



Shanghai Jiao Tong University

S0905 Social Problems

Term: May 29 – June 23, 2017

Instructor: Rae L. Blumberg

Home Institution: University of Virginia

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Class Hours: Monday through Friday, 120 minutes each day

Discussion session: 2.5 hours each week

Total Contact Hours: 66 contact hours (45 minutes each, 3000 minutes in total)

Credit: 4 units

Course Description

The central aim of this course is to develop your ability to “think sociologically” about social conditions that are deemed “social problems.” Heiner, the author of our main textbook, is an expert in how certain issues or occurrences become defined as “social problems” and others do not. We begin with his *sociological* perspective, contrasted with other explanations, such as *human nature* and *free will*. Heiner places great emphasis on problems linked to inequality, particularly in capitalist societies and especially in the U.S. So we take a quick look at our two closest relatives, bonobos and chimps, as well as pre-capitalist societies, which enables us to clarify the relative strengths of sociological vs. non-sociological approaches to social problems. We then examine Inequality and Capitalism; Inequality of Life Chances in the U.S., Problems of the Family (with some added material on gender in both the inequality and the family chapters), Crime & Deviance, Problems of the Environment and Conclusions. In both the book and in class, we consider these issues not just in America but more broadly in both the Global North and Global South. Heiner’s book does not deal with many current social problems, so each student can explore another issue you consider socially problematic for extra credit.

Course Goals

1. Understand his “critical constructionism”: he sees social problems not as inherently bad but constructed as bad by a significant number of people or a number of significant people;
2. Understand that his theory & those of free will and human nature/biological determinism cited in Ch. 1 differ from research on bonobos, chimps & hunter-gatherers that we review;
3. Understand that he sees many U.S. social problems as linked to inequality arising from its very strongly capitalist system (compared to most nations), which favors elites;



4. Understand his view that inequality in life chances for U.S. racial minorities and women & also in health and education is also affected by U.S. capitalism;
5. Understand his view of social problems affecting families and children and the additional “deep history” research presented in class that broadens our perspective on these issues;
6. Understand his detailed look at crime and deviance and their link to U.S. inequalities;
7. Understand his close look at environment problems and their link to corporate capitalism;
8. Study his conclusions and deepen your “sociological imagination” about social problems.

Required Text

Heiner, Robert, *Social Problems*, 5th Edition. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. Other readings will be supplied on the course online site or sent as attachments to emails to our class listserv. There will be PowerPoint handouts for most lectures.

Grading Policy

- 15% First week quiz
- 20% Second week quiz: midterm exam
- 15% Third week quiz
- 15% “What I Have Learned” exercise (serves as partial review for final quiz)
- 25% Final quiz/second exam (post-midterm material)
- 10% Classroom engagement (attendance,* attention, participation in discussions)
- 3% Extra credit will be offered, e.g., for a brief analysis of another social problem.

* Attendance is **required**, given the four-week schedule, and a doctor’s excuse or equivalent will be needed for any absence. Any unexcused absence may impact a student’s grade and two unexcused absences may be grounds for failing the course.

| Number grade | Letter grade | GPA |
|--------------|--------------|-----|
| 90-100 | A | 4.0 |
| 85-89 | A- | 3.7 |
| 80-84 | B+ | 3.3 |
| 75-79 | B | 3.0 |
| 70-74 | B- | 2.7 |
| 67-69 | C+ | 2.3 |
| 65-66 | C | 2.0 |
| 62-64 | C- | 1.7 |
| 60-61 | D | 1.0 |
| ≤59 | F (Failure) | 0 |



Course Schedule:

In the 1st week, we consider Heiner's well-known approach to social problems: "critical constructionism." Ch. 1 contrasts his sociological explanation with two other theories, free will and human nature/biological determinism. But he doesn't consider the broader picture so we look at what he leaves out: what research says about (1) our closest relatives (which share ~99% of our DNA), bonobos and chimpanzees, and (2) anatomically modern humans, Homo sapiens, who emerged in Africa ~200,000 years ago, and lived as egalitarian, relatively peaceful hunters-gatherers (until quite recently, in fact). Friday there's a quiz on this, following a review (sample questions are given out Thursday). We end the week by beginning Ch. 2, looking at the link between corporate capitalism and inequality in the U.S.

In the 2nd week, we start with the rest of Ch. 2. Then we expand our angle of vision to learn about what preceded the rise of capitalism, the factors involved in its rise and its role in today's world economy/world ecology. As in the 1st week, the cross-cultural/historical chapters that supplement Heiner's views are short, easy readings from my first book. We end the week with his Ch. 3 on unequal life chances in the U.S., which he links to corporate capitalism. He considers race, gender, education and health. Friday, the second quiz/midterm is given after we go over sample questions and a review. His views on gender in the U.S. today are useful but his assertions about male supremacy throughout history don't jibe with a broad array of research so we read a short article on that for Monday.

