SOC6516F: Culture I

Instructors: Professors Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann
Class: Tuesdays, 11am—1pm, Room 240
Contact: josee.johnston@utoronto.ca, shyon.baumann@utoronto.ca

---

Course Description

This seminar provides an introduction to some of the principal approaches to the sociological study of culture. The course is designed to equip students with an overview of how sociologists conceive of culture, the methodological approaches they use to study it, the major debates within the field, and an appreciation for how the field has evolved in the past few decades. Emphasis is on understanding how culture influences action, the relationship between culture and social inequality, how culture is produced and consumed, and how to measure meaning. Along the way, students will learn what the sociology of culture offers for studying a range of cultural objects, such as food, music, scents, and books, and also the cultural dimensions of diverse phenomena such as networks, bodies, and families.

Course Format

The first two classes will be held on ZOOM. After that, we will meet in person in Room 240.

Join Zoom Meeting https://utoronto.zoom.us/j/83758465720
Meeting ID: 837 5846 5720
Passcode: 575820

Session Topics & Readings

(1) Introduction (Sept 14) (ZOOM)

Roy, William G. and Timothy J. Dowd. 2010. “What Is Sociological about Music?” *Annual Review of Sociology* 36(1):183–203.

Wohl, Hannah, and Gary Alan Fine. 2016. “Reading Rites: Teaching Textwork in Graduate Education.” *The American Sociologist*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12108-016-9322-0.

Please read for the first class. The Roy and Dowd article takes the topic of music, as a self-evidently ‘cultural’ topic, and discusses how we can study things culturally and extend cultural analysis to a wide range of sociological concerns. Through the clear example of music, we can

highlight how cultural analysis in sociology is about applying a set of concepts and methods that can illuminate the cultural dimensions of a wide range of social phenomena, including those that aren't typically thought to be 'culture' (e.g., shopping, education, health care, etc.). The Wohl and Fine article takes on the topic of "how to read" in graduate school. We will use this piece of a jumping off point to discuss today (and throughout the semester) the most effective way to read articles, take notes, and keep track of our ideas. (This is especially important for PhD students who are planning to take comprehensive exams.)

(2) What is Culture? A Deceptively Complex Question (Sept 21)(ZOOM)

Lizardo, Omar. 2017. "Improving cultural analysis: Considering personal culture in its declarative and nondeclarative modes." *American Sociological Review* 82: 88-115.

Sewell, William H. 1999. "The Concept(s) of Culture." Pp.35-61 in *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, edited by Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Swidler, Ann. 2001. *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp. 1-40.

One vein of discussion in the sociology of culture is to define culture. This can be helpful, allowing us to have focused and coherent conversations. But it turns out that we mostly cannot agree. There are competing and complementary conceptualizations of culture. The above readings highlight that it can be helpful to parse out how different forms of culture do different things. Further, instead of a focus on what is or is not culture, these readings highlight that we can use cultural sociology as an approach that can illuminate the cultural dimensions of all social phenomena.

This week we'll also discuss the distinction between the sociology of culture, cultural sociology, and cultural studies. The sociological study of culture concerns two separate, but interrelated areas of study. The first area involves studying culture as a kind of norm, value, or belief system – as in, "I eat meat because it is part of my culture". This is often referred to as cultural sociology, and frequently addresses the collective impact, and structural implications of collective belief systems. Cultural sociology prioritizes interpretive analysis. The second area – the sociology of culture – involves scholarship on cultural phenomena/objects: art museums, restaurants, Hollywood films, and opera. The sociology of culture prioritizes enlightened positivism, of the sort that we would see in other sociological subfields.

(3) The Empirical Study of Culture (Sept 28)

Mohr, John W., Christopher A. Bail, Margaret Frye, Jennifer C. Lena, Omar Lizardo, Terence E. McDonnell, Ann Mische, Iddo Tavory, and Frederick F. Wherry. 2020. *Measuring Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press. Intro and chapters 1 – 3.

Pugh, Allison. 2013. "What Good Are Interviews for Thinking About Culture? Demystifying Interpretive Analysis." *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 1(1): 42-68.

