Summer 2021

Sociol 3. SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Instructor:
Email:
Office Hours:
Class Time:
Office hours:

Course overview

At various points in American history, Satanic ritual abuse, margarine, and global *cooling* have all been seen as serious social problems. Driving while drunk, beating your child, and smoking while pregnant, for their part, have been seen, and not too long ago, as perfectly appropriate behaviors.

In this course, we will examine why certain phenomena come to be seen as social problems while others are seen either as problems that people should handle on their own or not as problems at all. We will trace the steps to getting social problems recognized and getting policies made to address them. And we will try to understand the obstacles that stand between recognizing a social problem and solving it: why mobilizing people to demand a solution is so difficult, why the media sometimes lead us to fear the wrong things, why policymakers often struggle to get policies enacted, and why, when they succeed, they sometimes create new problems even as they fail to solve the old ones. Throughout, we will also wrestle with how we—as sociologists and as people—can do better to tackle social problems.

Our exploration will range across areas of social life and historical periods: from the 17th century Salem witch trials to the current opioid crisis, from the "discovery" of child abuse to the discovery of Covid-19, and from corporate-funded science to fake news. We will draw on a variety of materials, including classic texts in sociology, contemporary empirical research papers, magazine and newspaper articles, and podcasts and videos.

My goals in the course are threefold: to help you develop the tools to assess critically what you read and hear in the news; to introduce you to major sociological perspectives on social problems, and on society generally; and to hone your ability to use social scientific theories to make sense of what you observe in real life.

Please read this syllabus carefully. Since this class will be conducted online, it is essential that you know and follow the instructions.

Course requirements

Viewing lecture videos posted to Canvas; five multiple-choice tests (the lowest-scored of which will be automatically dropped; the resulting four test scores will together count for 60 percent of your final grade), one short essay assignment and an outline for the essay (together worth 20 percent of your final grade), and completion of discussion posts and peer comments (20 percent of your final grade).

NB: This course is adapted from a syllabus originally developed by Dr. Francesca Polletta.

Lectures

I will upload my lecture video to the Canvas module for that week by 9:00am PST Monday. You may watch the lectures at any time, but you are strongly encouraged to do the readings *before* watching the lecture rather than after, and you must complete the readings and lecture prior to posting in the forum. In addition to the lecture videos, I will also post a lecture outline to help you take notes and to study for the week's quiz – this is not a substitute for the lecture or readings.

Quizzes

Five quizzes (weekly each Friday) will cover the readings and lecture material from each week. They are not cumulative, although some major perspectives and core concepts will keep showing up. Quizzes will focus on key concepts and theories. Before each quiz, I will provide you with a list of topics and questions to be covered and give you access to a google drive (weekly each Thursday) where you may work together to fill out a weekly study guide (participation in the study guide is optional but encouraged). Quizzes are multiple choice, conducted via Canvas, and closed book/notes (however, you may make one handwritten 3X5 index card "cheat sheet" if you choose). You will have 30 minutes to complete 20 questions. Quizzes will take place Friday mornings from 10:00-10:30. If you are not in the US and need alternative times, or if you need to reschedule due to a documented emergency, please email me. Unfortunately, in a class this size, I cannot allow make-ups. Ordinarily, missing a quiz will result in a zero.

Outline and Short Paper

In a short paper you will apply the theoretical perspectives we will discuss to a social problem of your choice. At the end of week 2, you will write a brief outline (no more than one page) in which you propose a topic. You will receive feedback on this outline the following week and it will serve as the basis for your short paper. In the paper, you will be asked to draw on two or more course readings as well as three outside readings (two must be sociological, one can be journalistic) to analyze the social problem. Papers will be 5-6 pages double-spaced with ASA references. Outlines will be due at 11:59pm Friday July 2nd. Papers will be due at 11:59pm Tuesday July 27th. Since papers are due the last day of finals, I will not be able to give extensions, so be sure to complete it on time! Late outlines and papers will be subject to grade deductions of 2 points per day.

Discussion posts (in place of discussion sections)

There are no discussion "sections" for this fully online course. In place of discussion sections, we will use discussion forums. You will post a 2- paragraph memo each week in which you based on a prompt I will post each week. You must complete all reading assignments and lecture videos prior to posting in the forum. I will open forums Monday mornings and you have until 11:59pm Wednesday to write your initial 2 paragraph discussion post. Please then also respond

to a classmate's post with 2-3 sentences by 11:59 Friday. To receive full credit, you must post AND respond by the weekly deadlines. Late posts will loose 2 points.

