

Invitation to Sociology*

Sociology 20000

Tu Th 12:30-1:50 PM

Place TBA

Lecturer Spring 2024: John Levi Martin

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Thursday 1:00-2:00, 312 Social Sciences

or by appt**

TA Spring 2024: TBA

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 stitch in time saves nine.

* Originally prepared by Jenny Trinitapoli, John Levi Martin, Lucas Wehrwein & Timothy Elder

** Regarding ‘by appointment’; first, check in with us to see if zoom works—some times that might be okay. Second, if you cannot make regularly scheduled office hours, the best thing is to send a whole bunch of times in the next two weeks to minimized the number of back-and-forths.

Final Project: All your exercises will come together in a final project. The idea here is that you have learned how to go from a reasonable question, claim, hypothesis that you might have to having a sociological answer. This answer isn't just a summary of what sociologists have decided—it is also your own critical evaluation of the cogency of the logic, the strength of the data, and the robustness of the conclusions made by others.

Readings: Every day, there will be a reading, and you should post your reactions to the reading in the CANVAS “discussion” section. Posts should be there by 12:00 noon on the day the reading is due. There will be a thread for each reading. There are 17 possibilities, and while you should do the reading for every class, you are welcome to skip two of them. Last year, the good posts were around 300-400 words, and commenting on one another’s posts is greatly encouraged.

Evaluation: There are nine short assignments and a final paper. Your grade is based on the assignments (50%), attendance (33%), posts (7.5%), and the final write up (9.5%). 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.

Tuesday, March 19: How does sociology vary from other social sciences in its approach to questions?

Readings: None.

Thursday, March 21: Does a sociological literature learn? If so, how?

Readings: Peter Berger, *Invitation to Sociology* (New York: Anchor Books, 1963), chapter 2 (pp. 25-53); Clark McPhail, *Myth of the Maddening Crowd* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1991), chapter 5 (pp. 149-190). **NOTE:** Please take a look at the McPhail, but it isn't mandatory that you read all of it.

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: You are to come up with your sociological question/problem and try to identify the empirical assumptions or open questions underlying it. Please see the more complete description under *assignments*. **Although we are just starting in, this is a critical assignment, so give it thought!**

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 they 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.

Tuesday, March 26: Social Universes and Second Natures

Readings: Ann Swidler and Susan Cotts Watkins, *A Fraught Embrace* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017), chapters 7 & 11 (pp. 123-137; 198-214).

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 misaligning with the population they were hoping to serve.

Thursday, March 28: Nothing is Realer than a Social Construct

Readings: Michael Hout and Joshua R. Goldstein, “How 4.5 Million Irish Immigrants Became 40 Million Irish Americans,” *American Sociological Review* 59(1994): pp. 64-82; Michael Walker, “Race Making in a Penal Institution,” *American Journal of Sociology* 121(2016): pp. 1051-1078.

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: Given your transformed question (we might again try to shift it a bit), choose ten articles from peer reviewed sociology journals (they need not be the ones that you have looked at before) that seem most relevant. *At least half the articles must have been published in this millennium*—but it is fine to include earlier ones if those are still highly cited. Turn in full bibliographic information on them.

Tuesday, April 2: The Social Construction of Data

Readings: Viviana Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), chapter 4 (pp. 113-137).

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!

Thursday, April 4: How Not to Make and Unmake Worlds

Readings: Kathryn J. Fox, “Changing Violent Minds: Discursive Correction and Resistance in the Cognitive Treatment of Violent Offenders in Prison,” *Social Problems* 46 (1999): pp. 88-103.

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: 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. If this leads you to change your set of articles (e.g., you realize you have one from 1985 that looked important, but it is never cited), that is fine—just let us know why.

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 changing nature of work and ethnicity in the American South, Vanesa Ribas.

Tuesday, April 9: Accounting for Others: When explanations of the fight are part of the fight.

Readings: Deana A. Rohlinger, “Framing the Abortion Debate: Organizational Resources, Media Strategies, and Movement-Counter-movement Dynamics,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 43(2002): pp. 479-507.

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....

Thursday, April 11: Symmetric Research Designs; Folk Demography

Readings Matthew Desmond, *Evicted* (New York: Crown Press, 2016), chapters 3-4 (pp. 32-52), 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 put his personal observations in context—but this is only in the footnotes, which we didn't reproduce. Because of copyright restrictions.

Homework: You will have gotten back some suggestions as to how to rephrase your question/interest, and some journals that are most likely to have relevant work (as well as some general journals if those are applicable). Look at the table of contents in these journals over the past three years. What are concerns that the field your problem is located in seems to be dealing with? Is your problem (or the version we gave) even being addressed? If not, any guesses why not?