One key dimension of cultural phenomena is that they are understood to have meaning for people. Methodologically, the challenge is that meaning is created inside people's heads, and it's different for each person. It's not straightforwardly observable and measurable. These readings advise sociologists about how to best tackle this challenge: how to empirically capture and analyze complex meaning systems. Culture is also understood to be a dimension of objects and relationships, and we will discuss how to observe and measure the cultural dimensions of objects and relationships.

(4) Culture as Capital (Oct 5)

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. "The Forms of Capital," In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by John G. Richardson, 241–58. New York: Greenwood Press.

Lareau, Annette. 2002. "Invisible Inequality: Social Class and Childrearing in Black Families and White Families." *American Sociological Review* 67(5):747–76.

Carter, Prudence L. 2003. "'Black' Cultural Capital, Status Positioning, and School Conflicts for Low-Income African American Youth." *Social Problems* 50(1):136-155.

The English-language subfield of the sociology of culture was transformed in the 1980s by the incorporation of Bourdieusian analysis. A tremendous amount of contemporary cultural analysis is influenced by Bourdieu, and Bourdieusian concepts and vocabulary have filtered out into general usage -- especially the influential idea of cultural capital, which has expanded to include aesthetic capital, bodily capital and sexual capital. For these reasons, it is useful to gain an acquaintance with Bourdieu's core cultural ideas early on in the course.

(5) How Does Culture Generate Inequality? (Oct 12)

Small, Mario Luis, David J. Harding, and Michèle Lamont. 2010. "Reconsidering Culture and Poverty." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 629(1):6-27. [1]

Lamont, Michèle, Stefan Beljean, and Matthew Clair. 2014. “What is missing? Cultural processes and causal pathways to inequality.” *Socio-Economic Review* 12,3: 573–608.

Ray, Victor. 2019. “A Theory of Racialized Organizations.” *American Sociological Review* 84,1: 26-53.

The concept of a “culture of poverty” was proposed in the 1960s to understand persistent inequality in the United States. The idea was quickly critiqued as an instance of blaming the victim, because it suggested that poor people were doing things that caused their own poverty. As we know, poverty has structural roots (i.e., our current capitalist system is set up so that there will always be poor people). How can we bring our cultural perspectives to bear on this problem in a productive way? These readings demonstrate recent advancements in conceptualizations of how culture works, and the relationship between culture and structure, while avoiding the problem of victim-blaming.

(6) How Does Culture Legitimate Inequality? (Oct 19)

Sherman, Rachel. 2017. Conflicted Cultivation: Parenting, Privilege, and Moral Worth in Wealthy New York Families. *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*. Vol. 5. Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-016-0012-8.

Sherman, Rachel. 2018. “‘A very expensive ordinary life’: consumption, symbolic boundaries and moral legitimacy among New York elites.” *Socio-Economic Review* 16,2: 411-433.

Johnston, Josée, and Shyon Baumann. 2007. “Democracy vs. Distinction: A Study of Omnivorousness in Gourmet Food Writing.” *American Journal of Sociology* 113,1:165-204.

Although it is socially unacceptable to be a discriminatory snob and to flaunt disparities in wealth and power, inequality is pervasive and its magnitude is growing. How is inequality perpetuated in the face of social norms of equality? These articles explore cultural frames that people employ in order to legitimate inequality. Through cultural consumption, values, and tastes, people achieve distinction (a la Bourdieu), but they can also frame their consumption, values, and tastes as morally acceptable even when they work to enable inequality and to reinforce hierarchical boundaries.

(7) Cultural Production (Oct 26)

Peterson, Richard A. and N. Anand. 2004. “The Production of Culture Perspective.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 30:311-334.

Erigha, Maryann. 2021. “Racial Valuation: Cultural Gatekeepers, Race, Risk, and Institutional Expectations of Success and Failure.” *Social Problems*, 68,2 May 2021: 393–408. https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spaa006

Menon, Alka V.. 2019. “Cultural gatekeeping in cosmetic surgery: Transnational beauty ideals in multicultural Malaysia.” *Poetics* 75, 101354.

