

Instructor: Prof. Agnes Ku (soagnes@ust.hk) / consultation by appointment (Rm: 3369, lift #13-15)
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UNDERSTANDING SOCIETY

“Ours is a time of uneasiness and indifference ... Instead of troubles – defined in terms of values and threats – there is often the misery of vague uneasiness; instead of explicit issues, there is often merely the beat feeling that all is somehow not right. Neither the values threatened nor whatever threatens them has been stated; in short, they have not been carried to the point of decision. Much less have they been formulated as problems of social science.” (C. Wright Mills 1959, The Sociological Imagination)

“(T)he discovery of sociology can change your life. It can help you to understand better the social forces you confront, the forces that constrain and free. This understanding has a liberating potential: By examining these forces you can stand somewhat apart from at least some aspect of society, and thereby exert more creative control over your own life.” (James Henslin, adapting from Peter Berger 1963, Invitation to Sociology)

I. COURSE DESCRIPTION

The course introduces students to some basic sociological concepts, theories and perspectives. It addresses a broad range of social issues at the core of sociology including socialization, deviance, family, gender, class inequalities, education and politics. It invites students to look at these issues afresh and critically through the lens of the sociological imagination, and to relate sociology to their life experiences as well as the social context.

II. INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES

Upon completion of the course, students should be able:

- (1) To demonstrate basic knowledge of the key sociological concepts and perspectives;
- (2) To explain and analyze a wide range of social issues including deviance, gender inequality, family changes, class inequality, education, power, politics and so on; &
- (3) To apply some basic sociological concepts.

III. MODES OF LEARNING/ASSESSMENT

Quiz I	15%
Quiz II	15%
Final exam	45%
Essay	25%

The quizzes and final exam are in the format of MC questions, which include contents drawing on the lectures, assigned readings (see Section V) and class videos (available on Canvas>Pages). The questions shall test students on (i) their understanding of the course materials, and (ii) their ability to apply sociological concepts to selected examples.

※ **Quiz I** covers Introduction, Culture & Socialization, Deviance, and Sociological Theory. (Sociological Theory is a sub-topic attached to the topic of Deviance.)

※ **Quiz II** covers Family and Gender (including one assigned reading – see Section V).

※ **Final Exam** will cover the remaining topics (including one assigned reading – see Section V): Economy and Class Inequalities, Education, as well as Power & Politics.

Make-up arrangement not encouraged. Please refrain from scheduling job interviews or other activities on the dates of the quizzes and the exam. A make-up exam will only be arranged on medical or exceptional grounds, in which case you must contact us prior to or on the day of the exam and present proof.

※ **Essay:** You are also required to submit an essay of 600-800 words at the end of the semester. The task is to write a sociological response paper on one of the given articles or class videos (Deadline: May 17, Saturday, 11:59pm. See more details on p.5).

IV. CONTENTS AND SCHEDULE

Wk	Tuesday	Thursday
1	[03/02] Introduction	[05/02] Culture and Socialization
2	[10/02] Deviance	[12/02] Deviance
3	[17/02] Deviance	[19/02] Deviance
4	[24/02] Deviance	[26/02] Deviance; Sociological Theory
5	[03/03] Family	[05/03] Family; Gender
6	[10/03] Gender	[12/03] Gender (+ QUIZ I)
7	[17/03] Family & Gender (video show)	[19/03] Economy & Class Inequalities
8	[24/03] Economy & Class Inequalities	[26/03] Economy & Class Inequalities
9	[31/03] Economy & Class Inequalities	[02/04] <i>{mid-term break}</i>
9	[07/04] Economy & Class Inequalities (+ QUIZ II)	[09/04] Economy & Class Inequalities
10	[14/04] Education	[16/04] Education
11	[21/04] <i>{holiday}</i>	[23/04] Education; Power & Politics
12	[28/04] Power & Politics	[30/04] Power & Politics
13	[05/05] <i>{holiday}</i>	[07/05] Power & Politics

Lecture Notes & PPTs

Detailed lecture notes will be available on Canvas. A supplementary student version of the PPTs containing additional contents and examples will also be available on the course website.

V. ASSIGNED READINGS (required, to be included in quizzes & exams)

The following readings highlight certain sociological ideas and illustrate them with examples pertinent to contemporary society. Try to grasp the key sociological ideas, issues and arguments discussed in the readings.

- **[To be included in Quiz II]** Henslin, J. 2007. “On Becoming Male: Reflections of a Sociologist on Childhood and Early Socialization.” *Down to Earth Sociology: Introductory Readings*. New York: Free Press.
- **[To be included in the Final Exam]** J. L. Waters. 2006. “Geographies of Cultural Capital: Education, International Migration and Family Strategies between Hong Kong and Canada.” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 31 (2), pp.179-192. (extracts)

VI. ASSESSMENT CRITERIA & GRADING POLICY

Scores for the assessed activities as well as feedback will be communicated via Canvas within three weeks of submission. Students who have questions may consult the TAs within one week after the release of the scores.

