

Social Stratification and Poverty¹

Spring 2015

SOC 3170

*Department of Sociology
Bowling Green State University*

Class Time: Monday, Wednesday and Friday 1:30-2:20 PM

Location: Eppler Center, Room 223

Instructor: Michael Strand

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1. What this Course is About... and why we're just going to call it "social inequality" from now on

Who gets what and why? This is the central, motivating question of research on social inequality. While precisely who the "who" is in this statement, and "what" exactly they are getting and "why" remains to be determined (as we will see), this question essentially covers everything that we will read and discuss in this class. Sociologists have long been concerned with this question, and it is not a stretch to say that social inequality forms a kind of nucleus for the entire discipline. Beyond the fact that the wealth of literature in the field is absolutely huge (that's an understatement), nearly every piece of sociological

¹ This document serves as a general plan for the course and will likely change throughout the semester. Any deviations from the current document will be announced in class and on the course website.

research, regardless of what it is actually about, can be related in some way to social inequality and the question “who gets what and why?”

Concern with social inequality is not, however, limited to sociologists. In recent years, public concern for it, as sparked by the 2007-08 financial crisis and its aftermath (“The Great Recession”), has reached a fever pitch, with slogans like “the 1%,” “the 99%,” “Wall Street versus Main Street,” and “squeezing the middle class” resonating throughout the country.

Beyond the rhetoric, however, there seems to be something very real that is driving our shared concern with social inequality: the fact that inequalities involving the distribution of wealth and income (“the what”) have increased *dramatically* over the last 30 years, with the rich getting richer and everyone else staying the same or getting poorer (“the who”). When combined with growing levels of poverty over the same period and the appearance of new and unexpected kinds of inequality (involving race and gender in particular) not found in other countries, much of what we would *like* to believe about American society (e.g. that it is just and fair, and that the “American Dream” is available to anyone willing to work hard enough) has been severely challenged. It is not inaccurate, then, to consider social inequality, in all its various forms, to be one of “the defining challenges of our time.”

This course provides a broad introduction to the topic of social inequality (“who gets what and why?”), considering it both conceptually and empirically from a number of different perspectives. We will cover (in essentially this order) theories of social inequality, elites, poverty, racial and gender inequalities, discrimination, the structural determinants of inequality, the attainment process, social mobility, the consequences of inequality, college and inequality, what can be done about inequality, and finally the value of inequality (whether it is good or bad).

The goal of this course is to provide students with a comprehensive overview of research (mainly sociological) on social inequality in American society. By the end of this course, students will have improved their writing skills, improved their ability to deal critically with information, improved their knowledge of sociological theories and methods, and gained a comprehensive, social-scientific understanding (“just the facts please...”) of a topic with enormous political and moral importance.

2. Course Requirements

Here is what will be required of you in this course:

(1) Two Exams

Midterm examination on Friday, March 6

Final examination during Finals Week

These exams will consist of T/F, multiple choice and short answer/essay. They will draw from both the course readings and lecture/in-class discussion. They will be open-note exams.

The midterm will be worth 20% of your grade and will cover material from the first half of the class. The final will be worth 30% of your grade and will cover material from the entire semester.

(2) 5 (of 6) Section Papers

The course is divided into 6 sections: (1) Theories and Concepts, (2) Elites and Poverty, (3) Racial and Gender Inequalities, (4) Structure and Attainment, (5) College and Inequality, and (6) What is to be done about inequality?. On the last day of each section (usually a Friday), I will post a writing prompt to the course website related to what we've read and discussed in that section. You will be asked to write a 2-3 page (double-spaced) response in which you draw from (and cite!) the course readings and in-class discussion to answer the prompt. Your paper will be due the following week on Tuesday at noon.

You will be required to submit 5 of these papers (you can miss one). If you submit less than 5, each missing paper will be counted as a 0.

Your average score on the 5 papers is worth 40% of your final grade

(3) Participation

This course will only be interesting if you actively participate in it. To help motivate you to do this, I will quantify your level of participation in the following way: Did I normally see this person's face in class? Did this person sometimes talk in class when the opportunity arose? Did this person submit the homework assignments I periodically assign? Did I have to ask this person more than once to put away smartphone, laptop, or other *illegal* (in this classroom on MWF from 1:30-2:20 PM) tech device during class? If I can answer "yes" to the first three questions, and "no" to the last question, you will get 100% participation grade. If I *can't* answer yes to them, or if I can answer yes to the last question, then you will get something lower than 100% participation grade.

