

Spring 2012
SOC 302: Contemporary Social Problems

Instructor:	Luke Norris	Class Location:	Parkinson 202
Office:	Faner 3427	Meeting Time:	MWF 1-1:50pm
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Overview:

This course will introduce you to the definition and study of social problems. Rather than focusing on the conditions we ordinarily think of as social problems, in this course, we will learn and take a social constructionist analytical approach to examine how various actors come to define conditions as problematic, the claims-making and other strategies that take place in these definitional processes, and the outcomes of these processes for specific cases. How is it that a social phenomenon comes to be seen as a social issue? How do people decide what is or is not a social problem, and how do they organize to get others to agree? What is at stake in this process? We will examine and learn to apply concepts – such as “typification,” “claims-making,” “medicalization,” “ownership,” and “moral entrepreneur” to contemporary exemplars of social problems activities. By the end of the semester you should be able to meet the following objectives:

- identify important constructionist thinkers in the sociology of social problems;
- understand how social problems are constructed in everyday life;
- critically assess claims about social problems;
- use course concepts to analyze the social construction of contemporary social problems; and,
- demonstrate improvements in your critical thinking and expository writing skills.

Required Texts:

Best, Joel. 2008. *Social Problems*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co. [**BEST**]
Silver, Ira. 2008. *Social Problems Readings*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co. [**SILVER**]
Supplemental readings on Blackboard. [**READING**]

Assignments: Grades will be composed of the following components:

Class Attendance & Participation	15 points
Discussion Leader (3 total, 5 points each)	15 points
Response Papers (5 total, 10 points each)	50 points
<u>Movie Review</u>	<u>20 points</u>
TOTAL	100 points

Grading Scale:

A → 90-100	D → 60-69
B → 80-89	F → 59 and below
C → 70-79	

Class Attendance (5%):

You are expected to attend every class and arrive on time. If special circumstances prohibit you from arriving to class on time on a regular basis, please let me know as soon as possible. If you are involved in university-sponsored or sanctioned events (i.e., athletic events, academic conferences and/or competitions), and will need to miss class due to such events, you will need to present me with a paper or email copy of said event, and the dates you will be absent from class. Academic advisors, coaches, or sponsors usually provide appropriate documentation.

The sociology of social problems is a broad topic. We have a short time for you to gain some exposure to this information. It is important for your success in this class that you make it to class every day. Each section has an assignment attached to it, and the daily summary and discussion of these readings will greatly help your ability to complete these assignments. This is much better than reading the material the night before it is due and trying to write the papers then. The movie

review assignments will also use information that is discussed in class, so it is important that you are in class to hear this important information. Additionally, 15% of your grade is based on class attendance and participation; it is very difficult to participate when you are not present.

Class Participation (10%):

This is a junior level class. Upper division classes are supposed to get students prepared for the world they will eventually live and work in. Although much communication in today's world is mediated through technology, many good ideas still come out through discussion. This is not a lecture-based class. Each of you will participate in some significant way this semester. It does not have to be every day, but it needs to be frequent. If I have not heard from you in a few classes, I will ask you questions, and you should be able to answer them. Each of you needs to read all the readings and be prepared for the class discussion. This participation can be in the form of asking questions, answering questions, commenting (in a meaningful way) to someone's statement, or by making statements of your own.

Come to class prepared, having read the materials with a few questions or comments to share with the class for discussion. Your participation grade will not be based simply upon your appearance in class or on your frequency of comments but also upon the *quality* of your comments and your active participation in class. Additionally, quality listening skills are important to the class – I value the ability to build discussion with other class members, and I expect you to value others' opinions and exhibit respect for one another in the classroom.

Discussion Leader (15%):

Each student is required to participate in three panels leading the daily class discussion. A minimum of five discussion questions and/or discussion prompts is required each time, and these **questions/prompts must be emailed to me by noon on the day previous to which you are presenting.** (For example, if you are presenting on a Wednesday, discussion questions must be emailed to me by noon on Tuesday). Failure to email me questions beforehand will result in a 50% automatic loss to your score for each assignment.

