January 13th

From Poor Law to Working Poor: The world of low-income America

Sociology 36301

Wednesday 3- 5:20        Stokes 195S

Professor: Lisa Dodson
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Office hours are on Wednesday before class (please email to set up a time)

Syllabus

From “warning off paupers” to welfare reform to unsustainable wages, this course offers an overview of attitudes and policies directed to people living poor in the US. The class examines historical and contemporary images of poor/low-income people and families and how those images affect social policy and public debate. Readings uncover the relationship between poverty and race, gender, child-raising, immigration, and the expansion of a low-wage job market. The second half of the term will focus on the current increasing economic disparity and deepening class structure in the US. The course will encourage students to examine their own assumptions about who is low income, why they are, whether it matters, and what should be done. Your grade will be based on:

Expectations and general class format

Participation (40%) includes two parts.

1. Poverty-issue story (15%): Each class will start with (4-5) students presenting a newspaper or media account related to contemporary poverty – you should plan about 5 minutes and prepare one question for a brief class discussion. As you look for an article, consider the topics in our readings (for example poor houses, ideas about “worthy and unworthy” poor people, teen pregnancy, etc.) and try to find a story or debate that reflects that theme. You are not expected to do any other research/reading on the topic. On the date that you are assigned to present your poverty-issue story, you will hand in a half-page description of the topic.

2. Discussion of readings (25%): Completing all the readings is required and students will be called upon (or can volunteer!) to discuss questions that will be prepared and posted on the BB each week. Often, we will break into smaller groups for discussion and other times we may use the large group format. Regardless, your participation is required, we will keep tabs on it, and this will influence your grade!

Note: If you are very anxious about talking in class and that your grade will be affected, you may sign up to keep a journal. You will be required to write a journal entry before each class that reflects you have thought about all the readings. You can include connections to your own life or personal experiences/observations. Each entry should be a minimum of one page and a maximum of two pages. The journal will be checked at random periods over the semester (so you must bring your journal notebook to class) and you will receive either a check, a check-plus, or a check-minus. We may look back at all earlier entries, as well. You are responsible for
writing an entry even if you are absent. If you wish to sign up for the journal option, let us know after the first class.

3. Midterm exam (30%)
4. Final paper: 7-10 pages (30%)

General class format

- Poverty-issue stories, as described above
- Discussions questions posted on BB before class for discussion, as described
- Professor Dodson or Amanda Freeman will provide a brief summary of key themes from readings.
- 10-minute break
- In-class/group activities
- (On some days we will have a film or an outside speaker)

Course texts are in the bookstore and may be available used, @ online bookstores:


All other readings are on BC library course reserve or on Course Blackboard site (BB).

January 16th
Review student roster – brief introductions: Amanda Freeman, Teaching Assistant and PhD student in Sociology; Basant Badr, Senior, Sociology
- Review syllabus, expectations, and assignments.
- Expectations: Students will be called on throughout the term to respond to questions about the readings.
- Distribute the assigned date for poverty-issue story.
- Introductory lecture and PP on overview of poverty in US – Professor Dodson

Class activity: Estimate of the average U.S. household income: What does it cost to live/raise a family. What are our “necessities.”

We will have an informal discussion considering how a family can manage on median earnings
No Readings
January 23rd
Early poverty policies, public attitudes and social integration/isolation of “the poor”:
1750-1850 - Colonial times

• Poverty-issue stories
• Discussion questions about the reading
• Summary on key points
• Class activity: The class will break into 6-8 groups of “Boards of Overseers” for local poor houses, in various identified locations. Overseers are responsible for making up the rules about: who gets into the poor house; what they have to do to stay; how they might find a way out; etc. You might consider who you are, in the community, to be an overseer. The poor houses that you oversee will be composed of different populations… children, elderly, disabled, families, etc. so Overseers face different challenges.

NOTE: Each group should come up with two core policies and write them down, for discussion next week.

Readings:
Trattner, Chapters 1-4

2. *Homeless Students Top 1 Million, U.S. Says, Leaving Advocates 'Horrified'*
(Huffington Post on BB)

January 30th
History continued: 1850-1900 - Civil War to the Progressive Era and the “racialization” of poverty

• Poverty-issue stories
• Groups present their poor house policies as Overseers from last week
• Discussion questions about the readings
• Class activity:
  o Taking the reading into account, draw the first thing that comes to mind when you think about the “racialization” of poverty. Turn to a partner and discuss your images. Think about the similarities and differences between these two pictures. How do you think the media portrays poverty today? Is this similar to or different than the image you have just drawn?
  o The class will come together again and students will be called on to share their pictures and their answers to the questions above.

PP on the “racialization” of poverty
  o Professor Dodson will project images of poverty from newspapers/magazines and will discuss their implications.

Readings:
1. Trattner, Chapter 5
2. Bullock, et al “Media Images of the Poor”
February 6th
Poor children in the US: Child laborer to priceless child and back again

- Poverty-issue stories
- Discussion questions about the reading
- Summary on key points: Changing image of poor children.
- Class activity: video/film clip and policy debate about child labor.