The sociological study of culture has a long history of studying cultural objects, that is, things that are widely understood to be primarily vehicles of meaning. Art works, such as novels, paintings and television shows, are primary examples. But almost anything people make can be a cultural object if we adopt a cultural perspective for analysis. This week’s readings provide a framework for understanding the importance of studying the processes through which cultural objects come into being. The production perspective encourages scholarship to understand the linkage between the conditions of production and the eventual shape that cultural objects take, including the meanings they can carry.

(8) Consuming Culture (Nov 2)

Cerulo, Karen A. 2018. “Scents and Sensibility: Olfaction, Sense-Making, and Meaning Attribution.” *American Sociological Review* 83,2: 361-389.

Rodriquez, Jason. 2006. “Color-Blind Ideology and the Cultural Appropriation of Hip-Hop.” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35(6):645–668.

Thumala Olave, María Angélica. 2020. “Book Love. A Cultural Sociological Interpretation of the Attachment to Books.” *Poetics* 81: 101440.

In these readings, we learn about various ways to conceptualize the process of consuming culture. Each of these readings incorporates foundational concepts from neighbouring subfields, and in doing so, they provide novel ways for understanding the causes and consequences of how people make meaning from cultural objects.

(9) Classifying and Evaluating Culture (Nov 9)

Zelizer, Viviana. 2011. Economic Lives: How Culture Shapes the Economy. Princeton University Press. Princeton: Princeton University Press. “Introduction” (pp. 1-12), “Human Values and the Market” (pp. 19-39), “The Price and Value of Children” (pp. 40-60).

Baumann, Shyon. 2007. “A general theory of artistic legitimation: How art worlds are like social movements.” *Poetics* 35,1: 47-65.

Fitzmaurice, Connor. 2017. “How Rosé Became High Class: Categorical Divestment and Evaluation.” *Poetics* 61: 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2016.10.006.

How and why do we place things in categories? Why are these categories often hierarchical? What are the consequences of evaluations? How do those placements relate to social distinctions and patterns? If cultural reception involves individual-level interpretations, why do we see clear patterns and agreement in how cultural objects are perceived? How are these patterns accomplished?

(10) Taste & Group Boundaries (Nov 16)

Banks, Patricia A. 2010. *Represent: Art and Identity Among the Black Upper-Middle Class*. New York: Routledge. Chapters 1, 4, 5, and 6, pp. 1 – 12, 55 - 96.

Baumann, S., M. Szabo, and J. Johnston. 2019. “Understanding the Food Preferences of People of Low Socioeconomic Status.” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 19 (3). https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540517717780.

Childress, Clayton, Shyon Baumann, Craig Rawlings, and Jean-François Nault. 2021. “Genres, Objects, and the Contemporary Expression of Higher-Status Tastes.” *Sociological Science* 8,12. http://dx.doi.org/10.15195/v8.a12

While Bourdieusian analysis highlights the “homology” between class and culture, a long line of empirical research complicates the Bourdieusian perspective. Bourdieu specialized in classed tastes, but others have expanded on his work to understand other axes of differentiation, such as race. Bourdieu also emphasized that high status people prefer to consume the most consecrated, highest status culture. Although Bourdieu’s theories have received a lot of empirical support, this research has been hampered in various ways. Methodologically, past work has had to rely on quite crude measures of cultural consumption and cultural consecration. Substantively, Bourdieu neglected close analysis of the aesthetic preferences of people with low levels of economic and cultural capital. This week’s readings seek to build on Bourdieu’s work on taste by making both theoretical and methodological innovations.

(11) Culture and Action (Nov 23)

DiMaggio, Paul. 1997. “Culture and Cognition.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 23: 263-287.

Leschziner, Vanina and Adam Isaiah Green. 2013. “Thinking about Food and Sex: Deliberate Cognition in the Routine Practices of a Field.” *Sociological Theory* 31(2):116-144.