Response Papers (50%):

The books we draw our readings from have ten sections. These sections are clearly marked in the table of contents of the books. For five (5) of these sections, you will choose one of the readings and write a 4-6 page paper. Each paper must include a summary of the reading (at least one page, but not more than two pages) and a sociological discussion that must draw on the theories and other readings from your book and ideas we have discussed in class. All papers must be typed, double-spaced, 12 point Times New Roman font, and include page numbers. Papers need to include proper citation as well as a references page. No outside sources are necessary, but references to your text are required. Late papers will be docked a full letter grade for every day (including weekends) that the paper is late.

Movie Review (20%):

Social problems are an ever-present characteristic of human society, whether defined as such in an objective or subjective sense. To examine this, I require that you watch one movie during the course and write 7-10 page paper detailing the social problem you observed in the movie and discussing it using the sociological insights on social problems you will develop during the course, including the application of one or more parts of the social problems process used in the study of social problems. You must give a very brief summary of the film, including a discussion of the social problem of interest in the film, addressing how it is framed as a social problem, the primary claimsmakers associated with the social problem, and what solutions, if any, are offered to remedy the social problem. I will provide a list of pre-approved movies on Blackboard that you may choose from without checking with me first. I must approve any movie that is not on the list prior to you turning the paper in. Any paper I receive on an unapproved source will be given a grade of zero. I may be willing to allow alternative media (i.e., Television Series, Web Series, Plays, Radio Dramas, and so on). However, any series must encompass an entire season or story arc, and as with anything not on the list, be sure to contact me before deciding to use these.

Improving one's writing is an important part of the college experience, and spelling and grammar will be a part of your grade in this course on all written work. If you need additional assistance, I encourage you to contact the Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (SIUC) Writing Centers located at Morris Library, Room 236, Phone (618) 453-1231 and Trueblood Writing Center located at Trueblood Hall, Lower Level, Phone (618) 453-2927. Email: write@siu.edu.

Extra Credit:

As mentioned in the response papers section, there are ten (10) sections in our book. You are required to choose an article from five (5) of those sections. The other five (5) sections are opportunities for extra credit. Only three additional response papers may be completed for extra credit for a total of eight (8) papers (i.e., five (5) assigned and three (3) extra). In order to earn this extra credit, you must write a paper of the same format as the assigned papers, with the same requirements and page length as the other response papers. These papers will be graded using the same criteria as regular response papers, but rather than being worth 10 points each, each extra credit paper is worth a maximum of 5 points.

Student Etiquette:

Students are asked to follow some guidelines to help maintain a constructive learning environment. Throughout the semester, we will discuss a variety of social issues and your fellow class members may hold diverse opinions about topics we cover. As such, we need to ensure a safe and a positive learning environment. Class discussions should take place within the context of academic inquiry and in the spirit of understanding diverse perspectives and experiences. It is essential that everyone treat each other with respect during class discussions. Disrespectful treatment of others will significantly lower your class participation grade. Do not engage in private conversations, interrupt another student who has the floor, express negative comments about the opinions of your fellow students, walk into class late or leave early (without prior notice), keep cell phones on, text message your friends, read the newspaper, or show general signs of disrespect for the course, instructor, or other students.

Academic Ethics Policies:

Academic honesty is very important. Plagiarism and cheating will not be tolerated. The university and I expect that *all* work presented will represent original effort by the student. Any violations will be dealt with in the appropriate manner—*minimum* consequence is a zero for an assignment, *maximum* consequence is an F in the course. For more information, see http://www.siu.edu/gradschl/catalog/Student_Conduct_Code.pdf

Grade Report Privacy Policy:

The Family Educational Right to Privacy Act, also known as the Buckley Amendment, is a federal law designed to protect student privacy. This means that only *you* have legal access to your grades, not your parents, friends, or significant others. You have the option to sign a waiver to these rights, but if you have not signed said waiver, federal law prohibits me from sharing your grades with anyone but you.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Statement:

Reasonable accommodations will be available to students with disabilities. In order to take advantage of available accommodations, students must contact the SIUC Disability Support Services (DSS) and then submit to me written documentation of the disability and necessary accommodations by the second week of the semester.

Contact the SIUC DSS office to facilitate requests:

Mailing Address: Woody Hall B-150, Carbondale, IL 62901, Mail Code 4705

Email: DSSsiu@siu.edu

Phone: (618) 453-5738; Fax: (618) 453-5700; TTY: (618) 453-2293

Emergency Procedures:

SIUC is committed to providing a safe and health environment for study and work. Because some health and safety circumstances are beyond our control, we ask that you become familiar with the SIUC Emergency Response Plan and Building Emergency Response Team (BERT) program. Emergency response information is available on posters in buildings on campus, available on BERT's website at www.bert.siu.edu, Department of Safety's website www.dps.siu.edu (disaster drop down), and in Emergency Response Guideline pamphlet. Know how to respond to each type of emergency.

