Summary: This is a somewhat unusual class. It attempts to not only introduce students unfamiliar with sociology to the sorts of research that is currently being done, but also to communicate the distinctive approaches and contributions of sociology in three parallel registers: first, its substantive findings, second, its methodological approaches (including that of conceptualization), and third, its critical lessons—that is, the cautionary tales that sociology gives us regarding the hazardous task of developing social knowledge. To do this, it involves not only the reading, discussing, listening, and writing typical of a U of C undergraduate class, but also (1) participation in in-class exercises, some of which use clickers to collect and manipulate data, (2) a step-by-step exercise in which you explore a claim made in the public arena in terms of its data, its concepts, and its attempt to link claims to data, and (3) attendance at special events such as a debate where an author we read meets a department faculty member, and the screening of a fascinating documentary following the lives of a set of children as they grow.

Note: All readings are for the day with which they are associated (that is, they should be read by that class). With the exception of one book, all readings are available on Library Reserves through Canvas. This book is available at the Coop bookstore. We are having a special visit from the author.

Homeworks: Every Thursday there is an assignment, in all but one case (where it is to prepare for a discussion), to be handed in on the following Tuesday by noon. The steady diet of weekly work for this course (in contrast to a high-stakes final exam) will both relieve stress and (or so we believe) actually help you learn, remember, and use the concepts introduced in this course. These will all be set at “two pages” (which means double space, twelve-point standard font, with no cover page). This is a way of signaling to you the sort of endeavor you should be doing—and not a rigid minimum or maximum. Almost certainly, sometimes you’ll be over, and sometimes under. There’s no reason to try to stretch out a short response to make it look longer. But if you’re consistently handing in one page papers, that indicates that something is wrong. You can have these be informal if you want, but note: your final paper involves compiling all of these. So you might find that a stich in time saves nine.

Evaluation: There are nine short assignments and a final paper. Your grade is based on the assignments (50%), attendance (33%), and the final write up (17%). If you want any more information about grading and such not, see the final page of the syllabus.
I. What Is Sociology?

In this introductory module, we sketch what is distinctive about sociology as compared to the other social sciences, and what unites different—often contentiously competitive—sociological approaches.

April 2: How does sociology vary from other social sciences in its approach to questions?

Readings: None.

April 4: Does a sociological literature learn? If so, how?


Comments on Readings: Yes, we stole our name for the course from Berger’s book. He came from a German tradition and had a somewhat humanist take on sociology. McPhail is a social psychologist (the sociological kind); the first part of this wonderful book is an analysis of the historical development of crowd theorizing.

Homework: Choose one op-ed and write up your evaluation of the cogency (2 pages).

II. Social Construction and Social Destruction

In this module, we start from the fact of occasional radical cultural difference to explore how sets of actors, whether the mean to or don’t mean to, create social worlds and the corresponding social knowledge. Unfortunately for social science, that also includes the very data that we use to test our socially constructed theories! We explore how determined social scientists kick their way out of this hermeneutic circle.

April 9: Social Universes and Second Natures


Comments on Readings: Ann Swidler is a cultural sociologist and Susan Cotts Watkins a demographer. They teamed up to understand how NGOs in Africa were in some cases mis-aligning with the population they were hoping to serve.
April 11: Nothing is Realer than a Social Construct


Comments on Readings: Okay, so welcome to contemporary journal-oriented sociology. Hout and Goldstein are assuming that they are writing for people who have a decent grasp of basic mathematical demography and social statistics. Maybe you do, maybe you don’t. If you don’t, try to follow the gist of the argument even though you’ll be skipping over the technical details. The other article, whichever you pick, won’t throw you in the same way.

Homework: For your assigned journal (Your TA will have assigned this), skim the tables of contents. Be prepared to share with class your idea of what these are about. Choose between: *American Journal of Sociology, American Sociological Review, Social Forces, Social Problems, Demography, Sociological Theory, American Sociologist, Journal of Marriage and the Family, Administrative Science Quarterly, Population and Development Review, Gender & Society, Contemporary Ethnography, Sociological Forum, Sociological Perspectives, Economy and Society, Theory, Culture, & Society, Qualitative Sociology, Poetics, Journal of Health and Social Behavior.* You will discuss this next Thursday (not Tuesday); it is not handed in.

April 16: The Social Construction of Data


Comments on Readings: Zelizer is an economic sociologist who was instrumental in bringing a cultural approach to our understanding of markets and money. John read this when he was in Intro Soc and it made a big impression on him. He’s so excited to share it with you!

