Six Great Reads: Explorations in Sociology (01:920:215:01)

Spring 2024

Professor: Dr. Jeffrey Dowd **Email:** jdowd@sociology.rutgers.edu
Class hours: TTH 3:50-5:10 **Room:** FH-B4
Office Hours: T 12:30 – 2:00PM (via Zoom)

Course Description: Sociologists offer a unique perspective on a wide variety of social phenomena and contemporary societal problems. In this course, we will engage with six award-winning books, written by sociologists, that critically examine social justice and the role of power in social systems for a variety of topics. In addition to discussing and debating the substance of these issues, we will look closely at how authors support their findings as well as how they present the implications of their research. While each study stands on its own as a complete work, each also enters into ongoing conversations, both in academia and the public at large. As such, we will also consider the contexts of these studies. Finally, we will consider connections between the different concepts and ideas developed in each separate work. The defining feature of this course, and perhaps distinction from other courses (at least the ones I've taught) will be prioritizing deep engagement with a few topics rather than the broad overview of the discipline that relies on far more numerous works.

Required books:

Desmond, Matthew. 2017. *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. (ISBN-13: 978-0553447453)

Meadow, Tey. 2018. *Trans Kids: Being Gendered in the Twenty-First Century.* (ISBN-13:978-0520275041)

Rios, Victor. 2011. *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys.* (ISBN-978-0814776384)

Collins, Jane L., and Victoria Mayer. 2010. *Both Hands Tied: Welfare Reform and the Race to the Bottom in the Low-Wage Labor Market*. (ISBN-13: 978-0226114064)

Reich, Jennifer. 2018. *Calling the Shots: Why Parents Reject Vaccines*. (ISBN-13:978-1479874835)

Student Choice (5-6 choices will be offered)

Feel free to purchase a digital copy of these books if you prefer (sometimes it is cheaper), but please remember to bring something that you can access to class.

Course Assessments

Daily Writings: The questions on this syllabus (and reproduced on Canvas) should guide your reading and help you to reflect on the readings. I am not expecting a polished essay nor will these writings be graded (beyond marking them complete). I will set aside 5 minutes at the beginning of class to provide time to complete these.

The questions should help you work out ideas without the pressure of "getting the right answer." I also find that if students think about the material before class, they can better process the lectures and contribute to productive class discussion.

Beginning in the second week you will add one sentence on "what you learned today" and one question/area of confusion about the day's material/lecture. I will answer a selection of these questions to begin the next day's lecture.

Multiple Choice Quizzes: These quizzes consist of five to ten questions. Questions will not test your ability to memorize statistics or definitions but rather will measure your ability to interpret the meaning of the author's argument and/or follow the sociological implications of the question. For example, some questions will ask you to identify the point (or implications) of a quote from a text. Other questions will discuss concepts and ask you to identify an illustrative example of the concept.

