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Social Problems (SOC 1020)
Weber State University, Spring 2015

Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays 12:30 – 1:20 pm
SS 109

Course overview and objectives

Our modern world is filled with daunting social problems. Yet, evaluating which threats are pressing, or even legitimate, is itself a social problem. In this course, you will learn about the major problems, crises, and dangers in the world, as well as the techniques that social scientists use to identify and understand these problems. We will focus on three main questions: *How can we recognize and assess what are social problems (and what are not social problems)? How are some people privileged, while others are not? How do people influence us – both creating and resolving problems?*

A main purpose of this course is to help you use social science research to develop tools of flexible thinking, analysis, and evaluation. Therefore, by the end of this course you should be able to describe the main components of sociological research, explain various sociological concepts and perspectives for understanding social problems, apply sociological concepts and perspectives to examples of social problems (as well as recognize examples of sociological concepts and perspectives), and evaluate threats and problems as legitimate or not by analyzing the sources of information about social problems. You will also develop and hone skills of research, public speaking and debate, as well as speaking and writing skills of analysis, argument, and organization.

Required readings

Christakis, Nicholas A. and James H. Fowler (2009) *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.

Glassner, Barney (1999) *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Johnson, Allan G. (2001) *Power, Privilege, and Difference*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.

Additional readings and videos. (I've included these as links in the syllabus and, whenever possible, uploaded them onto the course [Canvas page](#).)

Course requirements and grade percentages

<i>Community engagement</i>	25%
<i>Research project</i>	20%
<i>Connection assignments</i>	28%
<i>Quizzes</i>	21%
<i>Course assessments</i>	6%

Community engagement – In order for you to fully understand the course material, as well as recognize, analyze, and apply examples of it to “real world” applications, I am asking you to be involved in **fifteen hours** of community engagement, as well as **turn in a report summarizing and analyzing your experience**. See instructions on [here](#). **(25%)**

Research project – In order to explore various examples of social problems, apply course concepts and perspectives to examples of problems, as well as sharpen your research and public speaking skills, I am asking you to **research a social problem, create a presentation to the class about that topic, and discuss these projects with each other**. See instructions on [here](#). **(20%)**

Connection assignments – In order to further understand the course ideas, as well as further connect them with “real world” examples, I am asking you to **do the following assignments**: “Social Science News Analysis” (10 points), “Diversity Wheel” (8 points), and “Network Friend Map” (10 points). See instructions on [here](#). **(28%)**

Quizzes – In order to help you understand the course material, as well as encourage attendance and participation, I am asking you to complete **eight quizzes**, and I will drop the one with the lowest score. They will ask you about the materials assigned for that week. I will administer the quizzes at **the beginning of class**, I will **NOT announce them** beforehand, and I will **NOT** accept late quizzes or hold any makeups. **(7 quizzes X 3 points each = 21%)**

Course assessments – In order for me to see how the course is going, I will be giving two assessments, asking you how you feel about the class and your participation in it. They will be available on Canvas three days before they are due. **(2 assessments X 3 points each = 6%)**

Disclaimers

- This course covers a wide range of the social world, including aspects that are controversial, shocking, or otherwise may make you uncomfortable. You will also be asked to share personal information about yourself. Please seriously consider whether you wish to take this course.
- My preferred method of contact is in person, then by email. Please do **NOT** contact me through Canvas.
- Late assignments will be penalized 20%. Unless widespread, internet disruptions are not a valid excuse for late work. I will lift the penalty for those with a legitimate, documented reason (doctor’s note, etc.), and I am more sympathetic when you contact me *before* missing the assignment. Unless you email me and request it, I will not grade work that you turn in after I grade everyone else’s assignments.

- In order to do well in this course and others, I highly recommend both the five part series of videos “[How to Get the Most Out of Studying](#)” and the Weber State course “Foundations of College Success” (UNIV 1055).
- I do not tolerate cheating. Plagiarism – the use of others’ words and/or ideas without clearly acknowledging their source – is also a form of cheating. I will take appropriate disciplinary action against offenders.
- If you are a student with a disability and require classroom accommodations, please meet with me to discuss arrangements (If you have not yet contacted Services for Students with Disabilities, please do so – Student Services Center, Room 181 or call (801) 626-6413).
- This syllabus, including all readings and assignments, is subject to change given the flow of the course and unforeseen circumstances. I may deliver such updates by email (including instructions on what to do if the university is closed for an extended period of time) so please regularly check your Weber email address or be sure that it forwards to your regular address.

Reading and lecture schedule

Part One: Ideology and research

How can we recognize and assess what are social problems (and what are not social problems)?

WEEK ONE: Introduction – Who are we and where are we going?

