

Course Syllabus for Sociology 20033

Introduction to Social Problems

Fall 2019

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| Time and Place | Debartolo 231, MW 12:30 PM-1:45 PM |
| Office Hours | MW 3:30-4:30 and by appointment. Right before class is usually good too. I am generally very accessible via phone, email, Zoom, and Skype. I may set up extra office hours right before exams and papers are due. |

Course summary

Today's society is beset by many serious social problems, for example, conflicts over gay rights, sexual violence, battles over abortion and reproductive rights, poverty & inequality & the decline of the middle class, and racial/ethnic discrimination (which has helped give rise to the Black Lives Matter social movement). How do we think about these problems in ways that lead to helpful solutions? In what ways does one's own social background and role in society affect his/her views of these problems? In this course, students will learn to take a sociological perspective not only in examining the causes, consequences, and solutions to some of society's most troubling social problems, but also in taking a critical look at their own perceptions of the problem. When possible, I will often try to provide a local angle to problems, e.g. from Notre Dame or South Bend. I encourage you to think of incidents from your own communities or personal experiences that are relevant and sharing them in class if you feel comfortable doing so.

Course Web Page/ Required Readings

Course Web Page (Check it often). Online readings, discussion questions and other links of interest will be available on the course web page:

<http://www3.nd.edu/~rwilliam/xsoc20033/>

Online Readings Packet and Discussion Questions for Sociology 20033. There is no text book for the course. All readings are online. The readings packet includes selections from a wide variety of mass media and scholarly sources, ranging from Atlantic Monthly to The American Sociological Review. Though sometimes lengthy, most of the material in the packet is fairly easy to read. The packet is designed to achieve the following purposes:

- To illustrate, and provide a sociological perspective, on the wide array of issues, controversies and opinions on social problems facing the US and world today
- To show the “real” impact that social problems have on people’s lives

All readings will be available at least a week in advance. The packet reflects a wide range of views, but I do not claim to present a “balanced” perspective on each and every single issue. Students are encouraged to offer their own views on the issues and to do additional reading on topics of interest to them.

Format, Policies, Assignments, Exams and Grading – Short Version

Read this even if you skip everything else!

- Diverse viewpoints are welcome. It doesn’t matter whether I agree or disagree with you. The critical thing is how well you make your case.
- There will be one take-home exam during the semester, one paper, and a take-home final. These are each worth 29% of your grade. Short assignments/class participation/attendance will account for the other 13%. *Do not underestimate the importance of the latter!* Some students have lost as much as a full grade because they frequently skipped classes or didn’t complete short assignments.
- We will use a variety of learning styles in this class – I will lecture some but much of the class will be taught seminar style, including small-group discussions and end-of-year student presentations. Readings and classroom discussion are critical – you will sometimes be required to hand in notes on the readings before class discussions.
- You are encouraged to make contact with me outside of class, either in-person or electronically.
- Regular attendance & punctuality are expected!!! Much of the class is taught seminar-style. Attendance will be taken each class. If absences are excessive, University policy allows me to give you a D or F after providing written notice.
- Trigger warning – almost every topic is potentially at least a little upsetting to someone. But if there is topic that you find especially upsetting to you personally, talk to me about it beforehand and we’ll see what we can do.
- Using electronic devices in class is allowed but strongly discouraged. I reserve the right to bar them altogether if they get to be too much of a distraction. Use of phones especially seems unnecessary during class.
- Check your Notre Dame email regularly, preferably every day. You may not use email much but I do, and I frequently send messages about upcoming readings and discussion topics.
- Do not lose your work – use some sort of Cloud backup service.
- Honor code and non-discrimination policies are in effect.

Format & Policies – Long Version

Diverse Viewpoints Welcome. First, let me make clear that, while I try to be fair and balanced on all topics, I may not always succeed. Further, while I try to keep my own personal views from being too obvious, they no doubt will sometimes become apparent. I stress that you are free to hold whatever views you want and to express them both in class and in your writing. I don't want to inhibit discussion, so not everything you say in class has to be thoroughly researched first! But when evaluating your exams and papers, the key thing for me is how well you can defend your views and support them with evidence. I've given lots of good grades to essays I fundamentally disagreed but were well written and given poor grades to essays whose viewpoint I shared but where the case was not well presented.

