

# Contemporary Theory in Sociology

Sociology 516  
Spring 2020  
Department of Sociology  
Rutgers University  
Tuesdays, 1:10pm to 3:50pm  
Davison Hall, Seminar Room (130)

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## Required Readings:

All readings are available as PDFs on the course Sakai site.

## Course Description

This course introduces several significant theoretical concepts, frameworks, and perspectives in frequently used in contemporary sociological research. In preparing the readings and organization of the course, I spent considerable time looking at graduate-level contemporary theory course syllabi across several sociology departments in the United States and the United Kingdom. Through this examination, I found two general types of courses. One approach presents key theorists and essential works in a chronological order beginning with Talcott Parsons and arriving at postmodernism or postcolonial theory. Another approach organizes readings according to critical theoretical perspectives such as functionalism, structure-agency, feminism, postcolonial theory. Rather than replicate either of these two models, I have opted to create a hybrid approach combining both approaches.

My primary goal in this course is to introduce significant concepts and perspectives-central to a variety of areas of contemporary sociological inquiry. Accordingly, I've organized the course around theoretical concepts and themes rather than individual theorists. While the ideas/perspectives selected for this course are by no means representative of the exciting field of sociology, they will enable you to gain a better sense of many of the dominant contemporary theoretical perspectives being used in research TODAY. Since there is no possible way to cover the totality of contemporary sociological theory in one semester, we will approach this course as an intellectual buffet. We'll sample a variety of theoretical and empirical works. You may not like everything; however, the things you do find potentially "tasty" may help you further develop your abilities to theorizing in the context of your own work.

After spending a week reading and discussing what it means to theorize in contemporary sociology, we will commence with our intellectual buffet by reading and reflecting on a variety of theoretically rich works that help sociologists analyze and interpret empirical data. In this journey, we will consider fundamental concepts such as structure and rational action as well as more specialized perspectives such as racialization, intersectionality, symbolic boundaries, and collective action, just to name a few. As we progress through the readings, I encourage you to reflect on the role of empirical research in the formulation, testing, and refining of theoretical concepts and perspectives. In so doing, you will see how research informs theorizing and vice-versa. Given the sheer significance of "theoretical" contributions in sociological scholarship, it is my hope that this course will give you a clear sense of what sociological theorizing looks like and how to use theoretical concepts to interpret empirical realities across the social world.

## **Learning Goals**

- Acquire a solid understanding of select theoretical concepts and perspectives frequently used by contemporary academic sociologists.
- Learn how sociologists theorize from their empirical research and how theorizing contributes the development or refinement of old and new concepts, frameworks, perspectives, and hypotheses.
- Learn how to frame empirical questions using a variety of theoretical perspectives and concepts.
- Acquire analytic skills necessary to form critiques of existing theories, concepts, and perspectives within the discipline of sociology.
- Apply sociological concepts, ideals and perspectives to current events and your own research.

## **Assessment**

- Active participation in weekly seminar discussions
- Submission of weekly memos (12 total). In this memo, you must use concepts/ideas from the weekly assigned readings to interpret a current event or issue reported in news of the week.
- Facilitating two class discussions in relation to the topic in your written memo for the week (everyone must do this twice during the semester)
- Final Paper/Exam

## **Diversity Statement for Classroom Interaction/Discussion**

The Rutgers Sociology Department strives to create an environment that supports and affirms diversity in all manifestations, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, social class, disability status, region/country of origin, and political orientation. This department celebrates a diversity of theoretical and methodological perspectives among our faculty and students and seeks to create an atmosphere of respect and mutual dialogue. We have zero tolerance for violations of these principles and have instituted clear and respectful procedures for responding to such grievances.

## **Course Requirements**

### Weekly Memos (50 points)

One of the essential skills one acquires in doctoral training is the ability to apply theoretical concepts and perspectives to guide and interpret empirical research. At the undergraduate level, we often ask students to "use their sociological imaginations" to see how everyday life is reflective of inequality and the social order of a given society. The act of using theoretical concepts to interpret the social world lies at the heart of theorizing. Therefore, we will practice theorizing each week in this course by using the theoretical concepts/themes to explain or interpret a current event or social problem. This exercise requires you to be to understand and apply theoretical ideas from the readings to the empirical social world.