Oleschuk, Merin, Josée Johnston, and Shyon Baumann. 2019. “Maintaining meat: Cultural repertoires and the meat paradox in a diverse sociocultural context.” *Sociological Forum* 34,2: 337-360.

In addition to the Bourdieusian concepts, another foundational set of concepts come from the vein of research that can be called “culture and cognition.” We will learn about the roots of these concepts in psychological research, how these concepts compare to Bourdieusian concepts (answer: some important overlaps, some distinct divergences), and how these concepts can help to explain the relationship between culture and behavior. Notice that this literature emphasizes an understanding of culture that is quite different from the study of cultural objects.

(12) Material Culture and Embodiment (Nov 30)

Mears, Ashley. 2015. “Girls as Elite Distinction: The Appropriation of Bodily Capital.” *Poetics* 53: 22–37. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2015.08.004.

Griswold, Wendy, Gemma Mangione, and Terence E. McDonnell. 2013. “Objects, Words, and Bodies in Space: Bringing Materiality into Cultural Analysis.” *Qualitative Sociology* 36: 343-364.

Wacquant, Loic. 2015. “For a Sociology of Flesh and Blood.” *Qualitative Sociology* 38: 1-11.

This final week’s topic deals with concepts that are relatively innovative for the subfield of cultural sociology. The subfield largely delineates itself from other sociological subfields through its focus on meaning, which necessarily emphasizes discursive and abstract aspects of culture. However, much of what we think of as culture takes material form, and when we think about how culture is related to action, it necessarily raises the point that actions are something we do physically with our bodies, not just mentally. These readings help us sort out how to understand how the material and the bodily can be cultural and sociological.

Course Requirements

Reading Memos (8 minimum); graded as ✓(8.5/10), ✓+ (9/10), check-✓- (7.8/10); post on Quercus discussion board	50%
Class Presentation	15%

Class Participation	15%
Final Writing Assignment	20%

Reading Memos

Each week you will prepare a brief reading response (approximately 500-750 words, or 2-3 double-spaced pages) for each class that will help you digest the readings. You will post this response on the course website under “Discussions”. You must post a minimum of **8 responses** in the semester, but we encourage you to check in on the website discussion board weekly.

Reading memos constitute the heart of the work in this course. They reflect the intellectual work of reading, note-taking, and reflecting on the assigned materials. Through memo’ing, you will hone your skills reading sociological texts and parsing out the most important pieces for your own research, writing, and interventions in the field.

As part of the weekly memo’ing process, we encourage you to experiment with and develop your own system of note-taking. We will spend class time discussing what works (and doesn’t work), and share our ideas for effective reading.

Think of your reading memos as “works in progress”, rather than final masterpieces. They are a way to focus your reading and reflections. In your memos, include what you think are the key points for each reading, but you should also focus on developing your analytical skills by synthesizing key themes, comparing readings, and asking critical questions.

Evaluation

Your reading responses for the semester will be evaluated as **check (85%), check – (78%),** and **check + (90%).** Please come to office hours for feedback on the quality of your posts. Your reading response must be submitted on Quercus the day before class (by 5:00 p.m.), since they will inform our class discussion and debate.

Memo Format

Please avoid using point form, and organize your ideas into coherent paragraphs. Subtitles are acceptable, and using a catchy title is encouraged. Don’t be afraid to be provocative in your responses, and connect the reading to your own research interests.
Each memo should contain the following: **3 keepers, 2 questions, and 1 ‘so what’.** You don’t have to present your memo in this order, but it should contain these component parts.

3 Keepers: A brief assessment of (at least) three key ideas in the readings. To come up with these “keepers”, ask your questions like the following: What ideas and theories of culture are being invoked, or challenged? What empirical questions are being asked? What are key arguments? What are key concepts, and how are they defined? What connections can you make across the readings?

- Please touch briefly on all the assigned readings in your memo, even if you decide to put most of your focus on one reading.
- Because space is limited, you can focus on what you find particularly interesting, important, and relevant for your own research agenda.

2 (minimum) Discussion Questions. Your discussion questions help generate class discussion, but also give us a sense of how you are engaging with the course readings.