Extra credit

You will have the opportunity to earn up to 10 points of extra credit towards your final grade with the completion of up to 2 short extra credit papers. These 2 page papers allow you to expand on one of the week's topics with an outside reading and each can earn up to 5 additional points for a total of 10.

Grading

The standard grading scale below is used to convert numerical grades into your letter grade.

A+ 100 - 96.5	C < 76.5 -73.5
A <96.5 -93.5	C- < 73.5- 70.0
A- <93.5- 90.0	D+ < 70.0 -66.5
B+ <90.0 - 86.5	D < 66.5- 63.5
B <86.5 - 83.5	D- < 63.5-60.0
B- < 83.5 -80.0	F < 60.0 - 0
C+ < 80.0 -76.5	

Assignment	**Percent**	**Points**
Discussion Posts (X5)	20	40
Outline (X1)	10	20
Paper (X1)	20	40
Quizzes (X5)	50	100
Total:	**100**	**200**

Weekly Schedule

	Monday	**Tuesday**	**Wednesday**	**Thursday**	**Friday**

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Instructor	Post Lecture. and Discussion forum by 9:00am PST		Post quiz study guide forum by 9:00am PST		
Student	*Read*	*Watch lectures*	POST in the discussion forum by 11:59pm PST	*Study guide*	**TAKE QUIZ AT 10:00am PST** POST response in forum by 11:59pm PST

Communication

Since this class is entirely online, it is essential that you be alert to communications from your instructor. I will make important announcements about requirements and deadlines over Canvas Announcements. Please make sure to set your preferences in Canvas so that you receive announcements immediately rather than in digest form. It is your responsibility to check your email daily for announcements.

If you have a question, do the following:

- 1) Check the syllabus or the announcement.
- 2) Post your question in the "course questions" thread on Canvas.
- 3) Email or Canvas message or come to office hours. I only check email in the morning so please be advised, it may take up to 24 hours for me to respond.
- 4) Concern about grade: If you have a question about the grade you received on a quiz, your outline, or your paper, please email me. I will explain to you why you received the grade you did. Upon request, I will review and possibly re-grade your assignment; however, I reserve the right to lower it rather than just raise it. Grades are my express purview, and I will not change your grade because of the effort you made or because you need to get a good grade in the course. Doing so would be unfair to other students. Note: You must contact me within 36 hours of receiving your grade, after which point, all grades are final.

Disability Statement

If you have a documented disability that requires assistance, you will need to go to the Disability Services Center (DSC) for coordination of your academic accommodations. The DSC website is www.disability.uci.edu.

Academic honesty

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Academic dishonesty applies equally to electronic media and print, and involves text, images, and ideas. It includes the following: *cheating* (e.g. copying from others during an exam, communicating exam answers with other students during exam, allowing others to do the research and writing of an assigned paper); *plagiarism* (e.g. trying to pass off as one's own the ideas or words of another person, or submitting, without permission, work that you have submitted or will submit for another class); and *collusion* (knowingly or intentionally helping another student perform any of the above acts of cheating or plagiarism). An act of academic dishonesty will result in an F in the course and disciplinary action.

All students' willingness to respect the norms of academic integrity is especially important now, given the changes we have had to make due to the pandemic. *I have opted not to use the Respondus Monitor because I believe it represents a potential invasion of privacy. Please give me and your fellow students the same respect by being scrupulously honest in fulfilling course requirements.*

Social and Behavioral Sciences Course

This is a Category 3: Social and Behavioral Sciences course. Courses in this category focus on principles, sources, and interpretations of human behavior and on how people organize, govern, understand, and explain social life. This category includes the analysis of human behavior at all levels, from the individual to collective social, economic, and political life, and on the scientific methods used in the acquisition of knowledge and the testing of competing theories. After completing a course in this category, successful students should be able to do all of the following:

1. Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the theories, sources, and interpretations of human behavior and organization (e.g., individual, societal, and/or institutional).
2. Do at least one of the following:
3. Demonstrate an understanding of contemporary and historical perspectives on individual or collective human behavior (e.g., individual, social movements, and/or institutions).
4. Understand and explain the scientific/interpretive methods used in the acquisition of knowledge and the testing of competing theories, in the social and/or behavioral sciences

Topics and readings

Note that this plan is *provisional*. Depending on how much ground I cover in lectures or whether interesting issues come up in section or in the news, a lecture scheduled for one date may extend into the next class. Test dates will stay the same, but depending on whether we have fallen behind on lectures and section discussions, the test scheduled for a particular week may cover less than indicated below. This is one more reason to stay alert for Canvas Announcements from me. All the readings are available under **Modules** in the navigation bar.

