

Syllabus Sociology 4461 [Section 003]

Course Title: Critical Thinking in Sociology

Time: Tuesday and Thursday, 2:00 p.m. - 3:15p.m.

Place: Humanities 186

Instructor: Tom Mayer

Instructor's Office: Institute of Behavioral Science
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Office Hours: Wednesday 2:00-4:00 pm or by appointment

Course Content:

The official description says that courses in Critical Thinking should "challenge students to think rationally and critically about those matters that educated people debate In Critical Thinking courses, students will learn to recognize and avoid common mistakes in reasoning, to identify and assess tacit assumptions, to gather and evaluate evidence, and to distinguish different kinds of reasoning. Each Critical Thinking course will have substantive . . . topics of inquiry. Each will deal not with logical concepts in abstraction, but with arguments and issues as they naturally arise in some particular areas of inquiry. Typically they will focus on issues that are likely to occasion lively discussion and argument. Students will be required not only to write papers in which they present or criticize arguments, but also to present arguments orally and to engage in reasoned class discussions."

With a few exceptions, this particular Critical Thinking course will adhere fairly closely to the official description. The topic on which the course will focus is race relations in the United States. I have chosen to concentrate on this issue for several different reasons. First and foremost it is a subject of enormous importance for our society. A book on race relations once used in this class introduced the subject in this way: "*race remains this 'malignancy' this 'great Achilles heel in our nations future,' cornering us, dividing us, and exhausting us....race -- and all the tentacles that attach to it -- continues to be America's greatest burden and greatest dilemma.*" The fact that I [the instructor] have studied race relations and know something about academic scholarship on this subject is a second reason for choosing it as a focus of the Critical Thinking course.

But these are not the only reasons for concentrating upon race relations. Race is a difficult subject to talk about in the United States. It is hard to be honest about ones perceptions and feelings, and it is also hard to avoid victimizing other people when discussing race. An important objective of this course is teaching students how to speak both truthfully and productively on the subject of race. If we can accomplish this, it will prove much easier to think critically about the various aspects of race relations listed in the course outline below. Students often have direct personal experience pertaining to race relations in the United States and, if the student involved is willing, these experiences can provide useful subjects for discussion and analysis. When this happens, critical thinking is no longer a remote austere methodology, but a highly practical ingredient of everyday life.

Required Books:

Alec Fisher, *Critical Thinking: An Introduction*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 249 pages.

A short book by a British philosopher of education on how to do critical thinking. Written in plain language, the book teaches students valid ways of interpreting, analyzing, and evaluating ideas and arguments. It includes a large number of questions designed to give practice in critical thinking. It also includes over fifty passages in which arguments about important social, political, scientific topics are made. Students are encouraged to interpret, analyze, and evaluate these arguments.

Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1999. 480 pages.

This is one of the most important social science books written in the last several decades. It has won numerous honors including the Pulitzer Prize. Jared Diamond provides a highly original interpretation – based on geography, food production, and microbes – about why some human societies came to dominate others. Thus he illuminates the origins of racial inequality without resorting to racist concepts of any kind. Nevertheless *Guns, Germs, and Steel* is a controversial work that provides an excellent subject for critical thinking.

Elizabeth Higginbotham and Margaret L. Andersen (eds.), *Race and Ethnicity in Society: The Changing Landscape*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006. 442 pages.

An up-to-date reader that treats the United States as a multiracial society and emphasizes race as a socially constructed system of relations. This book offers 55 highly diverse readings that explain how the racial order in the USA is maintained and also how it is contested. The editors have kept all of the readings relatively brief and free of technical paraphernalia.

Raymond D'Angelo and Herbert Douglas (eds.), *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Race and Ethnicity*. Fifth Edition. Dubuque, Iowa: McGraw-Hill / Dushkin, 2005. 427 pages.

Readings about 18 controversial issues in the area of race and ethnicity are presented. Pro and con arguments are presented on each issue. Among the issues considered are these: Is immigration good for America? Are Hispanics making economic progress? Should race be considered in college admissions? Is affirmative action necessary to achieve racial equality? Should African-Americans receive reparations for slavery? Is racial profiling a defensible public policy?

Course Organization:

This class emphasizes writing, public speaking, and class discussion. There will also be a midterm examination and a final. Students will write two short papers and lead a class discussion on a subject pertaining to race and ethnicity. Each paper and each student led class discussion should demonstrate critical thinking about race relations. A student led class discussion should also demonstrate capacity to speak clearly and effectively in public as well as ability to communicate honestly and constructively with other class members.

Each paper must not exceed five typewritten pages in length and should be constructed in the following way. Choose a passage from one of the assigned readings. Then do a critical analysis of the passage you have chosen using the methods discussed in class and presented in the book *Critical Thinking: An Introduction*. You may agree or disagree with the position taken in the passage you discuss. I will evaluate the papers on (a) their use of appropriate methods of critical thinking, (b) the clarity and cogency of their arguments, (c) the degree to which they marshal relevant evidence, and (d) the depth of insight about the passage chosen. The position you take in a paper need not be what you really believe. The important thing is doing critical thinking about race relations.

The task of leading class discussions is intended to give students practice doing critical thinking within a public context.

A student led class discussion will be a three way conversation between the student discussion leader (or leaders), the instructor, and the other students. In advance of the class discussion, the student leader will prepare three or four short passages suitable for critical thinking. These passages should pertain to the topic of the day. They can be taken from the assigned reading for the day, but they need not. In fact the student leader can herself write a passage that will be the subject of critical thinking. To get things started, the instructor will typically ask the student leader to summarize the assigned reading for the day. After that some or all of the class time will be devoted to consideration of the prepared passages.

