

Syllabus: Recognizing Inequality

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Social and economic inequality has become a persistent trope in media and public policy discourse. These tend to be high-level discussions full of statistics and distinctions between income, class and status. This course takes these themes and brings them down to a micro level – the everyday lives of individuals.

Objective: In this course we will investigate various manifestations of social inequality as we pursue two overarching goals: 1) learning to identify areas of inequality in our everyday lives and 2) learning to question the assumed mechanisms underlying social processes. We will grapple with a number of sociological questions that are crucial to understanding differences in wages, educational attainment, health and other social outcomes. How are social groupings created? Why do they persist? How are they justified? What are the implications of creating social groups? The primary objective of this course is for you to think deeply about these questions. It will be my job to convince you that they are question worth thinking about.

Inequality is ubiquitously present in our everyday lives, but we don't often take time to recognize that it's there. Differences between groups across a range of outcome measures—from education, to wages and promotions, to housing, to cultural consumption—indicate the existence of inequality. Once we start to notice these gaps and disparities it behooves us to ask why these differences exist and what we can or should do to reduce or eliminate them. Recognizing disparities and developing plausible explanations for why they exist is integral to creating a more equitable and egalitarian world. On a more practical note, these are skills that can be applied in fields as diverse as public policy, non-profit work and entrepreneurship.

Rationale: Inequality is a central concept in the field of sociology and, consequently, there are a number of classical and contemporary approaches to understanding the differential distribution of valued goods. These areas of research also provide insight into the social processes by which inequality comes to be seen as legitimate, natural, or desirable. We appear to be entering a new era of change not just in the amount of inequality but also in the types of inequality. The processes that generate and maintain inequality have consequences for lifestyles, consumption practices, and life chances. The foregoing changes invite fresh study into the types of social inequality in the United States and thought into whether these new and different forms of inequality are desirable or not.

Assessment and Evaluation: Since the course is designed around the goals of being able to identify and understand the mechanisms underlying inequality, the assignments are intended to help you think about these processes. There will be two short assignments and a final paper. The first assignment asks you to identify an incidence of inequality in your everyday life and to observe how you and those around you responded. Where did you notice the incidence of inequality? How did you respond? How did others around you respond? The second assignment asks you to suggest some plausible reasons why you think this inequality exists. Why do incidents of this sort of inequality occur? What are one or two alternative explanations? How

might it be related to other forms of inequality that you've seen? The final paper asks you to put these two skill sets together and also suggest what sorts of policies might be implemented to respond to the inequality. How would the policies change the way that people relate to each other? What changes would need to happen in order for the policy to be effective?

Notice that over the course of the term you will identify, analyze and solve a problem—exactly the same process that you probably go through in your everyday lives (and will certainly encounter in the working world). However, you'll have the opportunity to engage in this process systematically. Sociology is about understanding the ways the people relate to each other; recognizing, and analyzing various types of social inequality is an integral part of that process.

Note that the shorter assignments can be used to lead into the final paper, but it is not imperative that they do so.

Short assignment 1 (15%):

Identify inequality in your everyday life (2-3 double-spaced pages)

Short assignment 2 (15%):

Suggest a mechanism that may generate inequality (2-3 double-spaced pages)

Final Paper (50%):

Identify an area of inequality in your everyday life

Suggest two possible explanations for this inequality

Suggest a policy (via government, education, social exchange, etc.) that might help alleviate the problem (if there is a problem) or enhance the distinction (if you believe that the inequality is a force for good)

(6-8 double-spaced pages)

Each of these assignments is intended to help you think more deeply about the questions that lie at the heart of the course. How are social groupings constructed? Why do they persist? How are they justified? What are the implications of creating social groups? The assignments work backwards, first asking you to think about implications of social groupings (assignment 1) and then asking you about the origins of those groupings (assignment 2). The final paper is your opportunity to bring the story together to generate a logical and plausible explanation for the social outcomes we see.

Participation (20%):

I hold students to a high standard with respect to contributing to the classroom experience.

Therefore you should come to class prepared and ready to discuss the readings and questions for each class.

In class, be fully engaged: listen and respond to me and (more importantly) the other students. Life is about dialogue, so forming and expressing your opinion in discussion is one of the most important skills you can develop.

The fact that class participation is graded can lead to anxiety. Rest assured that your participation

is not graded on whether you provide the right answers, but rather on whether you contribute to a constructive conversation. Please treat each other with civility and respect during our discussions—there are no dumb questions and it's ok to give the wrong answers.

Books

There are no required books for this course. Readings will be posted on the Coursework site or distributed in class.

Additional Policies and Available Resources:

- 1) The instructor will not accept late assignments unless an extension has been asked for and granted in advance. No exceptions or excuses—I promise to come prepared to teach each day and expect the same accountability from my students.
- 2) Email policy: I will get back to you within 24 hours. I'll usually get back to you sooner, but allow 24 hours for any question over email. As a general rule, I don't respond to emails sent after 10 pm (... yeah, I go to bed early).
- 3) In this seminar format each student is integral to class discussion and student learning. Consequently, missed classes will be reflected in the participation portion of your grade—more than three unexcused missed classes will result in a zero for the participation grade.
- 4) Stanford University's policy on academic integrity applies in this course. Please be honest in your contributions in your written work and, of course, cheating and plagiarism are unacceptable. Your grade and your university standing can be affected by such actions.
- 5) Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: <http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oae>)
- 6) Though this is not a “writing” course *per se*, the course requires some academic writing. The Hume Writing Center offers a variety of services related to the writing process. We can all improve our writing and this center is an excellent resource for students of all ability levels. (<http://swc.stanford.edu>).