You will be required to write a 500 to 750-word memo each week in which you will reflect on the assigned readings and try to apply one or more of the concepts/ideas from the texts to a recent current event or social problem featured in the news. These memos will need to be uploaded to Forums on Sakai by 11 pm on the Monday before our Tuesday afternoon meetings. You will need to write and upload 12 of these memos during the semester. These memos will account for 50% of your final grade. I will be looking for two things: 1) that you understand the theoretical ideas you have been reading; 2) you have attempted to use the week's ideas/concepts to interpret a current event/social issue. The purpose of this weekly exercise is to help you clarify your thinking by trying to apply the theoretical ideas or arguments to the social world. I firmly believe that this type of activity can help sharpen your conceptual skills and hopefully contribute to your intellectual cultivation as theoretically-driven producers of sociological knowledge.

### Class Presenter/Facilitator (20 Points)

On two different class meetings, each one of you will be required to present your memo topic and interpretation(s) to the class. After presenting your memo, you and the instructor will jointly facilitate class discussion regarding your memo. You are required to do this twice over the course of the term. Sign ups will happen the second week of class. Look over the syllabus and begin thinking about which two weeks you would like to present to the class and lead discussion.

## Final Exam/Final Paper (30 points)

There are two options in this class for the final assignment. You can opt to write an argumentative paper on theoretical perspectives/ concepts from the class (20-25 pages double spaced). Alternatively, you can opt to take an oral exam with me in which you will be asked to answer and discuss a set of pre-determined questions. The oral examination will consist of a one-one oral exam with the instructor (45 minutes to 1 hour). These exams will be scheduled for the week of final exams in May. More information will be provided about both options as we progress.

### Grade Breakdown

Weekly Memos	50 Points
Class Presenter	20 Points
Final Exam/Paper	30 Points
<u>Total</u>	<u>100 Points</u>

### Final Letter Grade Out of 100 Points

A	90-100
B+	85-89
B	80-84
C	70-74
D	60-69

## **Code of Classroom Conduct**

I expect students to be on time for class and to stay for the duration of the lecture. The classroom should be a place for the free exchange of ideas where students act with civility, dignity, and an awareness of respect for one another. I welcome all viewpoints and perspectives that are not consistent with "HATE SPEECH". All classroom conduct must be consistent with the Rutgers Code of Student Conduct (see the code here: <https://slwordpress.rutgers.edu/studentconduct/wp-content/uploads/sites/46/2017/05/UCSC2016.pdf> 3)

## **Academic Integrity and Plagiarism**

I take cheating on tests and plagiarism very seriously. I refer all suspected cases of cheating and plagiarism to the Rutgers Office of Student Conduct. All students must review the Rutgers University Academic Integrity Policy. Refer to: [https://slwordpress.rutgers.edu/academicintegrity/wp-content/uploads/sites/41/2014/11/AI\\_Policy\\_2013.pdf](https://slwordpress.rutgers.edu/academicintegrity/wp-content/uploads/sites/41/2014/11/AI_Policy_2013.pdf).

## **Course Schedule (Buffet Menu)**

For each week you will see “required” readings for the week followed by a set of “suggested” readings. While I do not expect you to do the suggested readings, I have listed them in case you are interested in further exploring the concepts/ideas for a specific week.

