

# **Introduction to Sociology**

Michigan Tech University: Social Science 2700

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*As long as the Matrix exists, the human race will never be free.* –The MATRIX, 1999.

In the movie *The Matrix*, Morpheus offers Neo a blue pill and a red pill. If he takes the blue pill, he will go on believing what he has been programmed to believe about reality. If he takes the red pill, he will learn the truth—that what he has always believed to be reality is a façade or a dream world made to keep people under control. This class offers students a similar choice. You’ll be presented with new ways of thinking about the world that will call into question some of the fundamental understandings about the world you may hold dear (including things like religion, capitalism, and marriage). You’ll be challenged to think about what is “real” and what is socially constructed. You may choose to “take the blue pill” and only superficially engage with this material. Or, you might choose to “take the red pill” and think hard, truly questioning the world around you and in which you are an active part. I will encourage you to do the latter, but ultimately it is your choice.

Sociology is the scientific study of society (the social world). Just as an ichthyologist studies fish and a physicist studies motion and behavior of objects and energy, a sociologist relies on scientific methods of discovery to build knowledge about the way society works. This means we are studying ourselves. And that is complicated. People are complicated and the social world is always evolving, making it difficult to pin down lasting truths. Knowledge is constantly evolving and theories are put forth, tested against data, and revised, and then things change. The truth is elusive. Sometimes, there are no clear answers.

The sociologist approaches the social world (our reality) with a critical, questioning eye. Are things really as they seem? Why and how do things work as they do? What is *really* behind it? We question reality, rather than taking for granted that the world is as we have always presumed it to be (or as we have been socialized to understand it). This questioning is referred to as the “sociological imagination”, and it is what I’ll encourage you to develop in this course. I ask you to keep an open mind and to think about issues raised in class from multiple perspectives.

About now, some of you are likely wondering “what the heck is this crazy lady talking about?” or “is this just some escape into the mind that will never prove useful?” While the issues we address will get you thinking and challenging preconceived notions about reality, they are also very practical and important to your careers and even more important to your lives. In fact, I would argue that this may be one of the most practical courses you’ll take in your college career. You live in society. You are constantly shaped and affected by it. You must learn how to work within it to increase your chances of success in life (in your work, family, relationships, and community). And because you are not just a viewer of the world, but an actor within it, you also shape society and have the ability to change it.

Sociology is not just for thinking...it is about raising awareness about what is going on behind the obvious and it is about working to make the social world a better place. Use it for good, never for evil.

**Goals:**

The overarching goal is for you to learn to think sociologically about the world. This means not taking things for granted as “just the way things are” or “only natural”, but instead thinking about how and why things are the way they are and how they might be different. Throughout the course, I’ll challenge you to think this way with theories and concepts, evidence, and projects and assignments that allow you to practice. Theories and concepts are ways of thinking deeply about the world. They are tools that will help you to think about society from new perspectives and understand evidence. Evidence will come in the form of quantitative datasets that tell us something about people, but also from sources like interviews, content analysis, participant observation and even your own experiences. You’ll have the chance to do some sociology by using theories and concepts to understand evidence and then communicate your findings to the public.

My job as instructor is to give you these tools, introducing you to new ways of thinking about the social world and giving you opportunities to practice. Your jobs are to:

- 1- Stay open-minded and think carefully and critically about these ideas.
- 2- Participate! Your contributions are valued and even required.
- 3- Come up with your own ideas. You will be asked to propose solutions or new ways of thinking about social issues.
- 4- Effectively communicate your ideas to others. Writing, arguing, and verbal presentations will be important ways for you to communicate your ideas.

**Required Texts:**

- 1- *Our Social World*. 2012. Jeanne H. Ballantine and Keith A. Roberts. Condensed Version/second edition. Available in the University Bookstore.
- 2- Readings posted on Canvas

**Assignments and Grading:**

Discussions & Activities: 25%  
Quizzes: 15%  
Suicide in the Copper Country Group Project: 30%  
Final Paper: 25%  
Participation: 5%, plus potential bonus

*Discussions & Activities:* Discussions are brief (1 page or less) thoughtful reflections on a specific reading or topic question that should be posted on the Canvas course website before class on the day they are due. They are meant to be an informal venue for you to explore your ideas, thoughts, feelings, and experiences that relate to the week’s topic. Activities may include taking pictures, visiting websites, looking for data, talking to a friend, or something else that is a little different than just doing the reading and writing something. For both Discussions and Activities, the goal is to get you thinking about issues from class and readings and how they relate to real world circumstances and issues in your own life. There will be a total of 8 Discussions/Activities. Specific topics will be assigned in class and posted on the course website. They will be graded on how well you integrate material from readings and class, critical thinking, and creativity. See critical thinking grading rubric below. If you miss class, it is your responsibility to find out the assigned topic.