Tuesday, April 16: Status Politics

Readings: Harel Shapira, *Waiting for Jose* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), selections.

Comments on Readings: In class, we'll talk about ideas of class and status, and the tie to politics. Shapira is an ethnographer who studied a group of people that he considered his political opponents, but he knew how to study in a (pretend) battlefield, and developed insights that might be widely applicable.

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.

Thursday, April 18: The duality of person and situation. The past isn't over; in fact, it isn't even past.

Readings: Karida L. Brown, "The 'Hidden Injuries' of School Desegregation: Cultural Trauma and Transforming African American Identities." *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 4 (2016): pp. 196-220.

Comments on Readings: Karida Brown did an oral history that deliberately attempts to put the lives of one cohort of African Americans—children of coal-miners who grew up in a "stop-over" in the Great Migration—in the context of wrenching socioeconomic and cultural changes. Her book *Gone Home* weaves different aspects of this story; this article focuses on one part of interest to sociologists, namely the "successful" desegregation of public schools.

Homework: Given the results of the last exercise, now rewrite your first one. Come up with the question or concern that is closest to your original (or your original as we modified it) but that seems like it might be actually discussed in current sociological journals.

Tuesday, April 23: Lives and Institutions: Special Guest.

Readings: Kelley Fong, *Investigating Families : Motherhood in the Shadow of Child Protective Services*, selections

Comments on Readings: Kelley Fong got her PhD four years ago, and is now an assistant professor. She'll be coming to visit the class today to talk about being a sociologist and her work. 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!

***** Wednesday, April 24, 12:30 PM-1:50 PM:** Special talk by Kelley Fong in the Sociology Department. You are invited. This is one of our special participations. ***

Thursday, April 25: The Matthew Effect, Persistence, Reproduction, Regression to the Mean,

Readings: Shamus Khan, *Privilege* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012), chapters 1 & 3 (pp. 18-40, 77-113).

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.

Tuesday, April 30: Beyond Cohort Effects: We are what we are.

Readings: Neil Gross, *Why Are Professors Liberal?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), chapter 3 (pp. 104-140).

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 1st, 8:00 PM: Special screening of 7-Up films. (Time/date may need to change depending on room availability.) *****

Thursday, May 2: Social Change and Aging

Readings: Matilda White Riley, "On the Significance of Age in Sociology," *American Sociological Review* 52(1987): pp. 1–14.

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 question in one? What happened?

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.

Tuesday, May 7: Rational and Irrational Action and their Unintended Consequences.

Readings: Douglas Massey, Jorge Durand, and Karen A Pren, “Why Border Enforcement Backfired,” *American Journal of Sociology* 121 (2016): pp. 1557-1600; Jeong Hyun Oh, Sara Yeatman, and Jenny Trinitapoli, “Data Collection as Disruption: Insights from a Longitudinal Study of Young Adulthood.” *American Sociological Review* 84, no. 4 (August 2019): 634–63.

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...good chance that we’ll get some of the authors in to talk about this!

Thursday, May 9: Semiotic Systems

Readings: Iddo Tavory and Ann Swidler, “Condom Semiotics: Meaning and Condom Use in Rural Malawi,” *American Sociological Review* 74 (2009): pp. 171–189.

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?

Tuesday, May 14: Coordination Problems and Solutions

Readings: Gerry Mackie, "Ending Footbinding and Infibulation: A Convention Account," *American Sociological Review* 61 (1996): pp. 999-1017.

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?

Thursday, May 16: Institutions and conclusions

Readings: John Meyer and Brian Rowan, "Institutional Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony," *American Journal of Sociology* 83 (1977): pp. 340-363; Jason Beckfield, "The Social Structure of the World Polity," *American Journal of Sociology* 115 (2010): pp. 1018-1068.

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?

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 of the future. And what is the future: what is *your* future?

It is the Final Paper, Due May 31:

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.

<Turn the page over for more technicalities on grading!>

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 $50/9 = 5.55555\dots$ 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 $5.55555\dots$ points, remember? Well, late work loses $1.1111\dots$ 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.

Attendance: Full attendance points require that you come at the *start* of the class.

Posts: The fifteen posts add up to 7.5 total points, meaning that each one, if done successfully, is equivalent to 0.5 points total. Lame posts will get somewhere from 0.0 to 0.4 points.

Final note: This is a deliberately experimental class; we reserve the right to *improve* it at any time, so long as this does not increase the workload on you or draw on aspects of your skill-set that you thought could safely lie dormant.