Instructors will provide guidance and direction to students in the classroom in the event of an emergency affecting your location. It is important that you follow these instructions and stay with your instructor during an evacuation or sheltering emergency. The Building Emergency Response Team will provide assistance to your instructor in evacuating the building or sheltering within the facility.

Tentative Course Schedule:

As the semester progresses, I reserve the right to alter the syllabus as I see necessary. I will keep you informed should the syllabus need alteration.

Week 1: Introduction to Course

- 01-16: DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. BIRTHDAY HOLIDAY – NO CLASS
- 01-18: Introduction to Course; Discussion of Course Syllabus
- 01-20: BEST – Chapter 1 - The Social Problems Process (Pp. 3-28)

Week 2: The Social Problems Process

- 01-23: SILVER – Reading 5 - *Making Road Dangers Invisible* (Pp. 65-67); SILVER – Reading 26 - *Black Men as Criminals and as Victims* (Pp. 313-328)
- 01-25: READING – Fuller and Myers (1941) – “Some Aspects of a Theory of Social Problems” (Pp. 24-32)
- 01-27: READING – Blumer (1971) - “Social Problems as Collective Behavior” (Pp. 298-306)

Week 3: Claims

- 01-30: READING – Spector and Kitsuse (1973) - “Social Problems: A Re-formulation” (Pp. 145-159)
- 02-01: BEST – Chapter 2 - Claims (Pp. 29-60); Case Study - Claims about Gay Marriage (Pp. 60-63); **Response Paper # 1 Due**
- 02-03: SILVER – Reading 3 - *Viewing Bodily Imperfection as a Health Problem* (Pp. 51-60)

Week 4: Claims/Activists as Claimsmakers

- 02-06: SILVER – Reading 10 - *The Horrors of Child Abuse* (Pp. 107-121)
- 02-08: SILVER – Reading 22 - *Babies Having Babies* (Pp. 282-297); SILVER – Reading 20 - *Compensating for Deficit versus Enhancing Performance* (Pp. 260 -263)
- 02-10: BEST – Chapter 3 - Activists as Claimsmakers (Pp. 64-92); Case Study - Activists Concerned with Globalization (Pp. 93-96); **Response Paper # 2 Due**

Week 5: Activists as Claimsmakers

- 02-13: SILVER – Reading 9 - *Random Violence* (Pp. 91-106) and/or READING – Best (1999) – “Chapter 1: Random Violence” (Pp. 1-27)
- 02-15: SILVER – Reading 12 - *Injustice Based on Sexual Orientation* (Pp. 142-155)
- 02-17: SILVER – Reading 19 - *Selling Environmental Problems* (Pp. 243-259)

Week 6: Experts as Claimsmakers

- 02-20: BEST – Chapter 4 - Experts as Claimsmakers (Pp. 97-124); Case Study - Medical Experts Construct the Obesity Epidemic (Pp. 125-128); **Response Paper # 3 Due**
- 02-22: SILVER – Reading 6 - *Getting Fat on Misinformation* (Pp. 68-74)
- 02-24: SILVER – Reading 13 - *PMS and the Biological Flaws to Womanhood* (Pp.156-173)

Week 7: The Media and Claims

- 02-27: BEST – Chapter 5 - The Media and Claims (Pp. 129-158); Case Study - The Media Debate Whether Wal-Mart Is a Social Problem (Pp. 159-162)
- 02-29: SILVER – Reading 1 - *Spotlighting Disaster* (Pp. 7-31); SILVER – Reading 7 - *Making School Shootings More Thinkable* (Pp. 75-78); **Response Paper # 4 Due**
- 03-02: SILVER – Reading 11 - *Dangerous Music in Black and White* (Pp. 122-141)

