

Sociology 235: Social Problems

Summer 2015

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Course Overview

Purpose

Sociology 235 is an overview of how to understand social problems from the perspective of social constructionism. This means that we will look at how some social conditions get defined as social problems through the work of claimsmakers, the natural history of these problems, and the implications of these processes for public policy.

Required Texts

Best, Joel. 2013. *Social Problems*, 2nd edition. New York: W.W. Norton.

Best, Joel. 2012. *Damned Lies and Statistics: Untangling Numbers from the Media, Politicians, and Activists*, updated edition. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Berns, Nancy. 2011. *Closure: The Rush to End Grief and What It Costs Us*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Your responsibilities

This section of Social Problems is a distance education course. This will give you some flexibility you wouldn't have in a traditional course where professor and students meet together regularly. However, the class has regular weekly deadlines students need to meet.

Since the class is compressed into eight weeks, expect to do more work each week than you would during a fall or spring semester course.

During the weeks #1-3 and weeks #5-7, you will do the following: (1) read the assigned material in the required texts, (2) watch the professor's presentation(s) about each chapter, (3) make an original post on the class discussion board related to each reading, (4) read other students' posts on the discussion board, and (5) respond to at least one post by another student for each reading. During weeks #4 & #8, you will submit a paper and take an exam.

Credits

In creating this syllabus, I have used with their permission material or ideas from classes designed by: Nancy Berns, Drake University; Joel Best, University of Delaware; Brian Monahan, Iowa State University; and Dan West, Rochester Community College.

Assignments

1. Discussion posts (19.5%; 13 posts @ 15 points each)

Each week students must make one original post per assigned reading on the class discussion board. To get full credit, the post must be made Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday. Detailed requirements are described on page 5 of this syllabus.

2. Discussion replies (13%; 13 posts @ 10 points each)

Each week students must respond to at least one post by another student for each assigned reading. Detailed requirements are described on page 6 of this syllabus.

3. Papers (32%; 2 papers @ 160 points each)

Students will write two papers: a statistics analysis paper (due week #4) and a social problem analysis paper (due week #8). Each paper is worth 160 points. Detailed requirements for these papers are in this syllabus.

4. Examinations (32%; 2 exams @ 160 points each)

There will be two examinations. The purposes of the exams are (1) to encourage students to attend to, study, and commit to memory course material, and (2) to increase students' self-knowledge about their mastery of course material. The first exam will be held during week #4 and will cover chapters 1-5 of *Social Problems* and all of *Damned Lies and Statistics*. The second exam will be held during week #8 and will cover chapters 6-11 of *Social Problems* and all of *Closure*.

Each exam will consist of questions drawn from readings and the professor's presentations and will account for 160 points.

5. Course Feedback (3.5%; 35 points)

Students will receive these points for providing information about your experience in the course that will be used to improve it.

Letter grades

Students have the opportunity to earn 1000 points.. There are no ways to earn points in the course other than those described in this syllabus either during the course or after it ends. Final grades will be distributed as follows:

Discussion posts	195 pts	13@15 pts each
Discussion replies	130 pts	13@10 pts each
Papers	320 pts	2@160 pts each
Examinations	340 pts	2@160 pts each
Course feedback	35 pts	

Final grades will be determined according to the following grade scale:

900-1000	A	730-759	B-	600-629	D+
850-899	A-	700-729	C+	550-599	D
800-849	B+	660-699	C	500-549	D-
760-799	B	630-659	C-	Below 500	F

Exam Proctoring

Exams will be proctored. If you are in the Ames area, you should take your exam in the Engineering-LAS Online testing centers in 2552 Gilman. If you are not in the Ames area, you will need to find a proctor. Information about this can be found here:

www.elo.iastate.edu/proctored-testing-guidelines-for-students/

Since students will be able to take exams at different times, it is important that you do not share information about the exam with your classmates who have not taken it yet.

Academic Honesty

Speaking and acting truthfully are skills acquired through practice. These skills are indispensable for successfully living and working with other people. If you practice dishonesty, you will endanger all of your relationships. You will be a bad spouse, a bad parent, a bad employee and a bad citizen.

Participating in academic life is an important opportunity to practice truthfulness since dishonesty is incompatible with and abhorrent to the purposes of the university. Therefore, students in this course are expected to adhere to the highest standards of academic honesty.

