

Sociology 6101H-S  
Contemporary Sociological Theory

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## **Course Description and Objectives**

This course provides an introduction to contemporary sociological theory. In this course, you will grapple with a number of theoretical approaches that have provided and continue to provide influential and fruitful tools for understanding the social world. By the end of the course, you will have these tools at your disposal, and you will – I hope – be in a position to become not only a consumer of sociological theory but also a producer.

I have four main goals in teaching this course. First, I want you to have a basic facility with core theoretical concepts and approaches that you can bring to bear on your own work. Second, I want you to be familiar with the sort of theory sociologists are making and using today. Third, I want you to try your hands at doing original theory work yourself. Fourth, I want to help you to build a platform for engaging with the theory comprehensive exam, should you choose to take it.

## **Readings**

You should acquire *Social Theory: Twenty Introductory Lectures*, by Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl. It should be available at the U of T bookstore. All of the other required readings will be posted in the course folder.

## **Expectations, Assignments and Grading**

In addition to attendance, participation, and reading, four other kinds of work are required:

1. *Reaction Posts*. Each week, half the class will post a brief response to that week's reading on the discussion board in the course Quercus page. Posts should be roughly 500-750 words, more or less. You must post them by 7 PM the before class.

The posts should discuss topics or questions arising from the week's readings. Use them to raise questions about confusing passages, criticize controversial claims, make connections across readings, highlight important themes, or to

develop new ideas. Think of these posts as writing and thinking exercises rather than as finished products. I do not expect them to be polished, but I will be looking for evidence of actual thinking by you. They will also get you in the habit of writing and provide a record of your thoughts about the readings.

The other half of the class will read that week's posts, choose at least one, and post a brief response to it. This response can be short, around 250 words – it may be longer as well – but it should make some substantive engagement with at least one of your fellow seminar participant's statements. These should be posted by 11 AM on the day of class.

2. *Presentations.* Each week, one student will make an in-class presentation about that week's readings, raise critical questions, and set forth topics for discussion. You may wish to use the postings as a starting point. We will then gather further comments about the presentation and reaction posts from seminar participants as a catalyst for further discussion.
3. *Theory Work Assignments.* During the course, there will be four required exercises in theory work. These will invite you to do original theorizing yourself, using your own research area as a source of material. The first assignment will be an exercise in exegesis and interpretation, the second will be an exercise in conceptual critique and analysis, the third will be an exercise in conceptual synthesis, combination, and construction, and the fourth will be an exercise in formulating various types of causal propositions about social phenomena. I will provide more details about and models for the assignments during the course of the semester.

Exercises must be submitted at the beginning of the class on the date they are due.

**Here is when they are due:**

**Assignment One: Due Oct 4**

**Assignment Two: Oct 25**

**Assignment Three: November 15**

**Assignment Four: November 29**

4. *Final Paper.* Your final paper will combine your four theory work assignments into one integrated whole. It will be an opportunity for you to revise your work based on feedback received throughout the semester and to synthesize your ideas. Think of the paper as a chance for you to take stock of what you have done and to lay the groundwork for an original theoretical contribution to your area, whether in a dissertation proposal or publication. We will discuss more details about the paper during the semester.

## Grading

These assignments will be weighted according to the following scheme in order to determine your final grade:

Theory Work Assignments.....	60%
Final Paper.....	20%
Presentation.....	10%
Reaction Posts.....	10%

Grades will reflect the standard outlined by the University of Toronto.

### *Graduate*

<b>Truncated Refined Letter Grade Scale</b>	<b>Numerical Scale of Marks</b>
A+	90 - 100%
A	85 - 89%
A-	80 - 84%
B+	77 - 79%
B	73 - 76%
B-	70 - 72%
FZ**	0 - 69%

\*\*FZ = Fail

## Course Outline

### 1. Sep 13. What is sociological theory and how do you do it?

Readings:

- “Social Theory as a Vocation,” Donald N. Levine.
- “What is Theory?” pp. 1-19, in *Social Theory* (ST), Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl

Supplemental:

- Gabriel Abend, “What is Theory?”

### 2. Sep 20. The Parsonian Backdrop to Contemporary Sociological Theory

Required Readings:

- Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*. 1937, pp. 3-15, 87-125.
- Talcott Parsons, *The System of Modern Societies*, chs. 1-2.
- ST, pp. 20-93

Supplemental Readings:

- Jeffrey Alexander, *Twenty Lectures*, ch.7

### 3. Sep 27. Neo-Utilitarianism

Required Readings:

- Gary Becker. 1976. “The Economic Approach to Human Behavior.” Pp. 3-14 in *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior*. Chicago.
- Mancur Olson. *The Logic of Collective Action*. Pp. 5-52 (skip math parts if you want).
- Peter Blau. *Exchange and Power in Social Life*, selections.
- Thomas Schelling (1978). *Micromotives and Macrobehavior*. Norton, Excerpts.
- ST, pp. 94-122.

