

SOCIOLOGY 500: FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIOLOGICAL THOUGHT

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"[P]laying with ideas is fun..."
-Lave and March (1993: 3)

"[I]t is important to never stop thinking about the foundations of social science, partly because there is no consensus on these foundations, and partly because they are not particularly stable."
-Swedberg (2014: 185)

Course description

I believe a theory class should prepare you to theorize and leave you excited to do so. In this spirit, I have creatively interpreted the role of your *Foundations of Sociological Thought* course. Rather than developing expertise in the theoretical contributions of famous sociologists (e.g., Durkheim, Weber, and Marx), you will—if engaged in and committed to the course—be *familiar* with their works but have *expertise* in the art of theorizing. This journey will entail revisiting prominent sociological concepts in the service of learning how to produce a social theory.

Learning objectives

By the end of the course, you will be able to:

- State and debate various meanings of theory;
- Develop and defend your own definition of 'theory' in sociology;
- Define several core sociological concepts;
- Theorize topics of sociological importance.

Class format

For the most part, classes will involve roughly two hours of lecture / discussion and one hour of theory workshop. The purpose of the workshops is to give you hands-on experience with each of the stages of theorizing, and to learn from our community of theorists. I will begin class with a brief lecture to synthesize the readings and generate discussion on our topic of focus for the week. The class will be more enjoyable if each of you actively participates in discussions and workshops.

Course requirements and due dates:

Memos, 300 points, 30%	<i>Six, submitted over the course of the semester (see course outline).</i>
Term paper draft I (ungraded)	<i>Submitted in class on October 29</i>
Term paper peer reviews, 200 points, 10%	<i>Submitted via Canvas by November 12th at 11:59 p.m.</i>
Term paper final draft, 400 points, 40%	<i>Submitted by December 9th at 11:59 p.m.</i>
Participation, 200 points, 20%	<i>Throughout term, based on in-class and online discussions</i>

Grading:

Percent (%)	Letter Grade	Percent (%)	Letter Grade
90-100	A+	64-67	C+
85-89	A	60-63	C
80-84	A-	55-59	C-
76-79	B+	50-54	D
72-75	B	0-49	F (fail)
68-71	B-		

Description of course requirements:

Weekly memos:

You are required to submit six memos on the readings throughout the semester. These are due the night before class and should be no longer than 500 words. The goals of the memos are:

- (1) To provide your own definition and a scholarly discussion of the week's theme (e.g., 'theory', 'culture').
- (2) To identify 2-4 conceptual themes from the week's texts. There will be a lot of concepts and I do not want or expect you to provide an exhaustive account. Try to imagine which concepts / ideas you could see yourself referring to 10 years from now;
- (3) To practice using clear, eloquent writing typical of high-quality academic texts in sociology.

I encourage you to structure your memos in the following way:

- An overview paragraph that names the conceptual themes you drew from the reading, integrating these into an argument related to the topic / questions for the week.
- Body paragraphs that are structured with topic sentences that serve to name and define each conceptual theme and that synthesize perspectives from the readings that week. One paragraph per concept.
- A properly-formatted list of references.

To evaluate your own memo, ask yourself if each point you make:

- (1) Is related to the definition / discussion you offer about the topic in question;
- (2) Captures core concepts from the readings, defining these in your own words. And,
- (3) Ask yourself, if I read this in 3 years, would I come away with a clear sense of the authors' arguments and their main connections to the topic under consideration?

Please note, I will not grade memos substantially longer than 500 words. They will be returned to you and you will face a 10% late penalty if the resubmission is after the due date. There is a 10% late penalty on all memos.

Term paper draft I:

Swedberg (2014) argues that our education in the social sciences to date has likely worked to hone our capacity to work within the context of justification, where a term paper follows the same basic format (e.g., introduction, lit review, methods, results, discussion, conclusion). This semester, we will be swimming in the murky waters of the context of discovery. This is a unique scholarly environment. Your paper will likely not put forth one, air-tight explanation of a social phenomenon, but put forth several, half-baked "hunches" and "guesses" (Pierce 1929).

