognize the concepts outside of the classroom. Below are a few I recommend:

Daily Newspaper: [The New York Times](#)

Magazine: The Atlantic, Vox

Radio/Podcasts: [WNYC \(93.9 FM\)](#) [NJPR](#)

TV: PBS [Frontline](#), [American Experience](#), [Newshour](#)

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 17th (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 22nd (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. Mills article lays out why a sociological imagination can help us better understand the world around us.

Q. Why does Mills distinguish between private troubles and public issues? In other words, what point is he making with these terms?

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

Recommended: Becoming Disabled

Cerulo and Ruane – Why do Conventional Wisdoms

January 24th (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 article explores methods used to produce sociological claims.

Q. How do you think “common sense” differs from a sociological analysis?

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

Recommended: Schuman – Sense and Nonsense about Surveys (40-47)

Kramer et al. - Black Lives and Police Tactics Matter

January 29th (Monday) – Thinking about Inequality

The goal of this class is not to come to definitive conclusions about the causes of inequality but instead to grapple with the ways in which we can construct our claims. In class, we will break into discussion groups and critically examine some claims. Ryan and Gamson’s review of the concept of framing will serve as a kind of how-to guide for critical examination of the claims we will discuss.

Q. Why do you think Ryan and Gamson say that we should be able to construct a framework for an argument we disagree with so that a proponent of that argument would say, “Yes, that’s what I think”?

Reading: Ryan and Gamson – The Art of Reframing Political Debates (13-18)

January 31st (Wednesday) – Social Class and Inequality

Reeves mixes an economic/sociological argument with a moral one. In essence, he argues that our current socio-economic order creates an, often unacknowledged, moral dilemma between our beliefs in fairness and ensuring our children succeed.

Q. What is “opportunity hoarding” and why do you think those engaged in it rarely see the moral dilemma Reeves describes?

Readings: Reeves – Dream Hoarders (Chp. 1)

McElwee – Saving Our Kids (59-61)

Recommended: McNamee and Miller Jr. – The American Dream (1-4)

How Wealth in Childhood Shapes Personality Later in Life

February 5th (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)

Recommended Film: A Place at the Table

Recommended: Harrington – The Other America

Aren't the Poor Comparatively Rich?

February 7th (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: America's Poorest are Getting Virtually No Assistance

Economists Tested 7 Welfare Programs

It is Expensive to be Poor

February 12th (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 unions 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 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

What Unions No Longer Do (Book Review)

Recommended: The Gap is Ending On-Call Schedules

Polanyi – Fictitious Commodities

To Understand Rising Inequality...

February 14th (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 [watch before class!]

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

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

Hispanic Identity Fades Across Generations

February 19th (Monday) – Contemporary Racial Inequality

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

The Destruction of a Black Suburb

February 21st (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)

A Professor Wants to Teach “The Problem of Whiteness”

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

February 26th (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.

February 28th (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. Both articles acknowledge the role of agency among women. So, if women are making choices that lead to job segregation and workplace inequality, how do social forces matter?

Readings: Stone – The Rhetoric and Reality of “Opting Out” (14-19)

Charles – What Gender is Science (22-28)

Recommended: The Scourge of the Female Chore Burden

The Difference Between a Happy Marriage...

March 5th (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, 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 7th (Wednesday) – Midterm Exam

SPRING BREAK March 10 – 18th

March 19th (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 21st (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 26th (Monday) – 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.

Q. Apply some of the insights from Meyer to discuss what happens in Gould's article.

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

Gould – Ambivalence and the Emergence of Militant AIDS Activism

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

March 28th (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 [available on Netflix]

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

Schilt and Westbrook - Bathroom Battlegrounds and Penis Panics

Support for Same Sex Marriage Grows

April 2nd (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 4th (Wednesday) — Policing and Police Reform

In recent years, cases where the police have shot (often unarmed) black men and boys have sparked national controversies over policing and race as well as the status of black Americans in modern-day America. The article by Coates questions the emphasis on the police. While Coates reframes the debate over police shootings, the podcast demonstrates how differently-situated people can see the same event and have access to the same facts but come to very different conclusions.

Q. How do you think the police officers interviewed in the podcast might interpret Coates's article? (e.g. would they see it as exonerating the police, a criticism of the police, or something else?)

Reading: Coates – The Myth of Police Reform

Podcast: Cops See It Differently Part 1

Recommended Podcast: Cops See It Differently Part 2

Recommended Reading: Black Activists Don't Ignore Crime

April 9th (Monday) – 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 11th (Wednesday) – 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 16th (Monday) - College Campuses and Fraternities

Fraternities (and to a much lesser extent sororities) are linked to a series of social problems – most notably binge drinking and sexual assault. The following articles discuss the legal structure of fraternities, attempts to deal with binge drinking, and the social factors that give rise to sexual assault. You should be able to recognize themes and concepts that we have discussed earlier in the course.

Q. I had asked for suggested topics on social problems and students in this class, proposed and then voted to select “Fraternities” as their top choice. So, are fraternities, all male campus groups that form the basis of social life for its members (as well as many others) inherently problematic? Or are the problems associated with fraternities the result of larger social forces?

Readings: The Dark Power of Fraternities

No Kegs, No Liquor: College Crackdown Targets Drinking

A Recipe for Sexual Assault

April 18th (Wednesday) – Student Choice

As we cannot possibly cover every conceivable social problem, I selected what I think are some prominent and familiar ones for this class. Rather than pick all of them, I will leave the next two classes for students to choose a social problem we should cover.

Readings: TBA

April 23rd (Monday) – Student Choice 2

April 25th (Wednesday) – Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City

The next two days we will read from a single source – an award-winning ethnography about housing in contemporary America.

Reading: Desmond – Evicted (excerpt 1)

April 30th (Monday) – Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City

Reading: Desmond – Evicted (excerpt 2)

Final Exam: TBA