

Sociology 102: Current Social Problems
Spring 2009
Fine Arts Building, Rm. 202
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1:30-2:45 p.m.

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Office hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 8:30 – 9:30 a.m., Wednesdays, 1:30 –2:30 p.m.

Course summary

What is a “social problem”? What are some of the most pressing social problems in contemporary U.S. society? How have social problems developed over time in the United States and globally? How do race, class, and gender inequalities contribute to and manifest as social problems? In this course, we will use our sociological imaginations to explore these and other questions concerning some of the most critical problems facing society. Readings, lectures, writing assignments, films, and discussions will provide the foundation from which we will expand and deepen our understanding of the sociological nature of current social problems.

Course objectives

This course is designed to help you gain knowledge and develop skills that will aid you in becoming a critical thinker, a successful student, and an informed, engaged member of society. Specifically, in this course you will:

- gain knowledge of how society operates on the micro and macro levels
- learn how to interpret your and others’ behavior and experiences using a sociological framework
- gain an understanding of the structural roots of social problems.
- discuss social issues and problems in an informed, critical, and civil manner
- gain experience writing critical essays
- gain experience speaking to an audience of your peers

Overall goal

I want you to learn something new in this class. Sounds simple, right? Well, in my experience, this isn’t always such an easy task. We all have so many taken for granted assumptions about how the world works, what constitutes reality, why people behave in certain ways, etc., that it is sometimes difficult for us to recognize when “what we’ve always known” is keeping us from knowing more. I think that all of us—teachers and students alike—need to continually challenge ourselves to learn more about the world in which we live. I believe the way to accomplish this is by questioning status quo interpretations of reality, seeking out information that will help us answer our questions, and understanding that we can always learn more about any given topic. You should do well in this class if you approach the material with this in mind.

Required readings

The following required book is available at the LCSC Bookstore and/or from various booksellers online:

Eitzen, Stanley and Maxine Baca Zinn. 2009. *Social Problems*, 11th Ed. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon

The other required readings for the course are noted in the course schedule and are available on the LCSC Library's Electronic Reserves. I may add additional readings to the E-Reserves as we progress through the course.

Assignments and Grading

Your grade in this course will be based on the following:

Class participation, Portfolio, and Formal Essay - 20% (40 pts.) Small and large group discussions, in-class activities, and in-class writing assignments will be an important part of your experience in this class. I will also occasionally ask you to participate in an out-of-class learning activity. Your active participation in these discussions, activities, and assignments will deepen your understanding of the course material and, as such, is vital. **You will maintain a portfolio of all of your in-class writing assignments as well as any notes/thought pieces from out-of-class activities. You will use this collection of thought-pieces as the basis for one formal essay. *This formal piece of writing will be turned in along with the rest of your portfolio during Week 15.*** Specific guidelines for the portfolios and the essay will be discussed in class.

Pop quizzes - 10% (20 pts.) A pop quiz may await you in class on any given day. These quizzes are my way of ensuring that you are keeping up with the assigned readings, and they may also test your knowledge of previously covered lecture material.

First Exam - 25% (50 pts.) The first examination will consist of a combination of multiple choice, true/false, and essay questions on material covered during Weeks 1-6.

Second Exam - 25% (50 pts.) The second examination will consist of a combination of multiple choice, true/false, and essay questions on material covered during Weeks 8-12.

Final Exam - 20% (40 pts.) The final is a comprehensive exam consisting of a combination of multiple choice, true/false, and essay questions. It will test your knowledge of material covered throughout the semester.

*****Please keep in mind that any information from the readings is fair game for exams, whether or not it is explicitly covered in class. Also, please note that lectures will often introduce material not covered in the textbook, so good note taking is key to your success in this class.***

Grading scale

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| A+ | = 99-100% (197-200 pts.) |
| A | = 91-98% (181-196 pts.) |
| A- | = 90% (179-180 pts.) |
| B+ | = 89% (177-178 pts.) |
| B | = 81-88% (161-176 pts.) |
| B- | = 80% (159-160 pts.) |
| C+ | = 79% (157-158 pts.) |
| C | = 71-78% (141-156 pts.) |
| C- | = 70% (139-140 pts.) |
| D+ | = 69% (137-138 pts.) |
| D | = 61-68% (121-136 pts.) |
| D- | = 60% (119-120 pts.) |
| F | = 59% (118 pts.) or below |