Participation is worth 10% of final your grade

Other points to mention about grading

Late/Makeup Work:

It is your responsibility to make sure that all assignments are turned in on time. With the

exception of previously approved absences, late assignments will never be accepted for full credit. Grades will be marked down one percentage point for each hour the assignment is late. If you know that you cannot make a certain deadline, please contact me *beforehand* so that we can work together (assuming you have good reason to miss the original deadline) to consider alternative options for completion.

Disputed Grades:

Contact me in writing if you feel that you have been incorrectly awarded a particular grade on a class assignment. Include a paragraph describing: (a) how your work fulfills the course objectives outlined in the syllabus; (b) why your work is deserving of a higher grade; (c) what texts and page numbers in the required readings you based your paper's content and argument on; (d) what you think your grade should be. If I think your request has merit, then we can meet in person to further review your assignment and discuss the validity of your current grade. However, this meeting will come only after my reevaluation of the assignment in question.

Extra-Credit:

In rare situations there might be opportunities for extra-credit. I must approve each individual request, so you should contact me well before the end of the semester if you think you might need extra-credit.

3. Other Course Policies

1. Code of Academic Conduct

All Bowling Green students are responsible for compliance with the Academic and Student Codes of Conduct. Academic honesty violations include cheating, forgery, bribery or threats, fabrication, plagiarism, and facilitating academic dishonesty. The BGSU Student Handbook provides a great deal of detail on the Codes of Conduct and academic honesty violations. For violations with lesser penalties, a course instructor at BGSU has the discretion to determine guilt and impose sanctions *as high as removal from the course and an assignment of WF (withdrawn–failed)*. Violations carrying greater penalties are handled by the academic dean; at the *most lenient*, such violations lead to suspension from the university.

2. Academic Honesty

All work must be your own. Do not cheat on exams. Do not copy off of other people's exams. Do not submit others peoples' papers. Do not directly copy material without appropriate citation. Claiming someone else's work as your own is a violation of academic honesty. This is not an introductory course, and you are expected to know and follow appropriate academic standards of citation. If you have any doubts about how to conform to standards of academic writing and test taking, consult BGSU's resources including information at the Learning Commons and at the Library (e.g., <http://www.bgsu.edu/colleges/library/assistance/page41070.html>).

3. Laptop computers, cell phones, tablets and other tech stuff in class

Per Department of Sociology policy, use of laptop computers, cell phones and other “tech stuff” is *strictly forbidden* during class meetings, unless they are involved in an in-class assignment. If you have a medical excuse to use one of these devices, please bring the excuse to me so I can verify it. Otherwise, no student should use a laptop, phone, tablet, or other tech thing in class. If you do this, you will be immediately asked to leave and this will count as an unexcused absence.

4. Prerequisites:

All students must have taken and passed SOC 1010 “Principles of Sociology”

4. To do well in this course....

Here are a few tips to help you do well in this course:

- You have to have a **tolerant attitude** toward what we will read and talk about. Social inequality is a controversial issue. Sociology tries to bring a scientific, that is to say, a politically and morally *neutral* approach to it (“just the facts please...”). But the answers it gives and the facts it provides about inequality can often be interpreted as supporting one political point of view and not another. Given the potentially controversial material we will be reading and discussing, I ask that you to be tolerant of the opinions of others during our class discussions.
- You have to be prepared to **change your mind** and to **listen** to what sociology has to say. Even if you have already formulated opinions about social inequality, this course may be (very) interesting for you because it might help you to change or more effectively defend and understand your beliefs.
- That said, in order for this to work you need to have some **openness** about arguments that might not conform to what you already believe.
- Finally, you have to dedicate some **perspiration** to trying to understand what is a very complex and difficult issue in American society. The readings, lectures, handouts, statistics (etc) are available for you, but it is up to take advantage of them.