- Good questions focus on core and critical issues or make connections between different readings.
- Avoid questions that can easily be answered in a sentence or two and yes/no questions.
- To generate questions, you might want to reflect on what is strong or weak about the article(s). You might also want to think about how the article(s) connects to other larger issues in sociology, or broader social problems.

1 'so what' evaluation: tell us why the topic matters. Explain why you think it is (or is not) sociologically relevant.

Relevant Context (optional). Include any related links, video, photographs or academic articles you think are relevant or connected. The memos are most interesting (and generative) when people view them creatively, and use the texts as a jumping off point to think about other ideas, theories, and social phenomena.

Why a discussion board?

We are making use of the Quercus discussion board tool to allow your responses to be dialogical, and to provide a space for you to post any cultural observations, questions, or random thoughts that occur to you throughout the week. We will check in regularly on the discussion board, and will expect you to read and comment on each other's posts. Your comments on other students' posts will be factored into your participation grade.

Class Presentation

Students are expected to introduce the day's topic with a short presentation (10-15 minutes maximum). How often each student offers an introduction will depend on the course enrollment. You should connect with other students presenting on the same day so you can organize, divide up the readings, and decide who will present first. You can coordinate your presentation or complete the task relatively independently.

SUBSTANCE OF PRESENTATION

These presentations are not intended to be onerous research projects. Instead, think of it as an opportunity to gain experience introducing complex topics, writing concise oral overviews, generating discussion questions, and communicating academic ideas in a clear, accessible way. Student presentations can include a small amount of summary to refresh the collective memory of the class, but in general, presenters should assume that the class members have done the readings. Remember that a key goal of a class presentation is to *energize* class

discussion. For that reason, always try to avoid too much repetition, rambling, and monotone reading.

When it comes to organizing the presentation, you have some creative license. Your presentation strategy will depend on your general presentation style and skill-set. I recommend including the following: brief summary; methodological issues; key substantive points; connections to other course concepts/readings; questions for discussion. Above all, you should come to class prepared to answer the question, “why does this topic matter?”. I encourage you to come to class with a cultural artifact (e.g., an advertisement, a video-clip, food), if you are inspired to do so. This is not required, but can be a useful way to introduce the relevance of the topic.

GRADING CRITERIA

Your presentation will be graded on 1) comprehension of the reading(s); 2) sociological imagination; 3) presentation style (e.g., eloquence, timing, clarity); 4) quality of handout.

PRESENTATION HANDOUT

You are required to circulate a short handout (1-2) for your presentation. You can also use a PowerPoint presentation, but please arrange to have the projector available and working. The format of the handout is up to you. Please treat the handout (or slide show) as a map of your presentation, and not a transcript of your presentation.

Class Participation

Participation in the seminar is valued at 15%. Students are expected to come to class having done the readings, reviewed your fellow classmates reading responses (see below), and participate actively in class discussions.

If you find classroom discussions a challenge for some reason, please speak with me at the beginning of the semester. If you must miss a class, please inform us beforehand. Unexcused absences and not engaging in classroom discussions will negatively impact your participation grade.

Final Writing Assignment: Cultural Object Analysis

Your final writing assignment is an analysis of a cultural object of your choosing. Remember that a cultural object is primarily defined by the application of a lens of cultural analysis, so you are not limited in the object you choose. Remember also that cultural objects can be material or ideational. Your assignment should incorporate at least three course readings, and you should incorporate at least two readings from outside the syllabus as well. You can pick a physical object (e.g., a designer handbag, a hamburger, a pair of sneakers), or a cultural concept (e.g., art museums, diets, marriage). Your analysis can focus on cultural production, cultural reception, or cultural content. For example an analysis of “marriage” as a cultural object might explore the different meanings people hold of marriage, the historical or contemporary

conditions that shape the nature of marriage. Furthermore, you might want to explore how understandings of marriage are linked to class inequality or gender inequality. Although we do not have any readings on marriage per se on the syllabus, you could draw on concepts from readings that you are able to apply to the case of marriage. For example, you might draw on "the production of culture perspective" from the reading by Peterson and Anand, if you were analyzing the forces shaping the form of modern marriages.

