

Sociology 111: Social Problems

Course Details

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Class Time: 3:05PM - 4:20PM Wednesdays and Fridays

Class Location: Room 127 Sociology/Psychology Building

Office Hours: 2:00PM - 3:00PM Wednesdays and Fridays

Office Location: Sociology/Psychology 141

Course Summary

The sociological study of social problems is as old as the discipline itself. Marx's critiques of capitalism are widely known. Emile Durkheim famously examined the problem of suicide through a sociological lens. And W.E.B. Du Bois produced one of the first quantitative analyses of social dynamics in his study of race and space in Philadelphia. This course examines both foundational and contemporary studies of social problems through the social constructivist paradigm. We will specifically examine issues related to education, inequality, crime, health, violence, and the environment. These issues will further engage issues of race, ethnicity, sex, gender, social and cultural groups, and class in various historical and cultural contexts.

We will cover the following key topics, among others:

1. The social construction of social problems
2. "Value-free" sociology within the study of social problems
3. Contemporary cases of broadly accepted social problems

Learning Objectives

The course is designed to equip you with knowledge of history and theory, as well as the skills to apply that theory to historical cases of a debate about a social problem. By the end of this course, you will be able to

1. Describe at least one historical case of a social problem in detail
2. Identify the key actors and factors in the "social problems process"
3. Explain how actors and factors interact within a larger debate
4. Analyze historical and contemporary social problems using the social constructivist paradigm

5. Compare historical cases of a social problem across by identifying their similarities and differences

Readings

Required Books

Students will need to have access to two books to complete this course. Because of copyright restrictions, I can only provide one chapter from each book for educational purposes. I will provide the first assigned chapter for each on Sakai in case anyone is delayed in getting their copies, but students should make gaining access to the books a priority. Both are available through the Duke Bookstore. **If you'd like to use older editions of the books, be sure to check the chapter titles to make sure they are the same as in the schedule below.** While I will not be a stickler on this issue, students are ultimately responsible for having access to the required readings. That said, both books are relatively inexpensive as far as textbooks go.

Best, Joel. 2017. *Social Problems*. W.W. Norton and Company: New York. 3rd Edition.

Leon-Guerrero, Anna and Kristine Zentgraf (eds.). 2009. *Reader in Social Problems*. Pine Forge Press: Thousand Oaks, CA.

Provided Readings

I will provide all other required readings that are listed in the schedule. You will be able to access them through the class' Sakai page through the *Resources* and *Lessons* tabs.

Additional Readings

Students will need to complete additional readings for homework assignments that are not listed below. Specifically, students will need to regularly read a) a news or opinion piece on the particular social problem discussed each week and b) a historical study of the *specific* social problem students are assigned to present on. I encourage students to find sources of their own for these assignments, but I can also provide suggestions on where to look. I describe these assignments in more detail below.

Grading Scheme

Your final grade will be calculated from the following components, which are described in the next section

1. Chapter cheat sheets (15%)
2. Analyses of relevant news stories or opinion pieces (15%)

3. History and in-class presentation (30%)
4. Group project (30%)
5. Participation (10%)

Assignments, Projects, and Other Graded Items

Each assignment has a designated submission form on Sakai. I recommend that you be proactive about noting and completing deadlines, such as adding them to your calendars, considering deadlines for other courses, and planning out time to complete this courses' assigned work. The first half of the course includes smaller, stand-alone assignments while the second half of the course includes a presentation and group project, so plan ahead for that shift in the kind of work you will be doing. Unless otherwise noted, all written documents should be **12-point, double-spaced, 1-inch margins, Times New Roman font**. I will not be draconian in enforcing this format, but I reserve the right to deduct points if any deviations are egregious and in some way manipulate the perception of having achieved the requirements.

Chapter cheat sheets

Format: 1-page; 12-point font; double-spaced; combination of paragraphs, definitions, and lists

Purpose: To give you a quick summary of your take-aways from *Social Problems*; to aid class discussion

Grading: Completion

Due dates: at the beginning of each class from January 30th to March 1st, excluding February 20th

Full description: Section 2 of the course covers the theoretical approach described by Best, which we will be using to analyze social problems. It is important that students **remember** the key components of this approach and **create resources** for themselves to help them apply it later in the course. To help with this, students will need to write **one analysis for each chapter of the Best book, due on the day the reading is assigned**.