*A note on grades: At any point during the semester, you can calculate your own grade by simply adding up the number of points you've earned so far on quizzes and exams and dividing by the total number of points possible at that point in time. I make my grading simple and transparent so that **YOU CAN KEEP TRACK OF YOUR OWN GRADE.**

Evaluation criteria

For the participation and portfolio component of your grade, you will receive points for completing in-class writing assignments and writing assignments/notes related to outside-of-class activities. This is simply a measure of how many assignments out of the total you completed and included in your portfolio, although I reserve the right to award no credit to any assignment to which little effort was applied. You will also receive a qualitative assessment (A, B, C, D, or F) on the formal essay that you turn in with your portfolio. (This qualitative assessment will, of course, be converted into points.) The essay will be graded according to the thoroughness with which you have addressed the topic/question posed; the extent to which you offer a critical, sociological analysis/interpretation; the extent to which you have integrated course readings, lectures, films, discussions, and your own portfolio work; and the clarity and coherence of your writing (i.e. how well-written, organized, and logical your writing is). "A"s are reserved for truly superior work. "B"s are assigned to above average, well-written work. "C"s are an indication that more detail and analysis are needed and/or your writing needs significant improvement. "D"s are a sign that you did not adequately meet the requirements of the essay and/or your writing is unacceptable. "F"s are an indication that you have not met even the minimum requirements of the essay and your writing is unacceptable.

The grading of quizzes and exams is fairly straightforward. For the essay portion of your exams, I expect references to the readings and lectures, the use of sociological terminology, and coherent writing.

Expectations

Classroom behavior

If we all adhere to the following simple, common sense guidelines, our class time together will be a pleasant experience for everyone:

-Please be on time, and do not leave early. Coming in late or leaving early can be highly disruptive. Also, please do not begin shuffling papers and packing up before the end of class.

-Please do not interrupt others or talk to your neighbor while others are speaking.

-Address your fellow classmates respectfully, whether or not you agree with their particular viewpoints.

-Turn off cell phones, pagers, and any other little beeping, shrieking, or music-making devices before you come to class. If you are a parent or otherwise need to be available for family members, please put your phone on vibrate mode.

-Do not read the newspaper, work on an assignment for another class, or otherwise be disengaged from what is going on in the classroom.

-Finally, please, no web surfing in class. Despite the fact that that cute man/woman you've been obsessing over has just IM'd you or sent you a Facebook message, please do not read or respond to emails in class, all the while pretending to take notes. **If you use a laptop computer for note taking, you will need to sit in the front row of the classroom.**

Academic integrity

Any instance of plagiarism, cheating, or other form of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated and will be dealt with in a manner that is unpleasant for all involved. Please do not ruin your academic future by engaging in such foolish behavior. If you have any questions about what is meant by the term "academic dishonesty," please see me for an explanation or clarification.

Attendance

I believe very strongly in the benefits of regular class attendance. As you can see by looking at the percentage of your grade that comes from participation, you will not do well in this course if you do not come to class on a regular basis. My advice? Come to every class.

If you do miss a class and do not have a valid reason (defined below), please do not ask me, "What did I miss?" or, my personal favorite, "Did I miss anything?" Instead, get the notes from a fellow classmate, keeping in mind that s/he may or may not be a good note taker. But why take that risk? Just come to class.

I do understand that in certain situations, you may actually have a valid reason for missing class. I consider the following to be such reasons:

- documented medical emergencies (*not* regular medical appointments, which you can schedule at a different time than this class)
- acute illnesses (such as the flu)
- documented legal conflicts (your arrest on the way to class, for example)
- family emergencies/issues that require your immediate attention (This sort of situation can, of course, be more sensitive and difficult to document. I trust that each of you has enough integrity to use this reason only if it is legitimate.)
- documented housing emergencies (fire, flood, etc.)
- documented pet illnesses/emergencies (I also have animals, and their well-being is of the utmost importance.)

If you are absent from class for one of these reasons (or another one that you are absolutely certain fits into the “could-not-possibly-have-been-avoided” category), contact me as soon as possible (prior to class, preferably). Please be prepared to provide me with some form of documentation (if appropriate), such as a signed note with the signer’s contact information, and I will arrange for you to get the notes for the class you have missed.