Supplemental:

- Amartya Sen. 1977. *Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundations of Economic Theory*.” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6: 317-344.

- James Coleman. 1988. "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital." *American Journal of Sociology*. 94, supplement, pp. S95-S120.
- Jeremy Freese. *Preferences and the Explanation of Social Behavior*.

#### **4. Oct. 4. Symbolic Interactionism**

Required Readings:

- Blumer, Herbert (1969). *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Selections
- Erving Goffman. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Frame Analysis, and The Interaction Order*, selections.
- ST, pp. 123-149.

#### **5. Oct. 11. Ethnomethodology**

- Harold Garfinkel, Preface to *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, "What is Ethnomethodology?" "Studies in the routine grounds of everyday interaction," and "The Origins of the term 'Ethnomethodology'."
- Dorothy Smith, "The Everyday World as Problematic," and "Institutional Ethnography."
- ST, pp. pp 150-173.

#### **6. Oct 18. Communicative Action and the Public Sphere**

- Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, selections.
- Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, selections.
- Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere" and "Transnationalization the Public Sphere."
- ST, pp. 199-248.

#### **7. Oct 25. Agency, Power, and Social Structure**

- Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, selections.
- Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, selections.
- Sewell, William F. 1992. "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and

- Transformation". *The American Journal of Sociology*, Volume 98, Number 1 (Jul., 1992), 1-29.
- ST, pp. 281-307.

## 8. Nov 8. Structuralism and Post-Structuralism

- Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structuralist Anthropology*, selections
- Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish, The History of Sexuality*, selections.
- Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes."
- ST, pp. 339-370.

Supplemental:

- Hall, "The West and the Rest."
- David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, selection
- Habermas, "Modernity and Postmodernity"

## 9. Nov 15. Bourdieu

- Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production," "The Forms of Capital," "From Ruling Class to Field of Power," "The Power of Journalism," "Some Properties of Fields," "On Symbolic Power."
- ST, pp. 371-400.

Supplemental

- Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, chs 5-8, conclusion
- Wacquant, "Habitus," "Everything is Social."
- Jon Elster (1981). "Snobs." in: *London Review of Books* 3.20, pp. 10–12.
- Dreyfus and Rabinow on Bourdieu

## 10. Nov 22. Feminist Theory

- West, Candace, and Don H. Zimmerman. 1987. Doing gender. *Gender & Society* 1.2: 125–157.
- Selections from Patricia Hill Collins (1990). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, selections.
- Selections from Iris Marion Young: "Lived Body vs. Gender", "Throwing Like a Girl."
- ST pp. 432-462

## 11. Nov 29. Neo-pragmatism

- Gross, N. 2009. "A Pragmatist Theory of Social Mechanisms." *American Sociological*. 74:358-79.
- Joas, H. 1996. "Situation--Corporeality--Sociality. The Fundamentals of a Theory of Action."
- Joas, H. 1993. "Pragmatism in American Sociology." Pp. 14-51 in *Pragmatism and Social Theory* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- ST, pp. 500-528.

## 12. Dec 6. The Current Scene

- Selected recent articles from theory journals. Selections by seminar participants.
- ST, pp. 529-560

\*\*readings are subject to change

### **Fine Print**

**Email communication:** In accordance with the University of Toronto's suggested practices – and due to email security issues – I will only respond to emails sent from a University of Toronto email account (i.e., utoronto.ca, chass.utoronto.ca; utsc.utoronto.ca, etc.)

At times you may have to wait a minimum of 48 hours (2 days) for a reply to an email inquiry. Please do not send multiple emails within a 48 hour period. I do not respond to email during the weekend. So, if you send an email on a Thursday or a Friday you will likely have to wait until Monday for a response.

**Late Assignments:** To request accommodation for a missed assignment **you must present your case to the instructor, via email: dan.silver@utoronto.ca**

- You are expected to complete assignments on time.
- An assignment is considered late if it is not submitted by the announced due date and time. After this time, late penalties apply. You are expected to keep a back-up copy of your assignment in case it is lost.
- Late assignments for reasons that are *within your control* will be penalized 5% per day (i.e.: 24 hours). The penalty period includes weekends and holidays.
- For lateness *beyond your control*, you must provide documentation to indicate that you were unable to engage in school work during the period of the assignment.
- Assignments more than 7 days late will be accepted but will not receive credit unless they are accompanied by valid documentation of circumstances beyond the student's control.

