Sociology 199b
Senior Capstone Seminar: So, You Want to Change the World?

Tuesdays 2-5pm
Pearlman 203

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Course Description

This course has several interrelated goals. First, and most generally, it provides an opportunity for advanced students in Sociology and HSSP to engage in a shared capstone experience. We hope that the opportunity to engage with fellow seniors throughout the semester will provide occasion for different kinds of conversations about social science research and its translation into policy, practice, and other forms of social action.

Second, this course asks you to reflect on your studies – including focal interests that you have developed through course work, independent studies, and senior theses – to consider how research gets translated into social action. I am deliberately holding open the question of “what kind of social action?” so that we can consider a variety of ways that social science research “travels” beyond the academy, and a variety of domains in which it can be a basis for action. Our considerations will include how social scientists conduct our research, how we write up and present our research, how we engage with the media, and how we participate in processes relevant to policy making (agenda setting, implementation, evaluation, etc.) and other forms of civic engagement.

Third, this course highlights practices and processes associated with social science research and its translation, by engaging with social scientists and researchers from other fields. We will host guests throughout the semester, including faculty from the Brandeis Sociology Department and beyond.

Lastly, this course will invite you to develop working expertise in the history of a particular social scientific topic/issue/problem. Either individually or in small groups (depending on the range of interests among students in the class), over the semester, you will take a deep dive into the history of a particular issue of interest to you, map out the research and policy agendas relevant to this issue, identify “research gaps” (what do we still need to know?) and policy contexts (who are the stakeholders?), and write an Op-Ed that frames your working expertise for a non-academic audience. Much of our attention this semester thus will be devoted to the various ways in which a “sociological imagination” might creatively and effectively be deployed to broader civic ends.

Learning Goals:

1. Explore what it means to exercise a sociological imagination in civil society.
2. Gain insight into the various means by which social science research has impacts.
3. Evaluate your hopes and preferences re: how your research might “travel” and to where.
4. Engage with faculty in the Department of Sociology and visiting scholars to discover how they practice their craft, and how they think about the “translation” of their work.
5. Develop working expertise – and a portfolio of writings – focused on a specific social scientific topic/issue/problem.
6. Anticipate ways to build bridges from your education to your post-collegiate life.
Experiential Learning

The Sociology Capstone is an Experiential Learning course. This means that you will be an active agent in exploring your relationships to the topics at the center of this class. To begin, you will choose the substantive focus/topic for your work. You will be invited to reflect on your positionality, commitments, and aspirations in re: this topic at both the beginning and end of the semester. You will conduct a literature review and then gather your own primary data (either from the media or from an interview) to better understand the research and policy contexts for this topic. You will develop an Op-Ed on this topic and present your recommendations to the class. My goal is for you to feel a strong sense of ownership and agency as you develop a portfolio of work on this topic of your choice. Additionally, both class discussions and office hours will provide an opportunity for you to reflect on what you are learning in this course and how it may inform your studies, career plans, or engagement with various domains of social action.

Course Requirements

1. Attendance and Respectful Participation

This course covers a lot of material, which we will navigate together. To support the collective learning process in this class, your attendance is expected. You are also expected to bring readings, along with your notes on the readings, to class. Consistent absences will be noted and reflected in your final grade. Laptops are allowed but ONLY for taking notes or examining readings. Other observed uses of your laptop will result in a reduction of your participation grade.

I expect that you will be respectful of others in class, including our guest speakers, your fellow students, and me. Examples include arriving on time, not leaving early, listening when others speak, not monopolizing discussion time, and not having side-discussions. Please turn cell phones and pagers off.

2. Classroom Environment

In this class, we will discuss a variety of complex social problems, and we will reflect on our own experiences as social scientists and members of society. Please remember that your classmates have a range of experiences and be thoughtful when you speak and listen. My default is to always assume that there is someone in the room who has experienced what we are discussing; therefore, my intention is speak in a way that respects their experiences. At the same time, I recognize that it is important that we be able to ask our honest questions. Consequently, I ask you to bring to every class all of your trust, sensitivity, maturity, and sincere commitment to learning. If you have any concerns about your ability to participate actively in class, because of personal experience, trauma, or something else, please do not hesitate to talk with me about it—the earlier in the semester, the better.

3. Academic Integrity

You are expected to be honest in all of your academic work. Please be sure to follow the University’s policies on academic integrity (see: http://www.brandeis.edu/studentlife/srcs/rr/). I will refer any
suspected instances of alleged dishonesty to the Director of Academic Integrity. Students may be required to submit work to TurnItIn.com software to verify originality.

My policy is to give a “0” for any assignment that contains plagiarized material. Instances of academic dishonesty may result in sanctions including but not limited to failure in the course, failure on the assignment in question, suspension from the University and/or educational programs. Citation and research assistance can be found via LTS library guides.