WEEK ONE. Social Problems Introduction?

What is a social problem? In the lecture, I will contrast an *individualistic* perspective on social problems with a *sociological* perspective. Alan Johnson's article describes the difference. Sociologists treat social problems as both *objective* and as *socially constructed*. Joel Best describes objectivist and constructivist approaches in the excerpt from his book.

From the beginning, sociology has always focused on social problems: on how we should identify them, explain them, and solve them. I will talk about Emile Durkheim's study of suicide, published in 1897, which introduced a sociological explanation for a problem that many people saw—and continue to see—as individual rather than social. We will ask how well Durkheim's explanation holds up today, and if Durkheim's more general arguments are right, what should policymakers do?

In the lecture, I will talk about a social problem that has gained a great deal of attention: the contemporary opioid epidemic. What does a sociological perspective on the epidemic look like? How well does Durkheim help to explain the problem? And what are the challenges in finding a solution? The Gabe and Bury excerpt contrasts two more perspectives on social problems, which I will talk about in lecture: a functionalist perspective and a conflict perspective.

In the 1980s, Americans were riveted by another drug epidemic: that of crack cocaine. But the response by authorities to the epidemic was very different than their response to the opioid epidemic today. To understand why authorities *constructed* the problem of crack addiction in the way they did, we need to understand something about government housing policies in the 1930s--seemingly, a very different issue, but actually, connected.

Readings:

- Alan G. Johnson, "The Forest and the Trees" (1997)
- Joel Best, excerpt from *Social Problems* (2017) excerpts.
- Emile Durkheim, excerpt from *Suicide* (1897).
    - Table: Suicide rates by country, 2018.
    - Table: American states with high and low suicide rates, 2012.
- Opioid Epidemic Video
- Jonathan Gabe and Michael Bury, Drug Dependence as a Social Problem (1 page excerpt).pdf
- Andrew Cohen, "How White Users Made Heroin a Public Health Problem," *Atlantic Monthly* 12 August 2015
- Gene Demby, Codeswitch: Race and Redlining: Housing Segregation in Everything, National Public Radio (video), 2018
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WEEK TWO: Social Problems Process – Experts and the Media

Why do behaviors that were once seen as rare or as not especially dangerous come to be seen as social problems? Most people would answer: when people discover how dangerous or widespread the behavior is. Sociologists argue, however, that often people already know that the behavior is dangerous and widespread. And sometimes, in fact, the behavior is *not* dangerous or widespread—people just come to think it is like witchcraft. So, sociologists talk about the "discovery" of social problems as a process. In that process, *claimsmakers* bid to gain recognition of the problem. We ask: why those particular claimsmakers? Why at that moment rather than earlier or later? And when are claimsmakers successful in gaining wider attention for the social problem?

In lecture, I will talk about the discovery of several social problems affecting children: the discovery of child abuse in the 1960s, missing children in the 1970s, and the sexual abuse of children by day care workers in the 1980s. Kai Erikson draws on Emile Durkheim to make a surprising claim. Social problems and crimes like the ones I just described occur at a time when a society's shared values are in question. Identifying and prosecuting the crimes, in turn, allows a society to redefine its moral boundaries. In this section, you will consider this argument in relation to two empirical cases: a crisis of witchcraft that gripped the early American colonists, and the daycare sex abuse cases that gripped Americans in the 1980s.

Much of what people know about social problems comes from the media. Should we trust the media's claims about the existence, scope, seriousness, and urgency of social problems? Should we worry about media bias? If so, what are the sources of media bias? And is media bias becoming worse? What is "fake news," and should we worry about it?

In lecture, I will discuss three ways in which the media may make it difficult to grasp the true seriousness and causes of social problems. I'll argue that bias may lie less in reporters' personal prejudices than, ironically, in the very routines that news media have developed to be *objective*. And I will argue that the polarization we see in today's media may reflect less the fact that Americans are politically divided and more the demands of good business.

Reading:

- Kai Erikson, *Wayward Puritans* (Macmillan, 1966), excerpts
- Dorothy Rabinowitz, "From the Mouths of Babes to a Jail Cell," *Harper's Magazine*, May 1990
- Joel Best, "From Incidents to Instances: The Media Discover Wilding and Freeway Violence," in *Random Violence* (Univ. Calif. Press, 2000).
- Tobias Rose-Stockwell, "This Is How Your Fear and Outrage Are Being Sold for Profit," *Medium*, July 14, 2017.

