

SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES (SO101)
TISCH 204
SPRING 2016
MWF 12:20 AM-1:15 PM

Andrew M. Lindner

Office: Tisch 220, (518) 580-5446

E-mail: alindner@skidmore.edu

Office hours: MW 3-5pm (schedule an appointment in advance at <https://alindner.youcanbook.me/>)

Introduction

We are all fundamentally social beings. Much of who we are, what we believe, and how we act is based on what we've learned from the people and institutions we encounter, including our families, peers, and schools. Because most of us spend our entire lives in society, we naturally know quite a lot about it. We know the basic rules of everyday life in our particular milieu within society. But too often, unthinkingly, we assume that our particular circumstances are the same for everybody. Compared with this kind of "common sense," which can be riddled with assumptions, sociology offers a way of thinking about society and human behavior that is more systematic and scientific. By examining all aspects of society – from large institutions (e.g., the mass media, religion, governments) to patterns of intimate interpersonal interaction – and comparing across cultures, we can better understand whether our experiences are universal or unique to us.

Using what is called the *sociological imagination*, this semester, we will consider the ways in which the individual is shaped by society at all stages during the life course. Evaluating evidence gathered through several methods of scientific inquiry used by sociologists, students will also critically examine a variety of social problems, particularly race, class, and gender inequalities. In keeping with Skidmore's strategic goal of preparing students to be "informed, responsible citizens," we will consider the ways we can contribute to social change in a highly structured and seemingly unalterable society.

This course will cultivate several skills that will be of use to students in the future. First and most importantly, students will be encouraged to think creatively and approach readings in the spirit of critical inquiry, digging deep into texts and challenging assumptions. Secondly, students will develop literacy with several different social science research methodologies that are frequently used in an increasing number of occupations, including the fields of business, government, law enforcement, and the non-profit sector. Finally, students will be expected to put complex ideas into coherent language through regular writing assignments. Training students to be great writers is one of the fundamental hallmarks of a liberal arts education and well-honed writing skills empower students to articulate their thoughts clearly.

Learning Outcomes

Students completing SO101 should be able to:

1. Describe key sociological ideas and theories.
2. Critically use key sociological ideas and theories to understand lived experience and social issues.
3. Describe and evaluate arguments.
4. Critically interpret findings of qualitative and quantitative research.
5. Analyze the effects of stratification on lived experience and life chances.

Required Texts

Conley, Dalton. 2013. *You May Ask Yourself* (3rd Edition). New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Company.

Khan, Shamus. 2012. *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Other readings for the course are available on the course's Blackboard site (<http://learn.skidmore.edu>).

Requirements

Developing sophisticated insights about society and good suggestions to help solve social problems requires careful reading, reflection, and writing. To promote learning in these areas, your progress in this course will be measured in several ways. The following are the course assessments:

1. **Scholarly Attitude** (15%) – Most faculty members evaluate “participation” as a part of students’ course grades. But mere “participation” – how much you do or don’t talk, sit up or fall asleep – isn’t really what most of us want from our students. Instead, most of us hope to see students accept our invitation to “the life of mind” by adopting a “scholarly attitude.” Having a “scholarly attitude” involves developing intellectual curiosity and a genuine engagement with the ideas presented in the course. Students with a scholarly attitude take the student role seriously and demonstrate their commitment to academic pursuits by actively engaging in the material, reflecting deeply on the readings, raising thoughtful questions and comments in class, bringing unsolicited materials to share that are directly relevant to the topics being covered, come early and/or stay late to raise their own questions about the material, and generally go above and beyond the requirements of the course. Students who lack a scholarly attitude passively complete the readings and responses, occasionally engage in other activities during lecture (playing with phones, texting, daydreaming, and so on), and are primarily concerned with obtaining a particular grade in the course. I will send you a course grade report after each of the exams that includes a current scholarly attitude score.
2. **Online Quizzes** (15%) – Students will demonstrate their reading and comprehension of the required readings by completing open-book quizzes through the course Blackboard site. It is the student’s responsibility to look ahead on the course’s Calendar and complete all exams and quizzes prior to class on the due date. Students are free to work ahead and complete these assignments at any time prior to the deadline. For this reason, no late quizzes will be accepted.
3. **Four Research Memos** (25%) – Students will complete four research memos from a list of twelve possible assignments (see attached assignment sheet). Each will be approximately 750 words in length and will actively engage students in sociological thinking and data collection. Memos are due on staggered dates according to last name (see assignment sheet). All assignments should be printed and submitted in class.
4. **Three Exams** (45%) – There will be three non-cumulative exams on March 7, April 13, and during the final exam period. Exams will include multiple choice and short essay questions.