Second, you will be writing this paper with 2-3 of your peers. The purpose of this is to try to cultivate a context in which you can engage in creative guesswork, discussion and playing with ideas. The general evolution of this paper over the term is as follows:

- Week 1: We discuss what makes a topic a good one for generating insights about society. Part of your homework this week is to venture into one site in our social world (e.g., a local pub, a bus, Statistics Canada's website) and make observations until you find 1-2 things you think you would like to explain that would also help you make some argument about society.
- Week 2: In our theory workshop, we each share these ideas and discuss them, narrowing down the list of topics substantially. Part of your homework that week is to send me a ranked list of topics you'd like to study. Based on these rankings, I will pick 1-3 topics that the papers will focus on.
- Week 3: In our theory workshop, we will brainstorm explanations of these topics, using the tools we have learned thus far from Swedberg. Part of your homework will be to get together with your group to make observations on the topic you've chosen and write up a description of your observations.
- Week 4: In our theory workshop, we will continue to brainstorm explanations, using the tools we have learned from Swedberg. Part of your homework will be to get together with your group to brainstorm explanations of the observations you wrote up the previous week. You should write up these explanations (you have 3 weeks to do so). Note: at this point, please do not refer to the literature.
- Week 5: Separate workshop on theorizing. See course schedule.
- Week 6: No class
- Week 7: In our theory workshop, we will share the explanations generated and discuss / evaluate them. Part of the discussion will include brainstorming existing sociological concepts and theories that could support or challenge your explanation. Your homework this week is to work in your group to read several texts each, with the aim of identifying concepts that you can draw on to connect your explanation to existing sociological scholarship.
- Week 8: Submit a draft of your paper. In our theory workshop, we will work in small groups to devise a mental map or model of your explanation. Continue to refine this after class.
- Week 9: In our theory workshop, we will share and discuss the maps and models that each group devised. Your homework is to read and review another group's paper.
- Week 10: No class
- Week 11: In our theory workshop, we will continue to discuss the maps and models that each group devised and extend our discussion to consider how you can use this explanation to generate insights about society. Your homework following this exercise is to work as a group to write up these ideas—this is the last step in the process of abstraction.
- Week 12: In our theory workshop, we will have an open discussion about the triumphs and challenges that theorizing offers. Each group will provide a 10-minute presentation of their paper. As an audience member, try to offer critical feedback, discussing weaknesses and gaps as well as pointing out areas of strength. Based on this discussion, groups will likely want to convene afterwards to refine your efforts.

An excellent term paper makes clear why the topic is sociologically relevant, uses theorizing techniques creatively and effectively, adequately describes your observations, offers explanations that awaken the readers' interest in the topic and that skillfully draw on existing sociological concepts, and concludes with well-supported abstractions that allow you to generalize from your topic to comment on some dimension of society, more broadly.

The paper should be 4000-4500 words long (including references), be double-spaced and use 12-point font. The paper should include:

- **A title**¹
- The names of your group members (no need for a title page or abstract)
- **An introduction:** The introduction should convince the reader that the phenomenon is indeed occurring and that makes clear why it is interesting/ surprising and sociologically relevant. This evidence should be descriptive, not explanatory. Unlike a typical sociology paper, please don't worry about including citations about what others' explanations are at this point.
- **Methods:** 1-2 paragraphs explaining what when, where and how you collected observations (and from whom). Try to include a level of detail sufficient so that the reader could replicate the study.
- **Findings:** Revise the description from your Week 3 homework to provide a clear, judgment-free account of what you observed. Use tables or figures as appropriate.
- **Explanations:** Use the homework from Week 4 and discussion from Weeks 7 and 12 to put forth at least two competing or complementary explanations. This should build on concepts and typologies you developed in workshops. In the final paper, this is also the place for you to integrate existing concepts from sociology. You could include here the analogy / metaphor or typology you developed, if it serves your explanation somehow. Please write this in an active voice ("We argue") not passive ("It was found") and refer to the evidence when appropriate (e.g., an interviewee's comment; an observation from your field notes; a statistical relationship).
- **Discussion:**
 - Briefly summarize the phenomenon you studied and why your approach makes the topic sociologically relevant.
 - Abstract from the explanations. Here is where you could draw from mental maps, models or diagrams you developed in workshops to show what your reader could take away as a lesson about society and / or apply elsewhere.
 - Reflect on your explanations: What did you learn about your topic? How might you transition to a "main study" (Swedberg 2014): how might you refocus your topic? How would you collect data? What hypotheses might you test?
 - Reflect on theorizing: What are some things that make it easier to theorize well? What are some barriers? What did you do well? Where did you experience moments of insight? Frustration? What did you learn about theorizing? This would be the place to cite course readings to generate a scholarly dialogue about theorizing.
- **References cited:** Using ASA or APA format (in text as well). The aim here is really to be consistent and detail-oriented (e.g., Kennedy, E.H. or Kennedy, Emily H.; "Title here" or Title Here; (2019) or 2019) and always italicize journal or book title.