(January 12-16)

- This syllabus
- “Rodney King’s Question” (Chapter 1 of *Power, Privilege, and Difference*)
- [“Who Gets to Graduate?” \(Paul Tough\)](#)
- [“Utah students 'grossly' unprepared for workforce, study says” \(Morgan Jacobsen\)](#)

WEEK TWO: Methods – How do we know what we know?

(January 21, 23)

No class – Monday, January 19th

- [“An Animated Introduction to Social Science”](#) (video)
- [“Theory vs. Scientific Theory”](#) (video)
- [“The Truth in Social Research: Rebecca Huntley at TEDxSydney”](#) (video)

WEEK THREE: Fake and real social problems

(January 26-30)

- “Introduction: Why Americans fear the wrong things” (*The Culture of Fear*)
- “Crime in the news” (Chapter 2 of *The Culture of Fear*)

WEEK FOUR: Misdirection (gender)
(February 2-6)

- “Monster moms” (Chapter 4 of *The Culture of Fear*)
- [“Falling for Familiar Narratives” \(Jane Hu\)](#)
- [“On Equal Pay Day, key facts about the gender pay gap” \(Eileen Patten – article and video\)](#)
- [Business of Begging: The real stories behind Utah panhandling](#) (Headrick)
- [The city's panhandlers tell their own stories](#) (Knight)

Social Science News Analysis assignment due on Canvas on Friday, February 6th by 11:59 pm.

WEEK FIVE: Misdirection (race)
(February 9-13)

- “Black men” (Chapter 5 of *The Culture of Fear*)
- [“The Next America” \(Paul Taylor\)](#)
- [“Shrinking Shares” \(Andy Warner\)](#)
- [“Poverty In The US By The Numbers”](#)

Research project – research question due in class on Wednesday, February 11th.

Part Two: Power and privilege

How are some people privileged, while others are not?

WEEK SIX: What is privilege?
(February 18, 20)

No class – Monday, February 16th

- “What It All Has to Do with Us” (Chapter 6 of *Power, Privilege, and Difference*)
- “How Systems of Privilege Work” (Chapter 7 of *Power, Privilege, and Difference*)

Course assessment #1 due on Canvas on Friday, February 20th at 11:59 pm.

WEEK SEVEN: Learning to be privileged (and to oppress)
(February 25, 27)

No class – Monday, February 23rd. Instead, watch the following videos:

- [“Readers: Children learn attitudes about race at home”](#) (article and videos)
- [“A Girl Like Me”](#) (video)
- [“Microaggressions in Everyday Life”](#) (video)
- [“Microaggressions: The little Things People Say”](#) (video)

Also read:

- “Privilege, Oppression, and Difference” (Chapter 2 of *Power, Privilege, and Difference*)
- “Capitalism, Class, and the Matrix of Domination” (Chapter 3 of *Power, Privilege, and Difference*)

WEEK EIGHT: Denying oppression
(March 2-6)

- “Getting Off the Hook: Denial and Resistance” (Chapter 8 of *Power, Privilege, and Difference*)
- [“How Stereotypes Explain Everything And Nothing At All” \(Gene Demby\)](#)

Diversity Wheel assignment, Part One, due in class on Friday, March 6th.

Diversity Wheel assignment, Part Two, due on Canvas on Friday, March 6th by 11:59 pm.

WEEK NINE: Spring break
(March 9-13)

No class

WEEK TEN: Fighting oppression
(March 16-20)

- “What Can We Do” (Chapter 9 of *Power, Privilege, and Difference*)
- [“First-generation college students benefit from discussing class differences” \(Clifton Parker\)](#)
- [“Tabloid Headlines If They Weren't Sexist”](#)

Course assessment #2 due by Friday, March 20th by 11:59 pm.

Part Three: The power of networks

How do people influence us – both creating and resolving our problems?

WEEK ELEVEN: The network perspective
(March 25, 27)

No class – Monday, March 23rd. Instead, watch the Christakis video:

- [“Nicholas Christakis: The Sociological Science Behind Social Networks and Social Influence” \(video\)](#)

Also read:

- “In the Thick of It” (Chapter 1 of *Connected*)
- “The Buck Starts Here” (Chapter 5 of *Connected*)

WEEK TWELVE: The power of networks
(*March 30 – April 3*)

- “Love the One You’re With” (Chapter 3 of *Connected*)

Network Friend Map assignment, Part One, due in class on Friday, April 3rd.

Network Friend Map assignment, Part Two, due on Canvas on Friday, April 3rd by 11:59 pm.

WEEK THIRTEEN: Peace, love, and networks
(*April 6-10*)

- “This Hurts Me As Much As It Hurts You” (Chapter 4 of *Connected*)
- “Hyperconnected” (Chapter 8 of *Connected*)

Research project – blog post due Sunday, April 12th at 11:59 pm.

