

ASOC 341: Social Inequality

Fall 2018, class #8602

M/W 2:45-4:05pm

3 credits

Earth Sciences 242

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Office hours: Wednesdays 4:20-5:20pm and Thursdays 2:00-4:00pm (sign up at

<https://www.wejoinin.com/sheets/exdpy>), or by appointment

Teaching assistants:

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

- The Declaration of Independence (1776)

Equality before the law is a foundational principle of U.S. democracy. Yet clearly we are not equal to one another in background, abilities, or opportunities. Some of us are richer. Some of us are smarter. Some of us are healthier. Some of us are better-looking.

The reality of an unequal world has always been in tension with the democratic ideal of equality. The founding fathers who declared all Americans equal didn't mean Blacks or women. Some of them wanted to restrict the vote to property owners. Yet the basic principle of equality they set forth nevertheless remains a powerful guiding force in the United States.

This class will introduce you to sociological facts and theories about inequality, primarily in the U.S. We will spend most of our time talking about three kinds of inequality: economic inequality, racial inequality, and gender inequality. You will learn about what social inequality looks like, now and in the past; major sociological theories and concepts for understanding inequality; institutions that reproduce inequality from generation to generation; and policy efforts to mitigate inequality.

The objectives of this course are for you to:

- Learn about basic patterns and trends in social inequality in the United States
- Be able to apply sociological concepts and theories explaining the causes and consequences of social inequality
- Become better equipped to evaluate media claims about various forms of inequality
- Learn about U.S. social policies aimed at addressing inequality, and develop informed opinions about their desirability and likely effects
- Better understand (and empathize with) how people's social positions affect their life chances

GETTING READY

You will need to acquire two books for this class:

Lareau, Annette. 2003. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (Any edition is fine.)

Edin, Kathryn and H. Luke Shaeffer. 2015. *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Both of these books are available at the Barnes & Noble Campus Bookstore. As of this writing, you can purchase *Unequal Childhoods* for \$9 and *\$2.00 a Day* for \$10, including shipping, on Amazon. Both books will also be placed on reserve in the library.

Other readings will be posted to Blackboard.

GRADING

Your grade for this class will be based on three components.

Short assignments in and out of class (50 points, or 22%). You will have two types of short assignments in this class:

- Take-home assignments turned in via Blackboard. These will be reactions to the reading, applications of concepts from class to your life, analysis of a podcast or video, and the like. You can typically receive up to 5 points for one of these assignments, and you can expect one roughly every other week. Although I do not schedule the full semester of assignments in advance, I will always give you a week's notice before a take-home assignment is due.
- In-class writing and group responses. These may be short reflections or analyses completed in class, or reports from a small group discussion or activity. They are worth typically worth 1-3 points, and most weeks will have one of these.

To allow for some flexibility, I will provide at least 55 points worth of assignments. This allows you to miss a couple days of class with no penalty should there be an in-class assignment.

Assignments must be turned in at the time they are collected (for in-class work) or through Blackboard by the beginning of class (for take-home assignments). There is no credit for late assignments, nor are there make-ups.

Two midterm examinations (50 points, or 22%, each). There will be two in-class midterms, made up of multiple choice, short answer, and essay questions. The midterms will be on Monday, 10/8 and Wednesday, 11/7. The midterms are not cumulative, although the final is. We will talk more about the exams in class, but familiarity with the readings will be critical for success.

Final examination (75 points, or 33%). There will also be a cumulative final exam, structured similarly to the midterms but about 50% longer. About two-thirds of the content of the final will be from the last

third of the semester, with the remaining third covering material discussed earlier in the course. The final exam is Thursday, 12/13 from 3:30-5:30pm in our usual classroom.

Participation can help your grade. While it is hard to give formal participation grades in a larger class, I do strongly encourage verbal participation. In cases where a final grade is on the border between two letter grades, if I know you have been an active contributor in class, that record is likely to tilt your grade upward. Visiting office hours is another way you can demonstrate engagement.

CLASSROOM PROTOCOL

- It is disruptive to arrive after the beginning of class or to leave before the end. Please arrange your schedule to avoid this as much as possible. If you will need to arrive late, or leave early, on a particular day, please inform me in advance.
- Recent research has shown that students learn more and perform better in class when they do not use electronics for notetaking. Since electronic devices are also commonly a distraction (to others as well as the person using them), laptops/tablets are only allowed in this class by prior arrangement. That is, if you really really feel a laptop (iPad, whatever) is critical for your success in class, come talk to me at the beginning of the semester. I may ask you to sit in a particular part of the classroom to ensure the screen is not visible to others. If you haven't discussed it with me in advance, I'll ask you to put away the device. Possible exception: specific days, noted in advance, where we all use laptops/tablets/phones for a class activity.
- Any student who engages in academic dishonesty (plagiarizing from the internet, copying assignments from a friend, etc.) will automatically receive a failing grade on the assignment and may be referred to the University Judicial System, which can administer more serious punishment, including suspension or expulsion.
- If you are struggling for personal or academic reasons, please talk to me sooner rather than later! While everyone has to complete the work to pass the class, I am not totally inflexible with students who are communicating with me and making a serious effort. But I can't do much if you come to talk to me during finals week about how to get from a D to a B+.
- If you are a university athlete or registered with the Disability Resource Center, please come talk to me the first week of class so that we can make appropriate accommodations.