Classroom format. We will use a variety of learning styles in this class. Much of the class will be taught seminar style with student involvement both encouraged and expected. Other times I will do lectures and/or PowerPoint presentations, usually asking questions or inviting comments as I talk. We will have one or two videos and/or guest speakers. You will often break down into small groups. At the end of the semester you get to present on one of your projects.

Readings and classroom discussion are critical!!! The course web page has discussion questions that will help you to focus your reading and prepare for class discussion. While not identical, *the discussion questions tend to be very similar to the exam questions*. Hence, if you keep up with the readings and prepare notes on the discussion questions, you should be well prepared for the exams and projects.

To prepare for discussions, I want you to jot down notes from the readings that you think are especially important, any thoughts of your own on the subject, and questions which you would like to see discussed. Keep in mind, too, that you are reading opinions as well as facts, and that you are welcome to raise alternative viewpoints. In general, you should be prepared to make at least a few points about every major discussion question asked. *You are required to give me a copy of your notes before each small group discussion.*

Regular attendance & punctuality are expected. While I will often lecture, much of the class will be taught seminar-style. I therefore expect everyone to attend class regularly and to arrive on time; *more than two or three unexcused absences and/or excessive lateness will severely hurt your class participation grade*. Attendance will be taken each class. If absences are excessive, University policy allows me to give you a D or F after providing written notice. If there is some compelling reason you can't make it to class on time, let me know. Otherwise I will expect everyone to be punctual.

Trigger warning. Almost every topic is potentially at least a little upsetting to someone. But if there is topic that you find especially upsetting to you personally (e.g. sexual assault), talk to me about it beforehand and we'll see what we can do.

Using electronic devices in class is allowed but generally discouraged. I know from personal experience that the urge to check an iPhone or laptop can be irresistible at times. I also know it can be incredibly annoying for everyone when someone is frantically typing away and it

isn't about the class. Perhaps even more critically, from your standpoint, studies have found that "students who use their mobile phones during class lectures tend to write down less information, recall less information, and perform worse on a multiple-choice test than those students who abstain from using their mobile phones during class." (<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/the-age-of-distraction-getting-students-to-put-away-their-phones-and-focus-on-learning/>) However I am also aware that some people benefit from or even need to use a laptop or tablet (see https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/when-you-talk-about-banning-laptops-you-throw-disabled-us_5a1ccb4ce4b07bcab2c6997d). Therefore, so long as no one abuses the policy, the use of electronic devices in class is allowed but generally discouraged. Phones are especially discouraged, as I doubt that you can do many useful things with them in class.

Check your Notre Dame email regularly. I have increasingly found that students don't use email as often as they used to. But I do. Check your email at least once a day to keep up on any classroom updates on what we will be covering and my expectations of you for coming classes.

Use Dropbox, Google Drive, or some other sort of Cloud backup service. Every year I invariably have a student whose hard disk crashes or who accidentally deletes their exam or project. With online backup systems like Dropbox or Google Drive or whatever there is really no good excuse for not having a saved copy of your work. If you don't back up and disaster strikes you will just have to retype everything from scratch.

Honor Code. Entering Notre Dame you were required to study the on-line edition of the Academic Code of Honor, to pass a quiz on it, and to sign a pledge to abide by it. The full Code is available at <https://honorcode.nd.edu/>. I reserve the right to use University-approved mechanisms if I suspect plagiarism or cheating. Note: I am ok with students going to Notre Dame's Writing Center so long as they don't get help with the actual content of their work.

Non-Discrimination/ Inclusion Statement. The University of Notre Dame is committed to social justice. I concur with that commitment and strive to maintain a positive learning environment based on open communication, mutual respect, and non-discrimination. In this class we will not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, age, disability, veteran status, religion, sexual orientation, color or national origin. Any suggestions as to how to further such a positive and open environment will be appreciated and given serious consideration. If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation in order to participate, please advise me and we will work with the Office for Students with Disabilities to make appropriate arrangements. (My thanks to Kevin Barry for the suggested wording of this.)

Assignments, Exams, Grading – Long Version

Course Requirements. There will be two take home exams (a midterm and a final) and one major paper/class presentation. Each will count for 29% of your grade. Class participation will account for the other 13%. Exams will consist of essay and short-answer questions. NOTE: You must complete both exams and the paper. I reserve the right to give a D or F to any student who does not do so, regardless of how well they have done on the parts they completed.

