S112: Current Social Problems  
Summer 2008  
Course Number 05145  

Monday, Wednesday, and Friday  
1:00 - 2:50 pm  
JFSB B032

Instructor: Curtis Child  
Office: JFSB 2019  
Office Hours: Monday and Wednesday 3:00 – 4:00, or by appointment  
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Course Description

The purpose of this course is to introduce you to the sociological study of social problems. Substantive topics include crime, education, racism, sexism, poverty, disorder and disease, consumerism, capitalism, and the community. We will also discuss how social problems are constructed, as well as the different ways of addressing them.

Course Requirements

Readings:

This class is organized in such a way that you cannot do well if you do not read the assigned material. Readings on the schedule are listed according to the date they are due. I expect you to have read the assigned readings before coming to class. Chapters and articles are available on Blackboard (the password is “____________”). Some of the readings are challenging. If you should find some of the prose difficult to understand, be sure to discuss readings with other students, use a dictionary for difficult words, and/or visit me during my office hours.

Attendance:

I expect students to come to class on time and to be prepared by having assignments read and/or ready to turn in. I will not take attendance, but we will have regular in-class assignments, often at the beginning of class. See below (“In-class assignments”).

In-class assignments:

There will be 12 unannounced in-class assignments given throughout the semester, with the 10 highest scoring assignments counted towards your final grade. I will use these instead of exams to hold you accountable for material covered in readings and lectures. For any given assignment, readings and lectures since the last in-class assignment are fair game. If you are absent—for any reason—you will not be able to take the in-class assignment at a later date.
Likewise, if the assignment is administered at the beginning of class and you arrive after it is administered, then you will not be able to receive credit for the assignment. I reserve the right to increase the number of these assignments if I deem it necessary (in which case I will modify the point allotment and totals displayed below).

**Op-ed writing assignment:**

You are responsible to write an op-ed-style essay (700-900 words), due on the last day of class. Your essay should connect to a concept or issue we discussed during the term. Beyond that, it is up to you to choose a specific topic and to make a persuasive argument. You will need to think about and work on your essay well in advance of the due date, and I will ask you ahead of time to send me an email describing the argument you are planning to make. Your grade will be based on content (i.e. accuracy of content, demonstration of critical thinking skills, etc.) as well as style (i.e. clarity of writing, grammar, etc.). Late assignments will be penalized (2 points off if not turned in when collected in class but turned in later on the day it is due; 2 more points off if turned in the day following its due date; 2 more points off if turned in the next day; and so on). Assignments are due at the beginning of class.

**In-class presentation:**

Once during the term, you will be required to make one short (approximately 7-8 minute) presentation to the class, followed by a brief question-and-answer period. To prepare, you will first choose a social condition that (a) is of interest to you and (b) has been constructed as a social problem. Do some basic background research on this condition in order to learn about some interesting/innovative way that an individual or organization (business, nonprofit, or government) is addressing it. Once you have looked into the issue, find a way to present it to the class in an informative, concise manner. Tell us how people are addressing the social problem and, if possible, provide some evidence for how successful it is. You may—but are not required to—use hand-outs and/or Power-Point slides, but keep the hand-outs to one page (single-sided) and Power-Point presentations to three slides (or fewer). Although I want you to become knowledgeable about this issue in an academic sense, the main purpose of this exercise is simply to get students thinking about the many different social problems that exist and how people have tried to address them.

**Lively discussion:**

Once during the term, you will be required to participate in a “lively discussion” in front of the class. During the first week of class, I will pass around a short list of controversial statements. You will select one, but I will decide whether you will support or oppose the statement. Prior to the specified discussion date, you will do some investigative research on the issue in order to prepare for the discussion. You will also prepare a 700-900 word memo that includes the following: (a) a one- or two-paragraph statement that defends your (assigned) position, (b) a short list of expected rebuttals to your position, followed by (c) your responses to the rebuttals. Finally, you should include (d) a final paragraph that states your true position. At the end of the memo, provide a list of websites, studies, and other sources that were helpful to you. You will bring these memos to class on the day that you are assigned to participate in the lively discussion. They will serve as your notes, to help you make your arguments and defend your position. You will turn them in to me at the end of the class period.
Here is how the lively discussion will proceed: All of the students who have selected the particular statement (about 6 or 7) will sit at the front of the classroom. I will moderate a discussion about the issue (lasting about 15-25 minutes or more), in which you will be required to engage with each other: defending your positions, offering rebuttals, and responding to the rebuttals. You are welcome to organize your efforts with the others in your group who have been assigned the same position as you, but this is not necessary. Regardless, each student will turn in his/her own memo.