More concretely, in order to be successful in this class ... You should *read*. You should *take notes as you read*. You should be prepared to *talk in class and ask questions about what you’ve read*. And you should be able to *summarize, in writing, the main points of what you’ve read and construct coherent arguments about it*. Please note here that all of these “keys to success” involve **reading**. The main point I want get across: **if you do the**

required reading, you will be successful in this class. You should be prepared to set aside at least 5-6 hours of work (that's reading and writing) for this course every week.

Given that the exams are open-note, an obvious tip is that you **show up to class and take notes.**

You should also come to class ready to engage with (having read and thought about... at least a little bit) the required material during the in-class discussions and lecture. My educational psychologist friends tell me that this is by far the best way to prep for exams.

5. Course Resources

There are two required texts for this course:

(1) David Grusky and Szonja Szelenyi (eds). 2011. *The Inequality Reader: Contemporary and Foundational Readings in Race, Class and Gender*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press. ISBN: 9780813344843

(2) Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton. 2013. *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. ISBN: 9780674049574

I will also post readings (as PDFs or weblinks) to the course website.

6. Course Website

We will be using the normal Canvas website for this course (...unless it doesn't work, which it hasn't in the past). If something changes, I will let you know.

7. Course Schedule

TIR = *The Inequality Reader*

PPF = *Paying for the Party*

Jan 12 – *Class Introduction: What is Social Inequality? Why Care About It?*

SECTION 1: THEORIES AND CONCEPTS

Jan 14 – *Theorizing Inequality: Division of Labor*

Reading:

- Emile Durkheim, “The Division of Labor in Society” (Canvas)

Jan 16 – *Theorizing Inequality: Class*

Reading:

- Karl Marx “Classes in Capitalism and Pre-Capitalism” (TIR)
- Erik Olin Wright, “Class Counts” (TIR)

Jan 19 – no class

Jan 21 – *Theorizing Inequality: Status*

Reading:

- Max Weber, “Class, Status, Party” (TIR)

Jan 23 – *Concepts to Live By (for this semester)*

Reading:

- Charles Tilly, “Changing Forms of Inequality” (Canvas)
- Gerhard Lenski, “Two Laws of Distribution” (Canvas)

SECTION 2: ELITES AND POVERTY

Jan 26 – *The Power Elite*

Reading:

- C Wright Mills, “The Power Elite” (TIR)

Jan 28 – *Portrait of the 1%*

Reading:

- Chrysta Freeland, “The Rise of the New Global Elites” (Canvas)

Jan 30 – *Elites of a Different Kind*

Reading:

- David Brooks, “Bobos in Paradise” (TIR)
- Shamus Khan, “The New Elitists” (Canvas)

Feb 2 – *Elite Identities and the Legitimation of Inequality*

Reading:

- Shamus Khan, “Elite Identities” (Canvas)

Feb 4 – *Park Avenue, or The Difference between Rich and Poor*

Reading:

no reading

Feb 6 – *The World of the Poor*

Reading:

- Timothy Sneed, “Poorer by Comparison” (TIR)
- Elijah Anderson, “The Code of the Street” (Canvas)

Feb 9 – *Explanations of Poverty*

Reading:

- Harrell Rodgers, “Why Are People Poor in America?” (Canvas)

Feb 11 – *Segregation and “the Neighborhood Effect”*

Reading:

- Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, “American Apartheid” (TIR)
- William Julius Wilson, “Jobless Poverty” (TIR)

Feb 13 – *The Working Poor*

Reading:

- Barbara Ehrenreich, “Nickel-and-Dimed” (TIR)

SECTION 3: GENDER AND RACIAL INEQUALITIES

Feb 16 – *On Racial Formation*

Reading:

- Michael Omi and Howard Winant, “Racial Formation in the US” (TIR)

Feb 18 – *Racial Inequalities in an Era of Mass Incarceration*

Reading:

- Bruce Western, “Incarceration, Unemployment and Inequality” (TIR)
- Devah Pager, “Marked” (TIR)

Feb 20 – *Discrimination or Social Structure?*

Reading:

- Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan, “Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal?” (TIR)
- William Julius Wilson, “The Declining Significance of Race” (TIR)

Feb 23 – *On Gender Formation*

Reading:

- Judith Lorber, “The Social Construction of Gender” (TIR)

Feb 25 – *Gender Inequalities and the “Wage Gap”*

Reading:

- Trond Peterson and Laurie Morgan, “The Within-Job Gender Wage Gap”
- Paula England, “Devaluation and the Pay of Comparable Male and Female Occupations” (TIR)

Feb 27 – *Discrimination or Social Structure?*

Reading:

- Pamela Stone, “Getting to Equal” (TIR)
- Jerry Jacobs and Kathleen Gerson, “The Time Divide” (TIR)
- Shelley Correll et al, “Getting a Job” (TIR)

Mar 2 – *Making Sense of Discrimination*

Reading:

- Barbara Reskin, “Rethinking Employment Discrimination and Its Remedies” (TIR)

Mar 4 – *Review day*

Mar 6 – **Midterm Exam**

SPRING BREAK

Mar 9 – no class

Mar 11 – no class

Mar 13 – no class

SECTION 4: STRUCTURE AND ATTAINMENT PROCESSES

Mar 16 – *Global Economic Changes*

Reading:

- Robert Perrucci and Earl Wysong, “The Global Economy, the Privileged Class and the Working Class” (Canvas)

Mar 18 – $R > P =$ *Growing Inequality*

Reading:

- Thomas Piketty, TBA (Canvas)

Mar 20 – *Social Mobility*

Reading:

- David Featherman and Robert Hauser, “A Refined Model of Occupational Mobility” (TIR)
- Jan Jonsson et al, “It’s a Decent Bet That Our Children Will be Professors Too” (TIR)

Mar 23 – *The Attainment Process: Predicting the Life-Course*

Reading:

- Peter Blau et al, “The Process of Stratification” (TIR)
- David Harding et al, “Family Background and Income in Adulthood, 1961-1999” (TIR)

Mar 25 – *Cumulative Advantage*

Reading:

- Annette Lareau, “Unequal Childhoods” (TIR)
- James Atlas, “Super People” (Canvas)

Mar 27 – *Ain’t No Makin It*

Reading:

- Jay MacLeod, “Ain’t No Makin It” (TIR)

Mar 30 – *Unnatural Causes*

Reading:

no reading

Apr 1 – *Digital Inequality*

Reading:

- Eszter Hargittai, “The Digital Reproduction of Inequality” (TIR)

Apr 3 – *Politics and Inequality*

Reading:

TBA

SECTION 5: EDUCATION AND INEQUALITY

Apr 6 – *Education and Social Mobility*

Reading:

- Ralph Turner, “Sponsored and Contest Mobility and the School System” (Canvas)

Apr 8 – *Navigating College*

Reading:

- “Introduction” (PFP)

Apr 10 – *The Party Pathway*

Reading:

- “Socialites, Wannabes, and Fit with the Party Pathway” (PFP)

Apr 13 – *Blocked Mobility and the Professional Pathway*

Reading:

- “Strivers, Creaming and the Blocked Mobility Pathway” (PFP)
- “Achievers, Underachievers and the Professional Pathway” (PFP)

Apr 15 – *Is College Worth It?*

Reading:

- “College Pathways and Post-College Prospects” (PFP)

Apr 17 – *What Should College Be?*

Reading:

- “Politics and Pathways” (PFP)

SECTION 6: WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

Apr 20 – *Ameliorative Solutions*

Reading:

- Joshua Cohen and Charles Sable, “Flexicurity” (TIR)

Apr 22 – *Institutional Solutions*

Reading:

- James Heckman, “Skill Formation and the Economics of Investing in Disadvantaged Children (TIR)
- Robert Frank, “The Pragmatic Case for Reducing Income Inequality” (TIR)
- David Labaree, “The Winning Ways of a Losing Strategy” (Canvas)

Apr 24 – *Transformative Solutions*

Reading:

- Jake Rosenfeld, “Little Labor” (TIR)
- Frances Fox Piven, “The Nature of Disruptive Power” (Canvas)

Apr 27 – *Debating Inequality*

Reading:

- Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore, “Some Principles of Stratification” (TIR)
- Alan Krueger, “Inequality, Too Much of a Good Thing” (TIR)

Apr 29 – Debating Inequality

Reading:

- Melvin Tumen, “Some Principles of Stratification: A Critical Analysis”
- Claude Fischer et al, “Inequality by Design (TIR)

May 1 – Review day

May 4-9 Finals Week