Your assignment should be 2000-2500 words in length and it is due by 11:59pm on Sunday, December 12. Submit your assignment to Quercus.

Other Matters of Importance

Late Policy

Late submissions will be subject a penalty of 5% per 24 hours of lateness.

Academic Integrity

Copying, plagiarizing, falsifying medical certificates, or other forms of academic misconduct will not be tolerated. Any student caught engaging in such activities will be referred to the Dean's office for adjudication. Any student abetting or otherwise assisting in such misconduct will also be subject to academic penalties. Students are expected to cite sources in all written work and presentations. See this link for tips for how to use sources well: (http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/using-sources/how-not-to-plagiarize).

According to Section B.I.1.(e) of the Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters it is an offence "to submit, without the knowledge and approval of the instructor to whom it is submitted, any academic work for which credit has previously been obtained or is being sought in another course or program of study in the University or elsewhere."

By enrolling in this course, you agree to abide by the university's rules regarding academic conduct, as outlined in the Calendar. You are expected to be familiar with the Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters (http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/osai/The-rules/code/the-code-of-behaviour-on-academic-matters) and Code of Student Conduct (http://www.viceprovoststudents.utoronto.ca/publicationsandpolicies/codeofstudentconduct.htm) which spell out your rights, your duties and provide all the details on grading regulations and academic offences at the University of Toronto.

Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to Turnitin.com for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the Turnitin.com reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University's use of the Turnitin.com service are described on the Turnitin.com web site.

Accessibility Services

It is the University of Toronto's goal to create a community that is inclusive of all persons and treats all members of the community in an equitable manner. In creating such a community, the University aims to foster a climate of understanding and mutual respect for the dignity and worth of all persons. Please see the University of Toronto Governing Council “Statement of Commitment Regarding Persons with Disabilities” at http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/Assets/Governing+Council+Digital+Assets/Policies/PDF/ppnov012004.pdf.

In working toward this goal, the University will strive to provide support for, and facilitate the accommodation of individuals with disabilities so that all may share the same level of access to opportunities, participate in the full range of activities that the University offers, and achieve their full potential as members of the University community. We take seriously our obligation to make this course as welcoming and accessible as feasible for students with diverse needs. We also understand that disabilities can change over time and will do our best to accommodate you. Students seeking support must have an intake interview with a disability advisor to discuss their individual needs. In many instances it is easier to arrange certain accommodations with more advance notice, so we strongly encourage you to act as quickly as possible. To schedule a registration appointment with a disability advisor, please visit Accessibility Services at http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/as, call at 416-978-8060, or email at: accessibility.services@utoronto.ca. The office is located at 455 Spadina Avenue, 4th Floor, Suite 400.

Additional student resources for distressed or emergency situations can be located at distressedstudent.utoronto.ca; Health & Wellness Centre, 416-978-8030, http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/hwc, or Student Crisis Response, 416-946-7111.

Equity and Diversity

The University of Toronto is committed to equity and respect for diversity. All members of the learning environment in this course should strive to create an atmosphere of mutual respect. As a course instructor, I will neither condone nor tolerate behaviour that undermines the dignity or self-esteem of any individual in this course and wish to be alerted to any attempt to create an intimidating or hostile environment. It is our collective responsibility to create a space that is inclusive and welcomes discussion. Discrimination, harassment and hate speech will not be tolerated. Additional information and reports on Equity and Diversity at the University of Toronto is available at http://equity.hrandequity.utoronto.ca.

Copyright Statement

Course materials prepared by the instructor are considered by the University to be an instructor’s intellectual property covered by the Copyright Act, RSC 1985, c C-42. These materials are made available to you for your own study purposes, and cannot be shared outside of the class or “published” in any way. Lectures, whether in person or online, cannot be

recorded without the instructor’s permission. Posting course materials or any recordings you may make to other websites without the express permission of the instructor will constitute copyright infringement.