

SO 1871B

Sociological Perspectives on Poverty in the United States

Prof. Gregory C. Elliott
Maxcy Hall, Room 202
3-1907

Semester II, 2009
Monday, 3:00-5:20
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In this course, we conduct an intensive analysis of the lower levels of the socioeconomic status hierarchy in the United States of America. Our objective is two-fold: (1) to learn about the social structural forces that affect a person's life chances in our society, and (2) to gain insights into the personal experiences of those who occupy those lower tiers in the status hierarchy. Overall, we seek to understand the ways in which a person's place in the social system is related to personal growth and development, especially for those who are disadvantaged.

We will begin with a general introduction to the concepts of social class and socioeconomic status (SES), exploring the classic theories of Marx and Weber and pursuing their extensions in current sociological theory. We initiate our focus on poverty by examining briefly the history of the topic conducted in the twentieth century.

Aspects of the social structure can influence the personal consequences of poverty for the individual. We examine two such factors: gender and race/ethnicity. We will study the qualitative and quantitative differences between the experience of poverty for men and women. We will probe the controversial question of the relative impact of race/ethnicity and SES on a person's life chances.

Current theories of SES distinguish three strata at the lower end of the hierarchy: the working poor (those with steady employment but too low an income to escape their current level); marginal workers (those not consistently employed but who move from job to job, often with considerable time between employment); and the underclass (those effectively not a part of the socioeconomic system at all and who depend on government assistance, the underground economy, or friends and family for subsistence). Through the assigned readings, we will try to understand what it means personally for individuals or families who inhabit each of these three SES levels.

Finally, we will investigate the newest threat to our social system: homelessness. We will go beyond issues of numbers and trends to try to understand the structural roots of the problem and what it means to have no safe place to call one's own.

With the exception of the first meeting, the class will run in a seminar format. In a seminar, the primary responsibility for discussion of issues lies with the students themselves. I will serve as a facilitator for these discussions, but you will be expected to contribute to an informed analysis of each week's issues. I will lecture in our first class meeting on the basic theories and concepts that comprise the sociological perspective on the American SES hierarchy. For the next meeting (covering more particular issues of social stratification), I will organize the discussion.

Beginning with the specific topics on the syllabus (Week 3), each discussion session will be conducted by students: assignment will be rotated through the class roster, so that each of you will have an opportunity to run the seminar discussion. Those assigned will prepare the format for the class and lead the discussion. I ask that those responsible for leading the seminar discuss

their plan of organization with me in advance. We will expect that all of you will have done all the assigned readings for each week's session, in order that the discussions be as fruitful as possible. Our goal is to conduct an intensive analysis of the issues covered each week.

Grades for the course will be based on three sources. First, because this is a seminar, participation in the weekly meetings is essential for a full understanding of the sociological issues relevant to the causes and consequences of poverty. Part of your grade will be based on the quality (not merely quantity) of your contribution to the weekly discussions.

Second, those with the responsibility for conducting the week's discussion will be graded on their preparation and the manner in which they lead the analysis of the issues found in their topic. Special emphasis will be placed on the organization brought to the session and the successful inclusion of important issues.

Third, each of you will write a term paper, in which you will bring your new-found sociological perspectives to bear on the issues of poverty. Although I do not like to structure term papers according to page length, you can expect that this paper will require a major effort on your part. Your task will be to apply abstract sociological concepts and theories to the structural and social processes that are involved in the personal experiences of poverty. I will provide more details as the semester progresses.

In addition, I require that each student volunteer, through the Swearer Center, for a minimum of two (2) hours of community service per week with an agency that deals directly with people who are the subject of this course. Representatives of the center will be at our Jan. 26 session to provide information that will help you choose an appropriate agency. I hope that your first hand interaction with the poor will provide an opportunity to apply the concepts, theories and processes from the seminar to real-life situations.