Readings:
1. Zelizer, Viviana “From Useful to Useless” and “From Child Labor to Child Work” Chapters 2 and 3 in Pricing the Priceless Child (1985) (On course reserve)
2. Check Blackboard for news story with the tag: Child Labor.

February 13th
The 1935 Social Security Act: Ongoing debate about public (national/state), private, and local responsibility for vulnerable people.

- Poverty-issue stories
- Discussion questions about the reading.
- Summary of key points
- Class Activity:

Social or Private Security Debate:
Students will take a survey asking them to consider their extended family (immediate family plus grandparents/great grandparents and families of parents’ siblings) and list all members who are:
- Elderly and frail
- Physically/mentally disabled
- Experienced a job loss/economic hard times
- Terminally ill
- Single parent

Each group will develop policies based on: Public program or a social insurance approach; non-government or private solution approach; faith-based and local community solutions. Each group should describe how the vulnerable people would be cared for based on their policy.

Readings
1. Trattnor, Chapter 13: Depression and A New Deal


February 20th
Post-war conservatism, “proper” families, and the shift to personal responsibility

- Poverty-issue stories
- Brief group policy presentations from previous week.
Discussion questions about the reading.

Summarize of key points

Activity: Students will meet in groups to talk about advancing – or not – public policies to address socioeconomic stratification in the US. Should the government intervene? If so how? Students will then be randomly assigned to one of 5 socioeconomic levels and we will talk about “what life is like” living at that level.

Readings:
1. Trattnor, Chapter 14: From World War to the Great Society
2. Coontz, Chapters 2 and 4: “Leave it to Beaver” and “We Have Always Stood on Our Own Two Feet” in The Way We Never Were” (1992) (Course reserve)

February 27th
Social policy as “deviancy” control: Teen pregnancy and poverty policy

Poverty-issue stories

Speakers
Patricia Quinn, Executive Director, and Liz Peck, Director of Public Policy

Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy

Founded in 1979 by eleven youth agencies to improve teen parent services, the Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy is now a statewide coalition of over 100 health and human service agencies working to prevent teen pregnancy and support teen parents.

In the past 29 years, our educational services have trained over 10,000 individuals, and the Alliance’s policy and research efforts have resulted in the investment in teen pregnancy prevention and services for young families that have reached over 400,000 at-risk youth, teen parents and their children.

Readings:
2. Luker, “Why do they do it?” Chapter 6 in Dubious Conceptions (1996) (Course reserve)

http://www.massteenpregnancy.org/publications/research-reports
http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/sla/
March 6th  NO CLASS

March 13th
The neoconservative regulation of poor women: “Dependency” and welfare reform

- Midterm – one hour
- Poverty-issue stories
- In class reading (to be distributed after midterm) and discussion about the reading

March 20th
The good worker or the good mother: Untenable choices for low-income families

- Poverty-issue stories
- Reading questions discussion
- Summary of key points
- Class activity:
  - Students will be given scenarios of family types. These family types are facing difficult decisions and students will discuss how they would react/grapple with the different aspects of these situations.

Readings:

Dodson, Stereotyping Low-wage Mothers Who Have Work and Family Conflicts (2013)
Collins and Mayer, *Both Hands Tied*: Chapters Three and Four

March 27th  NO CLASS

April 3rd
Personal services, domestics, and homecare workers – the new servant class

- Poverty-issue stories

Speaker
Lydia Edwards, Policy Director
Massachusetts Domestic Worker Coalition

Readings:

*Home Economics: The invisible and unregulated world of domestic work* on Blackboard
April 10th
Immigrant workers’ families

- Poverty-issue stories
- Reading questions discussion
- Film clips.
- Class activity that explores “our ancestry” and who do we consider immigrants…

Readings:
Marquardt, et al *Living Illegal*: Introduction through (inclusive) Chapter 3

April 17th
The development of a very large and entrenched class of workers – disproportionately immigrant -- who earn unsustainable wages and what life is like in those families.

- Poverty-issue stories
- Reading questions discussion
- Trends in wages and labor markets – major

Activity: How do you manage work and family?

Readings:
Marquardt, et al *Living Illegal*: Chapter 4 - Conclusion

April 24th
The social cost of a stratified society: Comparing US inequality with other nations

- Poverty-issue stories
- Reading questions discussion
- Comparing the US and other nations: International comparison of investment in low-income/families. (Wilkinson and Pickett)

Student Activity:
Individually and anonymously, students use a family-budget template to plan their future budgets based on what they anticipate earning (and getting from any other source). Students pass these in and then meet in groups of 6 to discuss and report back on exercise and report out.

Readings: To be added

May 1st -- Final class

- Poverty-issue stories
• Turn in term papers
• Discussion questions reflecting on the entire course.

End with recent data about the cost of having a family, asking what should be done to create a more egalitarian society?  http://money.cnn.com/2012/06/14/news/economy/cost-raising-child/index.htm

• http://video.today.msnbc.msn.com/today/49287461#49287461