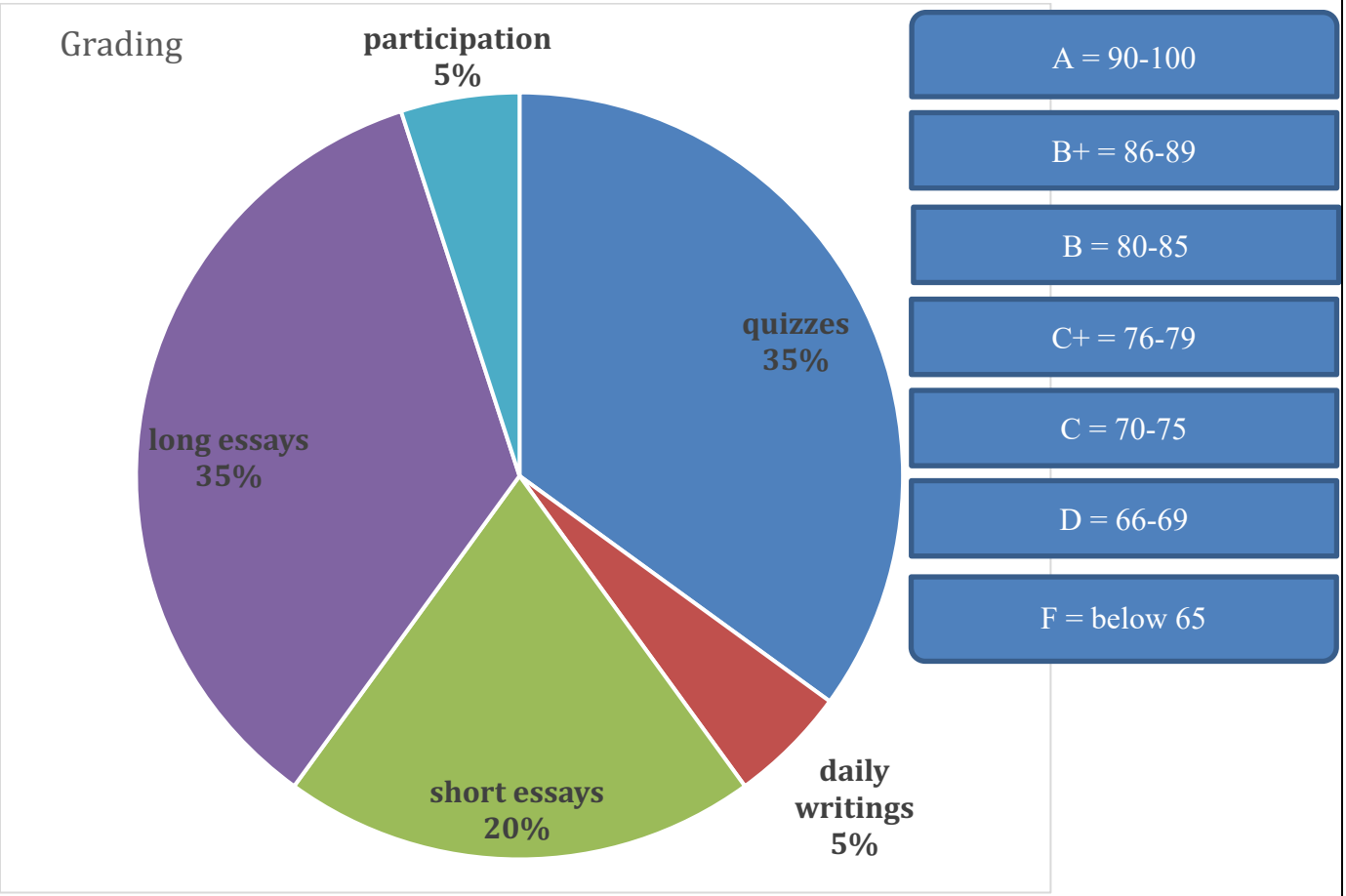
Participation: Attendance and active participation will earn students the full 5 points for participation.

Essays: I will assign 3 short essays (500-700 words e.g., about 2-3 paragraphs) and 2 long essays (800-1000 words e.g., roughly 5 paragraphs). The short essays will ask you to choose from a selection of prompts, while the long essays will ask you to put two or more articles in conversation (i.e. to make conceptual connections across the readings).

Late Policies: Assignments will close after two weeks, and **no late submissions will be allowed past that point.** Please let me know if your assignment will be a few days late as we can usually work something out without penalty.

Attendance and Self-Reporting Absence: Students are expected to attend all classes; 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.

Course Policies



Academic Integrity: Honesty and Integrity are essential to the mission of the academy. Here is the link to Rutgers policy on academic integrity.

Email: Please put "**SOC 215**" and your section number in the subject line. I will regularly answer emails M-TH 10am-4pm.

Participation AND Daily Writing grades are based on completion. I will review daily writings but will not assign grades to each individual writing.