Exams. One of the things that will be most important on the exams will be your ability to incorporate material from the readings. The best exams will go beyond what was said in class and will cite specific facts, opinions, authors and articles. They will be like short research papers, incorporating information from a variety of sources, except I have provided you with the readings in advance. Since successful class participation also depends on mastery of the reading, it is important that you not fall behind.

Attendance & Participation. I expect this to have a fairly neutral impact on most people's grades; but, *missed classes and assignments do sometimes lower final grades substantially.* I think these procedures will help you to understand the material better, produce better papers and exams, and improve the overall quality of the classroom experience. Note that I am basically just requiring you to do things that you ought to be doing anyway.

I expect everyone to attend class regularly and to arrive on time; more than two or three unexcused absences and/or excessive lateness will severely hurt your class participation. Attendance will be taken each class. If absences are excessive, University policy allows me to give you a D or F after providing written notice.

I will let you know in advance when we are breaking down into small groups (probably at least 4 to 6 times during the semester). To make sure that everyone is familiar with the material and has something to contribute, I want you to jot down at least a half dozen notes from the readings that you think are especially important, any thoughts of your own on the subject, and questions which you would like to see discussed. (It is a good idea to always do this but it is especially critical to do so on discussion days.) In general, you should be prepared to make at least a few points about every major discussion question asked. *You should take notes on every topic but I will require you to hand notes in before class on the days we break into small groups; be sure to make a copy for yourself.* I will mostly grade these on a present/absent basis but I do expect to see evidence that you have thought about the points and gone over the readings.

Paper. The paper should be typed, double-spaced, and approximately 10 to 20 pages long. The paper should include a bibliography and all sources for material should be clearly cited. *I want both an electronic and printed version of your paper.* Papers are due November 18 (although you are welcome and encouraged to hand them in well before that.). On November 25, December 2, December 4 and December 9, you will be given 15 minutes to discuss some aspect of your paper that you think would be of interest to the class (Amount of time and dates may be adjusted based on final enrollment). As a courtesy to your fellow students, I expect everyone to be there on those days. I usually assign grades *after* the presentation, so a strong (or weak) presentation can impact your grade.

I must approve your topic. By October 16, you should give me a one-page typed summary briefly describing your proposed topic and any sources you have already identified. I encourage you to schedule meetings with me to talk about your ideas. If you want to give me a draft of your paper by November 4th, I will return it with comments within about 7-10 days. Note that there is nothing that stops you from starting or even completing your paper well in advance of the due date; if you get a lot of the work done early the end of the semester will be a lot less hectic for you.

The paper should be a major, in-depth examination of some major social problem. It should demonstrate that you are familiar with the relevant research, and that you understand the issues and controversies involved. Your own original thinking, or your ability to offer some sort of critique, may be most helpful (but your own thoughts must not be used as a substitute for adequate research). A minimum of a half-dozen scholarly sources should be cited (e.g. books, journal articles). You can also cite other sources – Time, Newsweek, Atlantic Monthly, the New York Times and Wall Street Journal often have excellent articles - so long as you have the minimum number of scholarly references. Note that scholar.google.com is generally better than Google when searching for sources.

Classroom Topics

Following is the tentative but still flexible list of topics I plan to cover. The order of topics may change. Each will probably take three or 4 classes, give or take a day. The readings will always be available at least a week in advance, and I will make sure you know what topics we are covering each day.

There are more possible topics than could be covered in a semester, and I am open to your suggestions. If you would like to offer feedback, please email me by *Monday, Sept. 9*, indicating any topics or subtopics you find especially interesting or other topics or subtopics you would like to see added.

The culture wars 1: The struggles over LBGTQ rights, lives and marriage. The legalization of gay marriage was a great albeit controversial victory for gay rights activists. But, it didn't come without a long fight. We will talk about the struggles and discrimination gays have had and continue to have; arguments for and against gay marriage; why some gays aren't that excited about gay marriage and feel that it detracts from more important issues. Readings will include Ted Olson's "The conservative case for gay marriage."

The culture wars 2: The battle over abortion and reproductive rights. Probably few issues are more divisive in this country than abortion. We will read arguments from different sides, including claims that abortion is black genocide; an attack on children with Down syndrome; whether or not George Tiller was a baby killer or a hero to thousands; and whether or not Catholics can, in good conscience, vote for pro-choice candidates. Not surprisingly, abortion has often created heated controversies at Notre. We'll talk about some of those instances, including when Barack Obama came to Notre Dame.