The midterm and final examinations test (a) how well students have understood the assigned readings and the class discussion, (b) how effectively they can analyze evidence and arguments in a time limited framework, and (c) how fluent and resourceful they are in the practice of critical thinking. Regular class attendance is extremely important to gain the benefits of this course. Class attendance will be taken regularly and will influence grades.

Conference on the Sociology of Race and Ethnicity

The instructor is organizing a state wide conference entitled *New Directions in the Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*. This will be held on Saturday April 22 on the CU campus. The theme of the conference is obviously relevant to the issues discussed in this class. Students who are so inclined can earn extra credit by participating regularly in the design and preparation of the *New Directions* conference. However, such participation is strictly voluntary and certainly not a course requirement.

Class Schedule:

A. Methods of Critical Thinking (Jan. 17 - Feb. 2)

1. What is critical thinking? (Jan. 17)
Reading: *Critical Thinking* (chapters) 1
2. The language of reasoning (Jan. 19)
Reading: *Critical Thinking* (chapters) 2
3. Patterns of reasoning (Jan. 24)
Reading: *Critical Thinking* (chapters) 3,4
4. Clarification and credibility (Jan. 26)
Reading: *Critical Thinking* (chapters) 5,6
5. Evaluation (Jan.31)
Reading: *Critical Thinking* (chapters) 7,8,9
6. Causation and decision making (Feb. 2)
Reading: *Critical Thinking* (chapters) 10,11

B. The Origins of Racial Inequality Feb. 7-23)

7. Yali's question (Feb. 7)
Reading: *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (pages) 9-32
8. How Europe became dominant (Feb. 9)
Reading: *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (pages) 33-81
9. The relevance of food (Feb. 14)
Reading: *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (pages) 83-130
10. Domesticating plants and animals (Feb. 16)
Reading: *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (pages) 131-191
11. Germs and writing (Feb. 21)
Reading: *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (pages) 193-238
12. Technology and the state (Feb. 23)
Reading: *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (pages) 239-291

First paper due (Feb. 23)

C. Race and Identity (Feb. 28 - March 7)

13. A common American identity (Feb. 28)
Reading: *Taking Sides* (issues) 1 and 13
Race and Ethnicity in Society (readings) 8, 14, 22
14. The whiteness of America (March 2)
Reading: *Taking Sides* (issues) 4
Race and Ethnicity in Society (readings) 3, 13, 20
15. Skin color and identity (March 7)
Reading: *Taking Sides* (issues) 5
Race and Ethnicity in Society (readings) 7, 18

D. Race and Race Prejudice (March 9-14)

16. Definitions of race (March 9)
Reading: *Taking Sides* (issues) 7
Race and Ethnicity in Society (readings) 5, 6, 23
17. Nature of racial prejudice (March 14)
Reading: *Taking Sides* (issues) 6
Race and Ethnicity in Society (readings) 2, 9, 10

Midterm examination (March 16)

E. Race and Social Institutions (March 21 - April 6)

18. Immigration (March 21)
Reading: *Taking Sides* (issues) 2
Race and Ethnicity in Society (readings) 26, 27, 28
19. Segregation and resegregation (March 23)
Reading: *Taking Sides* (issues) 8 and 11
Race and Ethnicity in Society (readings) 31, 43, 44

Spring break (March 25 - April 2)

20. Class and race (April 4)
Reading: *Taking Sides* (issues) 16
Race and Ethnicity in Society (readings) 30, 32
21. Job discrimination (April 6)
Reading: *Race and Ethnicity in Society* (readings) 34, 35, 37

F. Social Policies (April 11-18)

22. Social welfare (April 11)
Reading: *Race and Ethnicity in Society* (readings) 39, 40, 41
23. Affirmative action (April 13)
Reading: *Taking Sides* (issues) 12 and 14
Race and Ethnicity in Society (readings) 12

Second paper due (April 13)

24. Racial profiling (April 18)

Reading: *Taking Sides* (issues) 18

Race and Ethnicity in Society (readings) 48, 49, 50

G. Other Non-white People (April 20-25)

25. Asian Americans (April 20)

Reading: *Taking Sides* (issues) 9

Race and Ethnicity in Society (readings) 17, 29

Conference: *New Directions in the Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* (Saturday April 22, 8:00am - 9:00pm)

26. Latino Americans (April 25)

Reading: *Taking Sides* (issues) 10

Race and Ethnicity in Society (readings) 33, 45, 46

H. The Future of Race Relations (April 27 - May 4)

27. Is racism permanent? (April 27)

Reading: *Taking Sides* (issues) 15

Race and Ethnicity in Society (readings) 11, 47, 54

28. The question of reparations (May 2)

Reading: *Taking Sides* (issues) 17

Race and Ethnicity in Society (readings) 55

29. Concluding thoughts (May 4)

Final examination (Saturday May 6, 4:30-7:00pm)

Approximate Grading Percentages

Class attendance	20%
Leading class discussion	15%
First paper	15%
Second paper	15%
Midterm examination	15%
Final examination	20%

Critical Dates

First paper due	Feb.23
Midterm exam	March 16
Spring break	March 25 - April 2
Second paper due	April 13
Conference	Saturday April 22 [all day]
Final exam	Saturday May 6, 4:30 - 7:00pm