Examples of academic dishonesty include plagiarism and cheating on exams.

The standard punishment for academic dishonesty is failure in the course and referral to the Dean of Students. Students who are expelled from Iowa State or otherwise punished for academic dishonesty are encouraged to see their punishment as an opportunity to reflect upon their failure to practice truthfulness and to commit themselves to a new life of integrity.

Special Accommodations


Students should address any need for special accommodations with me at the beginning of the semester or as soon as you believe you need them. Accommodations will be provided to students with a Student Academic Accommodation Request (SAAR) from the Disability Resources (DR) office (294-6624). DR is located in Room 1076 of the Student Services Building.

Sociology Code of Ethics for Human Relations

The Department of Sociology is committed to providing a professional and educational environment that is free of discrimination and harassment. The department's Code of Ethics for Human Relations and the Procedures for Filing Complaints of Discrimination or Harassment are posted on the bulletin boards on all five floors of East Hall.

Course Schedule

Week 1 (May 18-23)

 Chapter 1: The Social Problems Process

 Chapter 2: Claims

Week 2 (May 25-29)

 *Damned Lies and Statistics*

Week 3 (June 1-6)

 Chapter 3: Activists as Claimsmakers

 Chapter 4: Experts as Claimsmakers

 Chapter 5: The Media and Claims

Week 4 (June 8-13)

Statistics analysis paper due


Exam 1 due

Week 5 (June 15-20)

 *Closure*

Week 6 (June 22-27)


 Chapter 6: Public Reaction


 Chapter 7: Policymaking

 Chapter 8: Social Problems Work

Week 7 (June 29-July 4)

 Chapter 9: Policy Outcomes

 Chapter 10: Claims across Space and Time

 Chapter 11: The Uses of the Constructionist Stance

Week 8 (July 6-10)

Social problem analysis paper due

Exam 2 due

Discussion Post and Reply Guidelines

Posting for Each Chapter

Each week students must make an original post on the class discussion board on the assigned reading. To get full credit, the post must be made Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday. Be sure to follow these requirements:

1. **WORD COUNT:** Each of your posts must be a minimum of 150 words (equivalent to one or two fully developed paragraphs). If a post is not at least 150 words, it will receive a zero.
2. **Content:** Structure each paragraph with a topic sentence that emphasizes your main conclusion, then support that idea with details, examples, explanations and other evidence. Always use terms and concepts from the text to support and explain your ideas, but don't just regurgitate the textbook material or repeat what another student has already said in a previous post. Be sure to read all the posts made by other students in that chapter forum before writing your post so you are not repeating what another student has already said. The closer you are to the deadline for a post, the more you will have to read before making your posts. The goal here is originality! Develop your response by adding your reactions, analysis, examples and any personal observations or experiences that relate to the topic. You need not, and should not, mention all of the topics in the reading. Choose one or two that are of interest to you or relevant to your recent experiences to focus and expand upon. Avoid writing generic things like "I liked this chapter," or "I found this chapter interesting." Rather, focus on specific concepts/issues in depth. This is not a place for you to write a review of the chapter or repeat what it say. Instead, it is a place to add to it so we can all learn something extra. Assume that the readers of your post have already read the chapter and are familiar with it. Whether or not you liked a chapter, or found it helpful, doesn't contribute much to the learning for other students. The bottom line: Go beyond!
3. **LINK:** All your posts must include a URL link to further reading on the Internet on the topic you write about. This can be a link to something that supports what you have said in your post, an illustration of the concept you discuss, or further reading on the topic. Don't just post a link to a page that repeats material from the chapter. Briefly explain what the link is rather than just slapping it on the post with no reference.
4. **Question:** Finish your post by posing a specific question to the other class members about your topic. The goal of this question is stimulate discussion. Avoid generic questions (e.g., "What's your opinion on this?" "What do you think?") and rhetorical questions where the answer is already obvious or assumed.
5. **GRAMMAR /SPELLING:** Take care to write clearly and concisely, using proper grammar and punctuation. Be sure you proofread your text before you send the post to the discussion board. Take advantage of the spell-check feature in your word processor and proofread your posts carefully.
6. **POST IT:** Make your original post as the start of a new thread (not as a reply to another student's post) in the appropriate chapter forum. Come up with a title that reflects the main ideas of your posting. Do not give your post the same title that someone has already used. If you used a word processing program to compose your post, copy and paste the post into the discussion post window, **DO NOT** make your post as an attached file.