Summary:

15% Scholarly Attitude

15% Online Quizzes

25% Research Memos

45% Three Exams

100% Final Grade

Grades:

94%-100%	A	90-93%	A-	87-89%	B+
84-86%	B	80-83%	B-	77-79%	C+
74-76%	C	70-73%	C-	67-69%	D+
64-66%	D	60-63	D-	<60	F

Course Policies

Disabilities: If you are a student with a disability and believe you will need academic accommodation, you must formally request accommodation from Meg Hegener, Coordinator for Student Access Services. You will also need to provide documentation which verifies the existence of a disability and supports your request. For further information, please call 580-8150 or stop by the office of Student Academic Services in Starbuck Center. I would also encourage you to communicate with me about any accommodations well in advance of exams and due dates.

Electronic Devices: Unless directed to do so, I expect that students will not use laptops or other electronic devices in class. Many studies have shown that people are extremely poor multi-taskers. Looking at Facebook, Twitter, Wikipedia, etc. or even doing Google searches that may seem relevant all distract from lecture and discussion. Moreover, most people retain information better when taking handwritten notes. If you feel that your learning will be hampered by not having access to your laptop for note-taking or other legitimate purposes, please speak to me privately. Otherwise, keep your laptop as well as your cell phone and any other devices will be turned off and stowed away during class.

Late Policy: Online quizzes not completed prior to the deadline will receive a zero. For the research memos, your grade will be reduced by one unit for each day late (e.g., 1 day, from A to A-; 2 days, B+; 3 days, B, and so on). *After two weeks from the due date, you will receive a zero for the assignment.*

Missed Exam: Students who will miss an exam date due to an official school absence must schedule an alternative exam date and time *in advance*. As a general rule, I do not allow students with unscheduled exam absences to reschedule. In extreme circumstances, a make-up exam will be given at my discretion and I reserve the right to change the format.

Cheating and Plagiarism: By enrolling at the college, all students have agreed to abide by the *Skidmore Honor Code*, which says, "I hereby accept membership in the Skidmore College community and, with full realization of the responsibilities inherent in membership, do agree to adhere to honesty and integrity in all relationships, to be considerate of the rights of others, and to abide by the College regulations." Part of that code means not to misrepresenting others' work as your own. Please review the detailed description of the rules and regulations surrounding cheating and plagiarism as described in the *Skidmore College Student Handbook* (http://www.skidmore.edu/student_handbook/honor-code.php). If you are unclear on what

constitutes plagiarism and/or cheating, please discuss it with me in advance of due dates or exams. In the case of a violation, the offending student will receive a zero (“F”) for the assignment and I am required to report all offenses to the Dean of Academic Studies, which may result in disciplinary action. Please don’t let this happen!

Civility and Respect: The *Skidmore Honor Code* also has important implications for how students ought to treat each other. This course will include discussions of class, nationality, religion, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. I expect students to show respect toward all the subjects of our study. More importantly, I expect you to treat your classmates and your instructor with respect and dignity at all times – especially when you disagree with them.

Course Outline

All listed readings are required. The readings are listed using the following shorthand: (C) *You May Ask Yourself* (Conley), (K) *Privilege* (Khan), and (E) available electronically on Blackboard. Please let me know immediately, if you have difficulty accessing the electronic files.

Week 1: The Sociological Imagination

- Jan. 25 Introductions
- Jan. 27 What is Sociology?
(E) “The Promise,” an excerpt from *The Sociological Imagination* (Mills)
(E) “The Roseto Mystery,” an excerpt from *Outliers* (Gladwell)
- Jan. 29 The Sociological Imagination
(C) Ch. 1

Week 2: Sociological Thinking

- Feb. 1 Cumulative Advantage
(E) “The Matthew Effect” (Gladwell)
- Feb. 3 Agency and Structure
(E) “The 10,000 Hour-Rule” (Gladwell)
- Feb. 5 Theories Become Variables
(C) Ch. 2