Course Outline: Note the discussion questions for each week. Think about these as you're reading and come prepared to discuss them.

Week 1: What is inequality?

Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore. “Some Principles of Stratification,” *American Sociological Review* 10 (April 1945), pp. 242-49.

Alan B. Krueger. “Inequality, Too Much of a Good Thing,” in *Inequality in America*, edited by Benjamin M. Friedman. MIT Press.

Melvin M. Tumin. "Some Principles of Stratification: A Critical Analysis," *American Sociological Review* 18 (August 1953), pp. 387-394.

What do you think stratification is? (Come to the first class prepared to provide a definition.)
What do you think inequality is? (Come to the first class prepared to provide a definition of this too!)

Is inequality an inevitable feature of human social life?

Is all inequality problematic?

Week 2: Common (and less common) forms of inequality

For Monday:

Jerry A. Jacobs. "Detours on the Road to Equality: Women, Work, and Higher Education." *Contexts*, Volume 2, Number 1 [Winter], 2003, pp. 32-41.

Joe R. Feagin. "The Continuing Significance of Race: Antiblack Discrimination in Public Places" in *American Sociological Review* 56 (February, 1991).

What are the major forms of inequality in the present day US?

What types of social processes and state policies serve to maintain or alter racial, ethnic, and sex discrimination?

For Wednesday:

James H. Kunstler. "The Evil Empire" in *The Geography of Nowhere*. Available on Google Books

Joyce W. Fields. 2007. "Harry Potter, Benjamin Bloom, and the Sociological Imagination." *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 19:167-177. (You only need to read the "Stratification and Social Inequality" section, though you're welcome to read the whole article if you want.)

What was the last book you read for fun that exhibited stratification or inequality?

How did those processes play out?

Week 3: Trends in inequality (short assignment #1 due)

For Monday:

Gary Burtless. "Crisis No More." *Pathways*, Summer 2010.

For Wednesday:

Assignment 1 Due

Jake Rosenfeld. "Little Labor." *Pathways*, Summer 2010.

Arlie Russell Hochschild. "The Nanny Chain." in *American Prospect*. Stanford, 2000.

How frequently do individuals cross social boundaries?

Are educational degrees, social contacts, or "individual luck" increasingly important forces in matching individuals to social positions?

Week 4: Mechanisms

For Monday:

Annette Lareau. Chapters 1 and 2. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Come to class with an explanation (i.e. story, narrative) for one type of inequality that we've discussed. [No need to write it out, just come prepared to discuss...]

What do you think causes various types of inequality (e.g. race, gender, class)?

What mechanism did Lareau find to cause differences in behavior between the middle and lower classes?

Week 5: What are the implications of inequality?

For Monday:

Elinson, Zusha. 2013. "Few consequences exist for drivers who kill pedestrians." In *San Francisco Chronicle*. San Francisco.

Williams, Timothy. 2011. "As Public Sector Sheds Jobs, Blacks Are Hit Hardest." in *New York Times*. New York.

Wise, Tim. 2013. "Tim Wise on White Privilege and the Boston Marathon Bombing." In *War Times*. www.war-times.org.

How are the lifestyles, attitudes, and personalities of individuals shaped by their social groups? Are there identifiable "class/gender/racial cultures" in the US today?

For Wednesday:

McIntosh, Peggy. "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack."

Earlham College students. "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack II."

In what ways/contexts do you experience privilege?

In what ways/contexts do you experience the downside of inequality?

Week 6: Less common forms of inequality (short assignment #2 due)

For Monday: Assignment 2 due

--No reading for this week (you deserve a little break)! Just work on the short assignment below...

Suzanne Collins. *The Hunger Games*. Watch excerpts in class.

Come to class with a list of three social groups that we have not yet covered and the types of inequality they might face.

Why do you think these inequalities exist?

Have you seen discrimination or expressions of inequality against groups you wouldn't have expected?

Week 7: Resolving inequality

For Monday:

Robert Frank. "The Pragmatic Case for Reducing Income Inequality." *Pathways*, Winter 2008, pp. 25-27.

Joshua Cohen and Charles Sabel, "Flexicurity." *Pathways*, Spring 2009, pp. 10-14.

For Wednesday:

David Brooks, "The Harlem Miracle." *New York Times*, May 7, 2009

James J. Heckman. "Skill Formation and the Economics of Investing in Disadvantaged Children." *Science* 312, June 2006, pp. 1900-1902.

What might we do to reduce inequality in various domains?

There are examples in the readings of things we have tried to do in the US. Do you think these attempts have been effective?

Week 8: Concluding thoughts and inequality in the future (final paper due)

Monday: NO CLASS (ASA Conference)

For Wednesday:

Final paper due!

Charles Murray. "Poverty and Marriage, Income Inequality, and Brains." *Pathways*, Winter 2008.

Lane Kenworthy. "How Rich Countries Lift Up the Poor." *Pathways*, Fall 2011, pp. 28-32.

Will inequality regimes take on new and distinctive forms in the future? What forms?

How might we combat them?