Replying for Each Chapter

Each week students must respond to at least one post by another student for each chapter. (You may respond to as many messages as you like. Your best reply will be graded.)

Read the messages written by other students and choose those to which you would like to respond.

Please take care to post thoughtful, well-developed responses that add substance to the discussion. The minimum amount of words for a reply post is 100. "Good answer!" and "I agree!" type posts are nice compliments, but they don't enhance our understanding of the concepts. Expand on the student's conclusions, provide another example, make a "gentle" clarification if you think the answer was incorrect or incomplete. If you have an example that demonstrates a concept we've been discussing, tell us about it. Ask questions and give feedback just as you would in a regular classroom. Add your views on the questions you didn't originally answer, offer an example that illustrates the concept being discussed, and/or pose a new question for other students to answer.

"Me, too," or "I agree with Suzie" type postings do not count toward your grade. I will most likely delete these posts if they add no value to the discussion. There are a lot of posts to read, so be sure yours are worth the time others will spend reading them.

For replies, you are not required to include a link or ask questions as you are in original posts, but you may certainly do so if you wish.

Although you may continue a discussion after the deadline, those posts won't be graded and you shouldn't expect that other students will continue to follow the discussion.

Paper Assignments

Statistics Analysis Paper

For this assignment you will write a short (4-6 pages) paper examining a statistic used in a social problem claim.

Find a statistic that is part of a larger social problem claim. You might find it in on the Internet, in print media (newspaper, magazine), an organization's pamphlet or elsewhere.

Analyze the statistic using concepts from Joel Best's *Damned Lies and Statistics*. Best offers a number of critiques of statistics. Apply as many as are applicable to your statistic.

As best as you can, track down the source of the statistic. This may involve contacting a reporter or officer of an organization. Report any changes to the statistic. (If you can't find out anything about the origin of the statistic, consider choosing a different statistic.)

In your paper, you must do the following:

1. Identify and explain the larger social problems claim that includes the statistic.
2. Analyze the statistic using concepts from Joel Best's *Damned Lies and Statistics*.
3. Describe any "stats wars" over the statistic or describe a possible "stats war" that could arise from it.

Be sure to include the source of the statistic, either by including its URL in the paper or including a scanned version of it in your paper.

A good paper is one that demonstrates your curiosity about the statistic. Do web searches, follow links, read footnotes, look up references. This is not a paper for speculation; do the research required to learn everything you can about your statistic.

Social Problems Analysis Paper

For this assignment you will write a short (4-6 typed pages) paper examining the construction of some social problem.

If you understand the social constructionist perspective, you will be using terms like “claims” “claimsmaker,” and “claimsmaking.” You should not be acting as a claimsmaker yourself.

There are many ways you might fulfill this assignment. You can pick any social problem. Choices might range from some local problem (in a particular town, or even on a dorm floor), to national or even global problems. You can pick a contemporary problem, or some historical problem (or even one that may occur in the future). You can choose from a very broad range of sources (newspaper articles? TV talk shows? comic books?). You can look at a very narrowly defined aspect of the problem, or you can do something broader. This assignment gives you a lot of freedom. Take advantage of it. Use your imagination. Do something interesting. I would prefer not having to read dozens of papers on the same topic.

The best topics tend to be focused on a particular aspect of the construction of a particular problem. Here are some examples of focused topics: (1) Find some index of media coverage (e.g., New York Times stories indexed in Lexis-Nexis) and measure coverage (e.g., number of stories) over time, showing how concern about some issue rose and fell; (2) Examine how and why the words used to describe some social problem changed over time; (3) Evaluate the statistics used to measure some social problem; (4) Analyze who makes the major claims regarding some problem; (5) Compare the constructions of the same problem in two different places, at two time periods, or by two sets of competing claimsmakers. What doesn't work well? It is nearly impossible to write a good paper about a really broad topic. For instance, do NOT try to trace all six stages in the social problems process; instead.

Work on developing a clear, coherent paper. You need a strong thesis (“Problem X is socially constructed” is not a strong thesis—obviously Problem X has been constructed, but a good thesis says something about how that happened). You need a clearly structured paper, so that your reader can follow the argument.