Recommended Readings (or podcasts, videos, etc.): All additional course materials can be accessed through the Canvas site. Recommended readings are for those who would like additional information. I may refer to recommended readings in lecture, but they will not appear on quizzes.

I highly recommend regularly visiting the sites listed below. The ideas from class will be easier to learn if you can apply the concepts outside of the classroom. You can also like the sites on social media. https://www.wnyc.org/, http://www.nytimes.com, http://www.theatlantic.com/, http://www.vox.com

Broadly speaking, the purpose of this course is to broaden student's basic understanding of sociology. To accomplish this goal, we will read and engage with six important works in Sociology. Research shows that we build knowledge and skills through practice. In college, that practice consists of a variety of forms of engagement with new material, and the course schedule is designed with this purpose in mind.

For each book, we will begin by discussing the larger public and academic conversation the research enters, and then move on to consider (a) how the book tests claims about our social world and (b) the concepts or ideas that we can pull from each book. We will reinforce our understanding with forms of active learning – from informal class discussions to writing essays and quizzes.

Put another way, my job is not to pull out the relevant pieces for you, mark them as test-worthy, and then ask you to memorize them (briefly) as a set of disconnected facts, but instead, to both model and provide opportunities to process dense information, engage with it, and hopefully employ it to make better sense of the societies we inhabit.

Learning Goals

Engage with complex arguments and multi-causal explanations	Effectively communicate, in written form, how social forces shape social outcomes	Develop a critical eye towards narratives and the structure of arguments
Recognize the role of power embedded in hierarchical social systems	Understand the role of social systems on individual behaviors and attitudes	Assess social justice issues and the evidence required for valid claims

- **Core Curriculum Goals:**

  CCD-2 Analyze contemporary social justice issues and unbalanced social power systems.

  SCL-2 Employ tools of social scientific reasoning to study particular questions or situations, using appropriate assumptions, methods, evidence, and arguments.

Course Schedule: This schedule is reproduced on the Canvas course home page as distinct modules for each day. Within each module there will be a link to a **page** for that day. **Remember you should read the required materials prior to each class day.**

January 16th (Tuesday) – Introduction
This first class, we will go over the course format, expectations, and do a close reading of a few passages from our first book.

Lecture: What is Sociology?
Exercise 1: Close Reading: Desmond - Evicted (selections)

January 18th (Thursday) – Evicted Part 1(the conversation)
Here we will look at some of the public as well as academic conversations regarding the topic Desmond investigates in his book.

Q. Thinking about these first two chapters what do you think might be missing from the larger public understanding about affordable housing? Why do you think that matters?

Readings: Desmond – Evicted (Chapter 1 and 2)
Recommended: Desmond – Evicted (Prologue)

January 23rd (Tuesday) – Eviction Part 2 (making claims)
Desmond's book is an Ethnography. Here we will discuss what that means and how it has emerged as both an engaging and fruitful form of social research. In other words, we will ask how Desmond goes about investigating claims?

Q. What questions do you think Desmond attempts to answer?

Readings: Desmond – Evicted (Chapter 6 and 7)
Recommended: Evicted – Chapter 3 (a bit more background for Chapter 7)
Recommended: Quiz: How Well Can You Tell Factual from Opinion Statement

January 25th (Thursday) – Eviction Part 3 (concepts)
Concepts are the movable pieces of essays, books, and, for our purposes here - social science studies. Social science inquiry often begins with concepts. Concepts are also often the product of social science. Indeed, a researcher who develops a useful and novel concept can build a career with such a "discovery." Here we will discuss the key concepts that emerge in Desmond's work.

Q. Write down a quote you find particularly meaningful. Is there an identifiable concept? If so, what is it and can you define it more broadly? If not, what do you think the larger point is?