Week 3: Social Science Research

- Feb. 8 Logic of Elaboration
Come to class with handout completed
- Feb. 10 Surveys, Experiments, and Fieldwork
(E) “Sense and Nonsense about Surveys” (Schuman)
(E) “The Promise and Pitfalls of Going into the Field” (Adler and Adler)
- Feb. 12 Value Free Science and Research Ethics

Week 4: Culture

- Feb. 15 What is Culture?
(C) Ch. 3 (pgs. 75-94)
- Feb. 17 Norms and Sanctions
(C) Ch. 6 (pgs. 189-197)
- Feb. 19 **NO CLASS MEETING**

Week 5: Social Interaction

- Feb. 22 Socialization
(C) Ch. 4
- Feb. 24 Culture and Life Chances
(K) “Introduction: Democratic Inequality” + Ch. 1 (“The New Elite”)
- Feb. 26 Roles and Statuses
(K) Ch. 2 (“Finding One’s Place”)

Week 6: Structuring Culture

- Feb. 29 Lessons at the Top
(K) Ch. 3 (“The Ease of Privilege”)
- March 2 Lessons at the Bottom
(E) “The Black-White Test Score Gap” (Farkas)
- March 4 Exam Review

Week 7: Exam #1 and Communities

- March 7 Examination #1
- March 9 Field Trip – Meeting place TBA
- March 11 Structuring Cities
(E) “The Rise and Fall of Mass Rail Transit” (Feagin and Parker)

*****SPRING BREAK*****

Week 8: Social Capital and Networks

- March 21 Social Capital
(C) Ch. 5
- March 23 Social Capital Cont’d
- March 25 Networks and Organizations
(E) “Using metadata to Find Paul Revere” (Healey)

Week 9: Stratification

- March 28 The Age of Inequality
(C) Ch. 7 (pgs. 240-252)
- March 30 Conceptions of Class
(C) Ch. 7 (pgs. 252-277)
- April 1 Meritocracy and Mobility
(E) “In Climbing Income Ladder, Location Matters” (Leonhardt)

Week 10: Capitalism and The Economy

- April 4 Marx and the Market
(C) Ch. 14 (pgs. 537-549)
- April 6 The Corporation
(C) Ch. 14 (pgs. 549-571)
- April 8 Getting into College
(K) Ch. 5 (“Learning *Beowulf* and *Jaws*”) + Conclusion

Week 11: Exam #2 and Introduction to Race

- April 11 Exam Review
- April 13 Examination #2
- April 15 The Social Construction of Race
(C) Ch. 9 (pgs. 325-350)

Week 12: Racial Inequality

- April 18 The Structure of Racial Inequality, Then and Now
(C) Ch. 9
- April 20 Lived Experiences of Race
(E) Excerpt from *Whistling Vivaldi* (Steele)
(E) “Florida Teen's Killing: A Parent's Greatest Fear” (Dade)
- April 22 The Underclass and Poverty Policy
(C) Ch. 10

Week 13: The Welfare State/Gender Inequalities

- April 25 The Welfare State
(E) “The Secret to Finland's Success With Schools, Moms, Kids—and Everything”
(Khazan)

April 27 Sex and Gender
(C) Ch. 8 (pgs. 279-300)

April 29 Inequalities at Work and at Home
(C) Ch. 8 (pgs. 300-323)

Week 14: Gender Inequalities

May 2 Gender and Sexuality in Childhood
(K) Ch. 4 (“Gender and the Performance of Privilege”)
(E) “Boyhood, Organized Sports, and the Construction of Masculinity” (Messner)

Exam Week

TBA Final Exam

Research Memo Assignments

The following research memo assignments serve four key course objectives: 1) to stimulate critical, sociological thinking about society, 2) to provide students with opportunities to further develop their analytic writing skills, 3) to introduce students to a range of social scientific methods, and 4) to ensure deep reading of required texts. From the assignments listed below, students will choose four (4) to complete for their memos. There is no additional advantage to be gained from completing more than four; only the first four will be graded.