Quizzes: There will be no final exam in this course, but there will be an unspecified number of quizzes (sometimes unannounced) that in total will make up 15% of the final grade. These will be short and taken in class. They may involve multiple choice, short answer, or essay responses. They are meant to make sure that you do the reading, pay attention in class, and generally keep up. No make-ups, but I will drop your worst quiz grade. If students are well-prepared to engage in class, we'll have fewer quizzes.

Suicide in the Copper Country Group Project: Students will be divided into groups of approximately 5 to work together on a community based research project. Think of this like a job. It is your chance to practice doing some real and meaningful sociological work. Copper Country Mental Health has a set of data on youth and young adult suicide that they have "hired" us to analyze, interpret, and report to the public. You will be given these data early in the semester. Your first task will be to review them and think sociologically to address the question: **How can we explain the social conditions of youth suicide risk in the Copper Country?** Your second task will be to produce a product for the general public discussing youth suicide risk in the Copper County. **The aims of this product should be: (1) to raise public awareness of youth suicide risk in the local area; (2) to normalize talking about suicide risk (including helpful responses to someone at risk); and (3) to discuss some of the key social factors you've found to explain Copper Country suicide.** Your group may choose the form the product will take. This might be a Facebook page or another website, a video that can be posted on YouTube, a flyer or pamphlet and radio spot, or another idea that you might have and get approved by me. The point is that the product will be public. This is not just a class assignment, but a real life project that will get used and may be widely distributed. Bonus points for groups who submit projects to the *Undergraduate Journal of Service Learning and Community Based Research*. Each individual student should also submit a 2-4 page paper explaining how sociology explains youth suicide risk in the Copper Country. **Group Project Draft and Individual Paper due Nov 10. Final Group Project due Dec. 13. Group Presentations to Class will be Dec. 11 & 13.**

Final Paper:

All students are required to submit a final paper. The paper should be 3-5 pages typed and double-spaced. It is **Due Dec. 8** before midnight, chance to revise until Dec. 18. You may choose between the following topics.

A- Living Better Paper

Sociologists often study social problems (like racism, poverty, environmental destruction, crime, gender inequality, totalitarianism, suicide, family conflict, etc.). This can be depressing, but I would argue that the whole point of sociology is to tell us how we can live better, how a differently organized society might alleviate these problems. Or, in other words, by giving us a deep understanding of how these issues work, sociology should strive to provide insights into how we can re-organize the social world to live better. For this paper, your task is to address some problematic aspect of the social world as we currently know it, but **focus on how sociology suggests we could, if society was only organized differently, overcome this issue and live better.** This should be a thought paper on what sociology can tell us about how we (as a society) can live better. The best papers will directly incorporate meaningful concepts from class to creatively address an important social issue. **Be creative, but use the course material.** Think back over lessons covered throughout the entire course. The paper is meant to be comprehensive. What should this re-structured society be like? And how would it be better? You can choose to think and write about this from a global perspective, for a single country, or for a smaller area like a region or even a single community.

OR

## B- Sociological Autobiography

We are who we are because of our experiences in the social world. For this paper, think back on your own life experiences. Write about some aspect of your life and interpret it from a sociological perspective. To do this, try to remove yourself somewhat and approach your life as a detached observer might. Your job is then to examine the role of external social forces in shaping your life. Be specific, using concrete examples and social events/occurrences. You should discuss personal events, but focus on how these events illustrate sociological concepts and tie into bigger social issues. Use concepts from class to explain how your life is shaped by society. In other words, narrate your life story using sociological language. Your goal is to make connections between private experiences and public issues.