## **Theorizing and the Theoretical (1/21)\***

**Please come to the first-class meeting prepared to discuss/reflect on the two required readings below.**

### Required:

Skidmore (1975) “Theoretical Thinking in Sociology”

Swedberg (2014) “From Theory to Theorizing”

### Recommended Further Readings:

Merton (1967) “On Sociological Theories of the Middle Range”

Nisbet (1996) “The Unit-Ideas of Sociology” (P.3-20)

Blumer (1954) “What is Wrong with Social Theory”

Timmermans and Tavory (2012) “Theory Construction in Qualitative Research”

Paulsen (2014) “The Counterfactual Imagination” (Ch.7 P.158-167)

## **Agency & Action (1/28)**

- 1) Emirbayer and Mische (1998) “What is Agency”
- 2) Munch, Richard (1990) “Human Action as Rational Choice: James Coleman” in *Sociological Theory, Development Since the 1960s*
- 3) Abell (1996) “Sociological Theory and Rational Choice” in Turner, B. (Ed). *The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*.
- 4) Elder Jr (1994) “Time, Human Agency, and Social Change on the Life Course”

### Recommended Readings:

Cohen (1996) “Theories of Action and Practice” Turner, B. (Ed). *The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*.

## **Structure(s) (2/4)**

- 1) Giddens (1984) “Theory of Structuration”
- 2) Turner (1988) “A Behavioral Theory of Social Structure”
- 3) Bourdieu (1991) “Social Space and the Genesis of Appropriated Physical Space”
- 4) Munch (1994) “Power and the Reproduction of Social Structure and Culture: Pierre Bourdieu”

### **Recommended Further Readings:**

Giddens (1972) “Elites in the British Class Structure

Baber (1991) “Beyond the Structure/Agency Dualism: An Evaluation of Giddens’ Theory of Structuration”

Wilson (2010) “Why both Social Structure and Culture Matter in a Holistic Analysis of Inner-City Poverty”

## **Everyday Life (2/11)**

- 1) Blumer (1969) Symbolic Interactionism, Perspective and Method (P.1-60)
- 2) Goffman (1959) *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Intro-Ch.3, & Ch.6)
- 3) Luckman (1989) “On meaning in everyday life and sociology”

### **Recommended Further Readings:**

Zurubavel (1991) “The Social Lens”

Giddens (2009) “On Re-reading the Presentation of Self: Some Reflections”

## **Culture (2/18)**

- 1) Adorno and Horkheimer (1943) “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception”
- 2) Bourdieu (1990) *Logic of Practice* - Read Ch. 3 – “Structures, Habitus, Practices”
- 3) Swidler (1986) “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies”
- 4) Hall (1996) “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies”

### **Recommended Further Reading:**

Lamont, Beljean and Clair (2014) “What is Missing? Cultural Processes and Causal Pathways to Inequality”, *Socio-Economic Review*

Massey et al. (2014) “Understanding Inequality through the lens of cultural processes: on Lamont, Beljean, and Clair ‘What is Missing?’”, *Socio-Economic Review*

## **Discourse & Knowledge (2/25)**

- 1) Foucault (1972-77) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews* (Pp. 110-133)
- 2) Foucault and Deleuze (1977) "Intellectuals and Power"
- 3) Swidler and Ardit (1994) "The New Sociology of Knowledge"

### Recommended Further Reading:

Foucault (1975) *Discipline and Punish*  
Foucault (1961) *Madness and Civilization*  
Foucault (1984) *The History of Sexuality Volume 1.*

## **Symbolic Boundaries (3/2)**

- 1) Lamont and Molnar (2002) "The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences" *Annual Review of Sociology*.
- 2) Bourdieu (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Introduction-Only)
- 3) DiMaggio (1987) "Classification in Art", *American Sociological Review*
- 4) Lizardo and Skiles (2015) "Musical taste and patterns of symbolic exclusion in the United States 1993-2012", *Poetics*

### Recommended Further Reading:

Lamont, Pendergrass & Pachucid (2015) "Symbolic Boundaries"  
Roy (2004) "Race Records" and Hillbilly Music...", *Poetics*

## **Fields (3/9)**

- 1) Bourdieu (1989) "Social Space and Symbolic Power"
- 2) Fligstein (2001) "Social Skill and the Theory of Fields"
- 3) Martin (2003) "What is Field Theory?,"
- 4) Levitt & Schiller (2006) "Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society," *International Migration Review*