Part Four: Exploring social problems

WEEK FOURTEEN: Presentations
(*April 13-17*)

WEEK FIFTEEN: Presentations continued and conclusion
(*April 20-24*)

Community engagement hours due Monday, April 20th at noon.

Community engagement assignment, Part Two, due on Canvas on Friday, April 24th at 11:59 pm.

Research project – dialogue due on Canvas on Friday, April 24th at 11:59 pm.

Assignments

Community engagement

This assignment has two parts. First, you contact a “community partner,” volunteer fifteen hours there over the length of the semester, and then log your hours with the Center for Community Engaged Learning (CCEL). Second, you analyze and reflect on your experience. **(25 points)**

Part One

Register with the [Center for Community Engaged Learning \(CCEL\)](#), complete their [online training](#), and print and bring your training certificates to them. Then, search for an organization under the [Community Partner Directory](#). This organization should 1) interest you and 2) clearly address a sociological social problem that fits the course. Contact that organization, work there for at least fifteen hours, and [record your hours](#) with CCEL. **If any problems arise, do not hesitate to contact CCEL – (801) 626-7737, ccel@weber.edu, or Shepherd Union 327.**

Your hours are due by Monday, April 20th at noon. (10 points)

Part Two

Complete each of the following questions. Due on Canvas on Friday, April 24th at 11:59 pm (15 points):

- 1) Briefly explain your experience with community engagement. (1 point)
- 2) What specific social problem that we covered in class did your work address? (1 point)
- 3) How did your work personally help that social problem? (1 point)
- 4) In parts a, b, and c below, analyze your experience through each of the three lenses for viewing social problems that we have used in this course. For each part, include at least **two direct quotes** from the author:
 - a. *Ideology and research* (Glassner) – How did your experience vary, if at all, from media reports and popular wisdom on the problem? Who benefits from this misrepresentation of reality? (4 points)
 - b. *Power and privilege* (Johnson) – How did your experience reveal inequalities of power among people (yourself, clients, staff, the public, etc.)? How did it show how you are privileged and/or oppressed? (4 points)
 - c. *Networks* (Christakis and Fowler) – Describe specific networks that you witnessed and how information was transferred across them. How did your experience reveal the power of networks in solving (or worsening) the social problem your work addressed? (4 points)

Research project

In order to further illustrate the social problems of the world, as well as help you further understand the ideas of the course by applying them to concrete examples, I am asking you to do a research project and present your findings to the class. This project can be related to your community engagement assignment, but it does not need to be. **(20 points)**

This assignment has **four parts**: 1) question submission and acceptance (1 points), 2) blog post (12 points), 3) presentation and discussion (3 points), 4) dialogue (4 points):

Question submission – You must submit a research question to me in class on **Wednesday, February 11th**. I have included a list of potential topics below to get you started. I **must** approve your question before you can begin researching it.

Blog post – You need to **post an article about your social problem on the course discussion board**. It should be at least 500 words long and supported with at least **five legitimate sources** (see below). Also, your post should **include a bibliography** with citations of each source that you used. Also, your post needs to have **each of these four parts**:

- 1) *Definition*: define the problem.
- 2) *Methods*: discuss the various methods that researchers use in the studies you collected.
- 3) *Conclusions*: review the main findings of the articles by integrating them into themes.
- 4) *Connections*: using at least two direct quotes from **each** of the three assigned books (Glassner, Johnson, Christakis and Fowler), explain how your topic connects with the concepts, themes, or other issues of the course.

Your post should also be dynamic, including website links, images, audio, videos, or anything else that illustrates your topic. It will be graded on 1) the quality of your research, 2) the quality of your integration and analysis, 3) writing, grammar, and organization, and 4) creativity and flair. Due on **Sunday, April 12th at 11:59 pm**.

Presentation and discussion –Based on the research from your blog post, **give a presentation** to the class (about 15 minutes long) that outlines and illustrates each of the five parts of your blog post. After the presentation, you should **hold a class discussion of the issue** (about 10 minutes long). You can **ask if there are any questions or comments**, as well as **prepare discussion questions**, such as “How does the academic view of the problem vary from other viewpoints?” or “What are possible solutions, and what are people doing (or not doing) to solve this problem?”

Dialogue – In order to involve everyone in the course with these presentations, as well as have you further analyze the course ideas and materials, I am asking you to **post on the Canvas discussion board about four of the other presentations**. Discussion board posts can take three forms: 1) *Questions* – ask questions you may have about the topic or the presentation, 2) *Complements* – add new information to the topic or the presentation, or 3) *Comments* – reply to what someone has already written. Your post should be substantial and closely related to the material, or you will not receive credit for it. Your four posts are **due on Canvas on Friday, April 24th at 11:59 pm**.

Additional information:

Legitimate sources – Your five sources **must** be from peer reviewed academic articles.