WEEK THREE: Social Movements

Think about the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the "Dreamers," the marriage equality movement, the Alt Right, the MeToo movement, Occupy, Black Lives Matter, the Sunrise movement, and the protests in Hong Kong. In each one, large groups of people mobilized to gain wider recognition for a social problem and policy to address it. Social

movement scholars ask: Why do movements emerge when they do? Why do people participate in movements? When do movements succeed in achieving their goals? And how do contemporary movements look different from past ones?

In lecture, I will talk about how scholars have sought to answer these questions, focusing primarily on the civil rights movement. The article by Caren describes the main theories that sociologists use to account for the rise of social movements. In section, you will discuss how well those theories help to explain the rise of the Dreamers, as well as other movements that interest you.

Readings:

- Neal Caren, "Political Process Theory," *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* (2007)
- Walter J. Nicholls, *The DREAMers: How the Undocumented Youth Movement Transformed the Immigrant Rights Debate* (Stanford Univ. Press, 2013), chs. 1, 2.
- Arian Campo-Flores and Joshua Jamerson, "Black Lives Matter Paved Way for Shift," *Wall Street Journal,* 19 June 2020: A.1.
- BLM reading (see Canvas).
- Reading on cultural/institutional consequences of social movements.

WEEK FOUR: Public Opinion

There is considerable evidence that immigrants, including undocumented ones, commit less crime than native-born Americans. And yet, in spite of that evidence, many Americans believe that immigrants bring crime with them. This week, we will explore why it is often so difficult to change people's minds about a social problem (our own minds, included!). As much as we would like to believe that our own views are carefully considered, most of the time, they are not. And as much as we would like to believe that when confronted with compelling evidence, we will alter our views, most of the time, we do not. So the question is: under what conditions *do* people change their minds? Are you more likely to accept the need for vaccinations for young children if you see statistics on just how rare it is for people to suffer side effects from vaccinations or if you read the story of a young boy who died because he was not vaccinated? Are you more persuaded by an article in *Scientific American* about vaccination or by the character in your favorite TV series who decides to vaccinate her child?

In lecture, I will talk about research that has examined opinion formation and opinion change. We will consider the experience of Derek Black, a young man who profoundly changed his opinions. What was Derek Black up against when he began to rethink his beliefs that white Americans were facing the prospect of genocide? We will discuss the growing political and ideological rift forming in America and how it can potentially be overcome.

Readings:

- Sara Gorman and Jack Gorman, "Confirmation Bias," in *Denying to the Grave: Why We Ignore the Facts that Will Save Us* (Oxford, 2017).
- Eli Saslow, "The White Flight of Derek Black," *Washington Post*, 15 October 2016
- Polarization reading (see Canvas).
- Conspiracy reading (see Canvas).

WEEK FIVE: Policy and Implementation

Although Americans are divided on many issues, there are also many on which we agree. Almost all of us agree that people should have access to medical care, that children should have a decent education, and that our food should be safe to eat. The question, then, is why policymakers seem so unable to guarantee those things. This week, we will consider sociological perspectives on why policymakers so rarely pass legislation capable of solving social problems. Karl Marx did not write much about policymaking, specifically, but he did offer an ambitious analysis of the capitalist system and the place of government in it. To anchor our discussion, we will watch the film, *Food Inc*., which is a documentary about the production of the food Americans eat. Even if you have seen the film, I would like you to see it again, this time, with sociological, and specifically, Marxist, ideas in mind.

In spite of all the obstacles to passing policies that are intended to combat inequality, policymakers sometimes do pass such policies. They do pass laws that are intended to address social problems. And then professional administrators are charged with putting the heralded reforms into effect. Why do the reforms often not live up to expectations? Why do they sometimes make things even worse? This week, we will consider a surprising answer. The sociologist Max Weber believed that our modern world was becoming more and more formally *rational*. That should be a good thing, right? But Weber alerted us to the dangers of formal rationality, and more specifically, to the danger of turning values into numbers. In "Wrong Answer," Rachel Aviv describes what happened when a policy reform intended to help schools better serve poor children required that teachers turn the value of education into a number.

- Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 473-483.
- Benjamin Page and Martin Gilens, *Democracy in America?* (2017)
- Film: Food Inc

- Anthony Thomson, "Max Weber on Rationality and Bureaucracy," *The Making of Social Theory* (Oxford, 2010).
- Clip Atlanta Cheating Scandal.

- RECOMMENDED BUT NOT REQUIRED: 'It's Just Everywhere Already' How Delays in Testing Set Back the U.S. Coronavirus Response, New York Times, March 2020.pdf

FINALS WEEK:

Your Short Paper is due at 11:59pm PST Tuesday, July 27th.

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