Sociology 864: Contemporary Sociological Theory
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Spring 2020

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Office Hours: Tuesdays 2-3pm and by appointment  
Office Location: 725 Oldfather Hall

Course Meeting Time and Location: Tuesdays & Thursdays 12:30-1:45pm, 707 Oldfather Hall

Course Description and Objectives

The primary objective of this class is to introduce you to key perspectives in contemporary sociological theory, with an emphasis on the “cultural turn” and “postmodern turn.” We consider a variety of microsociological theories, including phenomenology and symbolic interactionism, which provide conceptualizations of 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. Finally, we 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. I also want students to understand how sociologists engage with theory in research. To that end, throughout the class, we will read empirical examples that relate to the theories covered.

Along with covering major contemporary theoretical perspectives (and related research), we will also engage in questions about the relationship between theory and research and about the politics of doing sociological research and theorizing. 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 questions. We end the course by returning to these larger questions and consider the politics of disciplinary research and theory and the link between contemporary and classical theories.

Course Materials


All other required readings are available online on our Canvas 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:
1) Weekly response papers 2) Presentations on empirical research 3) Participation
4) Midterm paper 5) Final paper

Weekly response papers (25%)
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 that engages with all of the theoretical readings of the week as well as the one empirical example to which you are assigned. The response paper will also include at least one discussion question. The response papers should be a minimum of 2 pages (double-spaced, Times New Roman, 12 pt font, 1 inch margins). The paper is due in-class on Tuesdays. Your weekly responses are worth 25% of your overall grade.

Presentations on empirical research (15%)
Over the course of the semester, you will be responsible for presenting on three pieces of empirical research (either a journal article of a chapter from a book). You will receive a separate handout with more information about the presentation assignment. The presentations are worth 15% of your overall grade.

Participation (10%)
You are expected to participate fully in each class by discussing the readings, asking questions and engaging with your peers. Missing more than two classes with negatively affect your participation grade. Participation is worth 10% of your overall grade.

Midterm paper (25%)
The midterm paper is due Monday March 9th at 9am (submitted via Canvas). The midterm paper should be 10 pages (double-spaced, Times New Roman, 12 pt font, 1 inch margins). It is worth 25% of your overall grade.

Final paper (25%)
The final paper is due Wednesday May 6th at 9am (submitted via Canvas). The final paper should be 10 pages (double-spaced, Times New Roman, 12 pt font, 1 in margins). It is worth 25% of your overall grade.

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 may make a change to the schedule to better meet the needs of the class. Additional or alternative readings may be announced in class.*

**Week 1: Introductions**

*January 14 & 16: Introductions and Syllabus*

**Week 2: What is Sociology? What is theory? What is the relationship between theory, epistemology, and research?**

*January 21 & 23*


**Week 3: What is Sociology? What is theory? What is the relationship between theory, epistemology, and research?**

*January 28 & 30*


One empirical article or book chapter of student’s choosing that has a clearly identified theoretical framework and one that we are not reading in the course

**Week 4: Micro Sociological Theories**

*February 4 & 6*

Blumer, Herbert. 1969. “Symbolic Interactionism” (excerpt)


Empirical examples:


**Week 5: Structure & Agency**

*February 11 & 13*


Empirical examples:


Week 6: Postmodernism

February 18 & 20


Foucault, Michel. 1975. “Discipline and Punish” (excerpt)


Empirical examples:


Week 7: Culture

February 25 & 27


Empirical examples:


Week 8: Midterm

March 3 & 5

MIDTERM PAPER DUE March 9th 9am

Week 9: Theorizing Class

March 10 & 12


Empirical examples:


Week 10: Theorizing Race

March 17 & 19


Empirical examples:


**Week 11: No Class**

*March 24 & 26 Spring Break*

**Week 12: Theorizing Gender**

*March 31 & April 2*


**Empirical examples:**


Polletta, Francesca and Pang Ching Bobby Chen. 2014. “Gender and Public Talk: Accounting for Women’s Variable Participation in the Public Sphere.” *Sociological Theory*

**Week 13: Theorizing Sexuality**

*April 7 & 9*


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


**Empirical examples:**


**Week 14: Theorizing Difference and Inequalities**

April 14 & 16


**Empirical examples:**


**Week 15: The Politics of Theory and Research: What is Sociology? What is theory? What is the relationship between theory, epistemology, and research?**

*April 21 & 23*


**Week 16: Course Reflections**

*April 28 & 30*

**FINAL PAPER DUE: Wednesday May 6th 9am**