Like a memo you might write in a workplace, I expect all assignments to be typed and to use clear, fluid prose, free of spelling and grammatical errors. Each memo should be approximately 750 words in length (or about two pages double-spaced). *Successful memos will engage directly with that course readings and show evidence of original sociological thought.*

Students have been divided up into three groups by last name and group due dates are staggered as follows:

A-H: Feb. 12, March 4, March 23, April 18

I-P: Feb. 17, March 11, March 30, April 25

Q-Z: Feb. 22, March 11, April 6, May 2

1. **Roseto and the Sociological Imagination:** Visit <http://www.city-data.com> and look up your hometown's detailed profile. From the many facts available, choose three statistics that you believe help describe your town. Create a clean and concise table (or tables) presenting these statistics. Based on the data and your experiences, how does Roseto compare to your hometown? What are some similarities and/or differences in the lifestyles of their residents and in their inhabitants' life chances? If it is similar, does it have the same positive health outcomes? Why or why not? Is a town like Roseto possible today? Why or why not? How does Gladwell's Roseto story connect with Mills' concept of the sociological imagination?

2. **Interview an Outlier:** The readings for this week reveal both structure (limitations) and agency (free will) in society. Interview someone who excels in any field (e.g., sports, music, academics, etc.) about the secrets to their success. Help them estimate how close they come to meeting Gladwell's 10,000-Hour Rule. Does your outlier attribute her/his abilities to inborn skill, hard work, coaching, parents, practice, etc.? Reflect on whether her/his answers are sociological or individual. Does s/he tend to emphasize structure or agency? Try to think about how Gladwell would think about the person. How and why is your analysis the same or different?

3. **Research Methods Analysis:** For this assignment, find an article that interests you from the past four years in one of the following academic journals: *American Sociological Review*, *American Journal of Sociology*, *Social Problems*, *Social Forces*, *Sociological Quarterly*, or *Sociological Perspectives*. Read the article carefully and write a summary of the article that answers all of the following questions:

- What is the main research question or hypothesis?
- What is the author's theory (or explanation of the causal mechanism)?
- What of data is it?
- Where does the sample come from?
- What is the larger population?
- What is the unit of analysis?
- How were the data analyzed?
- What conclusions does the author reach?

Be sure to write the summary *in your own words*; do not try to simply rephrase the abstract (I will know). After describing the study, discuss any shortcomings or limitations the study may have. What important questions remained unanswered?

Warning: Some articles in these journals use advanced statistical techniques and language that may be unfamiliar to some students. Try to choose an article that you are comfortable with and come see me in advance if you need help interpreting it.

4. Breaching Experiment: For this assignment, you will conduct a breaching experiment, deliberately violating a norm to observe your own and, working with a partner, others' reactions. In choosing a norm to violate, try to choose something legitimately deviant (e.g., college students can get away with a lot without people taking it seriously). Be creative, but also be safe and legal. You may violate any norm you choose, as long as you don't risk harming yourself or others. For example, you should NOT do anything that involves breaking a law, disrupting a class or public event, sexual behavior or sexually explicit speech, taking something that is not yours, or saying something that is threatening or hurtful to others -- such norm violations will result in a score of zero. Have a partner observe your act of deviance and take notes on others reactions (it can be hard to observe others while doing the act yourself). In the memo, describe the act itself, why you chose it, why it is perceived as deviant, and how people around you reacted (verbally and non-verbally). Did you do anything to avoid negative judgments from others? Did you find it exciting or intimidating to violate a norm? What do you think it would be like to be deviant or stigmatized on a long-term basis?

5. Gender in the Toy Store: An important means of gender socialization is through toys. Visit a local toy store and examine the available products. Many of the toys will be clearly aimed at boys and other ones will primarily target girls (hint: the pink ones). Some toys may not have an obvious gender profile. Do a brief inventory of the store, taking note of the type of lessons connected with the gendered toys. Interview a parent about what considerations factor into toy purchasing decisions. What role do the parent and the child play in choosing the toy? Are there some types of toys that the parent prefers not to buy? Some parents may react defensively if they feel you're suggesting that they're raising their child to be gender stereotypical. So, ease into any questions about the kind of lessons about gender that the toys may communicate. Write a memo comparing your own perspective of the role of toys in gender socialization with the view of the parent you interviewed.

6. Neighborhoods Photo Essay: We will spend time in class discussing urban, traditional suburban, and sprawl modes of planning communities. Create a collection of photographs that demonstrate how the social organization of two different neighborhoods affects their residents. Visit two structurally and architecturally different neighborhoods in the Capital District area (for example, downtown Saratoga Springs, Center Square in Albany, or near the mall in Wilton). Aim for the areas to be diverse. In each location, take three (3) photographs that reflect what life is like for residents of that neighborhood. Then, construct a photo essay (be creative!) presenting the pictures with a one paragraph description next to each picture, explaining what valuable insights we can glean from that photo. The point here is to consider how the design of neighborhoods affects the lives of people who live in them. How do people in that neighborhood get from place to place? Where do they eat or buy things? What do they do for recreation? How safe does it seem? Does the neighborhood make the people or do the people make the neighborhood? These are all potential areas of focus.