Finally, I believe that the issues you confront in this course will spark many and varied reactions from you. To help you organize and understand these reactions, I ask you to keep a weekly journal, in which you record your thoughts, feelings, and insights concerning the issues covered by the week's readings and class discussion. On Thursdays, please pass in the journal of your reactions to that week's issues. I believe that it would be helpful for you to integrate your spontaneous (and perhaps emotional) responses with more analytical assessment of these issues. You should incorporate your volunteer experiences into your weekly essays. As I review your journals, I will suggest connections, further readings, or particular theories and concepts that could help you with this task. Be assured that confidentiality will be strictly preserved.

I hope it is clear that it is very important that each of you participate fully and conscientiously in all phases of this course. This seminar will succeed only if all of you commit yourselves to a serious effort throughout the semester. To have some (even a few) of you withdraw from the course as the term goes on will create a heavy burden for those who remain. Please consider carefully whether you will be able to sustain an intensive and extensive commitment to the demands of the course. If you do participate in this course, please realize that I (and your fellow students) expect that you will do your full share in making the course a success. I look forward to an exciting and challenging semester. If you are willing to invest yourself in this venture, I am sure that you will find it both intellectually and personally rewarding.

Required Books

The following books have been ordered at the Brown Bookstore:

- Gilbert, D. 2008. *The American Class Structure in an Age of Growing Inequality* (seventh edition). Sage.
- Harrington, M. 1981. *The Other America*. Macmillan.
- Harvey, D. L. 1993. *Potter Addition: Poverty, Family, and Kinship in a Heartland Community*. Aldine deGruyter.
- Howell, J. 1973. *Hard Living on Clay Street*. Waveland Press.
- Iceland, J. A. 2006. *Poverty in America: A Handbook* (second edition). University of California Press.
- Liebow, E. 1993. *Tell Them Who I Am*. Penguin
- MacLeod, J. 2004. *Ain't No Makin' It*. Westview Press.
- Massey, D.S., and N. A. Denton. 1993. *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Harvard University Press.
- Sennett, R. and J. Cobb. 1972. *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. Norton.
- Shipler, David. 2004. *The Working Poor : Invisible in America*. Vintage.
- Sidel, R. 1996. *Keeping Women and Children Last*. Penguin.
- Terkel, S. 1974. *Working*. Norton.
- Wilson, W. J. 1980. *The Declining Significance of Race* (second edition). University of Chicago Press.
- Wilson, W. J. 1987. *The Truly Disadvantaged*. University of Chicago Press.
- Wright, J. D., Rubin, B. A., and Devine, J., 1989. *Beside the Golden Door: Policy, Politics, and the Homeless*. Transaction.

These books, as well as others that will be useful in the course, are on reserve in the Rockefeller Library.

SYLLABUS

Note: Required books are on reserve in the Rockefeller Library. Individual articles marked with an asterisk (*) are available on OCRA (Online Course Reserves Access).

Week 1: Introduction

Jan. 26 D. Gilbert. 2008. *The American Class Structure: In an Age of Growing Inequality* (seventh edition). Wadsworth. (Chapters 1-4)

Week 2: Stratification

Feb. 2 D. Gilbert. 2008. *The American Class Structure: In an Age of Growing Inequality* (seventh edition). Wadsworth. (Chapters 5-11)

J. A. Iceland. 2006. *Poverty in America: A Handbook*. University of California Press.

Week 3: History

Feb. 9 *J. T. Patterson. 2000. *America's Struggle Against Poverty in the Twentieth Century*. Harvard University Press. (Chapters 3-5)

Michael Harrington. 1997. *The Other America*. Simon and Schuster.

Week 4: The Reproduction of Status

TBA *R. D. Hess and V. C. Shipman. 1965. "Early Experience and the Socialization of Cognitive Modes in Children." *Child Development*, 36, 869-886.

*K. A. Miller, M. L. Kohn, and C. Schooler. 2001. "Educational self-direction and the cognitive functioning of students." *Social Forces*, 63, 923-944.