Students can find a rubric for the assignment in the *Resources* tab of Sakai. Analyses should be a mix of bulleted and paragraph form, depending on the section. Each analysis should highlight the key components of the particular factor in the social problems process. This might include

1. Actors and their roles (bulleted or paragraph)
2. Outlines of processes described (bulleted)
3. Relationships between different factors (paragraph)

4. Definitions (bulleted)

Analyses will be graded for completion, given that it is clear that the student made a good-faith effort to complete the assignment. Remember: this is as much a tool for your understanding as it is an assignment; the more you put into it, the more you will get out of it. Each class period, I will also be asking a few students to share their thoughts on the reading using their analyses.

Analysis of a relevant news stories or opinion pieces

Format: 1-page; 12-point font; paragraph form

Purpose: To give you practice applying Best's paradigm of the social problems process to a real-world example

Grading: See the rubric on Sakai

Due dates: Three times per student; varies by student; see Sakai

Full description: We will need concrete material to analyze while reading *Social Problems*. Students will assist in this by finding and analyzing news stories or opinion pieces from broadly recognizable news outlets that are relevant to the topic of the day. Students will be assigned three such analyses spread out across the second section of the class. In it, students should identify

1. The actors and claimsmakers discussed in the article
2. The claims made by each actor
3. The support used by the claimsmaker (e.g. facts, frames, philosophies, etc.)

Students who are assigned an analysis for a particular day should print off 1 copy of their analysis and six copies of the article they used. We will use these materials for small-group discussions in class.

It is important that I specify what "broadly recognizable news outlet" means in this context. Reputable news sources with large audiences (regardless of political position) are certainly included (for example, the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, and The Hill). But because our course focuses on the social construction of social problems, sources do not need to be reputable in their own right (e.g. InfoWars). That said, the average person in class should be able to identify the source. Obviously, use discretion when including controversial or potentially offensive sources. Have a clear reason for including the source you do, as it relates to the week's readings. I will address this issue at a future time if it becomes a concern.

In-class presentation: A historical case of a social problem

Format: 20-minute presentation on a particular case of the week's social problem of discussion and a 15-minute class exercise coordinated with the other presenters

Purpose: To learn about a specific instance of a social problem; to apply Best's paradigm and contemporary research

Grading: See rubric on Sakai

Due dates: January 30th (Milestone 1); Milestones 2 and 3 vary by student; see Sakai

Full description: Students will need to present on one history or account relevant to the social problem they are assigned. These presentations will include a historical overview of the particular case and an analysis of the case described using Best's paradigm. Groups of three students will present on the same day, though on different cases. Each presentation will need to address how their particular case relates to the others (again, following Best). At least two of these presentations must be on a non-white, non-US, or non-Christian account.

Each presenter should also produce a 1-page fill-in-the-blank notes page for the audience and print off one copy for each student. Audience members will complete the notes page and turn it in at the end of the class as part of their participation grade. Finally, each group will need to create a 15-minute exercise or discussion to be done as a class after the presentations. This exercise should build on what was presented by the students. It might reinforce an idea that was common between them, further draw out differences, or something else.

Milestone 1: Coordinate and choose an account

Once you have been assigned a presentation date, you will need to find a suitable account of a case of a social problem and coordinate with your co-presenters to ensure a breadth of contexts are examined. Each student should identify an account at least 150 pages long on which to base their presentation. If students will be selecting particular chapters from a book, they should be sure to identify which ones they will use and the motivation for doing so. If students/groups have difficulty finding sources, please let me know.

Students should upload a 1-page document to Sakai by January 30th describing a) the source they plan to use (including chapter selection, if necessary), b) the motivation for choosing the source, and c) how this source fits with the accounts that other students will present on.