In the 3rd week, on Mon., after reviewing the gender article, and on Tue., we read his Ch. 4 on the family. We supplement his views on children and on family systems with additional lecture materials. As before, we have discussions based on small groups (who can discuss in Chinese) who then share their conclusions with the class. Wed. and Thu. we study what is often the central chapter in other social problems texts, crime and deviance. Heiner's Ch. 5 discusses it in "critical constructionist" terms. He explains the specifics of the U.S. justice system in a more comprehensive manner than is found in most social problems books. We also have our third quiz on Fri. and end the week considering the first half of Ch. 6 on the environment; he again presents richer material than found in most social problems textbooks..

In the 4th week, Mon. is devoted to the last half of Ch. 6. On Tue., we go through Ch. 7, the Conclusions. On Wed., students who did extra credit by looking at another social problem share their work and on Thu. everyone brings in their "What I Have Learned" exercise, which also helps prepare you for the exam. This is given on Fri., the last day of class, after going through sample questions and a review. The exam will cover post-midterm materials only. Note: there will be a weekly small group discussion by students; each group then shares its main conclusions with the class. PowerPoints will be passed out and study questions will be provided before all quizzes and the 5th week exam.



Weekly Schedule:

WEEK ONE (May 29 – June 2)

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| Mon: Introductions; Course overview | Mon night read Heiner (H), Ch. 1 |
| Tue: H, Ch. 1, Intro | Tue night read De Waal, pp. 1-top of 19 |
| Wed: Bonobos, chimps & humans; discussion | Wed night read Blumberg, Ch. 1, 2, pp. 1-22 |
| Thu: Hunting-gathering & rise of cultivation | Thu night read H, Ch. 2, pp. 25-43 |
| Fri: Ch. 2, Inequality & Capitalism I | For Mon, review all materials for 1 st quiz |

WEEK TWO (June 5 – 9), MODERN INEQUALITY & DIVERSITY

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|---|---|
| Mon: Discussion; 1 st quiz | Mon night read H, Ch. 2, 43-66 |
| Tue: Ch. 2, Inequality & Capitalism II | Tue night read Blumberg, Ch. 4, pp. 33-53 |
| Wed: Growing inequality pre-capitalism | Wed night read Blumberg, Ch. 5, pp. 54-62 |
| Thu: Rise of capitalism & Industrial Revolution | Thu night read H, Ch. 3, pp. 67-82 |
| Fri: H, Ch. 3, U.S. Unequal Life Chances I: race & gender; discussion | For Mon, read H, Ch. 3, pp. 83-101 |

WEEK THREE (June 12 – 16)

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| Mon: 2 nd quiz; H, Ch. 3, II, education & health | Mon. night read H, Ch. 4, 103-118 |
| Tue: H, Ch. 4, Family I | Tue night read H, Ch. 4, pp. 118-135 |
| Wed: H, Ch. 4, Family II, incl. same-sex | Wed night read H, Ch. 5, pp. 136-top of 160 |
| Thu: H, Ch. 5, Crime & Deviance I | Thu night read H, Ch. 5, pp. 160-190 |
| Fri: H, Ch. 5, Crime & Deviance II; 3 rd quiz | For Mon read H, Ch. 6, pp. 191-top of 211 |

WEEK FOUR (June 19 – 23)

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| Mon: H, Ch. 6, Environment I; discussion | 211-231 Mon night read H, Ch. 6, pp. 211-231 |
| Tue: H, Ch. 6, Environment II; discussion | Tue night read H, Ch. 7, pp. 233-248 |
| Wed: H, Ch. 7, conclusions, discussion | Wed night prepare “What I Have Learned” |
| Thu: “What I Have Learned”; review | Thu night study for exam |
| Fri: Review; exam | |

A Note about the Professor

Prof. Blumberg holds the endowed “William R. Kenan, Jr. Professorship (chair) in Sociology” at the University of Virginia. She was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Venezuela and has worked in 47 countries since then, focusing on most aspects of international development and globalization. She has worked in China six times since 1995, carrying out research, giving keynote addresses



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at conferences and teaching summer school at Sun Yat Sen University in Guangzhou and Beijing Normal University. She is the author of over 100 publications. Her classes draw on her international experience; she gives students a “big picture” overview, linking course material on the U.S. with China and other regions and nations. She is the past president of the Sociology of Development Section of the American Sociological Association.

Academic Honesty

Cheating and plagiarism will result in loss of academic credit for the course.

Students are expected to maintain high standards of academic honesty. Failure to abide by this may result in a zero on an exam or even failure in the course.