### Recommended further reading:

Martin and Gregg (2015) "Was Bourdieu a field theorist?"  
Fligstein and McAdam (2011) "Toward a General Theory of Strategic Action Fields," *Sociological Theory*

## **SPRING BREAK (3/14-3/22)**

## **The Global, Transnational, & Neoliberal (3/24)**

- 1) Harvey (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Pp. 1-64)
- 2) Wacquant (2010) "Crafting the Neoliberal State..."
- 3) Gane (2014) "Sociology and Neoliberalism: A Missing History"

### Recommended Further Reading:

Klien (2007) "Disaster Capitalism, The New Economy of Catastrophe"

Harvey (2016) "Neoliberalism is a Political Project"

## **Race and Racialization (3/31)**

- 1) Blumer (1958) "Race as a Sense of Group Position", *Pacific Sociological Review*
- 2) Omi and Winant (2014) *Racial Formations (Chapters 1-3)*
- 3) Bonilla Siva (1996) "Racialized Social Systems" *American Sociological Review*
- 4) Brown and Jones (2015) "Rethinking Panethnicity and the Race-Immigration Divide: An Ethnoracialization Model of Group Formation," *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*
- 5) Golash-Boza (2016) "A Critical and Comprehensive Sociological Theory of Race and Racism", *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*

### Recommended Further Reading:

Feagin and Elias (2013) "Rethinking Racial Formation Theory: A Systematic Racism Critique", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*

Cornell & Hartmen (1997) "Mapping the Terrain" in *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World*.

## **Gender, Sexuality, & Intersectionality (4/7)**

- 1) MacKinnon (1982) "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State...."
- 2) Mohanty, C. (1988) "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", *Feminist Review*
- 3) Yuval-Davis (2006) "Intersectionality and Feminist Politics"
- 4) Cho, Crenshaw & McCall (2013) "Towards a Field of Intersectionality Studies"
- 5) Stein and Plummer (1994) "...Queer Theory and the Missing Sexual Revolution in Sociology"

### Recommended Further Reading:

Simon & Gagnon "A Sexual Scripts Approach"

Stein (1989) "Three Models of Sexuality"

Roth & Dashper (2016) "Sociology in the 1980s: The Rise of Gender (and Intersectionality)," *Sociology*

Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1983) "Contextualizing Feminism-Gender, Ethnic, and Class Divisions", *Feminist Review*

## **The Postcolonial (4/14)**

- 1) Said (1978) *Orientalism* (P. 9-36)
- 2) Said (2004) “Orientalism Once More”, *Development and Change*
- 3) Go, (2013) “For a Postcolonial Sociology”, *Theory & Society*
- 4) Borocz & Sarkar (2012) “Colonialism” in *Encyclopedia of Global Studies*

### **Recommended Further Reading:**

Said (1985) “Orientalism Reconsidered”, *Cultural Critique*

Go (2013) “Decolonizing Bourdieu: Colonial and Postcolonial Theory in Pierre Bourdieu’s Early Work,” *Sociological Theory*

## **Collective Action (4/21)**

- 1) Meyer and Minkoff (2004) “Conceptualizing Political Opportunity”, *Social Forces*
- 2) Benford & Snow (2000) “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment”, *Annual Review of Sociology*
- 3) Tarrow (2016) “War, States, and Contention: From Tilly to the War on Terror”, *Mobilization*
- 4) Goldstone (2004) “More social movements or fewer? Beyond political opportunity structures to relational fields”, *Theory & Society*

### **Recommended Further Readings:**

Chaudhary and Moss (2019) “Suppressing Transnationalism: Bringing Constraints Back into the Study of Transnational Political Action” *Comparative Migration Studies*

Voss, K., F. Silva. and I. Bloemraad (2019) “The Limits of Rights: Claims-making on behalf of immigrants” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*.

**Final Week Theme to be decided on collectively during the first two weeks of class. TBD (4/28)**

**Final Oral Exam/Final Paper - Due Week of May 7th**