4. Reasonable Accommodations

If you are a student who has academic accommodations because of a documented disability, please contact me and give me a copy of your letter of accommodation in the first two weeks of the semester. If you have questions about documenting a disability, please contact Beth Rodgers-Kay in the Academic Affairs Office (x63470, brodgers@brandeis.edu).

5. Communications

I will respond to email within 48 hours during the week, or following the weekend. If I can’t answer your question in a sentence or two, I will invite you to come to office hours. If you have questions about how to complete an assignment or about how an assignment was graded, I will invite you to come to office hours.

Assignments and Evaluation

Students are expected to be full-fledged participants in the seminar. As this capstone seminar has been designed specifically to provide a space for us to collectively engage with how sociology might inform public issues and debates, much of the benefit of this course will come through in-class discussion. This means coming to class having carefully read and thought about the readings. The course grade includes attendance and participation (15%).

In addition, working together in pairs, students will make two collaborative discussion guides for class; these which will account for 10% of the grade (5% each). Each discussion guide should include a brief synopsis of the theme for the week, very short (i.e., 1-2 sentence) overviews of each reading, and 8-10 questions for class discussion. Discussion guides should be distributed via LATTE at least 24 hours before class (i.e., by 2pm on the Monday before our class meeting), so that we can all reflect on them as we prepare for class. As well, the students who prepare the discussion guide for the week will be asked to begin the Q&A following guest lectures.
Overview of Written Assignments (note: assignment sheets will be distributed for each)

Essay 1 (reflection) – due January 24

In your first essay (5%), you will identify the research topic that will be focus of your work this semester and explore your personal interest in/commitment to this question or issue. This may be the focus of your thesis, a personal passion, or a something you’ve become curious about in during your coursework.

Essay 2 (research) – due March 2

Your second essay (20%) will provide an academic overview of your research topic/focus for the semester. It will include a literature review that outlines the history of research on the topic, an accounting of any issues/questions that are current foci of research, and a justification for what/whom you think of as the “ideal” audience or translation outcome for your work on this topic.

Essay 3 (research) – due April 6

Your third essay (20%) will focus on the current policy context of your topic. Your data for this essay may come either from a review of media coverage of your topic, or from an interview with an expert/stakeholder/etc. who works in a field relevant to your topic.

Essay 4 (looking ahead) – due May 4

Your fourth essay (10%) will reflect on where you have arrived, by the end of the semester, in terms of your research, thoughts re: translation or social action or civic engagement, and plans for post-collegiate life.

Op-Ed and Presentation – due May 2

Each student will write an Op-Ed (15%) designed to be paired with your presentation of your semester long project. In 600-800 words, you should introduce and support a position on the research topic you’ve chosen as your focus for the semester. The format of this essay should roughly follow the op-ed models that we will discuss in class, and advance a clear, empirically-supported position supported by a sociologically-informed analysis intended to convince readers of the validity and utility of your argument.

During the final week of class, each student will present their Op-Ed and lead a short discussion about the recommendations that they make therein (5%). The class discussion may include questions about the state of the research, relevant policy windows, stakeholders, and possible audiences and outcomes for research translation.
In sum:

- *Attendance and Participation* – 15%
- Collaborative guides to weekly readings (2 @ 5 points each) – 10%
- *Essay 1: Introduction and Topic Definition* – 5%
- *Essay 2: Research Topic Frame and Literature Review* – 20%
- *Essay 3: Interview or Media Analysis re: Contemporary Policy Contexts* – 20%
- *Essay 4: Reflection and Next Steps* – 10%
- *Op-Ed and Presentation* – 20%

Please note that I place a high premium on careful research and clear organization and writing. Papers may not be re-written. This means you should offer your best effort the first time and ask questions if you need clarification before completing any of the assignments. I encourage you to use the Writing Center as you work on your essays.

Written assignments are due at the beginning of class or at 2pm on the date noted on the syllabus. I will NOT accept your assignments through e-mail. I only accept hard copies or, when specified, via LATTE. If you have an emergency and are unable to complete an assignment, you must speak with me as soon as possible so we can discuss how you will complete the assignment. Do not assume that you may hand in all of your assignments at the end of the course, or that you will be granted an extension. You will lose one half of a letter grade for each 24 hours after the due date the assignment is turned in (i.e. if you would have received an A but your paper is turned in within the first 24 hours after it is due, you will receive an A-, etc.). If you are experiencing a medical or family emergency that is interfering with your ability to complete your work for the class, I will expect to hear from your Academic Advisor, so that we can collaborate on a plan to help you successfully finish the semester. If you’d like me to reconsider a grade, you must submit a detailed written explanation for why you believe a reevaluation is warranted.