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS

We will be covering the following topics over the course of the semester. Readings and other materials beyond the two required books will be posted to Blackboard. The exact schedule of readings and topics may evolve slightly as the class unfolds.

Introduction to social inequality

Class 1, Mon 8/27 Welcome

Class 2, Wed 8/29 The Great Debate

Is inequality good or bad? Inevitable or a societal choice?

Read:

- Kurt Vonnegut, "Harrison Bergeron" (link on Blackboard)
- John Scalzi, "Straight White Male: The Lowest Difficulty Setting There Is" (link on Blackboard)
- Scott Sernau, "The Great Debate," from *Social Inequality in a Global Age* (on Blackboard)

(I realize you may not have time to complete the reading by Wednesday—prioritize the Vonnegut and Scalzi readings, which are relatively short and we will be discussing in class, and catch up on the Sernau for the next class if needed.)

No class Mon 9/3 (Labor Day)

Class 3, Wed 9/5 Identity, intersectionality, and inequality
What are different kinds of inequality, and how do they relate to each other?

- Finish reading Sernau, "The Great Debate," if needed

No class Mon 9/10 (Rosh Hashanah)

Social class and economic inequality

Class 4, Wed 9/12 What is class? Marx, Weber and Bourdieu

Read:

- *Unequal Childhoods*, Chs. 1-2, plus Appendices A & B
- Gallup, "What Determines How Americans Perceive Their Social Class?" (link on Blackboard)

Class 5, Mon 9/17 Class differences

Read:

- *Unequal Childhoods*, Part I (Chs. 3-5)

No class Wed 9/19 (Yom Kippur)

Class 6, Mon 9/24 Language and class

Read:

- *Unequal Childhoods*, Part II (Chs. 6-7)

No class Wed 9/26 (due to travel)

Class 7, Mon 10/1 Institutions and class

Read:

- *Unequal Childhoods*, Part III (Chs. 8-12)

Class 8, Wed 10/3 Unequal childhoods, unequal adulthoods

Read:

- Annette Laureau, "Cultural Knowledge and Social Inequality" (on Blackboard)

Midterm 1, Mon 10/8

Racial inequality

Class 10, Wed 10/10 Talking race

Class 11, Mon 10/15 Race as a social construction

Read:

- Osagie Obasogie, *Blinded by Sight*, Introduction and Ch. 1 (on Blackboard)
- Pew Research Center, "Race and Multiracial Americans in the U.S. Census" (on Blackboard)

Class 12, Wed 10/17 Racial disparities and discrimination

Read:

- Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan, "Are Emily and Greg More Employable Than Lakisha and Jamal?" (on Blackboard)
- Melvin Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro, "Black Wealth/White Wealth" (on Blackboard)
- Mary C. Waters, "Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities" (on Blackboard)

Class 13, Mon 10/22 Institutional racism

Listen to:

- This American Life, "The Problem We All Live With – Part One" (podcast; link on Blackboard)

Class 14, Wed 10/24 The legacy of segregation

Read:

- Katie Nodjimbadem, "The Racial Segregation of American Cities Was Anything But Accidental" (on Blackboard)

Gender inequality

Class 15, Mon 10/29 Social construction of gender

Read:

- Judith Lorber, "Night to His Day: The Social Construction of Gender" (excerpts from *Paradoxes of Gender*, on Blackboard)

Class 16, Wed 10/31 Gender discrimination

Read:

- Kristen Schilt, "Becoming Men at Work: The Unequal Outcomes of Difference" (from *Just One of the Guys?*, on Blackboard)

Class 17, Mon 11/5 The gender pay gap

Read:

- Philip Cohen, "Gender Inequality" (from *Enduring Bonds*, on Blackboard)

Midterm 2, Wed 11/7

Evolving inequalities

Class 19, Mon 11/12 Global inequalities

Read:

- Branko Milanovic, "The Rise of the Global Middle Class and Global Plutocrats" (from *Global Inequality*, on Blackboard)

Class 20, Wed 11/14 Mobility and meritocracy

- Reading TBA

Class 21, Mon 11/19 The rise of the 1%

Read:

- Emmanuel Saez, "Striking It Richer: The Evolution of Top Incomes in the United States" (link on Blackboard—start w/p. 3, "Original Text...")
- Rachel Sherman, Introduction to *Uneasy Street: The Anxieties of Affluence* (on Blackboard)

Inequality, poverty, and public policy

Class 22, Mon 11/26 Welfare reform and \$2 a day poverty

Read:

- *\$2.00 a Day*, Introduction and Chs. 1-3

Class 23, Wed 11/28 Housing and labor policy

Class 24, Mon 12/3 The social safety net

Read:

- *\$2.00 a Day*, Chs. 4-5 and Conclusion

Class 25, Wed 12/5 Tax policy and redistribution

Class 26, Mon 12/10 Reducing poverty, reducing inequality

- Student-chosen readings

Final exam, Thursday 12/13, 3:30-5:30pm