Readings: Desmond – Evicted (Chapters 10 and 11)
Recommended: Desmond – Evicted (Chapter 12)

January 30th (Tuesday) – Eviction Part 4 (quiz 1 and discussion)
Here we will have a short quiz, a discussion of the book as a whole and we will go over what I expect from the essays.

Q. Explain a key finding of this book as if you were writing to someone who has not read it.

Readings: Desmond – Evicted (Chapters 16, 21, and Epilogue)
Quiz 1
Recommended: Eviction Lab

February 1st (Thursday) – Trans Kids Part 1 (conversation and close reading)
The term transgender was not in common usage when I first started teaching. Today, the issues around this identity have risen to the level of presidential politics and now involve the military, sports, and public restrooms. There is also a parallel academic discussion about gender and conceptions of gender (e.g. it's static nature v. fluid nature).

Q. How would you summarize the public conversation around trans kids? OR What do you know about this topic and/or what don't you know?

Reading: no reading today [catch up on the other readings if you haven't done so]
Short Essay 1 Due (500-700 words e.g., roughly 2 paragraphs)
Exercise 2: Close Reading: Meadow – Trans Kids (selections)

February 6th (Tuesday) – Trans Kids Part 2 (concepts and quotes)
Unlike Desmond's book, Meadow begins with a series of concepts and the larger academic debate around gender and transgender identities. As such, we will address concepts first.

Q. Identify a particular quote that introduces or unpacks a concept that you think is important (or perhaps find confusing). Explain why it matters or what you are unclear about.

Readings: Trans Kids – Chapter 1

February 8th (Thursday) – Trans Kids Part 3 (research questions and methods)
Trans Kids relies on interview research. As such, the author gathers qualitative data from their research subjects. We will delve further into the importance of qualitative data and its different forms here.

Q. If Meadow had done surveys, she could have had a much larger sample. What is gained by doing a smaller number of interviews?

Readings: Trans Kids – Chapter 2-3
Recommended: Trans Kids Chapter 4

February 13th (Tuesday) – Trans Kids Part 4 (writing workshop)
Here we will discuss the end of *Trans Kids* and spend half the class discussing the second short essay. We will actively work on writing in class.

Q. Find a popular press article (from anywhere) that discusses transgender issues. Assess one of the claims and/or frameworks employed in the article in light of Meadow's research. This can serve as the starting point for the second short essay (I will have other prompts as well).

Readings: Trans Kids – Chapter 6 and 7
Quiz 2
Recommended: Chapter 5

February 15th (Thursday) – Punished Part 1 (conversations and close reading)
While horrific incidents of police violence make national news, the daily interactions between police as well as between the larger criminal justice system and young men of color receives far less coverage. Rios's book is an in-depth examination of the intersection between the criminal justice system and young urban kids of color (i.e. Black and Latino young men and boys).

Q. What sociological questions do you think Rios can/should answer about the criminal justice system in high-poverty neighborhoods? Why might these questions matter?

Reading: none required (finish *Trans Kids* if you would like).
Short Essay 2 Due (500-700 words - roughly 2 paragraphs)
Exercise 3: Close Reading: Rios - Punished (selections)

February 20th (Tuesday) – Punished Part 2 (methods)
Chapter 1 of Rios's study details the methodology of Punished. Rios explains the scope of the study, argues that the research questions are important, and makes a case that his methods can offer valid answers to those questions.

Q. Pick something about the ways in which Rios says he will answer his questions. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this particular method?

Readings: Punished: Preface, Chapter 1 (3-18)
Recommended: Punished: Chapter 2

February 22nd (Thursday) – Punished Part 3 (concepts)
In Chapter 3, Rios employs a series of concepts from other studies. Works of social science don't stand by themselves, but as we have discussed begin with existing theory (i.e. the culmination of what "we" already know about a subject). Rios employs a series of existing concepts to add clarity to what he witnesses and experiences throughout his study.