Week 8: The Media and Claims/Public Reaction

- 03-05: SILVER – Reading 18 - *A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words* (Pp. 230-236); SILVER – Reading 31 - *Labor Strife Produces Disgruntled Consumers* (Pp. 375-382)
- 03-07: BEST – Chapter 6 - Public Reaction (Pp. 163-189); Case Study - The Public Responds to Terrorism After 9/11 (Pp. 190-193)
- 03-09: SILVER – Reading 4 - *Seeing Police Mistreatment of Blacks as a Necessary Evil* (Pp. 61-64); SILVER – Reading 8 - *The Problem with Welfare as We Know It* (Pp. 79-90); **Response Paper # 5 Due**

Week 9: Spring Vacation

- 03-12: SPRING VACATION – NO CLASS
- 03-14: SPRING VACATION – NO CLASS
- 03-16: SPRING VACATION – NO CLASS

Week 10: Public Reaction

- 03-19: SILVER – Reading 14 - *Black and Undeserving: Exposing Myths about America's Poor* (Pp. 174-190)
- 03-21: SILVER – Reading 16 - *Killer Tales about Serial Killers* (Pp. 200-211); SILVER – Reading 23 - *When Kids Become Victims of Violence* (Pp. 298-302)
- 03-23: SILVER – Reading 21 - *The Crimes That Come to Mind* (Pp. 264-281); SILVER – Reading 32 - *The Colored Stigma of Imprisonment* (Pp. 383-386)

Week 11: Policymaking

- 03-26: BEST – Chapter 7 - Policymaking (Pp. 194-221); Case Study - Making Policy about Global Warming is a Tough Proposition (Pp. 222- 225); **Response Paper # 6 Due**
- 03-28: SILVER – Reading 2 - *Waging War on Drugs* (Pp. 32-50)
- 03-30: SILVER – Reading 24 - *Homeless, Not Poor* (Pp. 303-308); SILVER – Reading 27 - *The War on Terror and a Terrified Public* (Pp. 329-343)

Week 12: Social Problems Work

- 04-02: BEST – Chapter 8 - Social Problems Work (Pp. 226-255); Case Study - Teachers as Social Problems Workers in a World of Standardized Testing (Pp. 256-259); **Response Paper # 7 Due**
- 04-04: READING – Holstein and Miller (1997) - “Introduction: Social Problems as Work” (Pp. ix-xxi)
- 04-06: SILVER – Reading 15 - *Treating Social Problems as Emergencies* (Pp. 191-199); SILVER – Reading 25 - *Catastrophes That Count* (Pp. 309-312)

Week 13: Social Problems Work/Policy Outcomes

- 04-09: SILVER – Reading 28 - *Fostering Personal Responsibility among Women on Welfare* (Pp. 344-360)
- 04-11: BEST – Chapter 9 - Policy Outcomes (Pp. 260-287); Case Study - Evaluating the Impact of Welfare Reform (Pp. 288-291); **Response Paper # 8 Due**
- 04-13: SILVER – Reading 29 - *Providing Free Housing to the Homeless* (Pp. 361-370)

Week 14: Policy Outcomes/Claims Across Space and Time

- 04-16: SILVER – Reading 30 - *The Politics of Disaster* (Pp. 371-374); SILVER – Reading 33 - *Gaming on Native American Reservations* (Pp. 387-393)
- 04-18: BEST – Chapter 10 - Claims Across Space and Time (Pp. 292-320); Case Study - Comparing Claims About Immigration Across Time and Space; **Response Paper # 9 Due**
- 04-20: READING – Becker (1955) - “Marihuana Use and Social Control” (Pp. 35-44)

Week 15: Claims Across Space and Time/The Uses of the Constructionist Stance

- 04-23: SILVER – Reading 17 - *Stalking as a Danger Potentially Menacing All Women* (Pp. 212-229)
- 04-25: BEST – Chapter 11 - The Uses of the Constructionist Stance (Pp. 325-336)
- 04-27: READING – Lowney and Best (1995) - “Chapter 3- Stalking Strangers and Lovers: Changing Media Constructions of a New Crime Problem” (Pp. 33-57)

Week 16: Conclusion to Course

- 04-30: READING – Ibarra and Kitsuse (2003) - “Chapter 1- Claims-Making Discourse and Vernacular Resources” (Pp. 17-50)
- 05-02: **Response Paper # 10 Due**
- 05-04: Review for Final Exam; Concluding Remarks

Final Exam is scheduled on Monday, May 7th from 12:50-2:50pm in Parkinson 202.

“Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.”

– C. Wright Mills (1959), *The Sociological Imagination*