

Introductory Sociology Syllabus

This course surveys major sociological perspectives, theories, methods, and ideas. We will take a journey in this course from the origins of sociology as a discipline to the formation of current social problems. A key objective for this course is for you to develop what we will call your **sociological imagination**. This term has become a foundational aspect of what it means to do sociology, and it should be your first and primary goal as a student in this course.

As a part of developing this sociological imagination, you should work toward understanding the major concepts presented in the reading and lectures, improving your critical thinking, reading and writing skills, integrating these new ideas into your personal philosophy, and generating a strong communal learning environment. I have structured this course along three different tracks:

- 0) Social Philosophy/Theory.
- 1) The Sociological Discipline.
- 2) Sociological Experimentation and Practice.

Each of these will provide you with aspects of your's and other's social worlds and will force you to think about the world in different ways. Each week we will delve into new aspects of what it means to think of the social field philosophically; what the discipline of sociology thinks about itself, its theories, and its methods; and what practices we as social animals might utilize to explore our co-constructed world (view).

Philosophy of the Course

I must recognize that students cannot understand their own rights because they are so ideologized into rejecting their own freedom, their own critical development, thanks to the traditional curriculum. Then, I have to learn with them how to go beyond these limits, beyond their own learned rejection of their rights.

-- Paulo Freire --

This course is based in philosophy of collective learning, an anti-hierarchical method of inquiry in which we are all teachers and learners. Often referred to as 'critical pedagogy', I have chosen this framework and philosophy for numerous reasons. First and foremost, it is an ethical decision based on the long history of oppression produced by our taken for granted notions of authority and knowledge. Second, it is my hope that by restructuring our lived classroom environment, you and I will learn together different modes of social organization that may have a continued impact on our lives outside the classroom and on our understanding of the societal formations and structures. Finally, I have chosen this philosophy in order to give you the freedom to develop an intellectual curiosity that

might go beyond the limitations of disciplinary boundaries. Given the above, you should note that this will be an open and transparent process. You are welcome to discuss any and every aspect of the course at anytime and should always expect to be listened to and heard. If at any point you feel your participation in the course has been compromised, I encourage you to let me and your classmates know. Your ability to express yourself freely is immanent to this pedagogical approach.

Course Structure

I have structured this course along three different tracks: 0) Social Philosophy. 1) The Sociological Discipline. 3) Sociological Experimentation and Practice. Each of these will provide you with aspects of your's and other's social worlds and will force you to think about the world in different ways. Each week we will delve into new aspects of what it means to think of the social field philosophically; what the discipline of sociology thinks about itself, its theories, and its methods; and what practices we as social animals might utilize to explore our co-constructed world (view).

Since this course fulfills a university core requirement in the social sciences, it necessarily includes attention to the following:

0. A concern with perennial questions

Certain questions in our field continue to remain open to exploration. These questions began the discipline and will likely never have a comprehensive answer. What is more important nature or nurture? What keeps individuals inside particular groups? Why do subjects obey social norms and/or laws? Why are some groups different from others? What are the similar features among groups? Do we have free will? These and other questions will be explored throughout the semester.

1. An examination of historical context

One of the starting points for this course is that we are always already bound to a historical context and contextualized by historical realities. Thus a significant aspect of what we will explore throughout the semester will involve the role of history in the production of knowledge, social institutions, and culture. From the very beginning of the field, sociologists have explored the relationship of society to history and vice versa. Throughout this course, we will examine both how early sociological thinkers as well as contemporary thinkers understand our relationship to history.

2. Cultural diversity

As the planet shrinks and the social field globalizes, it becomes imperative that we take into account differences among our fellow humans. During this course, we will

continually work through cultural differences to better understand how our positions in the world engage with, relate to, and co-exist with the difference of others. This will take various forms as the course progresses yet will remain an ongoing concern and focus for everything we study.

3. Methodologies of the field

Coming to a sociological understanding of the world requires taking care to examine the world in particular ways. The methods we employ determine the types of understanding we are capable of having. As a social science discipline, sociology carries with it a wide range of methodological approaches. We will examine some of the more popular methodological choices you have as a sociological thinker, and discuss the various strengths and weaknesses of each, what each has to offer, and how to put them into practice as researchers.

4. Writing Component

While the importance of clear thought and argumentation cannot be denied, the best way to develop your critical thinking skills is through writing. Thus, I emphasize the importance of writing in this course. You will be offered many outlets to express yourself through the written word, including blogs, forums, chat, wikis, and formal papers. Each of these should be seen as an opportunity to develop your writing skills.

5. Existential Reflection

One of the requirements for a Boston College core course “should be an integration of what the students have learned with how they act.” Therefore, you are encouraged to give voice and thought to how you fit into the social contexts we discuss. You will have numerous points of reflection and places of expression within the structure of this course. And you are encouraged both in class as well as out of class to apply what you learn to your lived reality.

