

Course Description and Objectives

The primary objective of this class is to introduce you to some of the major perspectives and key debates in contemporary sociological theory. We start by considering phenomenology, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, and exchange and rational choice theories, all of which provide different conceptualizations of the individual and the relationship between “macro” and “micro” levels of the social world. We then cover contemporary theorists who offer new approaches to the question of structure and agency, including Bourdieu, Giddens, Sewell, and Hays. Additionally, we consider theories that reflect the “cultural turn” and “postmodern turn” in social theory and discuss how sociologists have responded to these “turns.” Finally, we will consider contemporary theoretical approaches to the study of inequalities and differences. We cover theories that address class, gender, sexuality, and race as well as ones that advocate for an intersectional approach.

Along with covering major perspectives and debates, the course is also designed to allow you to engage in questions about the relationship between theory and research. Sociologists have differing perspectives about the role of theory in research and about how to justify knowledge claims. We begin the class considering some of these perspectives. Throughout the rest of the class, we will read empirical examples that relate to the theories covered and also provide more illustrations of sociological research and its relation to theory and epistemology.

Course Materials


All other required readings are available online on our Blackboard site.

Course Format

This course will be a seminar format and will be discussion based. Our class time is your opportunity to engage with and clarify the readings, many of which are not easy. You are expected to come to class having done all the required readings and being prepared to discuss them. Please note that this class requires a lot of reading each week and plan accordingly.
Course Assignments

Your grade in this class will be determined by your performance on the following:

Weekly response papers (15%)

Since this is a discussion-based class, coming to class prepared to participate will play a large part in how well you do in this class. Your preparation will be assessed through weekly response papers. Each week you will be responsible for writing a response paper. The response papers should be 2 pages, double-spaced, Times New Roman, 12pt font. The paper is due in-class. Your weekly responses are worth 15% of your overall grade.

Participation (15%)

You are expected to participate fully in each class by discussing the readings, asking questions and engaging with your peers. Missing two or more classes with negatively affect your participation grade. The participation component is worth 15% of your overall grade.

Midterm paper (30%)

The midterm paper is due Wednesday October 21st by 5:00PM. It will be submitted via email or my departmental mailbox. The midterm paper should be 10 pages, double-spaced, Times New Roman, 12 pt font. It is worth 30% of your overall grade.

Final paper (40%)

The final paper is due Monday December 7th. It will be submitted in class on the 7th. The final paper should be 10 pages, double-spaced, Times New Roman, 12 pt font. It is worth 40% of your overall grade. Part of the final paper assignment includes a presentation of the final paper on our last meeting.

Grading Scale

A+ = 97-100%  B+ = 87 – 89%  C+ = 77 – 79%  D+ = 67 – 69%
A = 93 – 96%  B = 83 – 86%  C = 73 – 76%  D = 63 – 66%
A– = 90 – 92%  B– = 80 – 82%  C– = 70 – 72%  D– = 60 – 62%
F = 59 % or below
READING SCHEDULE

*Please note this schedule is tentative. I reserve the right to make a change to the schedule to better meet the needs of the class. Additional or alternative readings may be announced in class.

* CST = Contemporary Sociological Theory

Week 1: Introductions

August 24: Introductions and Syllabus

Week 2: What is theory? What is the relationship between theory and research?

August 31

CST p. 1-22


*Read pp. 173-181


Week 3: No Class; Labor Day

September 7

Week 4: Symbolic Interactionism and Goffman

September 14

Goffman, Erving. 1959. “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life” (CST ch. 2)

Blumer, Herbert. 1969. “Symbolic Interactionism” (CST ch. 3)


**Week 5: Phenomenology and ethnomethodology**

*September 21*

Schutz, Alfred. 1932. “The Phenomenology of the Social World” (CST ch. 1)


**Week 6: Structure & Agency**

*September 28*


**Week 7: Postmodernism**

*October 5*

Foucault, Michel. 1972. “Truth and Power” (CST ch. 20)

Foucault, Michel. 1975. “Discipline and Punish” (CST ch. 21)


**Week 8: Culture**

*October 12*


**Week 9: No Class; Fall Break**

*October 19*

**MIDTERM PAPER DUE:** Wednesday October 21st at 5:00PM

**Week 10: Class**

*October 26*


**Week 11: Race**

*November 2*


**Week 12: Gender**

*November 9*


Butler, Judith. “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”


**Week 13: Sexuality**

*November 16*


Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality* (excerpt)


**Week 14: Theorizing Difference and Inequalities**

*November 23*

Collins, Patricia Hill. 1990. “Black Feminist Epistemology” (CST ch. 27)


**Week 15: Workshop Final Papers**

*November 30*

**Week 16: Present Final Papers**

*December 7*

**FINAL PAPER DUE**