Grade	Grade Descriptor	Elaboration
A	Outstanding/ Excellent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demonstrates a profound understanding of course materials • demonstrates the ability to apply sociological concepts to all or most of the examples • explains concepts & ideas effectively (in the essay) • shows depth and originality (in the essay)
B	Very Good/ Good	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demonstrates a very good/ good understanding of course materials • demonstrates the ability to apply sociological concepts to a good number of examples • explains concepts & ideas clearly (in the essay)
C	Satisfactory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demonstrates an adequate grasp of course materials • demonstrates the ability to apply sociological concepts to some examples • explains concepts & ideas adequately (in the essay)
D	Marginal Pass	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demonstrates a weak grasp of course materials • demonstrates a weak ability to apply sociological concepts to selected examples • explains concepts & ideas poorly (in the essay)
F	Fail	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fails to adequately understand course materials • fails to fulfill a significant portion of course requirements

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to adhere to the university’s academic integrity policy that requires you to uphold HKUST’s Academic Honor Code and maintain the highest standards of academic integrity. Please refer to Academic Registry for the University’s definition of plagiarism and ways to avoid cheating and plagiarism.

VII. RECOMMENDED READINGS (optional)

The following recommended readings are meant to help you better understand the lecture contents and provide references for your essay writing. They will not be included in the quizzes or the exams.

1. Introduction: The “Sociological Imagination”

- J.C. Alexander and K. Thompson 2008. *A Contemporary Introduction to Sociology – Culture and Society in Transition*, London: Paradigm, pp. 7-13.

Culture & Socialization

- Haralambos and Holborn 2004. *Sociology*, pp. vi-xi
- Henslin, *Down to Earth Sociology* (chapter by Henslin, “On Becoming Male”) (Also for Reading Quiz I)

2. Deviance

- Haralambos and Holborn. 2004. *Sociology*, pp. 330-351, 353-355

Supplementary

- Howard Becker.1953. “Becoming a Marihuana.” *American Journal of Sociology*, 59 (3), pp.235-242.

3. Sociological Theory

- Haralambos and Holborn 2004. *Sociology*, p. xiv-xxi, pp. 934-950, 961-964

4. Family

- Haralambos and Holborn 2004. *Sociology*, 466-470, 478-488, 494-500

5. Gender

- Haralambos and Holborn 2004. *Sociology*, pp 98-115, 126-137
- Henslin, *Down to Earth Sociology* (chapter by Thorne and Luria, “Sexuality and Gender in Children’s Daily Worlds”)

6. Social and Class Inequalities

- Bilton et al. 2002, *Introductory Sociology*, chapters 4 & 5 (pp.70-94, 98-127)

7. Education

- Haralambos and Holborn 2004. *Sociology*, pp. xxvi-6, 692-694, 698-706, 731-756

8. Power and Politics

- Haralambos and Holborn 2004, pp. 538-559

Recommended Books for the Course

Haralambos, M., and M. Holborn. 2004. *Sociology - Themes and Perspectives*. London: Collins. (Note: The latest edition contains very minor changes.)

Bilton, T., K. Bonnett, P. Jones, D. Skinner, M. Stanworth and A. Webster. 2002. *Introductory Sociology*. London: Macmillan.

Henslin, J. 2007. *Down to Earth Sociology: Introductory Readings*. New York: Free Press.

Johnson, Allan G. 1997. *The Forest and the Trees - Sociology as Life, Practice, and*

Promise. Temple University Press.

Essay Assignment (25%)

Write a sociological response paper on one of the following topics *in relation to the assigned article or class video* (#1-#6). The response paper should include two parts:

- (A) Explain the social phenomenon addressed in the article/ video with reference to certain sociological concepts or theories you have learned from the course.**
[You must NOT copy directly from the article.]
- (B) Relate the discussion to your personal experience or your observation about the society.**

The deadline is May 17, Saturday, 11:59pm.

(*File format: Word or PDF named as follows – “student name_student ID”, such as “Chan Tai Tai_12345678.” Such information should also be typed in the document.)

Topics:

1. Subculture
[VIDEO] *Lolita Subculture*
2. Deviance
[VIDEO] *Youth Gang*
3. Gender Socialization
[ARTICLE] Henslin, J. 2007. “On Becoming Male: Reflections of a Sociologist on Childhood and Early Socialization.” *Down to Earth Sociology: Introductory Readings*. New York: Free Press.
4. Class Inequalities
[VIDEO] *Poverty Line*
5. Education
[ARTICLE] J. L. Waters. 2006. “Geographies of Cultural Capital: Education, International Migration and Family Strategies between Hong Kong and Canada.” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 31 (2), pp.179-192. (extracts)
6. Power & Politics (Housing Issues)
[VIDEO] *Home for Whom*

Access to the articles and the class videos can be found in the file "Essay (Articles & Videos)". If your essay exceeds the word limit, the acceptable range is 100 words maximum; alternatively, you may put the extra contents in the footnotes. Samples of sociological writing have been uploaded for your reference.

AI Policy

The use of generative AI to assist your learning is permitted under the conditions that proper acknowledgement is provided, and the use does not replace your own work.

Introductory Lecture

I. Nature vs Nurture (Culture)?

II. “Sociological Imagination” (C.Wright Mills 1959)

-An awareness of the relationship between personal experience and the wider society

- private troubles ↔ public issues (e.g. poverty; unemployment; “unsuccessful” students)

-*Do not take things for granted!* (i.e. Don’t ever believe that what you see at present is the natural or the only way of behaving or organizing social relationships. There always are alternatives.)

-Sociology encourages you to develop a *debunking* attitude toward social phenomenon (i.e. a critical attitude that exposures falseness and pretensions).

Sociological Focuses:

- the recurring patterns in people’s attitudes and action
- how such patterns are formed culturally, socially, economically and politically
- how such patterns vary across time, societies, & social groups (e.g. classes)
- how such patterns generate social inequalities (e.g. gender inequality) & social conflicts