I will provide you with a detailed grading rubric at a later point in the term, but your score will ultimately depend on the strength and clarity of your reasoning as demonstrated in the memo, as well as your participation in the lively discussion. This will no doubt be challenging for many of you, especially if I ask you to defend a position with which you do not personally agree. My intention is only to get you thinking critically about different social issues and to learn how to thoughtfully make sense of others’ perspectives, even (and especially) if they are contrary to your own.

Public sociology experience:

Once during the term, you will be required to do something public to address a social problem of your choice. This might involve submitting a letter-to-the-editor or op-ed piece to a local or national newspaper; writing your congressperson to voice a complaint or advocate for an issue; attending a demonstration, rally, or protest; volunteering for a cause that is important to you; getting active in a political campaign; starting a petition; or publicly boycotting a product or service. I am very open to other ways of getting active about a social problem. This experience must go above and beyond any other activities that you regularly participate in (i.e. if you already volunteer for the food bank, you should choose something different). If you choose to submit an op-ed piece to a newspaper, it must be different than the one you submit to me for the op-ed assignment. Whatever you choose, please pass it by me prior to doing it. After the experience, send me, by email, an informal summary of what you did and what, if anything, you learned.

Grading

Grades will be based on the following allotment of points:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Points Each</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In-class Assignments</td>
<td>4 points</td>
<td>=40 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lively Discussion</td>
<td>20 points</td>
<td>=20 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-class Presentation</td>
<td>15 points</td>
<td>=15 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Sociology Experience</td>
<td>10 points</td>
<td>=10 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Op-ed Assignment</td>
<td>15 points</td>
<td>=15 points</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>=100 points</td>
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Final letter grades will be based on the following scale:

A  93-100  C  73-76.9
A-  90-92.9 C-  70-72.9
B+  87-89.9 D+  67-69.9
B  83-86.9  D  63-66.9
B-  80-82.9 D-  60-62.9
C+  77-79.9  F  59.9 or lower

**Guidelines and Policies**

**Incompletes:** According to departmental policy, I typically will not grant an incomplete for the course.

**Special Needs:** Students who have special needs that might affect their ability to complete the course requirements should contact me as soon as possible and provide the appropriate documentation so that we can make any necessary arrangements or modifications.

**Academic Misconduct:** Any activity that threatens the integrity of the university, such as cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, interference, violation of course rules, or facilitating academic dishonesty, will not be tolerated and will be punished severely. For definitions and university policies, please refer to the university's Honor Code.

**Classroom Behavior:** We will discuss a variety of important social issues throughout the course of the semester. Some of these will be sensitive in nature to all or part of the class. I expect each student to interact with his or her fellow students in a professional, respectful, and considerate manner.

**Absences:** If you miss class, it is your responsibility to get lecture notes from someone who was in class. I do not provide my notes or Power-Point slides to students, and it is not my responsibility to fill you in on what you missed.

**Technology:** Turn off cell-phone ringers. Do not use cell-phones at all during class (i.e. no text-messaging, games, etc.). Laptops are permissible as long as students use them to take notes. I will revoke this allowance on a case-by-case basis if a student uses a laptop to play games, check email, or carry on activity that is not related to the class (or is in any way distracting to other students)—regardless whether he/she is also taking notes.