**Accessibility Statement:** Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. In particular, if you have a disability/health consideration that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach me and/or the AccessAbility Services Office as soon as possible. I will work with you and AccessAbility Services to ensure you can achieve your learning goals in this course. Enquiries are confidential.

**Plagiarism & Cheating:** Misrepresentation and cheating will not be tolerated. Please see the University of Toronto's "Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters" to read about the penalties and risks.

**Academic Integrity:** Academic integrity is essential to the pursuit of learning and scholarship in a university, and to ensuring that a degree from the University of Toronto is a strong signal of each student's individual academic achievement. As a result, the University treats cases of cheating and plagiarism very seriously. The University of Toronto's Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters (<http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/policies/behaveac.htm>) outlines the behaviours that constitute academic dishonesty and the processes for addressing academic offences. Potential offences include, but are not limited to:

*In papers and assignments:* Using someone else's ideas or words without appropriate acknowledgement. Submitting your own work in more than one course without the permission of the instructor. Making up sources or facts. Obtaining or providing unauthorized assistance on any assignment.

*On tests and exams:* Using or possessing unauthorized aids. Looking at someone else's answers during an exam or test. Misrepresenting your identity.

*In academic work:* Falsifying institutional documents or grades. Falsifying or altering any documentation required by the University, including (but not limited to) doctor's notes.

All suspected cases of academic dishonesty will be investigated following procedures outlined in the Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters. If you have questions or concerns about what constitutes appropriate academic behaviour or appropriate research and citation methods, you are expected to seek out additional information on academic integrity from your instructor or from other institutional resources (see <http://www.utoronto.ca/academicintegrity/resourcesforstudents.html>).

#### Be Nice and Respectful To each Other

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 is available at <http://equity.hrandequity.utoronto.ca>.

#### Generative AI:

Students may use artificial intelligence tools, including generative AI, in this course as learning aids or to help produce assignments. However, students are ultimately accountable for the work they submit. If you submit work produced by a LLM, I will grade it, and you will be responsible for the grade. Keep in mind that such work often seems good on the surface, but just beneath it is rather poor. Students must submit, as an appendix with their assignments, any content produced by an artificial intelligence tool, and the prompt used to generate the content.



Generative AI tools built on Large Language Models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Consensus, and Elicit are changing how we research, think, and write. At their best, such tools are complements that enhance human abilities, by enabling us to do things we might not have been able to do (as easily) otherwise and/or pushing us to perform at higher levels. This is how we will treat these tools in this course.

It is important to think about how to use these tools in a constructive, creative, and informed way. Below are some initial notes in that direction. These are loosely adapted from notes from the anthropologist Alice Evans. Ethan Mollick has many helpful resources that are worth taking a close look at. His book can be very useful:

<https://www.amazon.ca/Co-Intelligence-Living-Working-Ethan-Mollick/dp/059371671X>Links to an external site.

Here are some blog posts that are also a good place to start:

<https://www.oneusefulthing.org/p/i-cyborg-using-co-intelligence>Links to an external site.

<https://www.oneusefulthing.org/p/how-to-use-chatgpt-to-boost-your>Links to an external site.

<https://www.oneusefulthing.org/p/a-guide-to-prompting-ai-for-what>Links to an external site.

[Links to an external site.](#)

<https://www.oneusefulthing.org/p/doing-stuff-with-ai-opinionated-midyear>Links to an external site.

## 1. Chat GPT, Claude, Gemini (AI Research Assistants)

- Provides information, feedback, and editing
- Helps with learning new topics, finding counter-arguments, and essay feedback

### How to use these tools effectively:

- Ask for information on a topic, then request elaboration with more details
- Upload academic articles for summarization or methodology scrutiny
- Use it to brainstorm ideas or explore alternative interpretations

- Review the posts from Mollick above closely and follow his links and commentary. Think about how to apply these ideas to your cases.

**Warning:** All of these tools can make mistakes or occasionally fabricate information.

- Always cross-reference with academic sources
- Use it as a sounding board, not ultimate proof
- Practice critical thinking by questioning and fact-checking their responses
- In essays, you must back up every empirical claim with academic references, every textual claim with a citation, and every theoretical interpretation with sound arguments.

## 2. Consensus and Elicit (Academic Literature Search Engine)

- Searches and synthesizes academic literature
- Highlights key papers on a given topic

**How to use these tools effectively:**

- Start with a clear, focused research question
- Use the suggested papers as a springboard for deeper research
- Pay attention to the most cited or recent papers
- Don't rely solely on Consensus; also use Google Scholar
- Read the full papers, not just the summaries provided

## Peer Collaboration

Your peers in class are even more valuable. You are surrounded by brilliant minds from all over the world, with diverse experiences and perspectives. Listening and learning from each other will massively improve your understanding (and possibly build life-long friendships).