Q. Choose a piece of qualitative data (e.g. an experience, a story etc.) from the reading and explain how Rios uses an existing concept to make sense of it. How does applying this concept alter how we might initially explain the event?

Reading: Punished: Chapter 3
Recommended: Punished: Chapter 4 and 5

February 27th (Tuesday) – Punished Part 4 (making claims)
In Chapter 6 Rios makes a series of claims that question the efficacy of certain forms of policing. While Rios will later in the book point to what he thinks would be a more effective means of enhancing public safety, here he identifies a source of the problem many, at least in the larger public debate, overlook.

Q. What does Rios identify as an overlooked contributing factor to violent crime? Is it fair to say that he argues that this is the main cause of crime? Or is the argument more complex? (Hint: it's more complex – explain how).

Reading: Punished: Chapter 6
Recommended: Punished Chapter 7

February 29th (Thursday) – Punished Part 5 (writing workshop for Long Essay 1)
Rios discusses the political and policy implications of his research in this final chapter.

Q. What do you think about Rios's proposed solutions? (This is a broad question. You can discuss the practicality of his ideas, how they are supported by the research, or whether the research could have other political implications).

Readings: Punished: Conclusion (157-168)
Quiz 3

March 5th (Tuesday) – Both Hands Tied Part 1 (close reading and conversation)
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.

Q. Despite major changes in welfare in the United States over the past few decades, the public debate has not dramatically changed (at least not on the level of political rhetoric). So, I want to get a sense of your perceptions of the debate. What do you think are the common arguments in favor and against social welfare programs?

Readings: no readings (catch up)
Long Essay 1 – Due on Friday (800-1000 words or 3-5 paragraphs)
Exercise 4: Close Reading: Collins and Mayer – Both Hands (selections)

March 7th (Thursday) - Catch Up Day [NO CLASS MEETING]
Today is designated a catch-up day. If you are missing any work or falling behind this is designed to give you some room to catch up in this (or your other courses). Remember your Long Essay is due tomorrow.

March 9th – 17th Spring Break

March 19th (Tuesday) – Both Hands Tied Part 2 (concepts)
There are a lot of concepts in this first chapter. Some of them you may be familiar with and some of them may be new. Remember that concepts are tools that are often broadly applicable.

Definitions of concepts can be important, but they are fairly worthless if we don't understand how to apply a concept.

Q. Rather than define a concept, pick a concept or two and explain how it allows us to think about welfare.

Readings: Both Hands Tied: Chapter 1
Recommended: Chapter 2 and 3

March 21st (Thursday) – Both Hands Tied Part 3 (making claims)
The authors reference a lot of different government programs as well as competing pressures that many of the women in her study face. Each individual requirement doesn't amount to much by itself. However, the culmination of all these factors can create nearly insurmountable odds.

Q. Imagine a "why don't they just…" argument here. For example, find an obstacle or requirement and ask why don't they just… and then explain why it's not quite that simple.

Reading: Both Hands Tied: Chapters 4 and 5

March 26th (Tuesday) – Both Hands Tied Part 4 (writing workshop)
The authors suggest a series of proposals to improve life for those they studied. Considering what you've read, including the last chapter, look to the Build Back Better Act (at least in its original form – see link on class materials page). This piece of legislation is the first (since I've been teaching) that would seriously address the concerns in this book.

Q. Pick one piece of this legislation and discuss how it would address the problems the authors cite.

Reading: Both Hands Tied: Chapter 7
Recommended: Chapter 6
Quiz 4

March 28th (Thursday) – Calling the Shots Part 1 (conversation and close reading)
In recent years, there have been recurring controversies around vaccinations. While the efficacy of vaccines and how they work is beyond the scope of sociological inquiry, public controversies about vaccines and their impact on public health have been explored using sociological methods.

Q. What do you think sociology can add to the public discourse about vaccinations? (i.e. come up with some sociological questions).