*Participation:* I expect students to attend class regularly and to engage in discussion of the material. Each student will begin the semester with the full 5 participation points for free. Throughout the semester, you can either gain or lose points. You can accumulate bonus points or lose as many as 28 points if you never once came to class. I will take attendance each day. For each absence (regardless of the reason), your participation grade will be deducted by 1 point. This means that you can “go negative” and start to take points away that you may have earned in other areas if you are absent more than 5 times. You may also gain extra points by participating fully in class. So, if you miss a class or two, it's OK as long as you participate in class. If you start to miss several classes, it will negatively impact your grade.

### **Important Notes:**

- To be successful in this class you will need to do the readings regularly and keep up.
- You are expected to regularly use the course website on Canvas. This is where you find out what the required readings are, turn in assignments, view grades, engage in discussions with your classmates, and access extra resources.
- Your textbook comes with access to a web-based student resources center. This gives you extra resources, practice quizzes you can take to study, flashcards, internet exercises, etc. Check it out. [www.sagepub.com/oswecondensed2e](http://www.sagepub.com/oswecondensed2e)
- We will be spending a good deal of time discussing a difficult topic—suicide. Most of you have had some kind of experience with suicide, whether you've contemplated it yourself, had a friend or family member attempt or successfully commit suicide, or you've been concerned about a friend or family member. This is tough. We want to be open about it, fair, approachable and considerate of everyone's feelings. It's OK to talk about this, and even encouraged. I encourage you to talk to someone—classmates, friends, me, your parents, anyone. And, if someone in the class (or outside the class) approaches you with this topic, please be open, caring, listen. If you become concerned, tell someone who can provide additional help. You can always come to me, but I also encourage you to approach MTU counseling <http://www.counseling.mtu.edu/>.
- Persons at risk of suicide need to be connected quickly to someone trained to help. If you or someone you know is at risk of suicide, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline for assistance at any time day or night at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). Lifeline staff are trained to assist in providing information as well as helping callers in crisis. Anyone at imminent risk of suicide should visit the local hospital emergency department to obtain a suicide risk assessment.

Michigan Technological University complies with all federal and state laws and regulations regarding discrimination, including the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. If you have a disability and need a reasonable accommodation for equal access to education or services at Michigan Tech, please call the Dean of Students Office, at 487-2212. For other concerns about discrimination, you may contact your advisor, Chair/Dean of your academic unit or the Affirmative Programs Office, at 487-3310.

### **General Rubric for Grading:**

You are expected to think, read, speak, and write in this class using critical thinking skills. But what exactly is critical thinking? And how will I determine if you're using it? Critical thinking means that you carefully consider ideas against evidence (from readings, class lectures, data, academic journal articles, government documents, other trusted sources) and against examples from your own life experiences. Critical thinkers justify their opinions and arguments. This means that they clearly explain how their opinions are shaped by evidence and agree or disagree with others by explaining why and, again, providing evidence to support their opinions. Essentially, you justify yourself by defending your thinking with examples and evidence. In order to really think critically, you should consider multiple different perspectives against evidence in search of the elusive truth.

In grading your assignments, I'll generally follow this broad rubric.

Best (A)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Demonstrate deep understanding of theories, concepts, and issues presented in readings and class.</li><li>• Justify opinions with evidence and highly appropriate examples from readings, class lectures/materials, other trusted (peer reviewed or government type) sources, and relevant life experiences. Explain thinking followed by "because" and clear justification.</li><li>• Agree and disagree with others and authors and tell why</li><li>• Keep the conversation going by asking open-ended questions of others</li><li>• Exhibit creativity and unique contributions, rather than simply repeating what others have stated</li><li>• Use accurate grammar and clear writing/speaking style and organization</li></ul>
Good (B-ish)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Demonstrate adequate understanding of theories, concepts, and issues presented in readings and class.</li><li>• Justify opinions with evidence and examples from readings, class lectures/materials, other trusted (peer reviewed or government type) sources, and/or life experiences.</li><li>• Agree and disagree with others and authors and tell why</li><li>• Make unique contributions, rather than simply repeating others</li><li>• Use accurate grammar and clear writing/speaking style and organization</li></ul>
Fair (C-ish)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• May refer to theories, concepts, and issues presented in readings and class, but without much meaning or understanding.</li><li>• Answers questions or tells opinion, without justifying</li><li>• Agree and disagree with others and authors, but cannot tell why</li><li>• Makes little unique contribution</li><li>• Uses some incorrect grammar and lacks clear writing/speaking style and organization</li></ul>
Poor (D/F)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Incomplete</li><li>• Does not integrate material from readings/class</li><li>• Does not contribute to the conversation</li><li>• Agree and disagree with others and authors, but cannot tell why</li><li>• Makes no unique contribution</li><li>• Uses poor grammar and lacks clear writing/speaking style and organization</li></ul>

NOTE: I want to give you plenty of opportunities to incorporate feedback and improve your work. You may revise all coursework for a new grade until 5:00pm on Dec. 18, if you choose.