For the first draft only: In addition to submitting your paper through Canvas, please bring two paper copies to class on the day it is due. Please try to print on both sides of the page.

Here are published examples of graduate student work generating theory in a similar way that we have done in class.

- Gong, N. (2015). How to fight without rules: on civilized violence in "de-civilized" spaces. *Social Problems*, 62(4), 605-622.
- Elliott, R. (2013). The taste for green: The possibilities and dynamics of status differentiation through "green" consumption. *Poetics*, 41(3), 294-322.

¹ I like the [LSE blog](#) for writing tips in general and advice on titles specifically.

- Steward, S. (2017). What does that shirt mean to you? Thrift-store consumption as cultural capital. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, DOI: 1469540517745707.

Term paper peer reviews:

Reviewing research is central to academia and is something you should do, and do well! Overall, the review that you submit should be **no longer than two double-spaced pages**. The review should:

- Begin with a brief summary of the paper and its contribution, pointing out the strengths of the paper;
- Evaluate the paper in terms of the extent to which the following elements are a strength or a limitation of the pre-study you're reading:
 - Is the topic of interest and satisfactorily described? Do the authors identify what is sociologically relevant about the topic? Are the methods appropriate?
 - Are the theoretical exercises productive and creative? Do they help the authors find new ways into their topic?
 - Are ideas and arguments well developed? Are concepts well defined?
 - Is there an effective connection to and synthesis of the literature?
 - Is the paper clearly written and easy to understand? Do the future research recommendations and hypotheses (if applicable) seem logical given the presentation of past literature?
- Point out any mis-readings of cited works;
- Point out whether any minor criticisms (such as typos, syntax errors) interfere with your ability to engage with the paper. You are **not expected to copy-edit the paper**.

Write your review so that it is easy to read and easy for the authors to understand. Again, don't worry about copy-editing; rather, evaluate whether the argument is clearly stated and convincing, whether the paper engages a sociologically relevant topic and offers a unique account of the topic, how effectively the paper integrates literature about theorizing (and to a lesser extent, about the topic), and whether the paper is written and structured well. The review should be written to the editor (me!) but understand it is the authors who will be reading it most closely. Please submit your review through Canvas.

Term paper final draft, response memo & presentation:

The term paper final draft will be structured the same way as the first draft. It should include a one-page (max. 500 word) response to the reviewers (each paper will be read by 3-4 peers and by me). This response should *summarize* the major critiques from your reviewers and outline how you have responded to the critiques and suggestions. Again, be sure that your work is double-spaced and has page numbers and uses citation formatting consistently.

Your presentation of your term paper should integrate a well-developed account of the theorizing process. This entails an honest evaluation of what you feel you did very well (why did it go well? Why do you evaluate this aspect of your theorizing positively?) and what did not go as well (what parts of your explanation are you not confident of), with ideas on how to avoid pitfalls in the future.

Participation:

Class participation involves more than attendance. This mark will reflect (1) the quality and care demonstrated by your questions and comments on the readings and your ability to foster an enjoyable learning environment and (2) Your engagement in the group theory paper. Regarding (1): Please **do not** use your phone or laptop for anything non-course related or inappropriate for class time (e.g., emailing me (or anyone!) during class is not appropriate during class time!). Please **do** contribute to class discussions by: (a) staying on topic, (b) refraining from personal anecdotes

unless they advance our discussion, (c) sharing your ideas, no matter how ill-formed; (d) responding to other people's comments; (e) asking questions. Concerning (2): I will have each group evaluate the contributions of the group members halfway through the semester and at the end of the semester. The halfway point is a chance for problematic group members to amend their actions, as this evaluation is ungraded. The final evaluation will count for 10% of your grade.

Required readings:

Feel free to find the most economical source for these texts. They are available through the UBC bookstore.