R. Sennett and J. Cobb. 1972. *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. Norton.

Week 5: Gender/Family and Poverty

Feb. 23 R. Sidel. 1996. *Keeping Women and Children Last*. Penguin.

*Y. Elmelech and H. Lu. 2005. "Race, ethnicity, and the gender poverty gap." *Social Science Research*, 33, 158-182.

*J. Sobolewski and P. Amato. 2005. "Economic Hardship in the Family of Origin and Children's Psychological Well-Being." *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 2005, 67: 141-156.

From S. Terkel. 1974. *Working*. Norton: Roberta Victor, Diane Wilson

Week 6: Race/Ethnicity and Poverty

Mar. 2 D. S. Massey and N. A. Denton. 1998. *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Harvard University Press.

*J. Moore and H. Pachon. 1985. *Hispanics in the United States*. Prentice-Hall. Pp. 78-85.

*C. M. Snipp. 1989. *American Indians: The First of Our Land*. Russell Sage Foundation. (Chapter 10).

*J. Van Hook, S. Brown, and M. Kwenda. 2004. "A Decomposition of Trends in Poverty among Children of Immigrants." *Demography*, 41, 649-670

Week 7: The Race/Class Controversy

Mar. 9 W. J. Wilson. 1980. *The Declining Significance of Race* (second edition). University of Chicago Press.

*R. Kahlenberg "Class, not race." *The New Republic*, April 3, 1995, 21-27

* M. D. Hayward, E. M. Crimmins, T. P. Miles, and Y. Yang. 2000. "The significance of socioeconomic status in explaining the racial gap in chronic health conditions." *American Sociological Review*, 65, 910-930.

Week 8: Rural Poverty

Mar. 16 D. L. Harvey. 1993. *Potter Addition: Poverty, Family, and Kinship in a Heartland Community*. Aldine deGruyter.

*A. R. Snyder and D. K. McLaughlin. 2004. "Female-headed families and poverty in rural America." *Rural Sociology*, 69, 127-149.

Week 9: The Working Poor

Mar. 30 D. K. Shipler. 2004. *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*. Vintage.

From S. Terkel. 1974. *Working*. Norton: Lincoln Janes, Lewis Hayward, Eric Hoellen.

Week 10: Marginal Workers

Apr. 6 J. T. Howell. 1973. *Hard Living on Clay Street*. Waveland Press.

From S. Terkel. 1974. *Working*. Norton: Maggie Holmes, Hobart Foote, Joe and Susie Hayes.

Week 11: The "Underclass": Structural Issues

Apr. 13 W. J. Wilson. 1990. *The Truly Disadvantaged*. University of Chicago Press.

*C. Jencks. "Deadly Neighborhoods," *The New Republic*, June 13, 1988, 23-32

*E. R. Ricketts and I. V. Sawhill. 1988. "Defining and Measuring the Underclass," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 316-325.

Week 12: The "Underclass": Personal Issues

Apr. 20 J. MacLeod. 2004. *Ain't No Makin' It*. Westview Press.

Week 13: Homelessness: Structural Issues

Apr. 27 Wright, J. D., Rubin, B. A., and Devine, J., 1989. *Beside the Golden Door: Policy, Politics, and the Homeless*. Transaction.

Week 14: Homelessness: Personal Issues

May 4 E. Liebow. 1995. *Tell Them Who I Am: The Lives of Homeless Women*. Penguin.

- *D. A. Snow and L. Anderson. "Identity Work Among the Homeless: The Verbal Construction and Avowal of Personal Identities." *American Journal of Sociology*, 1987, 92, 1336-1371.
- *B. A. Lee, C. R. Farrell, and B. G. Link. 2004. "Revisiting the Contact Hypothesis: The Case of Public Exposure to Homelessness." *American Sociological Review*, 69, 40-63.