Soc 154a: Community Structure and Youth Subculture

Tues and Thursday 3:30- 4:50

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Office hours: Pearlman 209
Tuesdays and Thursdays 5-6pm
and by appointment

Community is one of the most fundamental—and misunderstood and debated—concepts in sociology. What defines a community? Place, social ties, shared values? In our digital and mobile age, are our virtual, social communities more important than where we live? How are social bonds created and maintained? What happens when they are strained or break down? To better understand different forms of community, this course focuses on various youth subcultures that contest, resist or otherwise react to the mainstream community.

From punks to skaters, fandom to hip-hop, we will investigate historical and contemporary examples of subcultures to better understand youth collective behavior within community and learn more about community structure in general. Issues of style, identity-expression, consumerism, politics, deviance and class-based resistance, in addition to analysis of gender and race, will be explored through academic research, movies, blogs, zines, and music.

These issues, and more, animate this course, which covers the sociological study of community structure and how to define, locate, analyze and interpret community life. We will begin by introducing frameworks for analyzing both subcultures and communities, and deal more in detail with three generalizable community types: 1) small towns or rural communities, 2) cities or urban communities, and 3) suburban communities. Our main goal will be to apply these frameworks and theoretical ideas to actual communities, with some of the course assignments organized around applying the readings and concepts to communities and subcultures of your choosing.

Readings

The following books are required for the course and available at the campus bookstore.

Friday Night Lights: A Town, a Team, and a Dream, by H.R. Bissinger
Pretty in Punk: Girls’s Gender Resistance in a Boy’s Subculture, by Lauraine LeBlanc
The Community in Urban Society, 2nd edition, by Larry Lyon and Robyn Driskell

Additional readings will also be required and available on the LATTE site. On the syllabus these readings are marked with an (L).
Assignments and grading
You will be required to hand in all assignments in order to pass the course.

Community portrait 20%
Artifact analysis 20%
In-class quiz 15%
Final essay 25%
Class Participation and Attendance 20%

More detailed instructions for the written assignments will be passed out in class and posted on LATTE.

Community Portrait
You will use the readings, concepts and frameworks from class to describe and analyze a community of your choosing. You will address how you define and bound your community, its key identifiers, forms of social groupings and organizations, distribution of power and leadership, and other relevant characteristics.

Artifact analysis
In this assignment you will choose a subcultural artifact (object, representation or product) such as a song, article of clothing, group symbol to describe and analyze. The goal will be to explain how this artifact highlights key elements of the subculture and its connection to the broader community structure.

In-Class Quiz
There will be two in-class, short quizzes on central theories, concepts, cases and frameworks. The goal will be to test your own knowledge and increase fluency and competence. The lowest quiz score will be dropped and only one quiz grade will count towards your final grade. This should help to reduce test anxiety.

Final Essay
The essay prompt will be handed out in the final week of the course and will be due at some point during finals week. It will contain 2-3 broad questions to answer in short essay form and will allow you to tie together the course main themes and ideas about community structure and youth subcultures.

Class Participation and Attendance
Class participation is crucial to the vibrancy and success of the course. You are expected to have read the days readings in advance and come ready to engage. You are encouraged to share relevant news/websites/songs/additional materials with myself and the other students- they can be uploaded to LATTE.

*Students will be held to the highest standards of academic integrity and plagiarism will not be tolerated. If you have any questions about plagiarism please look at the plagiarism section in the University Handbook, the LTS informational website: http://lts.brandeis.edu/teachlearn/support/academic-integrity/index.html or speak directly with me.
*If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see me immediately.

Please note that this syllabus is subject to change.

Week 1: 8/30 Movie: Dogtown and Z-Boys
Week 2: 9/4 and 9/6. Discussion of movie and intro to course.
  • read chapter 1 from Suzanne Keller’s Community: Pursuing the Dream, Living the Reality, p3-15 (L)
  • read selections from Durkheim’s Suicide (L)
  • read section 1 from Lyons and Driskell’s The Community in Urban Society, Basic Approaches to Community (skim overall, we will return to specific passages)
Week 4: 9/18 (no class 9/20, Brandeis Monday). Portrait of a rural community.
  • begin reading HR Bissinger’s Friday Night Lights
Week 5: 9/25 and 9/27
  • finish Friday Night Lights

Community Portrait Assignment due 9/27

Week 6: 10/2 and 10/4. Subcultures in rural communities and analyzing community breakdown.
  • selections from Kai Erickson’s Everything in its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood (L)
  • selections from Mary Grigsby’s Noodlers in Missouri: Fishing for Identity in a Rural Subculture (L)

Weeks 7 (10/11, no class on 10/9, Brandeis Monday) and 8 (10/16 and 10/18). Intro to Subcultures.
  • Read chapter 1 and 2 in J. Patrick Williams’ Subcultural Theory: Traditions and Concepts (L)
  • read selections from Dick Hebdige’s Subculture the Meaning of Style (L)

In-class quiz

- Selections from William Julius Wilson’s *More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City* (L).

Weeks 10 (10/30 and 11/1) and 11 (11/6 and 11/8). Urban subcultures.

- Selections from Jeff Chang’s *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop* (L)
- Nelson George: “Hip-Hop’s Founding Fathers Speak the Truth” p45-55” (L)
- Murray Forman “Represent: Race, Space, and Place in Rap Music” p201-221 (L)

**In-Class Quiz**

Weeks 12 (11/13 and 11/15) and 13 (11/20, no class 11/22). Gender and Subcultures.

- Read Lauraine LeBlanc *Pretty in Punk*.
- Recommended: Tricia Rose “Never Trust a Big Butt and a Smile” (L)

**Artifact Analysis Assignment due 11/20**


- Read William Finnegan’s “The Unwanted” (L)

Week 16: 12/11. Looking forward: Community in the Virtual Age and Aging out of Subcultures.

- Jason Torkelson. 2010. “Life After (Straightedge) Subculture” *Qualitative Sociology* v33, p257-274. (L)

**Final Essay distributed on 12/11 and due TBA**