Additionally, they **must** be found at the following places, most of which are only accessible to you through the [WSU library website](#): Academic Search Premier (with the “Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals” button checked), [Google Scholar](#), JStor, or Sociological Abstracts. You can use sources that are not peer reviewed academic articles and do not appear in these databases, but they will not count toward the required number of five. If you have any questions, ask me.

Possible topics – Below is a **list of social problems** from which you can develop a question, although your topic does not have to come from this list. As these are all broad and complex issues, it is a good idea to narrow down your subtopic to an issue within it. (For example, for “drug abuse” you can choose to cover one drug issue – such as “What are the problems with heroin abuse?” – or even an issue within that issue – “What is the controversy surrounding needle sharing programs?”)

Abortion, ageism, drug abuse, disability rights, eating disorders, educational inequality, environmental pollution, gender inequality, gay rights and same-sex marriage, globalization, gun control, homelessness, human trafficking and sex slavery, mass media, obesity, poverty, prostitution, racial inequality, social class and economic inequality, suicide, terrorism, undocumented immigration

Connection assignments

Social science news analysis

In order to develop your skills in evaluating research and how others represent it (and misrepresent it!), I am asking you to compare two news stories about social science research (**10 points**).

- [Business of Begging: The real stories behind Utah panhandling](#) (Headrick)
- [The city's panhandlers tell their own stories](#) (Knight)

Read the two articles and be ready to discuss them in class on Friday, February 6th.

Then, answer the following questions about your two articles. I will not give credit to answers that do not clearly support their points with **evidence from the sources** – the articles and, for questions 4) and 5), Glassner. Due on Canvas on Friday, February 6th at 11:59 pm:

- 1) Name three ways that the two articles vary in how they represent the social problem of panhandling. Please number your points. (3 points)
- 2) How does each news article explain the methods of the research, if at all? (2 points)
- 3) Evaluate the methods – What does each study do better than the other? (1 points)
- 4) One of Glassner’s main points is that the media distorts our picture of reality. a) How do each of these stories distort panhandling? b) Who do you think benefits from these distortions of the social problem of panhandling? c) Do you think one study is more accurate than the other? Why? (3 points)
- 5) Another main point of Glassner is that media stories reflect our fears. What fears of panhandlers do you think these articles reveal? (1 points)

Diversity Wheel

In order for you to be able to define “diversity,” “privilege,” and “oppression,” apply examples from your life to these sociological concepts, as well as develop and hone skills of group work, I am asking you to fill out the Diversity Wheel, as found in Chapter 2 of *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, and discuss it in class and then through a writing exercise. This assignment will also help you understand yourself as a sociological being, fitting various large-scale, demographic groups and their corresponding benefits and/or disadvantages. (**8 points**)

Fill out the “Diversity Wheel” (found in Chapter 2 of Privilege, Power, and Difference) and bring it to class on **Friday, March 6th**. Keep in mind that you may be publicly sharing this information with your classmates and me, so censor information that you would be uncomfortable sharing publically.

On Canvas, attach a file or photo of your Diversity Wheel (2 points). Then, answer the following and turn in on Canvas by 11:59 pm on **Friday, March 6th**. I will not give credit to answers that do not clearly integrate **Johnson’s arguments**:

- 1) Using Johnson’s explanation of privilege, in what ways does your Diversity Wheel show that you are privileged? In what ways are you disadvantaged? (2 points)
- 2) Flip two aspects of your Diversity Wheel in order to make yourself less privileged (for example, from male to female or straight to gay). Describe two benefits that you would no longer receive. How would your life change? (2 points)
- 3) Define the “matrix of domination,” and explain how your Diversity Wheel may reflect it? (2 points)

Network friend map

In order to better understand networks, I am asking you to analyze your connections with your friends and/or family. Generate a network map of your friends and family and then analyze it as an example of various network concepts. **(10 points)**

Generate or create a network graph and bring it to class on Friday, April 3rd. You can do this through a Facebook application like [FriendsGraph](#), or you can create your own using at least thirty people.

On Canvas, attach a [screenshot](#) or photo of your network map (1 point). Then, define the terms, or sets of terms, below **in your own words** and explain how each of them fits (or does not fit) your network graph. Thus, analyze how your network is structured (numbers 1 – 3), as well as how you think information (or anything else) moves across it (numbers 4 – 9). If the term does not fit your network, that’s fine. Just clearly explain how it does not fit. Due on Canvas on Friday, April 3rd by 11:59 pm. (1 point each)

- 1.) Basic types: Unconnected, telephone tree, bucket brigade, military squad
- 2.) Network communities
- 3.) Centrality
- 4.) “The strength of weak ties”
- 5.) Connection
- 6.) Contagion
- 7.) Homophily
- 8.) The Three Degrees Rule
- 9.) Lévy flight