1. Swedberg, R. (2014). *The Art of Social Theory*. University Press.
2. Durkheim, E., & Mauss, M. (2009). *Primitive Classification (Routledge Revivals)*. Routledge.
3. Martin, J.L. (2014). *The Explanation of Social Action*. New York: Oxford University Press.
4. Joas, H., & Knöbl, W. (2009). *Social Theory: Twenty Introductory Lectures*. Cambridge University Press. [Online through UBC libraries]
5. Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology (Vol. 1)*. University of California Press.
6. Weber, M. (2013). *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*. Routledge. [Online through UBC libraries].
7. McLellan, D. *Karl Marx: Selected Writings, 2nd Ed.* Oxford University Press.

Other readings are available through UBC libraries or on the class Canvas site.

Academic Integrity:

The academic enterprise is founded on honesty, civility, and integrity. As members of this enterprise, all students are expected to know, understand, and follow the codes of conduct regarding academic integrity. At the most basic level, this means submitting only original work done by you and acknowledging all sources of information or ideas and attributing them to others as required. This also means you should not cheat, copy, or mislead others about what is your work. Violations of academic integrity (i.e., misconduct) lead to the breakdown of the academic enterprise, and therefore serious consequences arise and harsh sanctions are imposed. For example, incidences of plagiarism or cheating may result in a mark of zero on the assignment or exam and more serious consequences may apply if the matter is referred to the President's Advisory Committee on Student Discipline. Careful records are kept in order to monitor and prevent recurrences.

It is very easy to **unintentionally plagiarize**. It is actually so common, that I've added text to this academic integrity statement for us to discuss. This is the most common version: you have taken notes on a reading and when you summarize the reading (in a paper or memo), you acknowledge the author (e.g., Lamont and Molnár 2002). But shortly after, you use a direct quotation from Lamont and Molnár but fail to put the quotation in "quotation marks". Another common type of unintentionally plagiarizing is incorrectly attributing an idea to an author.

A more detailed description of academic integrity, including the University's policies and procedures, may be found in the Academic Calendar at <http://calendar.ubc.ca/vancouver/index.cfm?tree=3,54,111,0>.

General Suggestions:

These are a few uncategorized recommendations for enjoying theorizing, theory, and this course. *First*, you are not here to be taught theory, you are here to learn theory (and theorizing!). This means we are truly all both teachers and learners in this class and that you should be accountable

for your learning by voicing confusion and offering up expertise. *Second*, in my experience, everyone is a little intimidated by theory (at first) but my aim is to create an atmosphere where we get over our nerves quickly and trust that we will enjoy a constructive, creative atmosphere where we will all get some things right, some things wrong, and enjoy the process along the way. Swedberg (2014) likens learning theory to learning to be a pot smoker (Becker 1982): first, you're not sure if you want to do it. Then, even when you start, it's going to feel weird. You'll need to have access to people you like that also like theorizing. If you're going to keep up with it, you'll have to convince yourself that those "weird" feelings are quite positive. Then, you'll be a "theory user". *Third*, if you like to take notes on a computer, please remove access to the Internet while in class. Non-academic Internet use in the classroom has been proven to be negatively related to learning (Ravizza, Hambrick, and Fenn 2014).²

COURSE SCHEDULE

**Please note that we will discuss the course schedule together on the first day of class, and will re-evaluate it throughout the semester. This may result in changes to our schedule. Revised versions will be posted to the class Canvas page, which you should check regularly.*

September 9. Week 1: What does it mean to theorize? What makes a subject "sociological"?

- Swedberg, Introduction, Ch.1, Ch.2
- Theory workshop: Coming up with a topic

September 16. Week 2: What does "theory" mean in sociology? How and what do we theorize? What is a "good" theory?

- Joas and Knobl, Ch. 1
- Giddens, Ch.22 [available on Canvas site]
- Abend, G. 2008. The meaning of 'theory'. *Sociological Theory*, 26(2), 173-199.
- Swedberg, Ch.3
- Theory workshop: Reviewing, discussing and selecting topics
- Submission after class: Send me a ranked list of the top 3 topics you would be interested in explaining for your paper.
- Memo #1: Use the readings to answer this week's questions.