In the interest of fairness, all written papers are to be typed, double-spaced, using a 11-12-pt. Times New Roman font, 1 inch margins. Please be sure to include page numbers, appropriate citations, and bibliographies.

Success in this four-credit course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class.

**Books available at the campus bookstore and on reserve at the library:**


All other materials will be available on the LATTE course page: [http://latte.brandeis.edu](http://latte.brandeis.edu).
Course Outline

Week 1: Introductions
January 17

Chapter 1 - “Starting Where You Are.”

At URL: http://harvardmagazine.com/2010/04/social-sciences-hard-problems


Week 2: Research Agendas: (Critical) Public Sociology and Policy
January 24

Guest: Darren Zinner, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Heller School for Social Management and Policy, Brandeis University.


*** Essay 1 due

NOTE: ‘DEIS Impact’, a “week-long festival of social justice,” is January 26-February 2, 2017. On January 31, at 7pm, Rebecca Walker will give a keynote address entitled "The World in You and You in the World: Identity in Action," which looks to be a perfect fit for our class:

*In a complex and interconnected world, how can we come to understand the power and strength that arises from our own lived experiences while being respectful of others in their quest to find fulfillment? How can each of us leverage our individuality, strengths, and skills to make the changes we wish to see in the world? How can we love, honor, and reserve space for ourselves, while also serving as a force for social change?*
Week 3: What Kind of Data? How to Tell the Story?
January 31

Guest: Sabrina McCormick, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Environmental and Occupational Health, George Washington University School of Public Health (Skype)

WATCH: “Years of Living Dangerously,” Season 1, Episode 8.


Week 4: What is Advocacy? What is Community Based Participatory Research?
February 7

Guest: Veena Siddarth, MSc, MPP, London School of Economics, Centre for the Study of Human Rights. (Skype)


Brown, Phil, Brody, Julia Green, Morello-Frosch, Rachel, Tovar, Jessica,, Zota, Ami R & Ruthann A. Rudel. 2012. “Measuring The Success Of Community Science: The Northern California Household Exposure Study.” Environmental Health Perspectives 120:326–331.
Week 5: Research Communications: Getting the Word Out
February 14

Guests: Max Pearlstein, Office of Communications, Heller School (2-3pm)
Cynthia Colen, Associate Professor of Sociology, Ohio State University. (3:15-4:15pm, Skype)


Breastfeeding on Long-Term Child Health & Wellbeing Using Sibling Comparisons.” Social Science &

OSU research news brief: At URL: http://researchnews.osu.edu/archive/sibbreast.htm

“Sibling Study Finds No Long-Term Breastfeeding Benefits For Kids” At URL:
http://www.wbur.org/commonhealth/2014/02/28/sibling-study-finds-no-long-term-breastfeeding-
benefits-for-kids

At URL: http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/05/22/the-politics-of-breastfeeding

Week 6: No Classes, Winter Break

Week 7: Sociology as Empathy: Engaging “the Public”
February 28

Guest: Michael Strand, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Sociology, Brandeis University.


***Reading TBA

*** March 2 – Essay 2 due
Week 8: Engaging the Courts
March 7

Guest: Jocelyn Viterna, PhD, Professor of Sociology, Harvard University.

Case Study 1: Abortion in El Salvador


http://globalvoicesonline.org/2014/12/16/el-salvador-imprisons-17-women-who-lost-their-newborns-as-murderers/


Case Study 2: The New Family Structures Study


“Letter to the Editors of Social Science Research.” At URL: https://familyinequality.wordpress.com/2012/06/29/200-researchers-respond-to-regnerus-paper/


Skim:  "Amicus Brief in Golinski v. Office of Personnel Management"
Week 9:  Engaging with Professionals
March 14

Guest: Wendy Cadge, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology, Brandeis University.


Wendy Cadge in the media:


WATCH: "Chaplains" PBS Documentary, 2015

Week 10:  Engaging with Activists
March 21

Guest: Gowri Vijayakumar, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Sociology, Brandeis University.


***Reading TBA
Week 11: Engaging Across Disciplines
March 28

Guest: Derron Wallace, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Education and Sociology, Brandeis University.


NOTE: Professor Nelson is giving a talk on March 20, 2017, from 3:30-5pm, in the International Lounge, Usdan. I encourage you to attend.

April 4

Guest: Rich Levitt, Associate Director, Corporate and Foundation Relations, Brandeis University

***Reading TBA


*** April 6 – Essay 3 due

Week 13 & 14 – No Class, Spring Break
Week 15: The Politics of Science Policy
April 25 Case Study: Researching Violence in the U.S.


Week 16: Op-Ed/Project Presentations
May 2 Presentations

*** Op-Ed due

*** May 4 – Essay 4 due