SOCIOMETRY 208
CONTEMPORARY THEORY AND RESEARCH

Fall 2011
Wednesday 10-12, WJH 601

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Course Overview

Sociology 208 has four principal goals:

1) to convey a general understanding of how sociology developed as a discipline within the milieu of 20th-century America and to trace the development of the main theoretical traditions in American sociology

2) to consider the role of mechanisms in sociological theorizing

3) to examine cultural and structural explanations of empirical phenomena

4) to give students more experience in analyzing how sociological theory is employed in empirical research.

American sociology is distinct in having evolved in the 20th century as a highly empirical social science, often in the service of trying to find solutions to contemporary social problems. As 21st-century sociologists we now find ourselves in the situation of not sharing one dominant, overarching paradigm, nor do we necessarily agree on an accompanying set of shared assumptions about the determinants of human action or the most fruitful units of analysis. Sociological research and journals—as well as the structure of the discipline’s main professional association in the U.S., the American Sociological Association—tend to be organized by substantive area (e.g. inequality, crime, collective action, organizations, education, labor markets, culture, economic sociology, gender, historical sociology, urban sociology, etc.). It is often the case that a variety of theoretical approaches co-exist, happily or not, within a given substantive area and often cut across substantive areas as well. Moreover, the boundaries between theory and method within the sociological discipline in the U.S. have become increasingly blurred. Some sociologists view this as an unproblematic development while others regard it with some distress.

We begin the semester with the question of how a theory “works”, especially with regard to how a theory specifies or implies the mechanisms that lead to human action and how sociologists choose to conceptualize the “sociological actor”. We then turn in the second part of the course to an overview of the path that American sociology followed in the 20th century. Here we consider the key roles played by several departments (Chicago, Harvard, Columbia) in defining the central questions of the discipline and in championing particular types of sociological theory to address them. In the third part of the course we look more carefully at the contrasts and
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complementarities between theoretical perspectives that privilege structure and those that privilege culture. In doing so, we move to the third purposes of the course: analyzing how contemporary sociologists employ sociological theory in their empirical work.

Course Requirements

You are expected to carefully read the assigned texts before we meet in class and to participate actively in class discussions. You should come to class having identified the main questions that scholars are raising, the assertions they are making, and any underlying assumptions you can discern in their arguments. As in Sociology 204, you are required to submit a 1-2 page précis of the readings each week. This should be posted in the course dropbox at least 24 hours in advance of the weekly class meeting.

You will have two longer writing assignments. The first will be a review and analysis (“synthesis paper”) of a group of theoretically-related articles (in one of weeks 9-13 in the course). The second will be a longer paper in which you apply theoretical concepts or hypotheses to an area of interest to you; I will refer to this as the “theoretical application” paper. You will write two drafts of this latter paper—one for the purposes of presentation and critique by a classmate, and a revision that incorporates the feedback from this critique and that of the instructor. The final version of the theoretical application paper will be due on December 9.

Grading

Your course grade will be determined as follows:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class participation</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weekly précis of readings</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Synthesis paper</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critique</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theoretical application</td>
<td>30%</td>
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Readings

All readings listed on the syllabus are required. They are available on the course website: [http://isites.harvard.edu/k64382](http://isites.harvard.edu/k64382).

SEMESTER SCHEDULE

PART I. SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY AND SOCIAL MECHANISMS

Week 1 (September 7) Introduction

*NOTE: Graduate courses that meet only on Wednesdays do not officially begin until September 7. Please read and be prepared to discuss the following for our class meeting on that day:


[Read if you are interested: Gabrielle Ferrales and Gary Alan Fine. 2005. “Sociology as a Vocation: Reputations and Group Cultures in Graduate School.” The American Sociologist 5: 57-75.]

Week 2 (September 14) Social Mechanisms, Micro-Macro Linkages


Week 3 (September 21) What is a Sociological “Actor”? Assumptions in Sociological Theorizing


PART II. SOCIOLOGY IN AMERICA: A BRIEF HISTORICAL TOUR

Week 4 (September 28) American Sociology from the Late 19th Century through the Rise of the “Chicago School”


**Weeks 5 and 6 (October 5, 12)** Harvard: Parsons vs. Homans

**October 5: Parsons and Structural Functionalism**


**October 12: Homans and Beyond—Individual Actions and Social Exchange**


Week 7 (October 19)  The Columbia School and Its Legacy: Merton, Coleman, and Rational Choice Theory


Week 8 (October 26)  Market Processes and Social Influences


Week 9 (November 2)  Discussion of Theoretical Application Paper Drafts

→ First draft of research proposal due in course dropbox by 6 PM Sunday, October 30; Brinton to randomly assign a discussant for each paper

In class: Summary and critique of first drafts of theoretical application papers
( Class format: Discussants to be randomly assigned; each summary and critique=10 mins.)
PART III. STRUCTURE, CULTURE, AND IDENTITY

Week 10 (November 9) Gender: Structure, Culture, and Ascription


Week 11 (November 16) Structural and Cultural Bases of Networks and Social Support


Week 12 (November 23) Pre-Thanksgiving holiday (no class)

Week 13 (November 30) Structural and Normative Explanations for Macro-Level Outcomes: The Empirical Puzzle of “Lowest-Low” Fertility


Mary C. Brinton. Grant proposals to NSF and CGP.