September 23. Week 3: Metaphors and Classifications

- Mauss and Durkheim, Primitive Classification
- [Orgtheory blog on Primitive Classification](#)
- Hochschild, A. R. (2016). The ecstatic edge of politics: Sociology and Donald Trump. *Contemporary Sociology*, 45(6), 683-689.
- Swedberg Ch.4
- Theory workshop: Brainstorming explanations for your topic, drawing on typology and metaphor/analogy as tools.
- Homework: Conduct observations on your topic

September 30. Week 4: What errors do sociologists make in their explanations? How do these errors impact how we theorize?

- Martin, Ch. 3-4
- Swedberg, Ch. 5-6
- Theory workshop: We continue brainstorming and evaluating explanations.

² Ravizza, S. M., Hambrick, D. Z., & Fenn, K. M. (2014). Non-academic internet use in the classroom is negatively related to classroom learning regardless of intellectual ability. *Computers & Education*, 78, 109-114.

- Memo #2: Use the readings to answer this week's questions.

October 7. Week 5: Debates on Sociological Theorizing

- 2017 *Sociological Theory* issue 35(2): pp. 118-153*
- Theory workshop: class discussion and small group presentations

*Note: for this week, you will be assigned to groups and each group will present on one of the papers. This is a short presentation (10 minutes) focused on summarizing the main argument. (Each student will read all of the papers in the issue.) After each presentation (plus quick clarifying questions), we will have a roundtable discussion drawing out: (a) the lessons learned about how to develop and recognize a good theory, (b) dialogue across the papers, (c) critique of the papers, (d) other comments.

October 14: Thanksgiving Break. No Class.

Be sure to refine your explanation of your topic. In the next part of the class we will be familiarizing ourselves with concepts and theories in sociology and work on abstracting from our data to draw conclusions about society.

October 21. Week 7: Concepts I: What is a concept? How do concepts help us explain sociological phenomena?

- Weber, *Economy and Society*, Introduction, Ch. 1
- Weber, *Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism*: Introduction and section one (Ch. 1-3)
- Optional: Reread Swedberg Ch.1
- Theory workshop: Debriefing theorizing
- Bring to class: The (revised) explanation document you submitted earlier + 5-6 ideas of supplementary sociological concepts. These can be named (and cited) in bullet points with brief descriptions of the concept.
- Memo #3: Use the readings to answer this week's questions.
- Homework after class: Each group member reads ~3 texts beyond class readings to identify concepts relevant to your topic.

October 28. Week 8: Concepts II: Action

- Overview: Joas and Knobl, Ch. 2
- Parsons, Talcott. 1938. "The Role of Ideas in Social Action." *American Sociological Review* 3:652-64.
- Strand, M., & Lizardo, O. (2015). Beyond world images: Belief as embodied action in the world. *Sociological Theory*, 33(1), 44-70.
- Recommended: Joas and Knöbl, Ch.3-4; Swedberg Ch.3
- Theory workshop: Brainstorming mental maps and models
- Submission: Term paper draft I.
 - Note: Please bring 2 paper copies

November 4. Week 9: Concepts II: What is class conflict? What is abstraction? What is alienation?

- Overview: Joas and Knobl, Ch.8 & 9
- Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*
- Theory workshop: More brainstorming on our mental maps and models; brainstorming diagrams as well
- Memo #4: Use the readings to answer this week's questions.

November 11: Week 10: Remembrance Day. No Class but:

- By Nov 12 before 11:59 p.m.: Submit term paper peer review.

November 18. Week 11: Concepts II: Culture (What is symbolic power? What are symbolic boundaries? How does culture shape social space?)

- Overview: Joas and Knobl, Ch.15
- Bourdieu, P. (1989). Social space and symbolic power. *Sociological Theory*, 7(1), 14-25.
- Lamont, M., & Molnár, V. (2002). The study of boundaries in the social sciences. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28(1), 167-195.
- Optional: Swedberg Ch.5
- Theory workshop: Using mental maps, diagrams and models to make abstract generalizations about society
- Memo #5: Use the readings to answer this week's questions.

November 25. Week 12: How do we produce good social theory?

- Joas and Knöbl, Ch.20
- Swedberg, Ch.8 and Ch. 10, plus Appendix
- Martin, Ch. 9
- Theory workshop: Group presentations, summarizing their theory; Discussion of the process of theorizing and evaluating social theory
 - ***See "Theorizing SOCI 500"**
- Memo #6: Use the readings to answer this week's questions.
- Submission, by December 9, 11:59 p.m.: Term paper final draft.