Milestone 2: Plan for presentation

Groups should schedule a time to meet with me at least one week before they present. At this time, each student should have a solid idea of how they will organize their own presentation, and the group should have one or more ideas on how to spend the final 15 minutes of class. During this time, I will give feedback to students to ensure they are prepared to meet all of the requirements described in the rubric.

Milestone 3: Present

Finally, students will present on their designated day. Prior to class, students should upload their slides individually to Sakai, e-mail me materials for the 15-minute exercise/discussion, and print off enough copies of their note sheets for the class.

Group project: Social problems board/card game

Format: A playable board or card game and a 2-page memo describing its relevance to the course material

Purpose: To illustrate the complexities and interactions that occur in the social problems process

Grading: See rubric on Sakai

Due dates: March 8 (Milestone 1); April 5 (Milestone 2); April 29th (Milestone 3)

Full description: A major component of the class will be a group project to be completed by the final exam period. This project will take the form of a board or card game that illustrates specific parts of the social problems process described by Best. Why a game? Game rules can act as a good representation of the structure of some process. The pieces can represent the actors, resources, and choices available to players. And the strategies can represent the approaches that actors take in a social environment. By creating such a game, students will both strengthen their understanding **and** produce a tool to help others understand.

Students will be assigned randomly to groups based on their presentation schedule such that students presenting on the same day will be in different groups. That way, no group should experience significant conflict between achieving project goals and completing students presentations.

This final project is meant to be more engaging than a final paper and allow students to use their creativity and other skills. Be reassured, though, that your grade is entirely based on the accuracy and complexity of its presentation of the social problems process. Its playability, fairness, and artistic style will not affect your grade.

As with the selection of opinion pieces to analyze, I encourage you to be sensitive to the content when selecting a topic. A well-done game about racism may help players understand the experiences of minorities, but it risks being insensitive to or belittling of their experiences. I ask you to use your best judgment and, if you are unsure about the content, check with me.

Milestone 1: Defining the theoretical scope and topical focus

The first milestone is designed to define the scope of the game, both in what aspects of the social problems process it will illustrate as well as the topical scope. Groups should produce a list of at least 3 ideas from *Social Problems* that they aim to illustrate. They should identify the actors and resources that may be relevant to the game. Groups may also define a topical theme at this stage (e.g. getting an education). However, topical themes are not necessary.

By completing this milestone, students should at least know **what** they are treating to teach and demonstrate through the game. The next step is to address **how**.

Milestone 2: Defining the structure

For the second milestone, groups will define the structure of the game. At a superficial level, this includes the mode of play (board game or card game). This might also include identifying an existing game that it is modeling after and listing the basic play mechanics.

At a deeper level, though, students should identify the strategies of play and the interactions they want to illustrate. For example, one strategy might be to invest in experts who will petition congress to pass some environmental bill. But how will that interact with another player who plans to use grassroots activists?

Milestone 3: Final game and memo

Students will bring their completed game to our final exam session on April 29th. Students will spend 5 to 10 minutes discussing the motivation and structure of their games to the class, particularly highlighting how it illustrates the social problems process. The class will then spend 40-60 minutes playing each others' games and conclude with further questions for each of the groups.

Participation

Participation makes up 10% of your grade for the course. By participation, I mean a) contributing meaningfully to classroom discussions, b) attending all classes, and c) completing all assignments in a timely manner. I do not have a strict approach to grading participation. Instead, I will contact any student that I feel is not participating sufficiently *prior to* deducting any points. I will inform them how I believe they could be participating more and that I may deduct points from their participation grade if they do

not do so. In other words, you should not be caught off-guard by point deductions and you should have an opportunity to make up for any lack of participation at the beginning of the course.

Course Outline

Note: **[Best(ch1)]** refers to chapter 1 of *Social Problems* by Joel Best. **[Best(pp1-4)]** refers to pages 1 through 4 of the same book. **[Reader(ch1)]** and **[Reader(pp.1-4)]** refer to the same sections, respectively, in *Contemporary Readings in Social Problems*. In either case, I provide the title of the section and author (if applicable) to account for differing editions. **[Sakai]** indicates that you can find the reading on Sakai.