**Summary of due dates**
(Unannounced in-class assignments not shown)

1. 9-July  E-mail me about your idea for a public sociology experience
2. 25-July  E-mail me about your idea for a op-ed article
3. ________  In-class presentation
4. ________  Lively discussion (with memo)
5. 13-August  Op-ed writing assignment
6. 13-August  Final e-mail about public sociology experience
Introduction to social problems

June 23 – Monday: Introduction
• No readings

• Zerubavel: “Islands of Meaning” (excerpted from *The Fine Line: Making Distinctions in Everyday Life*)

June 27 – Friday: Structure, agency, and solutions to social problems
• Zald: “Making Change” (*Stanford Social Innovation Review*)

Crime and Punishment

June 30 – Monday: Why People Deviate
• Becker: “Becoming a Marijuana User” (*American Journal of Sociology*)

July 2 – Wednesday: Punishment and Its Alternatives

July 4 – Friday – NO CLASS

Disorder and Disease

July 7 – Monday: Physical and Mental Health in the U.S.
• Rosenhan: “On Being Sane in Insane Places” (*Science*)
• Parry: “The Art of Branding a Condition” (*Medical Marketing & Media*)

July 9 – Wednesday: Claims-Makers and Their Strategies
• Due: E-mail me about your idea for a public sociology experience
• Moynihan & Cassels: “Advertising Disease: Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder” (excerpted from *Selling Sickness: How the World’s Biggest Pharmaceutical Companies Are Turning Us All into Patients*)

July 11 – Friday: Models of Health Care
• Cohn: “Health Care Special Issue: Creative Destruction” (*The New Republic*)
• Krugman & Wells: “The Health Care Crisis and What to Do About It” (*New York Review of Books*)

Privilege

July 14 – Monday: Race and Racism, part I
• Gilens: “Race and Poverty in America” (*Public Opinion Quarterly*)
• McIntosh: “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”

July 16 – Wednesday: Race and Racism, part II
• Bobo: “Laissez-Faire Racism” (excerpted from “From Jim Crow Racism to Laissez-Faire Racism: The Transformation of Racial Attitudes” in *Beyond Pluralism: The Conception of Groups and Group Identities in America*)
• Coates: “This is How We Lost to the White Man” (*The Atlantic*)

July 18 – Friday: Gender and Sexism, part I
• Duenwald: “Body and Image: One Size Definitely Does Not Fit All” (*New York Times*)

July 21 – Monday: Gender and Sexism, part II
• Hofstadter: “A Person Paper on Purity in Language” (excerpted from *Metamagical Themas: Questing For The Essence Of Mind And Pattern*)
• Hochschild: “A Speed-up in the Family” (excerpted from *The Second Shift*)
Inequality
July 23 – Wednesday: Poverty at Home and Abroad
- Block et al.: "The Compassion Gap" (Contexts)
- Ehrenreich: "Nickled and Dimed" (Harper's)

July 25 – Friday: The (False?) Promise of Meritocracy
- **Due**: E-mail me about your idea for an op-ed article
- Tough: "What it Takes to Make a Student" (New York Times Magazine)

Good Capitalism, Bad Capitalism
July 28 – Monday: Capitalism Defined
- Greenhouse: "Worked and Overworked" (excerpted from The Big Squeeze: Tough Times for the American Worker)
- Prasad et al.: "Consumers with a Conscience: Will They Pay More?" (Contexts)

July 30 – Wednesday: The Corporation
- Fishman: "The Wal-Mart You Don't Know" (Fast Company)
- Klein: "Bad Mood Rising: The New Anticorporate Activism" (excerpted from No Logo)
- Friedman: "The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase Its Profits" (New York Times Magazine)

Community, Consumption, and Commodification
August 1 – Friday: Consumption
- Schor: "The Visible Lifestyle: American Symbols of Status" (excerpted from The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting, and the New Consumer)
- Zelizer: "Do Markets Poison Intimacy?" (Contexts)

August 4 – Monday – NO CLASS
August 6 – Wednesday: Commodification/Marketization
- Schor: "The Commodification of Childhood: Tales From the Advertising Front" (The Hedgehog Review)

August 8 – Friday: Community
- Putnam: "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital" (Journal of Democracy)

Conclusion
August 11 – Monday: Catch-up, Review, and Success Stories

August 13 – Wednesday: Wrap-up
- **Due**: Op-ed writing assignment
- **Due**: E-mail me about your public sociology experience
- No readings