7. Social Mobility Interview¹: Conduct an interview with someone (other than your family members) about an experience of social mobility in their family, upwards or downwards.

¹ Assignment designed by Matthew Lindholm (Concordia College)

Identify the events that led to the experience of mobility (illness, getting a degree, divorce, getting a significant promotion, losing a job, etc.). What problems or issues did the change in fortunes bring for this family (regardless of whether the movement was up or down)? Did it solve problems? How? Reflect on your interview subject's perspective. How might her/his class status affect her/his view of mobility? What, if any, assumptions does your interview subject make?

8. Home County Economy: For this assignment, students will use the Small Area Income & Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) data from the Census to study the economy of their home county. Visit the following web site: <http://www.census.gov/did/www/saipe/data/interactive/>. Using the interactive form, look up *the percentage of people in poverty* ("All ages in poverty") and the *median household income* in your own home county for each year from 1999 through 2012 (come see me in advance of the due date if you need help). Translate your median household income estimates into "real dollars" (i.e., adjust for inflation) using this tool on the Bureau of Labor Statistics website: <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl>. Create two graphs demonstrating any changes in median household income and the percentage in poverty in the years between 1999 and 2012. Then, in your research memo, describe the patterns in poverty and buying power in your home county and consider what might explain any changes. If there are no changes, what explains the stability? Do you think life is going to get better or worse for people in your home county? Did these data surprise you? Why or why not?

9. Interviews at a Soup Kitchen: Volunteer at a local soup kitchen or homeless shelter. Examples include Shelters of Saratoga, Code Blue Saratoga, WAIT House, etc. For this assignment, you can opt to focus on either: 1) the staff and organization providing the food or 2) the guests. If the first, have conversations with at least two staff members: What motivates them to be involved? How do they view the guests? What issues do the guests face in making a decent life in the city? How do they view the volunteers? The role of the church in providing this charity service? The role of the government in addressing the underlying social problems? If you choose to focus on a guest(s), give a demographic overview of who comes for the meal (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, etc.). Interview at least one of the guests along any of the following lines of inquiry. Start out by making friendly small talk, asking them what their lives are like, whether they've always lived in Saratoga, about family in the area, etc. If you can, find ways to get at the following: Are they housed or not? If not, how did that happen? What is it like being on the streets? Where do they find places to eat, sleep? Are there places where they get harassed or are made to feel unwelcome? Where do they prefer to hang out and why? What are their grievances, concerns about their situation? What could people and the city do to make their lives better? If housed, prepare an analogous line of inquiry. Then, why do they come to the soup kitchen? Is it hard to live in the city on a modest income? What makes it hard? What are their favorite daily activities? Their most onerous tasks? Write up your findings in a brief report.

10. Vocational Racial Inequalities²: As we read about the differing economic and career opportunities available to people of different races, it is important to consider its relevance in our own lives. In the Assignments folder on Blackboard is a file (career_path.pdf) that will guide you through the process of investigating inequalities in your planned career path. After recording all relevant figures on the worksheet, create a pie chart showing the race proportions of workers in your intended occupation. Also, create a bar graph representing how average earnings in your occupation differ by race. Describe your findings in brief report. Then, offer some possible explanations for why (or why not) racial differences exist in your intended line of work. If you do pursue this career, do you expect your race to play a role in the way your career

² Assignment developed by Stephen Sweet (Ithaca College) and John Paul DeWitt (University of Michigan)

unfolds (either to your benefit or detriment)? Be sure to include your worksheet, charts, and research memo.

12. Media Content Analysis: Early in the course, we will discuss the social scientific method of content analysis. Choose a television show and watch at least seven episodes (you may work with a partner). In advance, choose three measures that you will count while you watch. Some examples include the frequency of violent acts, various body types, or people of different races. An example of a good finding might be that 65% of characters had very thin body types or 37% of news segments mentioned violent crime. Be creative in developing your own measures. After you have collected your data, create tables or charts to present your findings. Then, describe your results in prose and explain what it may tell us about mass media messages.