Policy on make-ups and late assignments

Please do not ask me about in-class writing assignments that you’ve missed unless you have a valid reason for being absent, as defined above. I will still expect to see these writing assignments in your portfolio, but it is your responsibility to figure out what it is you need to do if you have chosen not to come to class.

Pop quizzes cannot be made up.

Make-up exams will be given in very rare circumstances for students with legitimate reasons who make arrangements with me well in advance. Vacations and other optional absences are not legitimate reasons for rescheduling an exam. Emergency situations as defined above may warrant an exam make up. The sooner you contact me after such a situation arises, the better your chances of being able to make up an exam.

Additional notes

Documented disabilities

If you have a documented disability or other issue that may affect your performance in this course, please let me know during the first week of the term, and we will work together to figure out appropriate accommodations.

Contacting me

If you have questions about the course material and/or would like to further discuss any of the topics we are covering, please come chat with me during my office hours. If you need to contact me otherwise, the best way to reach me is via email. You can also try calling my office phone during office hours. Please be aware, however, that if you leave a message at any other time on my office phone, I may not get it until the following office hour, so if you need to be in touch with me in a timely manner, use email. If/when you email me, please include a phone number where you can be reached, so I can call you if necessary. All this being said, **please use email sparingly**. I would much rather talk with you in person during my office hours.

Course schedule

The following course schedule is subject to change depending on our progress in covering the material. Any changes will be announced in class. It is your responsibility to know what is announced in class, whether or not you are present when it's announced.

Your active engagement with each week's assigned readings is key to your success in this class. The readings for each week should be completed prior to each Tuesday's class so that you are able to engage in informed discussions about the readings with your fellow classmates and respond to any questions that I might ask you about the material.

Documentaries and film clips will be integrated with the lectures and class discussions throughout the semester.

Week 1 (8/25, 8/27): Introduction: A Sociological Approach to the Study of Social Problems

Readings: Eitzen and Zinn, Ch. 1

Week 2 (9/1, 9/3): Systemic Bias: Wealth and Power

Readings: Eitzen and Zinn, Ch. 2

Week 3 (9/8, 9/10): Environmental Problems as Social Problems

Readings: Eitzen and Zinn, Ch. 3, and Foster, "The Ecological Crisis" (E-reserves)

Week 4 (9/15, 9/17): Environmental Problems (continued...)

Readings: Eitzen and Zinn, Ch. 4, and Foster, "The Vulnerable Planet" (E-reserves)

Week 5 (9/22, 9/24): Work, Poverty, and Inequality: Economic Inequality in the U.S. and Beyond

Readings: Eitzen and Zinn, Ch. 7

Week 6 (9/29, 10/1): Work, Poverty, and Inequality (continued...)

Readings: Eitzen and Zinn, Ch. 14, and Ehrenreich, "Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America."

Week 7 (10/6, 10/8): Exam Week

******First Exam on Thursday, October 8th***

Readings: None

Week 8 (10/13, 10/15): Racial and Ethnic Inequality

Readings: Eitzen and Zinn, Ch. 8

Week 9 (10/20, 10/22): Racial and Ethnic Inequality (continued...)

Readings: Eitzen and Zinn, Ch. 8

Week 10 (10/27, 10/29): Gender Inequality

Readings: Eitzen and Zinn, Ch. 9

Week 11 (11/3, 11/5): Crime, Deviance, and the War on Drugs

Readings: Eitzen and Zinn 12 and 13

Week 12 (11/10, 11/12): Family Problems

Readings: Eitzen and Zinn, Ch. 15

Week 13 (11/17, 11/19): Exam week

******Second exam on Thursday, November 19th***

Readings: None

****** Thanksgiving Break (11/23-11/27)******

Week 14 (12/1, 12/3): Problems in the U.S. Health Care System

Readings: Eitzen and Zinn, Ch. 17

Week 15 (12/8, 12/10): Course Wrap-up: Possible Solutions to Systemic Problems?

Readings: Eitzen and Zinn, Ch. 19

****Portfolio with Formal Essay due in class on Tuesday, Dec 8th***

Finals Week (12/15): Comprehensive Final Exam on Tuesday, Dec. 15, at 1:30 p.m.