April 18: How Not to Make and Unmake Worlds


Comments on Readings: Fox is a criminologist and sociologist who comes from a social interactionist tradition, but who was influenced by Michel Foucault’s notion of how states attempted to discipline and change selves.

Homework: Come up with a set of ten important articles on your subject. Turn in full bibliographic information on them.
III. How to Do Science in a Battlefield

Sociology often studies cases in which participants are using “essentially contested concepts” to describe their own action. It is difficult, though not impossible, for sociologists to do balanced and objective (which does not always mean neutral) studies of these cases. Doing this involves, first, understanding how those same processes of construction can be employed by actors in struggle. Once we have done that, symmetric research strategies allow us to learn things about others that we might otherwise miss. For this unit, we have a guest visit by the author of a great new book on the “Minutemen,” Harel Shapira.

April 23: Accounting for Others: When explanations of the fight are part of the fight.


Comments on Readings: We looked for something that investigated framing from two sides, and this was the one we found. It turns out that there aren't enough….

April 25: Symmetric Research Designs; Folk Demography

Readings Matthew Desmond, Evicted (New York: Crown Press, 2016), chapters 3-4 (pp. 22-52), 9 (pp. 111-133) and “About This Project” (pp. 315-336).

Comments on Readings: Desmond is an ethnographer who, as a graduate student, got funding to also carry out a sample survey in the city in which he was doing his ethnography. This let him puts his personal observations in context—but this is only in the footnotes, which we didn’t reproduce. Because of copyright restrictions.

Homework: Figure out the relation between your ten articles. Put them in a chart in terms of time, and draw arrows that represent citations (one neat page). If you want, you can add a paragraph of analysis—for example, that there was one pivotal contribution that reoriented the field. Doing this now will save a bit of time later, but you can put it off if you aren't sure about how they hang together.

April 30: Status Politics


Comments on Readings: Shapira is an ethnographer who will be coming to visit the class. You know how often in class you want to argue back with the author of a reading? Well, this time you will! And, unlike when your professor assigns her/his own material, you can do so without fear of offense!
May 2: Discussion with Harel Shapira


Comments on Readings: Flores is a professor in sociology at the University of Chicago; he just joined us from the University of Washington. He works at the intersection of immigration, political sociology, and race, and uses a wide variety of different methodological approaches.

Homework: What are the concepts being used in the professional literature? Are the same as those used in the popular debate? Are there ideas that are bundled that you can take apart? (2-3 pages).

May 2nd, 7:00 PM: Special debate / discussion between Rene Flores and Harel Shapira.

IV. History and Biography

One key notion of sociology is that it matters where we are, and when we are. Many of our experiences are, to some extent, shared by others, especially those who are close to us in geographical space, in social space, and in time. Here we examine how who we are is shaped by these forms of location, and what that means for our understanding of our relations to one another.

May 7: The duality of person and situation. The past isn't over; in fact, it isn't even past.


Comments on Readings: Brian Powell is a prolific and creative researcher who works in the sociology of education, life course, gender, and family. Freese and Schnittker were his students, with the former now a social psychologist, and the latter, a medical sociologist. Most of the methods here should be clear to you.

May 9: The Matthew Effect, Persistence, Reproduction, Regression to the Mean,


Comments on Readings: Khan is a general sociologist, but one with interests surrounding culture and class. This book came from his time in graduate school but also, as you’ll see, from his time in prep school!

Homework: Lexis diagram exercise.
May 14: Beyond Cohort Effects: We are what we are.


Comments on Readings: Gross is a sociologist of knowledge/science who comes from the pragmatist tradition. Most of his work is about knowledge production, although here, he tries to take on what seems to most of us an impossible task—to explain why professors are liberal. You should be able to follow the argument, even though we’re starting in the middle.

May 15th, 8:00 PM: Special screening of 7-Up films. (Time/date may need to change depending on room availability.)

May 16: Social Change and Aging


Comments on Readings: This is Riley’s presidential address, and as such, it’s a big think piece, less mathematical than much of her work. Here she talks a little bit about her life, which makes for a very meta article—one about how studying aging is embedded in the joint processes of individual aging and social change.

Homework: If you are investigating science in a battlefield, how did authors avoid the weaknesses here (assuming what is in question, preaching to the choir, using loaded concepts)? Or did they fail? If you think the articles you’re looking at aren't in a battlefield, why does anyone care? Was your original opinion piece in one? What happened? (2-3 pages).