All assignments should be submitted through Sakai. **[print]** indicates that you should also print a copy and bring it to class.

Section 1: Introduction, Key Concepts, and Early Examples

The first two-and-a-half weeks of class are dedicated to the foundations of the study of social problems. We examine summaries of the endeavor to study social problems as well as classic examples of such studies.

Students have no formal assignments at this point, so should focus on completing the readings and searching for a suitable text to present on later in the course.

January 11th: Introduction

January 16th: Course Overview

Readings

- "The Art of Savage Discovery" by William Ryan [Reader(ch2;Sakai)]
- "Where Do We Go from Here?" by Martin Luther King Jr. [Reader(ch3)]
- "Invitation to Sociology" by Peter Berger [Sakai]

Assignments

- Complete the survey to rank presentation topics, which you can find here [\[https://duke.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_5jOswUR0BCxP17n\]](https://duke.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_5jOswUR0BCxP17n)

January 18th: Theoretical Overview

Readings

- "The Social Problems Process" [Best(ch1;Sakai)]
- "The Promise" by C. Wright Mills [Reader(ch1)]

January 23rd: Marx's Critique of Capitalism

Readings

- "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*" by Karl Marx [Sakai]
- "Some Principles of Stratification" by Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore [Sakai]

January 25th: Durkheim's Study of Suicide

Readings

- "The Social Element of Suicide" by Emile Durkheim [Sakai]
-

Section 2: The Social Problems Framework

For the second portion of class, we will focus on Joel Best's framework for analyzing social problems found in his book *Social Problems*. This book is a quick, easy read, so make sure you take the time to reflect on it while reading and after each chapter. Consider examples that fit his cases and think back to previous examples from class and your own thinking.

All students should complete a cheat sheet for each chapter (due at the start of class, submitted on Sakai). Students who must write an analysis for the class should also print out one copy of their analysis and six copies of the news/opinion article they based in on. This will aid class discussion.

January 30th: Claims

Readings

- "Claims" [Best(ch2)]

Assignments

- Presentation milestone 1: coordinate and choose an account
- Cheat sheet for chapter 2
- Analysis of news/opinion [Analysis Group 1; print]

February 1st: Activists

Readings

- "Activists as Claimsmakers" [Best(ch3)]

Assignments

- Cheat sheet for chapter 3
 - Analysis of news/opinion [Analysis Group 2; print]
-

February 6th: Experts

Readings

- "Experts as Claimsmakers" [Best(ch4)]

Assignments

- Cheat sheet for chapter 4
- Analysis of news/opinion [Analysis Group 3; print]

February 8th: The Media

Readings

- "The Media and Claims" [Best(ch5)]

Assignments

- Cheat sheet for chapter 5
 - Analysis of news/opinion [Analysis Group 1; print]
-

February 13th: The Public

Readings

- "Public Reaction" [Best(ch6)]

Assignments

- Cheat sheet for chapter 6
- Analysis of news/opinion [Analysis Group 2; print]

February 15th: Policymaking

Readings

- "Policymaking" [Best(ch7)]

Assignments

- Cheat sheet for chapter 7
 - Analysis of news/opinion [Analysis Group 3; print]
-

February 20th: A Basketball-themed Breather

A well-timed discussion of themes related to college basketball, including one-and-dones, athlete and coach compensation, and other topics.

February 22nd: Social Problems Work

Readings

- "Social Problems Work" [Best(ch8)]

Assignments

- Cheat sheet for chapter 8
 - Analysis of news/opinion [Analysis Group 1; print]
-

February 27th: Policy Outcomes

Readings

- "Policy Outcomes" [Best(ch9)]

Assignments

- Cheat sheet for chapter 9
- Analysis of news/opinion [Analysis Group 2; print]

March 1st: Variation and Comparison**Readings**

- "Claims across Space and Time" [Best(ch10)]

Assignments

- Cheat sheet for chapter 10
 - Analysis of news/opinion [Analysis Group 3; print]
-

Section 3: A Topical Exploration of Social Problems

In the third section of the course, we will look at contemporary research in six areas; education, health care and medicine, poverty and inequality, crime and incarceration, the environment, and immigration. Race, ethnicity, gender, and other major social identities are central to a number of these pieces, which we will discuss throughout the section.