Coursework

- **Read** – As much of this course will involve in and out of class discussions, it will be imperative that you keep up with the reading. Our only required text is James Henslin's Down to Earth Sociology which you can find at the campus bookstore.
- **Forum Posts** – This will be an integral part of how you express your ideas about what you learn. I expect everyone to write one forum entry each week (12 total). These entries should somehow incorporate the ideas from the readings and class discussions, and they should reflect your ability to examine the social world utilizing what we've learned. I

expect you to write approximately 500 words per week for a total of 6,000 words for the semester. Attempt to use as many concepts as you can in your writing.

- **Concept Exploration** – As with any discipline, sociology has its own language. Part of our project this semester is to find and write definitions for a long list of sociological concepts. Our list is [here](#). All **red** terms have no definition, **yellow** terms need additional work, and **green** terms you should try to remember. If you go to the [course wiki](#), you will find definitions from prior students. You are welcome to use these definitions to populate the concepts, but try to improve upon them as you go.
- **Social Experiments** – Throughout the semester, we will be participating in various social experiments. At least one of these will be a [formal experiment](#) fulfilling one of your individual paper requirements. You will be required to write up your findings and submit them as necessary.
- **Individual Papers** – You are expected to write two 3-5 page papers. These papers should reflect your ability to think sociologically and analyze a social issue, problem, and/or situation.
- **Group Project** – Everyone will be involved in a group research project for the duration of the semester. At semester's end, you will submit your finished research, approx. 10,000 words. This will include a presentation of your group work to the class during our final examination period.

Grading

Grading for this course will take the form of self and group evaluations. While I will respond to and offer feedback on your work. The grade that you receive for the course will be based on a combination of your own self-reflections of your participation in the course and your group's reflections on the same. This too is in the spirit of freedom, autonomy, and community. You will be given a guide on ways to think through evaluating yourself and your group members.

Statement About Self-Assessment

“Freedom as the ability to govern oneself rather than 'being left alone' by the government, was the dream of those revolutionary movements which ushered the Western world into its modern history. The French Revolution of 1789 aimed at transforming that 'nothing' which was the 'Third Estate' (i.e. the great majority of the nation, denied effective influence over the running of national affairs) into 'everything' – into a force freely deciding all questions of public interest. The Founding Fathers of the American Revolution sought in their Declaration of Independence to 'guarantee a space where freedom can appear' – freedom again understood as fully-fledged and universal participation in public affairs.

Commenting on the early experience of revolutionary America, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote of 'freedom for its own sake', justified by the sheer pleasure of being able to speak, to act, to breathe. The craving after a freedom which is not to be bothered by public affairs but on the contrary an unconstrained and enthusiastically exercised right to manage them, is not therefore new. Yet it always remained a dream – a 'utopian horizon' at best."¹

- Zygmunt Bauman –

Why Self Assessment?

The grading for this course uses self and group assessment². I have chosen to use this grading methodology for a number of reasons. First, I believe in the benefits of intellectual curiosity and want to foster that in this course. I hope by giving you freedom and autonomy, you will find creative and new ways to explore the world around you, both personally and intellectually. Second, sometimes the best ways to understand and research our social world emerge from violating our taken for granted assumptions. By offering you a situation which shifts the traditional structure of authority, I will give us all an opportunity to examine the social logic of our education system in a first hand phenomenological way. Third, I hold a radical view of freedom, and thus believe it ethically imperative to offer you as much freedom as possible within our institutional confines. Finally, as you work with your groups, you should seek a sense of collective responsibility as part of your participation. You will have the opportunity to examine your group dynamics as participant observers, while relying on one another to accomplish projects throughout the semester. Through this process, you will have the opportunity to discuss with each other how your group functioned, divisions of labor within the group, and how your relations translated into finished projects. Due to this, you as a learning community will have an excellent perspective with which to assess yourselves.

Limits of Autonomy

While I encourage, expect and wish to foster your intellectual freedom through self-assessment. This process assumes that you choose to accept your freedom ethically and honestly. And this process requires an active engagement with the class, the assignments, and your group. I do expect you to attend class, participate in class discussions, complete assignments in a timely manner, work closely with your group, and keep up with reading assignments. Should you chose not to do these things, you must be willing to take

responsibility for such gaps in intellectual rigor. Not taking responsibility equals the limits of autonomy, and I will intervene in the process of self-evaluation.

1Bauman, Z. (1988). *Freedom*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

2I have taken some aspects of self-assessment from Laura Rediehs, who designed a more systematic framework for self-assessed grading. You can read more about her philosophy of grading on her website: <http://it.stlawu.edu/~lrediehs/grading.htm>.