V. Unintended Consequences and Institutionalization

The theoretical core of sociology is largely the way in which sets of actions not only must be understood against a backdrop of trans-personal regularities, but they also themselves solidify into institutions, whether or not we want them to. To some extent, this is because actions, whether or not they have a direct operational purpose, are also semiotic: they contain information about other parts of the world. They might signal something about an individual’s internal state, or what she is likely to do, or where he has been, and so on. As they orient to these meanings, actors can produce regimes that have all the force of committed belief…whether or not anyone actually holds these implicit beliefs.
May 21: Rational and Irrational Action and their Unintended Consequences.


Comments on Readings: The goal of Massey’s article is unusual for a current top sociology article—to focus on why something happened, as opposed to why a whole class of things happens. But the core of the paper is something you’ll have seen before: that regression model in which many factors are pitted against one another to explain something else. It’s okay to skip over the technical parts, but read the results section anyway. And as for the second piece…we’re confident that we’ll get some of the authors in to talk about this!

May 23: Semiotic Systems


Comments on Readings: Yes, this is the same Swidler we read some of before. And yes, there’s a lot of Malawi here. Swidler was Martin’s advisor and Trinitapoli’s collaborator, so there’s a lot of influence here. Tavory is a cultural sociologist who did his dissertation on the phenomenology of religious life in Los Angeles!

Homework: What data are used in the most important articles that you identified for your project? How valid are these data? (2 pages)

May 28: Coordination Problems and Solutions


Comments on Readings: Mackie is a political scientist (who got his degree at the U of C!), and who actually cares about changing what the UN would consider harmful social practices. Perhaps that took him a bit out of political science and into sociology?
May 30: Institutions


Comments on Readings: Yes, the Beckfield is hard going; we expect you read the parts you can, and to try to get the gist of the other parts. The Meyer and Rowan, on the contrary, should be easier—but it’s a deep idea that fundamentally transformed the way in which sociologists were understanding organizations (or, perhaps, synthesized and gave name to an increasing transformation already in place).

Homework: What is the range of methods are used in the studies you have examined? Do you see any limitations to any of the methods used? (2 pages)

Conclusion

You would think that robust social scientific knowledge would help us predict the future. Well, it can, and it also can’t—precisely because it is true. True knowledge about the future can change some parts the future. And what is the future: what is your future?

June 4: Summary


Comments on Readings: This is an odd book, in that it comes from a project that wove together many strands—to actually do social activism in the form of organizing workers, to teach undergraduates how to do research, and to do research on these same undergraduates!

Final paper Due June 10:
Please integrate all the portions of previous papers to juxtapose what you think is the best knowledge we have from sociology to the ideas first raised in the opinion piece you started with. Do enough smoothing so that it is coherent and reads like a paper, but you do not need to revise earlier parts unless you now think they are incorrect.
Some Technicalities on Grading

Academic Conduct: First, in general, if you just got to college and no one has talked about this to you yet, let us take this opportunity. If you’re ever unsure as to what borrowing or talking to others is okay and what isn’t, don’t hesitate to ask. But not your friends! Ask your teacher, or your academic advisor, or both. That said, the main cause of violation of plagiarism policies is students starting too late on standardized assignments, trying to catch up in their understanding by going to secondary sources, and then being unable to think for themselves (since it’s 2:34 AM). That isn’t going to happen here. The only question for you might whether or not it is okay to work with others. The answer is, it is fine to talk to others about what you are doing, including about the particularities of the case you are working with (for example, “hey, what did you think about that one article we found in Journal of Marriage and the Family?”). But when you sit down to write, you should write as yourself, and without help from or dialogue with anyone other than your TA, instructor, or tutor at the writing center.

Assignment Rubric: Each assignment is worth $50/9 = 5.55555…$ points, remember? Our rubric is as follows: full points go to a paper that covers the range of the relevant material, and displays careful thought about these. Including the relevant materials, but being cursory would lead to something in between full and no points, as would thoughtful and judicious analyses of only a subpart of them. Being cursory on a sub-portion would lead only to a point or two. But we throw in the .55555 just for writing your name on the top. I hate fractions.

Late Assignments: A late assignment is a paper that is turned in (in person or via email) after class on the due date. Each assignment is worth $5.55555…$ points, remember? Well, late work loses $1.1111…$ points a day (starting immediately after the due-minute has passed). And remember, you still need to do it for your final paper!

Grace Period: We realize that personal, medical, and miscellaneous events that prohibit students from turning work in on time do arise, and since this class is comprised of responsible adults, we have no desire to monitor reasons for late work. A 48-hour grace period will be granted once per quarter to any student needing to take advantage of this policy. You are under no obligation to explain the circumstances to me, and the grace period can only be utilized once. Also, to be fair to the TA, who has to space out his own work, late assignments will not necessarily be graded with any haste.