Wednesday will be devoted to discussing the readings, so come prepared. Fridays will focus on student presentations.

March 6th: Education**Readings**

- "The Paradox of Poverty Narratives" by Cynthia I. Gerstl-Pepin [Reader(ch17)]
- "Ideological Success, Educational Failure?" by Michael W. Apply [Reader(ch18)]

March 8th: Student presentations on education**Assignments**

- Final project milestone 1
 - Presentation [Presentation Group 1]
-

March 13th: Spring Break

March 15th: Spring Break

March 20th: Health Care and Medicine

Readings

- "Pills, Power, People" by Joan Busfield [Reader(ch19)]
- "Chronic Back Pain Sufferers--Striving for the Sick Role" by Claire Glenton [Sakai]

March 22nd: Student presentations on health care and medicine

Assignments

- Presentation [Presentation Group 2]
-

March 27th: Poverty and Inequality

Readings

- "Welfare Reform in the United States" by Mimi Abramovitz [Reader(ch21)]
- "Child Labor in Bangladesh" by Claire Salmon [Reader(ch23)]

March 29th: Student presentations on poverty and inequality

Assignments

- Presentation [Presentation Group 3]
-

April 3rd: Crime and Incarceration

Readings

- "Crime" by Michael Tonry [Reader(ch24)]
- "Prison Health and the Health of the Public" by Natasha H. Williams [Reader(ch25)]

April 5th: Student presentations on crime and incarceration

Assignments

- Final project milestone 2
 - Presentation [Presentation Group 4]
-

April 10th: The Environment

Readings

- "Nature's Trust" by Mary Christina Wood [Reader(ch27)]
- "Karina and Power in America" by Peter Dreier [Reader(ch28)]

April 12th: Student presentations on the environment

Assignments

- Presentation [Presentation Group 5]
-

April 17th: Immigration

Readings

- "The Marking of International Migrants" by Saskia Sassen [Reader(ch9)]
- "21st Century Slaves" by Andrew Cockburn [Reader(ch14)]

April 19th: Student presentations on immigration

Assignments

- Presentation [Presentation Group 6]
-

Section 4: Wrap-up

April 24: Last Day of Class; Wrap-up

Assignments

- Complete the survey for the final exam session (link to be provided at a future date)
-

April 29th 2PM-5PM: "Final Exam" Session

The focus of the final exam is on the group projects. Each group will take 5 to 10 minutes to present the game they designed, the theoretical motivations behind their design, and the complexities of the social problems process they illustrate. After all three groups have presented, the class will take time to play each of the games. The session will end with a question and answer session for each of the groups, with peers asking about additional complexities addressed or not addressed by the games.

Attendance in the final exam period is mandatory.

For the full final exam schedule, visit [<https://registrar.duke.edu/calendars-key-dates/exam-schedules>]

Assignments

- Final project milestone 3 [print]

Course Policies

Attendance

Outside of excused absences (described below), students are expected to **attend every class session** including those without readings and assignments. I am not instituting a formal process by which attendance is factored into students' grades. However, I reserve the right to dock students' participation grades if they miss more than one class or are regularly late to class. I will attempt to head off such a scenario by contacting the student directly to inform them of my concern, meaning no student should be surprised by such a deduction.

Late Assignments

Cheat sheets and analyses can be turned in late with 10 additional percentage points deducted for each additional 24 hours. For example, a cheat sheet that is turned in 23 hours and 59 minutes late will have 10% deducted, while one turned in 1 minute later will have 20% deducted.

Besides the presentation and final project deliverable, all presentation and group project milestones can be turned in up to a week late with no points deducted. However, I **highly** recommend that you meet the deadlines suggested. They are set to keep you and your group on track to complete the final assignments. If a week passes and I still have not received a milestone, I will ask for the current version to be graded. If no milestone is provided at that time, then I will grade it as 0%.