Reading: No reading
Short Essay 3 Due
Exercise 4: Close Reading: Reich – Calling the Shots (selections)

April 2nd (Tuesday) – Calling the Shots Part 2 (methods)
Reich discusses how parents, who are not health experts, evaluate evidence and conduct what they call "research."

Q. How do members of the general public conduct research and how does this differ from how scientists conduct research?

Reading: Calling the Shots: Introduction and Chapter 2
Recommended: Calling the Shots: Chapter 1

April 4th (Thursday) – Calling the Shots Part 3 (concepts and frameworks)
Frameworks are how we organize information. We bring various frameworks to new information. These frameworks help us highlight important information and disregard unimportant information. Many parents in Reich's study use a framework that distinguishes between "natural" and "unnatural." Reich is critical of this framework.

Q. What is problematic about the "natural v. unnatural" framework and/or the way it is employed by the participants in Reich's study?

Reading: Calling the Shots: Chapter 3 or 4
Recommended: Chapter 3 and 4

April 9th (Tuesday) – Calling the Shots Part 4 (jigsaw)
We will do a jigsaw exercise. Each of you will be assigned a group. One member of each group will be responsible for one chapter and for explaining that chapter to the rest of the group – by summarizing main ideas, pointing to concepts and quotes, and facilitating discussion.

Reading: Calling the Shots (TBA) – chapter 5,6,7, or 8

April 11th (Thursday) – Writing workshop about Second Long Essay
Reich's final chapter asks a question that we could ask at the end of each of the books we have read so far. Sociology depends on a basic fact: humans are social beings. While we do tend to focus on all of the conflict and division that humans engage in, cooperation is the far more frequent form of human organization. Of course, how we cooperate, to whose benefit etc. are the kinds of questions that lead to conflict.

Q. Consider how Reich grapples with this question and then try to explain what this question looks like if we apply it to one of the other books we've read. This will be the starting point for the second long essay.

Reading: Calling the Shots: Conclusion – What We Owe Each Other
Quiz 5

April 16th (Tuesday) – Book Selection for Final Book
Students will choose between six different books for their final book. We will then work in groups to discuss each book. The exercises will be designed around individual book groups of 4-6 students.

Readings and Questions: see Canvas

April 18th (Thursday) – Book Group discussions
Working in groups, students will discuss the first two chapters of their books and devise a plan for the jigsaw exercise next class.

Readings and Questions: see Canvas

April 23rd (Tuesday) – Jigsaws
Students will work in their individual book groups for most of the class discussing the remainder of their books.

Readings and Questions: see Canvas
Long Essay 2 Due April 24th

April 25th (Thursday) – Course Summary
No readings due today – Attendance required (don't skip the last class!)

Student Support and Mental Wellness

- Student Success Essentials: https://success.rutgers.edu
- Student Support Services: https://www.rutgers.edu/academics/student-support
- The Learning Centers: https://rlc.rutgers.edu/
- Rutgers Libraries: https://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/
- Bias Incident Reporting: https://studentaffairs.rutgers.edu/bias-incident-reporting
- Dean of Students – Student Support Office: https://success.rutgers.edu/resource/dean-students-student-support-office
- Office of Veteran and Military Programs and Services: https://veterans.rutgers.edu
- Student Health Services: http://health.rutgers.edu/
- Counseling, Alcohol and Other Drug Assistance Program & Psychiatric Services (CAPS): http://health.rutgers.edu/medical-counseling-services/counseling/
- UWill: free immediate access to teletherapy; you can choose a therapist based on your preferences including issue, gender, language, ethnicity. http://health.rutgers.edu/uwill/
- Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance: www.vpva.rutgers.edu/
- Office of Disability Services: https://ods.rutgers.edu/
- Basic Needs Assistance (food, housing, and other essentials): https://ruoffcampus.rutgers.edu/basic-needs
- Rutgers Student Food Pantry: https://ruoffcampus.rutgers.edu/food-pantry