## Schedule, Readings, & Assignments

### Week 1: What is Sociology?

- Sept 4: Read syllabus and review course website  
Sept 6: *Our Social World*, Chapt 1 AND  
C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*  
**Discussion Due**

### Week 2: Suicide

- Sept 11: Portner, *One in Thirteen*, Part 1  
Stack, *Suicide: A 15-year review of the sociological literature*. Parts 1 & 2.  
Sept 13: Portner, *One in Thirteen*, Part 3  
**Discussion Due**

### Week 3: Methods and Theory

- Sept 18: *Our Social World*, Chapt 2 AND  
Willis et al., *The Undergraduate Perspective on Community-Based Research*  
Sept 20: Joel Best, *Telling the Truth about Damned Lies and Statistics*

### Week 4: Culture & Media

- Sept 25: *Our Social World*, Chapt 3  
Sept 27: Geoff Harkness, *Hip Hop Culture and America's Most Taboo Word*  
**Activity Due**

### Week 5: Socialization & Community

- Oct 2: *Our Social World*, Chapt 4  
Oct 4: *Our Social World*, Chapt 5

### Week 6: Community & Social Control

- Oct 9 Western and Pettit, *Incarceration and Inequality*  
**Discussion/Activity**  
Oct 11: *Our Social World*, Chapt 6

### Week 7: Stratification

- Oct 16: *Our Social World*, Chapt 7  
Oct 18: William Julius Wilson, *The Economic Plight of Inner-City Black Males* OR  
Scanlan, Jenkins and Peterson, *The Scarcity Fallacy*  
**Discussion/Activity**

### Week 8: Race & Gender Inequality

- Oct 23: *Our Social World*, Chapt 8  
Gloria Yamato, *Something about the Subject Makes it Hard to Name*  
Oct 25: *Our Social World*, Chapt 9  
**Discussion/Activity**

Week 9: Family

Oct 30: *Our Social World*, Chapt 10

Nov 1: Hull, Meier and Ortyl, *The Changing Landscape of Love and Marriage*  
**Discussion/Activity**

Week 10: Education and Religion

Nov 6: *Our Social World*, Chapt 11, p. 314-340 AND  
William Beaver, *A Matter of Degrees*

Nov 8: *Our Social World*, Chapt 11, p. 341-363 AND  
Elaine Howard Ecklund, *Religion and Spirituality among Scientists*

**Nov 10: Draft of Group Project and Individual Paper Due by midnight**

Week 11: Politics & Economics

Nov 13: *Our Social World*, Chapt 12

Nov 15: Feagin and Parker, *The Rise and Fall of Mass Rail Transit* OR  
William Adler, *Job on the Line*

\*\*\*\*\* THANKSGIVING BREAK \*\*\*\*\*

Week 12: Population, Health, and Environment

Nov 27: *Our Social World*, Chapt 13

Nov 29: Marsiglio, *Healthy Dads, Healthy Kids* OR  
Auyero and Swistun, *Amidst Garbage and Poison*  
**Discussion/Activity**

Week 13: Process of Change

Dec 4: *Our Social World*, Chapt 14

Dec 6: Barrack Obama, *A More Perfect Union* AND  
Mary Pardo, *Grassroots Activism: Mothers of East Los Angeles* OR  
Bill McKibbin, *The Cuban Diet*

**Dec 8: Final Paper Due by midnight**

Week 14: Presentations

No readings this week.

**Group Project Presentations in Class**

**Dec. 11 Final Group Project due**

**Dec. 14 Discussion Due**

**\*\*\*ALL REVISIONS OF ANY WORK DUE BY 5:00PM DEC. 18\*\*\***