On Active Learning

The structure of the course revolves around the principle of active learning, a framework of classroom engagement which focuses on creating your own learning structures and applying them. This is in contrast to "traditional" classroom styles which focus on memorization and recall--that is, memorizing and recalling how someone else structured some body of knowledge.

You will be discussing the topics at hand, presenting your own work, and designing a game to illustrate a concept. **Active learning takes commitment from the students.** If it feels awkward or uncomfortable at first, that is likely because much of your time in the classroom has been spent listening to lectures without any engagement and reading textbooks without any structure to help you stop and think.

If you feel ill-equipped in these situations, please let me know. I am always happy to discuss strategies and ideas with students.

Special Accommodations

Illness

If a student is unexpectedly ill and will miss class, they should complete Duke's Short-Term Illness Notification Form. Students should then directly contact me to learn about what they missed and how they can make it up. I will work with students to make up the difference in a reasonable way. You can find more information at [<https://trinity.duke.edu/undergraduate/academic-policies/illness>].

Disability

In accordance with Duke policy, students should send me a form from the Student Disability Access Office which describes their allowances. We will then arrange a meeting to discuss the requirements of the course and the specific ways we will act within those guidelines. We will produce then produce a document describing these allowances which either party can refer to if they feel they are not being met. You can find more information at [<https://access.duke.edu/requests>].

Religious Holidays

Students are highly encourage to inform me of any religious holiday or observance that will affect the completion of assignments or class attendance. Please aim to do so **no later than the end of class on January 18th**. I will happily do what I can to accommodate all reasonable requests.

Athletic Events

All athletes should provide the required form indicating their allowances under Duke policies. I also ask that athletes examine the schedule above and let me know **no later than the end of class on January 18th** of any conflicts with their schedule.

Other Unplanned Events

Unfortunately, serious, unplanned events happen. While the severity of these events range in intensity, your schoolwork should be the least of your worries in such cases. If these events affect your ability to attend class or complete work, please let me know as soon as possible. Just as importantly, please also inform your dean; they will be able to mediate between you and your instructors to find appropriate accommodations moving forward.

Statement on Diversity

The course is designed to take advantage of the ethnic, gender, and religious diversity in the class by drawing from readings about diverse subjects. I encourage you to also present your own experiences to the class when they are relevant to the discussion, if you feel comfortable.

This has both a humanist and a scientific motivation. For the former, we all benefit from a greater understanding of the lives of diverse others. The study of social problems in particular benefits from recognizing the value of voices of people different from ourselves. From a scientific perspective, considering diverse opinions highlights debates about generalizability vs contextual particularities. By introducing ideas and cases from many different contexts, I hope to give you the impetus to reflect on the ways that a particular theory works broadly and when additional nuance is warranted.

Suggestions for Success

Active Reading

Your learning in this course will be greater if you actively engage your thinking at each stage. This includes while you are reading the assigned texts; you are more likely to forget the material if you only read it rather than stop and reflect, take notes, and try to synthesize ideas as you read. The assigned summaries are designed to keep you engaged while reading *Social Problems*, but I encourage you to use other strategies throughout the course. I am happy to discuss strategies with you.

TWP Writing Studio

Students who want to improve their writing should consider making an appointment with one of the writing consultants at the Thompson Writing Program Writing Studio. Students can schedule in-person and online appointments through their website (<https://twp.duke.edu/twp-writing-studio>). This is a wonderful, free resource provided by Duke that caters to students at all levels and at all points in the writing process. I highly recommend you take advantage of it.

Academic Resource Center

The Academic Resource Center (ARC) offers free services to all students during their undergraduate careers at Duke. Services include Learning Consultations, Peer Tutoring

and Study Groups, ADHD/LD Coaching, Outreach Workshops, and more. Because learning is a process unique to every individual, we work with each student to discover and develop their own academic strategy for success at Duke. Contact the ARC to schedule an appointment. Undergraduates in any year, studying any discipline can benefit!

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