Blacks Lives Matter: Minorities and the criminal justice system. Black lives matter in many ways, but in this section we will focus on the criminal justice system. In her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, legal scholar Michelle Alexander writes that many of the gains of the civil rights movement have been undermined by the mass incarceration of black Americans in the war on drugs. She says that although Jim Crow laws are now off the books, millions of blacks arrested for minor crimes remain marginalized and disfranchised, trapped by a criminal justice system that has forever branded them as felons and denied them basic rights and opportunities that would allow them to become productive, law-

abiding citizens. In *On the Run*, Alice Goffman explains why many blacks do not trust the police and indeed try to hide from them even when they need help. We'll talk about why activists sometimes target progressive leaders like Bernie Sanders and why the "All Lives Matter" response draws criticism. We'll discuss some suggested policies, including Ban the Box, decriminalization and police reforms.

Wealth, Poverty and Inequality: The Problems of the Poor and middle class. What are the problems of the American poor? What are some of the ways that the poor try to cope with poverty, and why is it so difficult for them to do so? What are some of the specific examples that you find particularly striking? How has poverty become a multi-billion dollar industry?

The poor aren't the only ones with problems though. The distribution of wealth in the United States has become increasingly uneven over the last few decades. People like Elizabeth Warren and Robert Reich warn about the collapse of the middle class, and warn that even the rich suffer from inequality when people don't have the money to buy their products. There has been a growing but controversial movement to raise the minimum wage. We'll talk about the causes and consequences of income inequality and the radically different ideas about what, if anything, should be done about it.

Gender Inequality and gender roles. Many claim that girls are discriminated against in school – but in *The War Against Boys*, Hoffman-Summers says that males are the ones who need help. Women continue to make less in the workforce, but in *The End of Men* Hanna Rosin argues that there is an unprecedented gender role reversal now under way that has vast cultural consequence. We'll assess how accurate such claims are and why people like Stephanie Coontz attack the *Myth of Male Decline*.

The #MeToo Movement and the Battles over Sexual Harassment and Assault. I haven't always covered this topic in the past but now I think I almost have to. One aspect I want to cover is sexual assault. For a local angle, the documentary *The Hunting Ground* claims that rape is a major problem on college campuses and that institutions are covering them up. The film includes a famous incident from Notre Dame where a St. Mary's student committed suicide after claiming she had been violated by a Notre Dame football player. Others challenge at least some of the claims made.

Migration and immigration. Donald Trump says that immigrants are "bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people." He wants to build a wall to keep them out. Others say that immigrants bring benefits to this country and that the US should provide paths to citizenship. Time permitting, we'll go over the empirical evidence and the many heated opinions on the topic.

Other Possible Topics. Other topics we might also cover (or cover instead of some of the ones listed above) include racial identity (is race even a meaningful concept?); alcohol and drug abuse; health care in America; other aspects of the criminal justice system (e.g. white collar crime; the fight over the death penalty); why "guns and religion" are such hot button topics to many people; and the war on terrorism, including the conflict between the right to privacy and the need to protect US citizens from attack.

Key Dates

Sept 9 – If you want to submit feedback on topics to be covered, please try to do so by Sept 9 (although you can continue to offer suggestions throughout the semester)

Oct 7 – Catch up, Review for first exam; Take home exam handed out

Oct 9 – NO CLASS. You can use the time to work on your exams.

Oct 10 – TAKE HOME EXAM DUE BY 5:00. If you keep up with the readings this should be plenty of time to finish the exam. But, if the due date is problematic because you have other exams and papers due at about the same time, contact me in advance and we can negotiate over an extension. If asked I will usually give a one or two day extension but you should contact me first.

Oct 16 – PAPER TOPICS ARE DUE.

Nov 4 – (Optional) Drafts are due if you want me to offer comments.

Nov 18 – PAPERS DUE

Nov 25, Dec 2, 4, 9 – In-class paper presentations.

Dec 11 – Catch up; Review for final exam; Take home final handed out

Dec 18, 10 AM (Wednesday) – Take home finals are due (but are welcome sooner). DO NOT BE LATE!!! I only have a few days to get your grades in, and I am not allowed to give incompletes.